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Dissertation

ANTHROPOLOGIES OF FIBER:
CLAIRE ZEISLER, ED ROSSBACH, SHEILA HICKS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s and 1970s, American artists Claire Zeisler, Ed Rossbach, and Sheila Hicks helped forge an international art movement that expanded the boundaries of fiber usage and, by extension, the boundaries of art itself. Often with only a loom, hook, or their own hands as tools, they crafted soft sculptures from thread, string, and rope. In contrast to recent formalist and feminist attempts to recover the overlooked genre of Fiber Art, this dissertation explores the ways in which artists employed fiber to register the ethnic and economic tensions of their era. Zeisler, Rossbach, and Hicks borrowed anthropological strategies to research the materials and processes associated with non-Western, Native American, and South American textile histories. Incorporating these principles into their own work, the artists in this project promote such art forms while simultaneously appropriating them as a ground for articulating their own responses to issues of industrialization and globalization.

Chapter One contextualizes the dissertation's three case studies by describing the Fiber Art movement, its contemporary reception, and its relationship to anthropology. Chapter Two highlights Chicagoan Claire Zeisler, who used her personal collection of African, Oceanic, and Native American art as source material for her thread-based sculptures. She therefore promoted

diverse cultural traditions while also taking advantage of these art forms to establish her own artistic identity. Ed Rossbach, the subject of Chapter Three, studied international textile traditions as a teacher and theorist at the University of California, Berkeley. He repurposed ancient and foreign techniques using ephemeral, mass-produced materials, thereby challenging the romanticized distinction between the industrial present and preindustrial past. Finally, Chapter Four considers how Sheila Hicks engaged directly with fiber workshops in Mexico, Chile, India, Morocco, and France through travel and collaboration. By assimilating motifs and materials from these experiences into installations that were shown in corporate settings, her art alluded to the complex relationships between workers around the world. In their respective roles as collector, scholar, and traveler, these artists drew from anthropological discourses to provide critical perspective on United States society at a time when global communication and transportation technologies brought cultures into collision.