

ON THE GRID

“The more hurdles the better – I don’t like running on the flat with the wind behind me.” Professor Ann Sutton MBE

When Ann Sutton was a small girl she and her mother went from home in Stoke-on-Trent to Altrincham, Cheshire, to visit Auntie Elsie who ran a high quality bespoke dressmaking business. Her showroom was not an easy place in which to entertain a toddler so Ann was plonked down in a changing room with a cheval mirror but her reflection did not divert her. Instead, she was given a swatch of fabric samples. The plain navy blue cloth was boring; the next, with a single white pinstripe in the warp, began to hold her interest. The third sample had a second horizontal white line woven in the weft: *“Evidently I was very pleased with these three pages and turned them back and forth seeing how plain became stripe became check, until it was time for tea.”*

The fact that this tale entered family legend implies that there was always a need to explain away Ann’s behaviour: she says she was born saying NO. However, Ann Sutton is never negative. It is rather that she searches not just for answers but simply for much better questions. And throughout her career it is a focus on the grid and its infinite possibilities that has held her attention.

For most of her early and mid-career her exploration of the grid was in weaving. The strength and tension of woven fabric comes from the warp crossing the weft in a simple network of lines that can create deep complexity. In mathematics, a grid consists of small squares, a tool for measurement in paper form for graphs, maps, pattern cutting or engineering diagrams. In terms of the visual arts, the use of the grid is important to British Constructivist artists with whom Ann Sutton has deep links. Constructivism began in Russia in the early 20th century and the artists in this avant-garde movement believed art should directly reflect the modern industrial world. Their materials were the most modern, not chosen for beauty but for effectiveness, and the method was construction rather than chipping away from marble or moulding in clay then bronze. This form of constructivism was austere and utopian but its later British version, influenced by emigres to Britain, was a more painterly form of abstract geometry. The word painterly implies colour and freedom which are typical elements of Ann Sutton’s work but she very firmly rejects any notion of aiming for beauty.

The direct trajectory of her work has been technical mastery, control of materials and the clarity of a grid. But, adding both strength and variety, the crossing line or weft of her career has been curiosity, boldness and colour. Another childhood memory is of a box of twelve felt squares, each three inches square and colourful. This was a rare and bright treat during the grey war years and the little scraps were given with the idea that Ann might make dolls' clothes. NO. Instead, she endlessly re-arranged the small pieces irritated only by two imperfections: one was not a true square and another was shiny.

Ann Sutton has always worked with a very clear and binary vocabulary: over and under; positive and negative; colour and monochrome; vertical and horizontal. But her career has been much more flexible and multifaceted than this formal studio focus suggests. She has worked as an artist, designer, teacher, author, consultant, curator, patron, arts promoter and organiser. She has seen "craft" evolve from a profession that more or less concentrated on the handmade, usually functional and traditional towards a more fluid, exciting and generous term of reference. However, Ann has always avoided the word craft when describing her own work, preferring to be called a maker which evokes energy and drive, focussing on the finished work rather than deliberating over method and materials.

Aged only 21, Ann was put in charge of the Weave Department at West Sussex College. A few years later, in Croydon, she ran what was possibly the first fine art weaving course in Britain. Still eager to continue learning herself, she enrolled at the Glamorgan Summer School in Barry, South Wales, a remarkable series of annual courses based loosely on the principles of the Bauhaus which combined art, craft and design in the hope that, eventually, a total approach to art, including architecture, would evolve. The Nazis closed the original Bauhaus in Germany but the influence remains far reaching today.

At Barry, Ann worked first as a student then as tutor in loom weaving, venturing into areas of experimentation with both materials and constructions. This made her work close to the sculptural and intellectual ideas of the fine art staff including Kenneth Martin who, with his wife Mary, were leaders of British Constructivism with clear concepts of restriction and rules, all immediately understood by Ann. The equipment with which she worked had been her first solid challenge and she found that the rules of weave could be subverted and developed to create a new logic with an infinite variety.

In 2004, after a distinguished international career especially in the USA, Japan and Scandinavia for which she was awarded the MBE, the Crafts Council organised a UK touring retrospective of her textiles. One venue was her home city of Stoke-on-Trent. When the works from her own archives were to be returned to her she donated the entire collection to museums; she wanted to “clear the decks” and start anew. This philanthropic impulse also led her to open The Ann Sutton Foundation for International Weave Research for Royal College of Arts graduates about the same time.

And so a new period of experimentation began. The phrase “clearing the decks” has a maritime ring to it and, most summers, Ann has made a long voyage on a cargo ship. The focus of the voyage was simply to draw and draw. While weaving, her designs were worked out on a small scale, never drawn, but now a new passion for lines on paper developed until a hurdle rose up in the form of waves. The sea tossed away her control of the pencil as wavy lines emerged under her hand and, turning this adversity to strength, she created a long series of “on the move” pencil and pen drawings made either on a ship, a train or in a vintage Porsche. She now describes herself as “*released from straight lines.*”

She also experimented with paint but did not get on with its eccentric fluidity. Instead she made an important transitional work, *Black/White Grid*, in which layers of plastic paint on nylon are suspended at a distance from the wall so that substance and reflection, paint and support, begin to flicker and alter. This is painting without brushes and moved her firmly into the arena of sculpture with an architectural formality, strongly related to the wall behind. In 1995, she had exhibited woven studies at Winchester School of Art and, in one work, by superimposing grids, began to exploit the power of layering. Twenty years later layering has become an important format of her work and a major five-layered piece, *Moving Through*, was made for Collect at the Saatchi Gallery in 2015 to mark her 80th birthday.

The controlled translucency of her layers next emerges in a series of cubes, never quite the same form but always the exact same dimensions, seemingly caught in mid-tumble or group shuffle on plinths. Some are of mesh; another consists of crawling outlines. Occasionally, a new material is casually introduced, just part of the crowd.

It is important to the artist that the materials employed are not lovingly listed as a critic or curator tends to do. For Ann, this would be a fetish. She describes

the materials as "humble" and they are of the everyday, used in medicine, house building, theatre, sewing: anywhere and everywhere as long as it works. But in her most recent work the list has become longer and unexpectedly varied. For many years she ran her own workshop and worked in collaboration. Recently she has taken joy in employing local artisans but emphasises that she also works with skills that anyone can use.

Her 2014 series of spatial drawings are animated by the viewer, linear shapes altering as we pass by or glance back. Works from 2015/2016 emphasise the idea of looking through so the grid now becomes a frame, lens or window, teasing our view with mirrors, peepshows sometimes offering glimpses of hidden jewels of paint.

A grid is a platform for measure and plotting and also the starting point for Formula One high-octane races, town planning and the definition of national connections of power sources. In electricity, we are now moving from the Super Grid to the Smart Grid: Ann Sutton is always just ahead of her time.

'I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it' Picasso

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