

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

QUILTING, CROSS STITCH, AND COMMUNITY:  
THE TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENT OF ARTISTIC FOCAL PRACTICES  
IN THE WORK OF CHAWNE KIMBER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
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IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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PREVIEW

## ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the use of technology by an artist, Chawne Kimber, to examine the incorporation of technology and its impact on artistic processes, identity affirmation, and authenticity. With Heideggerian theory serving as a methodological framework, a thorough survey of Kimber's social media accounts combined with critical analysis of the artwork she exhibited online was conducted in the course of analyzing her use of technology to document artistic practices, engage with and establish artistic communities, and share and display art. Qualitative analysis of Kimber's social media accounts and her use of social media suggest there is a strong relation between mindful incorporation of technology into an artist's process and practice and the creation of meaningful work. Based on the results of the evidentiary analysis of Kimber's thoughts and artistic processes shared on social media, I argue that it is possible to incorporate technology into artistic activity in the endeavor to live a good life as well as a life of authenticity. Furthermore, the intentional integration of technology into artistic activity and focal practices can heighten an artist's engagement with art while serving as a basis for reconsideration of technology and one's relationship to it.

## INTRODUCTION: THREADS OF RESISTANCE

Much of the philosophical thought about technology today is in response to the writings of Martin Heidegger, particularly his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology.” In this essay, Heidegger considers the human response to living in a technological world and how technology influences the ways humans think, act, and live. Heidegger’s treatise is preoccupied with the question or problem that technology poses, though he does offer an answer or solution to our technological situation at the end of the essay. Heidegger’s ultimate aim in the “The Question Concerning Technology,” is for humanity to reconsider, or better reorient, our perspective on technology; in the end, he does offer an answer to the question he poses. Heidegger offers art as the primary solution to humanity’s problem with technology.<sup>1</sup>

There is considerable interest in the nexus of art and technology that goes far beyond the tools used to produce works of creativity. A commonly accepted definition of technology as “the systematic application of scientific or other knowledge to practical skills” provides a suitable foundation for an understanding or discourse regarding technology and will serve as the working definition here.<sup>2</sup> As technology and the gifts it bestows expands, the desire to harness and control it also grows. There is an abundance of technology available to the artist working today, particularly in the virtual world of the internet. While many artists may struggle with the advantages and consequences posed by technology on their art and medium, textiles artists—particularly quilters—have found ways to incorporate technology into their work organically.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. William Lovitt (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 339.

<sup>2</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (1967; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 14.

How do artists choose what will be useful and what is trivial to their artistic practices, particularly when applications in an online environment—which often spills into real life—serves as a gauge of relevance, and in some quarters significance? More importantly, concerning this study, how does technology, specifically social media, impact or influence the inspiration and reception of textiles such as modern quilt art, particularly that of a political or controversial nature? The answer or answers to these questions are relevant and worth study and consideration because they offer an understanding of how all art, not just quilt arts or textiles, engages us to think about social and political problems, or rather the problems we all face as humans.

This dissertation explores the purpose of art in a technologized world while contemplating the impact of technology on art by examining ways that a textiles artist, Chawne Kimber, is incorporating technology into her artistic practices, as well as how technology impacts reception of her work. The research is positioned as a response to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* as well as his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology" and questions whether technology can be integrated into artistic processes to achieve authenticity and goodness in life. Finally, this dissertation will explore the potential and limitations of modern textiles, particularly quilts, as objects of art, community, communication, and activism—particularly when exhibition and reception of the work are facilitated online.

#### CHAWNE KIMBER: AN ARTIST IN AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

In order to frame the conversation regarding Kimber's artistic work and processes as a response to Heidegger, his philosophy is addressed to establish a foundation for this study. Chapter 1 of this dissertation is a methodological consideration of crucial concepts of Heideggerian theory regarding technology, art, and being. Chapter 2 critically considers Kimber's use of technology, mainly social media, to live an authentic life.

Much of Kimber's work is political and is often viewed as controversial as she explores issues of activism and social justice in the art she creates. Chapter 3 of this dissertation explores Kimber's engagement as an activist through art and technology. Although she spends a great deal of her time creating textile artworks—primarily quilts—Kimber's primary vocation is a mathematician and a professor of mathematics. Chapter 4 of this dissertation considers Kimber's affirmation of her identity as both artist and educator as she incorporates technology to teach others informally online. Kimber's integration of technology into artistic focal practices, particularly quilting and cross-stitch are considered in Chapter 5.

Kimber's development as an artist has grown over time and is well-documented online through her various social media platforms. Kimber, like many contemporary quilters, uses the resources available on the internet to draw inspiration, learn new skills, and to generally keep informed about the world around her; but, she also uses the internet to spark conversation, collaborate with other artists, exhibit her work, and inspire. Overall, Kimber's use of social media creates a space for documenting her work and considering her pursuit of textile arts—specifically quilting, with a considerable amount of needlecraft as well.

Kimber created quilts long before the advent of what would eventually become known as the modern quilt movement and tends to eschew labeling herself as a modern quilter. However, she does acknowledge that her more popular quilts “tend to be art quilts in the modern aesthetic.”<sup>3</sup> Though she may not subscribe to calling herself a modern quilter, Kimber is recognized as a quilter in the modern quilt movement as she has won awards, exhibits in modern quilt shows, and often teaches classes in modern quilting techniques. An understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sandi Sawa Hazelwood, "Designer Profile: Chawne Kimber," *Love Patchwork & Quilting*, 2016, 51.

historical context—particularly this moment regarding modern quilting—is necessary to understand who and what Chawne Kimber is frequently addressing in her social media posts.

## MODERN QUILTING, THE MODERN QUILT GUILD AND THE MODERN QUILT MOVEMENT

Modern quilting, as an aesthetic, allows a quilter or textiles artist considerable leeway to explore themes often considered taboo in traditional quilting, particularly in the world of traditional juried competitive quilt shows. Thematic quilts exploring social injustice or other political concerns were once group projects made for performative expression, though not necessarily made for artistic enjoyment, appreciation, or documentation.<sup>4</sup> However, the Modern Quilt Movement paved the way for new mainstream conversations to occur about quilts and the messages they could convey as a matter of course.

The Modern Quilt Movement, itself, is a point of controversy and disagreement. Some quilters, often those who do not consider themselves modern quilters, consider modern quilts and those making them as a category within the broader framework of quilting. Most modern quilters, however, consider themselves to be part of a more significant movement that has built upon the foundation laid by the traditional legacy of quilting. It may be that the movement, regarding modern quilting, is the resultant force of the collision of time, place, and technology.

Jacquie Gering, a quilter from Kansas City, who is active in the modern quilt movement eschews traditional quilt form and design and draws inspiration from the quilts of the quilters of Gee's Bend, Denyse Schmidt, and Molly Upton, amongst others, notes that "Modern quilting is a

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Beth Krause, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Cultural Resistance for Gay Communities," *Critical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (October 1994): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089692059402000304>.

grass roots, organic movement.”<sup>5</sup> The modern quilting movement was one borne online through communities that are often established virtually, extending to relationships in the real world or in real life (IRL). One example of the modern quilt movement’s spontaneous existence in both the virtual world and IRL is the Modern Quilt Guild (MQG), and its representation as chapters or groups of quilter geographically spread out and meeting face-to-face in the “real” world.

Although the Modern Quilt Guild has one central website, there are hundreds of affiliated city, state, or regional sites affiliated with the organization. The Modern Quilt Guild was established in 2009 by leaders within the modern quilt community living in Los Angeles, California who desired to create an avenue for quilters meeting virtually to meet IRL while continuing their appreciation and learning about modern quilting.<sup>6</sup> The original leadership sought to infuse some of the traditional heritage of quilting, specifically the quilt guild—where quilters would gather to quilt together—into the virtual space that helped shape the community. The stated mission of the MQG is “to support and encourage the growth and development of modern quilting through art, education, and community.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to sponsoring one massive quilt show (competition) each year, the organization sponsors webinars, forums, discussions, charity outlets, and opportunities for learning online as well as gathering IRL through its more than 200 guilds.

While the MQG does not serve as the sole definer of the Modern Quilt Movement, the organization does offer concrete definitions for novices that may struggle with the vernacular of

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<sup>5</sup> Linzee Kull McCray, "Making Modern: The Roots of the Modern Quilt Guild Run Deep," *Modern Patchwork*, Winter 2015, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Modern Quilt Guild, "About the MQG," Modern Quilt Guild, last modified 2017, accessed October 5, 2017, <https://www.themodernquiltguild.com/content/about-mqg>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

modern quilting, not least of which the term ‘modern quilting’ itself. Concerning modern quilting and modern quilts, the MQG suggests that:

Modern quilts are primarily functional and inspired by modern design. Modern quilters work in different styles and define modern quilting in different ways, but several characteristics often appear which may help identify a modern quilt. These include, but are not limited to: the use of bold colors and prints, high contrast and graphic areas of solid color, improvisational piecing, minimalism, expansive negative space, and alternate grid work. "Modern traditionalism" or the updating of classic quilt designs is also often seen in modern quilting.<sup>8</sup>

While the definition may seem ambiguous, modern quilting offers an opportunity for quilters to approach the art of quilting in a liberated way. It may be easier to understand modern quilting in contrast to its more traditional form, which tends to follow relatively strict rules of construction. At a fundamental level, a quilt is a bed covering comprised of layers of fabric: batting or padding surrounded by two outer layers of fabric which are bound and stitched together. Traditional quilting often employs repeating patterned cells, often referred to as blocks evenly distributed in a grid.<sup>9</sup> Even if modern quilts have blocks of the same size (an occurrence that is usually rare unless the quilt is made as part of a quilting bee or group event), there is seldom repetition (see *figure 0.1*). Quilters looking for an outlet to make something functional and beautiful with a sense of freedom often find modern quilting an appealing departure from traditional quilting. Modern quilting breaks from tradition while simultaneously honoring the heritage upon which it was built.

The history of quilting is lengthy and rich with nuance as well as controversy. While the modern quilt movement’s break from traditional quilting is a relatively contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> There are many resources for the history of quilts, for a considerable understanding of the history of quilts as well as their taxonomy see John Forrest and Deborah Blincoe, *The Natural History of the Traditional Quilt* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995).

controversial issue in the quilting world, the question of quilting's place in the arts has been and continues to be, a source of contention. Many critics and quilters themselves may struggle to understand quilting as an art because of the functional elements of the end product—of the quilt itself. While modern quilts may be similar to what many classify as art quilts, modern quilts can and are meant to serve a functional purpose. The Art Quilt Association defines an art quilt as “an original exploration of a concept or idea rather than the handing down of a “pattern.” It experiments with textile manipulation, color, texture, and/or a diversity of mixed media. An Art Quilt often pushes quilt world boundaries.”<sup>10</sup> An art quilt is meant to explore an idea artistically when exhibited. Alternatively, a modern quilt—in the strictest sense—can be appreciated artistically but modern quilters expect that the works produced can and will be used.

#### THE ART VS. CRAFT DEBATE OF QUILTING

Is a quilt a work of art, or is it a craft object? Arguably, a quilt is, or can be both, a work of art as well as craft. Well-made quilts—even poorly made quilts, to a certain extent—require a basic level of skill or craftsmanship to make a functional object. Materially speaking, a quilt is a blanket or bed-covering however, a quilt's functional role does not detract from the quilt's artistry or its aesthetic valuation. A quilt can be functional and simultaneously beautiful, sublime, or abject. David Galef suggests that “[a]rt must have significant form; it must please aesthetically... but art doesn't *have* to do anything.”<sup>11</sup> While objects of craft are expected to fulfill some utilitarian purpose, works of art can serve a purpose, but there is no expectation that

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<sup>10</sup> Art Quilt Association, "What is an Art Quilt?," Definition of an Art Quilt, accessed November 27, 2017, <http://theartquiltassociation.com/home/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/WHAT-IS-AN-ART-QUILT.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> David Galef, "The Art of Art," *Southwest Review* 91, no. 1 (2006): 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40137406>.

art will serve as a means to a larger goal. While acknowledging that definitions and understanding of art and craft can blur, Galef notes that “craft is useful...art is inspired, with no base utilitarian purpose. But craft raised to a high—enough level is perforce art.”<sup>12</sup>

How does craft become elevated, and at what level does it become categorized as art? Perhaps as Yuriko Saito suggests, elevation occurs when a particular craft has somehow surpassed its ordinariness or everydayness to encompass a message or meaning of more considerable significance.<sup>13</sup> Crafts or rather forms of craft, such as pottery, weaving, metalworking, and quilting can also be considered art, notably when a craft object’s symbolic message, meaning, or purpose surpasses its fundamental materiality. Further, Galef acknowledges that “we may never adequately pin down the essential or necessary conditions of art” in order for art to be art, at a minimum, there must be an artist to produce the work in order for it to exist “because otherwise it’s not art, whatever else it may be.”<sup>14</sup> Regardless of a viewer’s or audience’s classification of an artistic object of craft, or a quilt, the intentionality of the creator of the work reflects considerably upon the categorization of the work or objection.

Many skilled craftspeople may bristle at being labeled as artists as the classification of ‘craftsman’ may carry a specific distinction or sense of pride. Mary Douglas, a museum curator, and practicing metalsmith, notes that:

...craft goes by many names—decorative art, handicraft, design, and art—but these are not synonymous. Each name connotes a certain historical genealogy, purpose, and value.... Rather, we make hierarchal distinctions: art is at the top, followed by design, then decorative art, and last, handicraft. Oftentimes, the language or values of another

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>13</sup> Yuriko Sato, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 251.

<sup>14</sup> Galef, "The Art of Art," 123.

field are appropriated to leverage a higher status—whether craft practice takes on the critical language of art or art absorbs certain notions of craftsmanship.”<sup>15</sup>

Douglas ties her definition of craft heavily to the economy and her understanding of craftsmanship as a potential skill for use as a business resource. She notes that “craft may be defined by culture, period, subject matter, material, or process, but it is equally about producer and consumer, seller and buyer....relationship between craft object and the market.”<sup>16</sup> While this understanding of craft is oriented towards supply and demand, it sits in opposition towards the idea of craft or art produced for its own sake. Quilters, as a matter of course, are more accustomed to inhabiting craft circles. Even if they had artistic intentions, they might have been reluctant to call themselves artists in the past.

Evidence of the reluctance of modern quilters to identify themselves as artists can be found in abundance online in social media, particularly on blogs, or informational websites that have a diary-like format. Many quilters maintain quilt blogs to document their work in detail, specifically their process of making individual quilts. While an entry on a blog can give insight to the thought process of a particular quilter, a community conversation about the entry occurs in the comments section of individual posts. When Felice Regina, an illustrator, and designer based in Houston, Texas posted a blog entry about her perspective of quilters identifying as artists troubling because she thought that “A person who makes quilts might call themselves “artists” in order to elevate their work...because they feel that the...title has more distinction [and that]...this rationale...implies that being a quilter is not good enough,” she sparked a productive

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Douglas, "When Is a Teapot Not a Teapot?" *American Art* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/518291>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

dialogue with her blog followers about the topic.<sup>17</sup> While the comments section of social media sites can become overrun with debate and controversy, they can also become spaces of agreement, encouragement, and support. Many of Regina's blog readers and followers concurred with her views on quilters identifying as artists and often noted that they appreciated her raising the issue because they found the discussion interesting and relevant.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Chawne Kimber has no reluctance in calling herself an artist. She has an appreciation for both art and craft, but she clearly articulates on social media and interviews with others that she is an artist and her quilts, and other textiles she creates, are art.

Whether quilters see themselves as artists or not, the works they produce are often seen as art by those viewing or appreciating their work, as the reception of the quilts of Gee's Bend makes evident. Indeed, the exhibition of the Gee's Bend quilts made clear to many, particularly in the museum world—where the debate seems to matter most—that though quilts were often classified as folk and craft objects, they are also works of art.<sup>19</sup> Gee's Bend is a small rural area in Alabama with a long history of quilting. Though Gee's Bend women quilted individually and as members of quilting bees or a guild for decades, their work was unknown outside of their community. It was not until the first exhibition of some of their quilts in 2002 at the Whitney Museum that the world outside of Gee's Bend became aware of the history and quilting talent of the women who have lived there and continue to reside there.

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<sup>17</sup> Felice Regina, "Why I Don't Identify as an 'Artist,'" *I am Luna Sol* (blog), entry posted November 13, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.iamlunasol.com/2015/11/why-i-dont-identify-as-artist.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics*, "Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America?" Episode 5, 2011, created by Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.