FROM PLAYING TO PERCEIVING

by

MARIE KATHLEEN MASSEY HENDRICK

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Major Professor: Clay McLaurin

Committee: Jose Blanco
Jennifer Crenshaw
Susan Hable Smith
A few years ago, I read or was told about a study based on people’s perceptions of themselves. The conductors of the study showed a group of related people two photographs and asked them to pick the one they thought looked the most like the person in the picture. One photograph was taken of a person directly with the camera and the other photo was the person’s reflection in the mirror (both photos looked the same, just their sources were different). When shown the two pictures the person who was the subject of the photographs would pick their reflection. However, the friends and family of the person in the photo would choose the picture that was taken directly of the person. This study demonstrated how people respond to what they are familiar with. The people in the photographs would not choose the image taken directly of them since they do not see themselves that way. The person only sees him/her-self in a reflective surface, so that is what he/she is most familiar with, even though it is merely a reflection of the real thing.

As Jan Jagodzinski claims in “Between Aisthetics and Aesthetics,” there is ‘seeing’ before seeing yourself in the mirror and art will get you back to that place.\(^1\) For me, this makes me ask the questions: What do I want to create that is familiar to me but new and different? How can I get back to myself before I knew what ‘myself’ meant? In other words, ‘What do I want?’

I am at a cross roads, not only in my work but also in my personal life. I came from a very structured and stable upbringing. My father was a sheriff and my mother was a teacher and a daycare owner. I was not only taught manners but also

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\(^1\) Jan Jagodzinski, “Between Aisthetics and Aesthetics: The Challenges to Aesthetic Education in Designer Capitalism,” in *Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century*, ed. Tracie Costantino and Boyd White (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010), 34.
told to watch what I did in fear of ruining my reputation. I was very interested in art, but I was advised to not make it my career, because my parents did not want me to grow up as a "starving artist." They said I could practice art on the side as a hobby. Therefore, I went to school and performed how I was expected. I made the honor roll and attended college immediately after high school. I decided to pursue art as a career despite my parents' advice. I finally convinced my parents the textile field was full of jobs, and I would not become that "starving artist." I graduated magna cum laude. I followed the rules in this "grid of supervision."  

I did everything I was supposed to do but was unable to find a job in the textile industry. I did find jobs in the retail industry, but disliked every minute of it. When the opportunity arose for me to go to graduate school, I jumped at the chance.

There I was, at a point in my life where I could focus on myself and go in any direction to create my artwork. Yet, here was the problem: I always needed ground rules; some form of supervision and expectation so I could meet what was expected and even rise above it. I was accustomed to a "grid of supervision" and I felt I needed guidelines or some sort of "line" to follow in order to create my artwork. I am driven to excel, and I believe how I was raised to "stay in line" is a reason why I am at an impasse.

Due to my internal stalemate, I began to formulate thoughts on this grid or "line." How do I work outside of this grid? What if I started to deconstruct the grid itself? My sketchbook has many variations of what the "line" represents:

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3 Ibid., 145.
expectations (following the rules, on the straight and narrow), communication—how people interact with one another (telephone lines and wires, email connections, sound waves), connections—how people are related/acquainted and travel (family trees, friends, and modes of transportation), and visual images of lines (spider webs, railroads, and telephone lines).

In the beginning, my work emulated these images and ideas in the most basic form—the line. After I explored this idea of line forming compositions, I started to deconstruct the line itself. By using my sewing machine, I would break apart the line by sewing a straight satin stitch line onto fabric, stop the sewing machine, move the fabric forward, and start sewing the line again. By dissecting the satin stitch, I allowed the sewn line to manipulate the fabric itself. By manipulating the fabric, the line would create texture and dimension to an otherwise flat piece of art. I was not planning out the composition, but I was controlling how the line was sewn horizontally across the fabric and how I moved the fabric through the sewing machine. I was starting to break down my personal framework of how I see myself and my artwork. Sewing a line that was not uniform and intentionally creating ripples on a flat surface was the beginning of my departure from “staying in line.”
Figure 1: Detail of satin stitch manipulating fabric.

My most successful artwork was where I "let go." Well, "let go" to a degree. I let myself "play" with the sewn line. In other words, I did not plan out the composition, and I enjoyed the act of sewing lines onto linen fabric. I wanted this sewn line to make the fabric move and to give it texture. I was breaking down the structured grid I had followed for the majority of my life. I did not realize it then, but essentially I was "playing." I was like a kid again, but this time I was not worried about how straight the lines were or whether I was meeting my professors' expectations. I was having fun with the materials themselves and seeing how they interacted with one another to create texture. I was starting to create artwork and I was not focused on whether the resulting fabric had an end use. For example, I did not worry if the finished piece would work as a comforter or as drapery. I was taking two opposing materials and forming a new unified whole. I did not know it then, but I was working toward an aesthetic experience. I had an emotional and
appreciative response with the fabric, not only in making it but also in viewing it as an artwork.

The work in Figure 2 was inspired by a microscopic view of an organism, but the end result was intentionally nonrepresentational. Agnes Martin stated this idea most directly, "anything can be painted without representation."4 I was working with my sewing machine, and my intuition was propelling me forward in creating the composition. I was not trying to recreate the inspirational object.

After reading *Art as Experience*, I felt John Dewey best described my new outlook on my work. He stated that from observation and imagination the artist will create a new vision and then create new artwork. This brings me to John Dewey's notion that there is thought beyond symbols. When thinking of a work of art, a viewer looks at the qualities (lines, color, shapes, etc) and then the relationships of these qualities (the juxtaposition, repetition, etc). An aesthetic experience happens when these relationships between these qualities allow the viewer to connect with the artwork. While creating the work in Figure 2, I kept in mind how people would perceive the work. I wanted the viewer to linger with the work, to have a mental and emotional connection, and to develop their own personal interpretation—to have their own aesthetic experience.

During the summer of 2011, my work embarked on a new direction in creating and manipulating the “line.” While taking summer classes I began cataloguing, photographing, and digitizing records of various fabrics from The Charlene Page Kaufman Memorial Textile Collection at The University of Georgia. While photographing a belt from Turkey, I was inspired by the coiled fringe. I realized I was not limited to just creating line on fabric, but I could physically create it through a process I had re-discovered, coiling.

Coiling is a traditional basketry technique. This method allows the artist to cover the base material with yarn or colored reeds to form baskets and urns. I realized I could coil rope and not form an object, but leave the rope in its most basic

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6 Ibid., 52.
form, the line. This belt appealed to my craft background and pushed my notion of
line and how to manipulate it even further.

![Figure 3: Coiled belt from Turkey from The Charlene Page Kaufman Memorial Textile Collection at The University of Georgia.](image)

I started to experiment with coiling on rope with black yarn. I tightly wound
the yarn around the rope and realized the rope would start to twist back onto itself.
After I completely covered the rope, I let the “coiled line” fall naturally creating its
own composition. As I pushed and pulled the line, it would resist my touch. If I
straightened out the kinks, the rope would form new twists. I began playing with it
by throwing it around on the ground and allowing it to form new shapes—it became
an interactive object. When I placed it on the wall, it became its own “fabric”. The
coiled rope formed its own linear composition and created intriguing negative
spaces. When I moved it while it was on the wall, it became an interactive art piece.
I started to question myself about how the viewer could interact with it. If I let
people move it, interact with it, or for a better term, let them "play" with it, would these actions enhance their own experience with my work?

Figure 4: Coiled line.

Previously it was my own interaction, or "play", that I explored. Now I wanted to connect people to my artwork. I wanted to have them in mind when manipulating the line and the fabric, or have them visually and/or physically connect to the piece. My internal questions became, "How do people cross my path?" and "What kind of art can we create together?" These questions were required of me to grow as an artist, to delve deeper into my psyche. How do people and my past experiences shape the way I work and even view the world? Where do I want my art to originate from?
After my first coiled rope, I began to experiment with a larger base material. I wanted the line to be substantial, to make a statement, and to entice the viewer to interact with it. While in Florida I discovered the perfect material for coiling in a marina shop, and I bought 92 feet of marine rope. I was attracted to the overall thickness of the rope, its weight, and its texture and feel. I covered it with yarn, ribbon, duct tape, sequins, and other various items that would wrap easily around the rope. In the beginning I limited my color palette to four colors—white, green, blue, and red—while investigating unconventional materials to coil with. I limited myself to these colors to ensure a sense of cohesion and consistency to the overall work since I was playing with so many materials. Towards the end of the 92 feet, I began to experiment with more unusual color—pops of lime green and hot pink.

Figure 5: Photo of coiling marine rope in studio.  
Figure 6: 92 feet of coiled rope.
I wanted my work to stay ambiguous and entice viewers to create their own interpretations. The ambiguity of the piece would engage the viewer so they would stay with artwork longer and have a more meaningful interaction with it. As Boyd White wrote in *Aesthetics*, if I do not supply any definitions, the viewers' views and opinions will not be influenced by my preconceived notion about the work.\(^7\)

One method I used for creating my line-based artwork and involving people was by focusing on a specific person. I manipulated the line in the way the person made me feel or how we were connected emotionally or physically. My emotions guided me in playing with the composition and the color and materials that I used to coil. I added mass to the rope by layering fabric and yarn to represent new connections, new people, or even family. Or if I took the rope apart and coiled it in a dark color it would represent how connections fade and end. These visual representations were from my own internal dialogue. By allowing my work to remain abstract, the viewer would form their own interpretations and connections to the work.

\(^7\) Boyd White, *Aesthetics* (New York: Peter Lang Primer, 2009), 33.
This play of materials, the structure of the rope itself, and its installation were answers to the question of how to visually and abstractly represent the ideas of connection and play. Installation was key to involving the viewer. When I installed the rope in a space, I would need to emphasize how the rope interacted with itself and created an intriguing composition. Installing the coiled rope to overtake and surround the viewer in a space would have a different effect than if the rope was hung on the wall and did not involve the surrounding area. By solving
these questions with the installation the viewers would emotionally "understand these intricate webs of relationship" that the coiled rope represented.  

When I finished coiling the 92 feet of rope, I experimented with how to install the work. I had the previous questions in mind and showed the rope for five days in the graduate annex on the first floor of the Lamar Dodd art building. This exercise allowed me to play with different ways to show the piece. Each day was a progression from the previous day. On Day 1, the coiled rope laid on the floor. Viewers had to consciously walk around as it covered the space. On Day 2, I moved the rope up the wall slightly with two strategically placed hooks. On Day 3, I added another hook and had the rope overtake the entire space by the rope hanging on the wall, spilling across the floor, and climbing over a couch across the room. Viewers had to physically step over the rope to get around it. Day 4, I placed the rope at different levels on the wall, a pedestal, and overflowing onto the floor. By Day 5, I placed all the hooks on the wall, and spelled the word "play" with the coiled rope and the tail end of the rope created a "y" in the air. I planned every step, every hook, and placement of this installation, and I learned at the end of the five days I did not want to control the final installation for my MFA exhibition. I knew I wanted to "let go" even more.

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Day 1: Floor.

Day 2: Floor and wall.

Day 3: Floor, wall, and couch.

Day 4: Floor, wall, and pedestal.

Day 5: On wall, spelling "play".

Figure 8: Five Day Installation in the Graduate Annex.
After the Fall 2011 semester, I took the coiled rope to different locations and photographed it. This idea of moving the rope out of a designated art space and into various environments came from the notion of the word “play.” I was already playing with materials, the rope itself, and how to display it; why not have fun with the work as a whole? By transporting the coiled rope to the beach and to the jetties in Venice, FL, I was removing the work from where it was expected and allowing it to form new connections to other surroundings. I had not only allowed the coiled rope to be a piece of art in a gallery, but had enabled it to break my own preconceived notions of what art is and where artwork is shown. I took the rope on an adventure and this expedition gave it a history, a story. Sand, grass, and even dirt attached itself in the yarn and to the duct tape on the rope. I let these remnants remain on the rope as they are evidence of its traveling experience. I was letting go, playing, and enjoying the coiled work and myself.
After the installation exercise, I decided this coiled line needed to be larger, more substantial, especially if I wanted the work to really overtake an area and involve the viewer. In Spring 2012, I bought 175 feet of marine rope to coil and to add to the previous 92 feet. On this section of the rope I deviated slightly from the color scheme I used previously and started to explore alternative materials. The viewer will find speaker wire, ruffles, rickrack, large chain, measuring tape, pearls, beads, and even specialty ribbon. I was beginning to let go and have fun with the work. This progression can be seen in the last half of the coiled rope. In this section I let go of my self-imposed guidelines and just enjoyed seeing how the texture of the material interacted with the rope. I like to think the final 267 feet of coiled rope became a visual documentation of my subconscious taking over, allowing myself to play with the idea of connections, people, and materials, all while enjoying myself.
For the MFA exhibition, I knew I wanted the coiled line to overtake the space and involve the viewer. I accomplished this by not planning the layout. But allowing the rope to dictate its own installation. I drilled six hooks in the ceiling and hung several strands of monofilament from each hook. I started to twist the rope and let it play with itself to start forming shapes. I let my intuition guide me during the installation just as I had let it guide me previously. After installing, I named the work *Play*. The title described how I viewed this piece and how I interacted with it. I realized this artwork had the potential to keep going—to keep growing, to keep playing, to keep pushing me as an artist.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 11: Installation view in the MFA exhibition.*

I believe there is an implied conflict in the art world between fine art and craft. There are many different levels to this debate, but many feel that artists create fine art while skilled craftsmen create “crafts”. I have a solid craft
background in textiles, with my knowledge and love of tapestry and basketry. While in graduate school, I have been trying to separate myself from “craft” by elevating my work to the realm of fine art. I am a weaver at heart and the basic component of weaving is the grid—warp and weft intersecting at right angles to make fabric. I believe breaking away from my self-imposed restrictions and embracing my craft background with my current artwork helped me grow as an artist. No matter how people classify my art, whether craft or fine art, it is the craftsmanship—that love for what I do—\(^9\)—that will distinguish my work from the rest.

In deconstructing the grid and lines of my past, I am creating new ones. Whether these new crossing points are intersecting at right angles or forming their own web, they are forming a new vision for me and are building towards a new perception of myself, my worth, and my work. My goal is that my MFA work will let the “viewer perceive the connectiveness and pattern within it and then this recognition will allow the viewer to see one’s self in relation to the world.”\(^{10}\) I am breaking out of my grid, and it is a slow process. I am unable to recognize what I am doing for I am still perceiving.

\(^9\) Dewey, 54.
\(^{10}\) Siegesmund, 85.
Works Cited


