

Action for Arachne

Rebecca Shanahan

7.8.2020 – 23.8.2020

Fibre culture has been associated with women throughout its thirty thousand year history. Weaving appears in many Ancient Greek myths, repeatedly symbolising female labour, creativity, expression, and communication in a culture that did not permit women to have public lives. In the myth of Arachne and Athena, the mortal Arachne challenges the goddess of weaving Athena to a weaving competition. Arachne's weaving not only surpasses Athena's, but details violence by the gods towards mortal women. In contemporary terms, Arachne speaks truth to power and holds the gods to account. She pays for it, of course, since Athena turns her into a spider, but it is a magnificent expression of textile resistance by a mortal woman against the gods' all-powerful patriarchal system.

The weavings in *Action for Arachne* acknowledge some of the many women artists who have informed my practice. Each weaving is made from a pair of jeans associated with a woman artist. An abstract trace, it is a placeholder honouring an artist. The weavings recognise female cultural endeavour and recuperate a female-identified craft process to art. In allusion to the broader absence of women and their work from history, the intensive and repetitive labour of weaving is undertaken as a performance in the gallery. It models and makes visible women's unpaid labour – the work they do that invisibly yet massively underpins the economy and culture. Such labour is not counted in gross national product calculations but is essential to capitalism, even more so now during the pandemic.

In another register, these weavings respond to Hiroshi Sugimoto's celebrated *Seascapes* series of photographs. In my first encounter with the photographs as an undergraduate art student, they struck me as universal representations of a world outside culture: pure, interlocking molecules of air and water, indexed by light. I now

think of the photographs as a representation of loss. Rising sea levels and melting ice sit outside their precise framing, yet also pulse invisibly within them. That sublime perspective of air and water standing outside human structure is gone. I have translated the meeting of sky and sea in *Seascapes* into weavings for the Anthropocene, re-using existing material to resist capitalism's ever-increasing consumption for profit – a direct cause of the climate crisis.

Markers of transience pervade *Action for Arachne*: the laborious weaving process, the repurposed material, the slow video transitions of rubbings taken from the garments, the weavings' continued accumulation over the exhibition period. Apprehending transience and our own impermanence means recognising life cycles longer than our own; without this understanding we can't imagine, or protect, a future for subsequent generations. I think of clothes once handed down from generation to generation, now choking landfill. I think of women who care for babies and old people (in other words, for all of us at some point) and their lived experience of our impermanence. Our ecology and women's work are both devalued under patriarchal capitalism and yet are core to our continued existence. *Action for Arachne* is a temporal and material intertwining of these ideas.

Participating Artists

Vita Cochran | Christine Cornish | Tracey Clement | Lynne Eastaway | Raquel Ormella | Jill Orr | Alia Parker | Sue Pedley | Debra Phillips | Lynne Roberts-Goodwin | Skye Wagner

Works

1. Rebecca Shanahan *Action for Arachne (Untitled)* 2020 Weaving performance
2. Rebecca Shanahan, *Action for Arachne (Untitled)* 2020 Cotton weavings
3. Rebecca Shanahan, *Action for Arachne (Untitled)* 2020 Single channel digital video 2:40 minutes

Biography

Rebecca Shanahan is a Sydney artist working on Gadigal land across photography, video, installation, performance, and textiles. She has held numerous exhibitions and been a finalist in many juried competitions. She received her PhD from the University of Sydney in 2019, and is a lecturer at UNSW Art and Design.

Artist Talks on Saturday 22 August 3 – 5pm

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