

<b>Institution:</b> Manchester Metropolitan University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
<b>Title of case study:</b> 'Thread Bearing Witness': Changing Lives One Stitch at a Time		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2003–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Alice Kettle	Professor	2005–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2013–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Professor Alice <u>Kettle</u> is one of the world's most important textile artists whose seminal and award-winning work has created cultural and disciplinary change. Her ground-breaking projects have shaped textile practice and set the benchmark for innovative, participatory projects. <u>Kettle</u> generates collaborative methodologies, empowering marginalised communities and interrogating textiles' role in shaping identity, politics and society. The <i>Making It</i> project shaped Arts Council England's (ACE) policy on craft and informed the monumental project, <i>Thread Bearing Witness</i>, which explored refugee displacement through textiles. It challenged an art-historical perception of craft and its practitioners as subordinate, and has generated 678,783 visitors to date. <u>Kettle</u> transforms lives by evoking stitch as a form of resilience and has evolved a participatory art practice that enables trust, equity and co-creativity.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p><u>Kettle</u>'s research has established an innovative methodology of collaborative and participatory textile practice that has an immense personal significance for the people that she works with. <u>Kettle</u>'s projects engage diasporic communities, international organisations, schools, community groups and the public via workshops, exhibitions and publications. <u>Kettle</u>'s work is held in international collections, including the Crafts Council London; Hanshan Art Museum, China and the Museum of Decorative Art and Design, Riga, Latvia. Throughout her distinguished career and in her former role as President of the Embroiderers' Guild (2019 onwards), <u>Kettle</u> has explored the role of textiles in valorising women's rights; visualising narratives of displacement and belonging; empowering marginalised communities and individuals; and communicating through the agency of stitch [1].</p> <p>The genesis of <u>Kettle</u>'s ground-breaking collaborative methodology is rooted in her project, <i>Pairings</i> (2009-2011), which established a model of interdisciplinary craft production, involving 38 practitioners from Manchester School of Art and other institutions, including Sunderland, Falmouth, Cardiff and Chichester [2]. These partnerships settled into ongoing creative relationships; informed teaching; and produced seminal artworks. They were also the foundation of <u>Kettle</u>'s involvement with the Cultural Olympiad (2012) and the <i>Making It</i> festival (2013) [3]. Building on this innovative model of collaborative making, <i>Thread Bearing Witness</i> (2017-2019) used stitched textiles to examine subjects of migration, displacement and cultural identity, specifically as experienced by refugees and asylum seekers. Centred on a major exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester (2018-2019), with multiple satellite projects, <u>Kettle</u>'s monumental textile work was co-created with refugees in France, Italy and Greece, as well as the northwest and south of England. The project was documented in the monograph, <i>Thread Bearing Witness</i> (2018), and the book chapter, <i>Resilient Stitch</i> (2020) [4].</p> <p>The project ran over 100 workshops for international refugees, who explored their personal experiences, emotions and memories through drawing and embroidery. Stitch was used as a narrative device and culturally-specific language, enabling them to tell their own stories as part</p>		

of a collective whole. The sharing of personal testimonies in dialogue and discussion accompanied the act of drawing and stitching. These artworks became integral figurative elements of Kettle's expansive murals, which were exhibited alongside drawings and textile pieces signed by individual refugees [5]. Kettle continued to work with refugees, creating further artwork that was exhibited at the London Art Fair (2020) and the Crafts Council exhibition 'Collect' (2020), which resourced the establishment of an online sewing group during Covid19 with Refugee Action (2020). A further facet of *Thread Bearing Witness* was the public participatory project, *Stitch A Tree* (2017-2019) [6], inspired by the Refugee Resilience Collective (2013 onwards). The latter worked with children at Dunkirk refugee camp to create tree drawings as a narrative therapy tool. Kettle invited participants to stitch a tree that represented their connection with place, through distinctive styles of indigenous embroidery. Participants also wrote a caption elucidating the personal significance and symbolism embedded in their stitched tree. Many schools and refugee groups adopted the project as a means of teaching stitch as well as exploring issues of migration and the environment. The individual trees were sewn together to form two giant patchwork Forest hangings that symbolised unity, equality, and a shared language of making. Participants for Forest 1 came from all over the world. Forest 2 was made in Karachi, Pakistan, where Kettle worked with over 100 women.

### 3. References to the research

1. **Kettle, A.** and Webb, J.A., 'A Stitch in Time: Historical Authenticity and Site-Specific Textiles', book chapter in Barber, C. and Macbeth, P. (eds.) *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (2014), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, ISBN 9781443856959
2. **Kettle, A.**, *Pairings I* exhibitions (2010-13) and *Pairings II* exhibition (2012) <https://alicekettle.co.uk/pairings/>
3. **Kettle, A.**, Ravetz, A. and Felcey, H. (eds.), *Collaboration Through Craft* (2013), Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, ISBN 0857853929
4. **Kettle, A.**, *Thread Bearing Witness* (2018), The Artists Agency, ISBN 9781916432505
5. **Kettle, A.**, *Thread Bearing Witness* exhibition, The Whitworth Art Gallery (1 September 2018-24 February 2019)
6. **Kettle, A.**, 'Stitch a Tree', book chapter in *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* (2020) eds. Burns, J. and Duncan, D. Liverpool University Press, ISBN 9781800345560

#### Funding:

**G1.** *Stitch A Tree*: GFTA-00045936, Arts Council England: GBP37,769

### 4. Details of the impact

Kettle's research, specifically *Thread Bearing Witness*, has had a profound impact in a range of arenas that encompass the cultural, institutional, societal and pedagogical realms. Her collaborative methodology promotes international engagement and inclusion, placing textiles and stitch at the vanguard of an exciting and socially-engaged contemporary art practice.

#### Cultural and Institutional Impact

The high-profile venues, lengthy exhibition spans, acclaimed media reviews and lauded publications linked to *Thread Bearing Witness* were ground-breaking in the medium of textiles, placing it firmly in the rarefied sphere of fine art. The monumental scale of Kettle's intricately stitched textiles has changed perceptions of what stitched textiles could do or be, creating a new paradigm for the field, which has challenged canonical art-historical hierarchies. Moreover, Kettle has reframed textiles as a shared, as well as a solely individual practice, inherently suited to collaboration, participation and co-creation, thus turning "the belief in the single-handed creation (of textiles) on its head." [A]. Jennifer Harris, Curator of The Whitworth Art Gallery's renowned textile collection (1982-2016), commented on how Kettle's work shaped curatorial policy: "Alice was unique in the scale and ambition of her textile work. It shaped my collecting policy and the collection at The Whitworth. She was at the forefront of a new and emerging type of textiles art which redefined the medium. Alice is unique in the impact that she has had outside the UK as one of the few textile artists with work in international collections." [B].

The artwork generated by *Thread Bearing Witness* was shown in eight high-profile exhibitions, centred on The Whitworth Art Gallery, and seen by 678,783 visitors [C]. The other venues were: Winchester Discovery Centre (2017); British Textile Biennial (2019); Gawthorpe Hall (*Strands of Time and Place* 2019); Hanshan Museum, China (2019); Karachi Biennale, Pakistan (2019); The Knitting and Stitching Show (2020) and *Threads of Change*, Saïd Business School, Oxford (2020). In 2020, Kettle's work with refugees was also the acclaimed central exhibit at the London Art Fair (2020). *Thread Bearing Witness* engaged new practitioners and audiences, incorporating international grassroots and specialist textile practice. The project mobilised a sea-change in museological practice, reconfiguring the gallery space and reconceptualising exhibitions from mere spectacle to participatory and transformative events. Alistair Hudson, Director of the Whitworth, attested to the project's revolutionary approach, "the first exhibition to present making as a way of understanding, processing and thinking about societal issues. It challenged established thinking about the value of making. *Thread Bearing Witness* reinstated the importance of art, expression, creativity and manufacturing... It influenced our thinking as an institution and changed the way the Whitworth worked with artists in the city." [D]. *The Guardian* equally recognised Kettle's pioneering role in "creating a new, politically-engaged textiles practice through unique and powerful work." [E]. Visitors to the exhibitions were deeply moved by the representations of refugees' experiences, with comments such as, "I was so touched. So moving, so poignant – made me cry" and "Work created by human hands reminds us that refugees are people just like us." [F].

Kettle's research has also had an impact on many individual textile artists working within *Thread Bearing Witness*: one example is Manchester-based textile student Ibukun (Bukky) Baldwin, who Kettle mentored as the project's artist-in-residence (2019). Bukky became the first 'Workshop' resident at the Whitworth, running courses for refugees. The initiative led to her Deutsche Bank Award for Creative Entrepreneurs in 2019 [G]. *Thread Bearing Witness* thus re-conceptualised the gallery as an inclusive and productive space where things are discussed, taught, made and sold at the same time as dispossessed people being educated and empowered.

Kettle has equally changed institutional policy in the UK. *Pairings* and *Making It* were the nascent models for *Thread Bearing Witness* and led Kettle to consult on Craft Development Strategy for the Arts Council in South East England (2014). Lynne Dick, former Director of the Making Space charity, who were the project partners on *Making It*, commented on how the project had "amplified the position of Making Space, enabling this small charity to build in the success and continuously attract new emerging designer-makers to the studio. Since *Making It*, Making Space studios have been fully occupied and the charity has supported over 21 different designer makers as tenants, a real success." [H].

### Societal and Pedagogical Impact

Of all the significant changes resulting from *Thread Bearing Witness*, the most profound are those experienced by vulnerable and marginalised people who have benefited from taking part in the project. In the UK, 89 refugee families participated in *Thread Bearing Witness* and regular charitable donations generated from the project go to PIKPA camp, Greece. Participants commented how stitching textiles facilitated communication ("Everyone realised that stitch was a language that communicated individual stories, feelings and emotions"); promoted wellbeing ("People felt valued through their stitching. The stitching allowed them to tell their stories. It was a very healing and positive process"); created community ("The day we went to the exhibition at the Whitworth, I was so proud that my name was displayed. At that moment I became a member of the UK and the future."); and fostered self-esteem ("I had such sadness, I forgot I could draw and create art."). The project further inspired and enabled participants to enter education and careers, with one participant saying: "It has inspired me to study dressmaking at university. I realised it's never too late. It was very beneficial." [I]. The project continues to produce legacy impacts: Kettle has set up an online *Sewing Group* during the COVID pandemic as a supportive, creative space, and Kani Kamil, an artist in *Thread Bearing Witness*, has commenced a self-funded PhD project entitled 'The 'Unnatural Silence' of Iraqi Kurdish Women', supervised by Kettle.

Kettle's work in educational settings has generated positive change and pedagogical impact with over 55 schools and colleges taking part in *Thread Bearing Witness* alone. In 2019 *Stepping*

*Stones*, a charity for children with special needs, invited *Kettle* to become a patron, commenting that the project was “the stimulus for creative work”. This resulted in 16 pupils achieving Explore Art Awards. One pupil from another school stated that, “It was amazing to see our work on display in such a prestigious gallery [The Whitworth] and I will remember the experience forever”. In 2019 *Kettle* participated in The Mushaira Project, which worked with 27 Manchester schools to make quilts and poetry pods. Jocelyn Aschavir, a teacher, noted how the project educated children about the refugee crisis, increased their creative skills and promoted a sense of cohesion and belonging: “Some of the children had followed the news about Syria and some were aware of the refugee camps in Greece ... It was the chance to take part in a collaborative piece of art and to see the huge finished product displayed in a gallery they had never visited before that impacted them the most ... Primary schools are community hubs and reach out to the community... The children who visited the gallery with their families were very impressed by their artwork being part of a bigger whole... they felt that they were part of a bigger community.”. Vanessa Rolf, the project artist in schools, expressed how stitch created mutual understanding: “The ‘*Stitch a Tree*’ project spoke to people who already understood many of the issues facing refugees but also to those who felt less comfortable talking about the subject as this was a non-confrontational route to discussing displacement and humanity.” [J].

In Karachi, *Kettle* worked with 100 women, many of whom spoke about the life-changing effects of taking part in *Thread Bearing Witness*: “Until today I only stitched in the four walls of the house or at Behbud, I never knew that the work we are doing and giving will be showcased at such a high platform. Calling us here today, promoting us and the work we have done makes us realize that we are not only made to take care of our homes, but we can also go in the outside world and stand on our own feet, we can accomplish anything.”; “I feel very proud. If my husband was present, it would show him that his wife is capable of much more than just handling the house.”; “There are a lot of tensions in life but this sort of work helps cope with them, making it easier to deal with.”; “It shows all the hard work we have put into this project; our hard work is usually hidden to the world, nobody notices us or recognizes our work.”; “It has opened our minds to new ideas.” [K].

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Professor Tim Ingold, *Collaboration Through Craft* book review (2013). Corroborating *Kettle*’s impact on the textiles discipline.
- B. Jennifer Harris, former Curator of textile art at The Whitworth testimonial. Corroborating *Kettle*’s impact on the textiles discipline.
- C. *Thread Bearing Witness*, visitor numbers across all venues, and evaluation report. Corroborating the reach and significance of *Thread Bearing Witness*
- D. Alistair Hudson, Director of the Whitworth Art Gallery testimonial. Corroborating impact on curatorial practice.
- E. *Thread Bearing Witness* exhibition review, Editor’s Choice, *The Guardian*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017. Corroborating *Kettle*’s impact on the textiles discipline.
- F. *Thread Bearing Witness* and *Strands of Time* visitor feedback; Evaluation statistics from British Textiles Biennale. Corroborating impact on exhibition participants
- G. Ibukun Baldwin article. Corroborating impact on project participants.
- H. Lynne Dick, ACE testimonial. Corroborating impact on national policy.
- I. Refugee project participant testimonial. Corroborating impact on project participants.
- J. Jocelyn Aschavir and Vanessa Rolf (*Stitch a Tree*) testimonials. Corroborating impact on project participants.
- K. Women from Karachi testimonials. Corroborating international impact on project participants.