

# NÅLENS ØYE

Samtidsbroderi



The Needle's Eye  
Contemporary Embroidery

# NÅLENS ØYE

Samtidsbroderi

The Needle's Eye  
Contemporary Embroidery

# Innhold/Contents

<b>Forord/Preface</b>	6
<b>Utbredelse, randsoner og overskridelser. Om broderi i kunst og samtid</b> Anne Karin Jortveit	11
<b>Intervensjoner. Gammel broderikunst møter ny</b> Anne Kjellberg	31
<b>Kunstnerpresentasjoner / Artist presentations</b>	45
<b>Prevalence, boundary zones and transgressions. Embroidery in art and contemporary life</b> Anne Karin Jortveit	99
<b>Interventions. Old embroidered art meets new</b> Anne Kjellberg	113
<b>Verksliste / List of works</b>	123

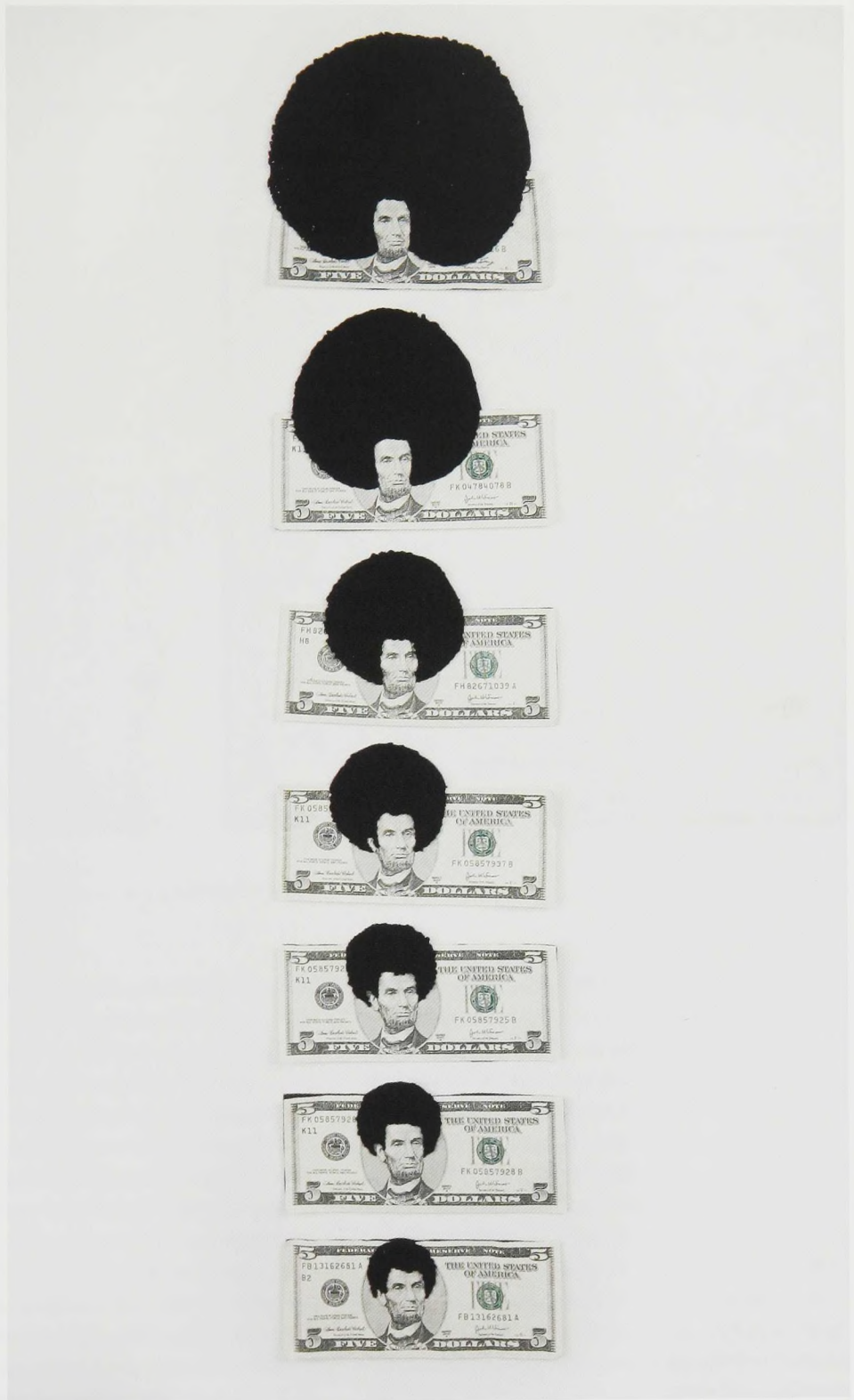
# Sonya Clark

(1967, Washington, DC)

Bor og arbeider i / Lives and works in Richmond, Virginia

Når jeg forsøker å nøste opp i innviklede spørsmål, trekkes jeg instinktivt mot ting og gjenstander som jeg kan forholde meg personlig til og som jeg kan bruke som utgangspunkt, som for eksempel en kam, et papirark eller et hårstrå. Men jeg tiltrekkes også av hvordan den enkelte gjenstand kan virke som et nettverk, og av de mange ulike måter den kan oppdages på eller tolkes av et bredt publikum. Jeg vrir og vender på gjenstandens form for å få betrakteren til å delta i en samtale om betydningen av det kollektive. Kan et hårstrå berette en livshistorie? Jeg har troen på at gjenstanden kan romme både mine fortellinger, dine fortellinger og våre fortellinger. På denne måten blir den hverdagslige «tingen» en linse som vi kan se hverandre bedre gjennom. Gjenstanden og dens avbildning gir opphav til et visuelt ordforråd, som i sin tur danner et språk som spenner fra det hverdagslige til det politiske til det poetiske.

When trying to unravel complex issues, I am instinctively drawn to things that connect to my personal narrative as a point of a departure: a comb, a piece of paper, or a strand of hair. But it is also the object's ability to act as a rhizome, the multiple ways in which it can be discovered or read by a wide audience that draws me in. I manipulate the object in a formal manner to engage the viewer in conversation about collective meaning. Can a strand of hair tell a life story? I trust that my stories, your stories, our stories are held in the object. In this way, the everyday «thing» becomes a lens through which we may better see one another. A visual vocabulary derived from object and image forms a language ranging from the vernacular to the political to the poetic.



*Afro Abe (progression)*, 2008  
Broderi på dollarseddel / Embroidery on US currency

# Prevalence, boundary zones and transgressions

## Embroidery in art and contemporary life

Anne Karin Jortveit

*– and for my needle I absolutely hated it.*

Lucy Hutchinson, 1906.<sup>1</sup>

*I am now quite obsessed with embroidery.*

Ida-Lovisa Rudolfsson, 2011.<sup>2</sup>

In the Carl Larsson house in Dalarna, Sweden, there is an unusual and thought-provoking cushion. Spreading out across a surface of black cloth is an embroidered mass of red flames and tear-shaped forms. Stitched along the lower edge are the dates 1914–1918. The pillow was made by Karin Larsson (1859–1928), an artist in her own right, but known in her day primarily as the wife of her famous husband. A number of the design and craft objects in the house were the work of Karin Larsson. Inspired by the English Arts and Crafts movement, she wove and embroidered to meet the many needs of her household.<sup>3</sup> Her impressions found an outlet in the design of everyday utility objects. Social occurrences gave meaning to, and helped to determine, the way things were decorated.

In Karin Larsson's thoughtful hands, a cushion, intended for decoration and comfort, could become a silent meditation on a global conflagration. As an early illustration of how everyday objects could be coupled with reflective observation and insights, her creative

and innovative gaze is still relevant today. For it is precisely this approach that is central to the experimental and free embroidery used in contemporary art: the exploration of, and search for links between, the idiom of embroidery and the world, on both the personal and the social level. There is, however, a significant difference between then and now: whereas embroidery was once something women *had* to learn, today it is something both they and men *choose* to do.

### **(Parts of) the story**

*She is silent, and she – why not write down the word that frightens me – she is thinking.*

Colette<sup>4</sup>

In *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, the English art historian Rozsika Parker makes the point incisively and succinctly: «To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.» Her book is regarded as an important contribution to the history of embroidery from a feminist perspective. In the 19th century, the image of the silent woman, deep in concentration, her head gracefully inclined over her embroidery, became the very epitome of the feminine. Moreover, it was considered a thoroughly natural pairing. In her profound analysis, Rozsika

Parker probes this link with embroidery, exploring the methods and strategies women used, despite the obstacles, «to negotiate the constraints of femininity».<sup>5</sup> Just as Karin Larsson made her home a meaningful arena for her life, women throughout history have striven to push back their boundaries, even if progress often consisted of only the tiniest steps.

It is (still) hard to think of embroidery and art without also thinking of the roles and positions women have historically assumed in society and culture. Not even the artist who prefers to look ahead rather than think about the past can escape the issue, and many a text about embroidery suddenly finds itself grappling with at least a few of the common notions about meticulous needlework or traditional women's pursuits that posed as hobbies. And I have to admit that the same is true of my own preparatory notes. One of the first thing I wrote was: «Embroidery? Just mentioning the word will prompt certain responses. These will include descriptions of tablecloths with floral borders, bell-pulls, and framed landscapes behind glass built up stitch by stitch.» One of the things I did was of course to scrutinise my visual recollections of the home I grew up in. Even with a certain knowledge of embroidery's rich and diverse history, it is intriguing that it was textiles of precisely this kind that sprang to mind in my first phase of preparation.

Although this text is about contemporary embroidery, I find it important to cast a glance back into the recent past, to identify transitions and lines of continuity. What was done in the past will have a bearing on what is being done now. Instead of personal memories, I could have referred, for example, to the embroidered banners of the English suffragettes in the early years of the last century, banners behind which these courageous women marched in pursuit of change. For these pioneers of women's rights, embroidery was not the language of the woman who bowed her head, but a highly relevant tool of communication, which they were proud to master. They fetched embroidery out from the private sphere and into that of urgent, collective action. Embroidery united the skilled with the not so skilled. The banners of the suffragettes were not just superb pieces of embroidery; they signalled the inclusion of those who struggled to contribute with clumsy, maladroit fingers.

In the years since that turbulent period, embroidery has made a contribution to a number of other political struggles. One notable example is the «Green-

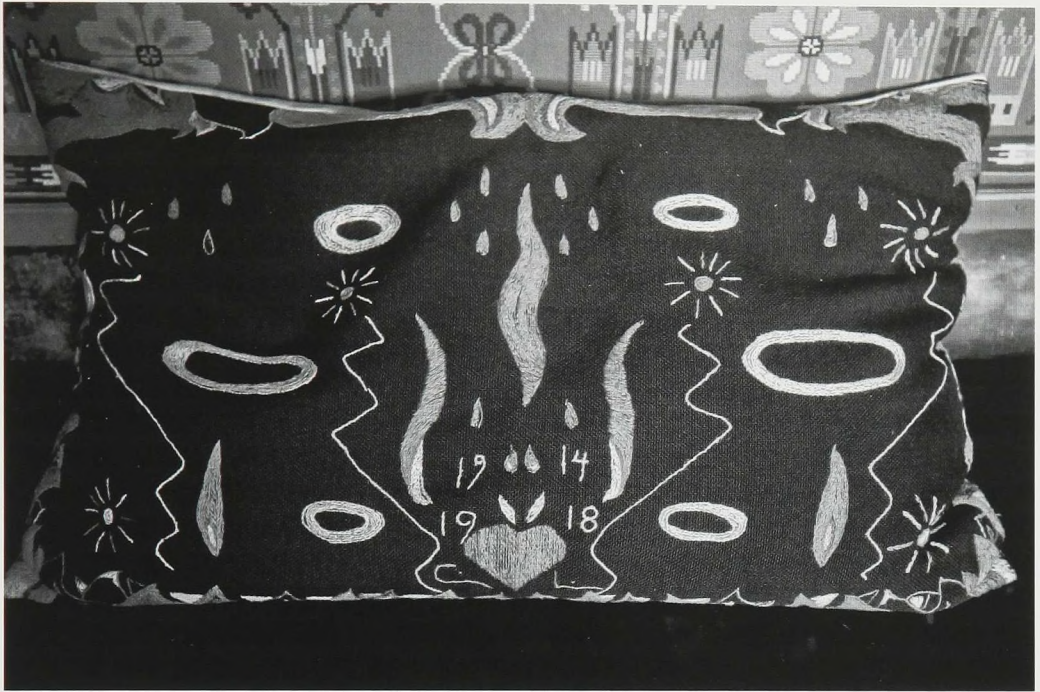
ham Common Women's Peace Camp», a protest that began in 1981 outside the Greenham Common RAF base in Berkshire, England. In this campaign, which would last nineteen long years, the women activists used sewn, embroidered banners to articulate their resistance to the stationing of nuclear weapons at the base. Even the fences around the facility became a canvas for woven and embroidered messages.<sup>6</sup>

If I hadn't thought of this, I could have gone straight to the field of art and mentioned the monumental but highly controversial feminist installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) by the American Judy Chicago (b. 1939). With its embroidered runners, its ceramic table settings and everything else that is needed to entertain and honour a company of the most celebrated women, both mythical and real, from every age of history and every corner of the world, Chicago would never have been able to put together this magnificent spread without the help of hundreds of volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

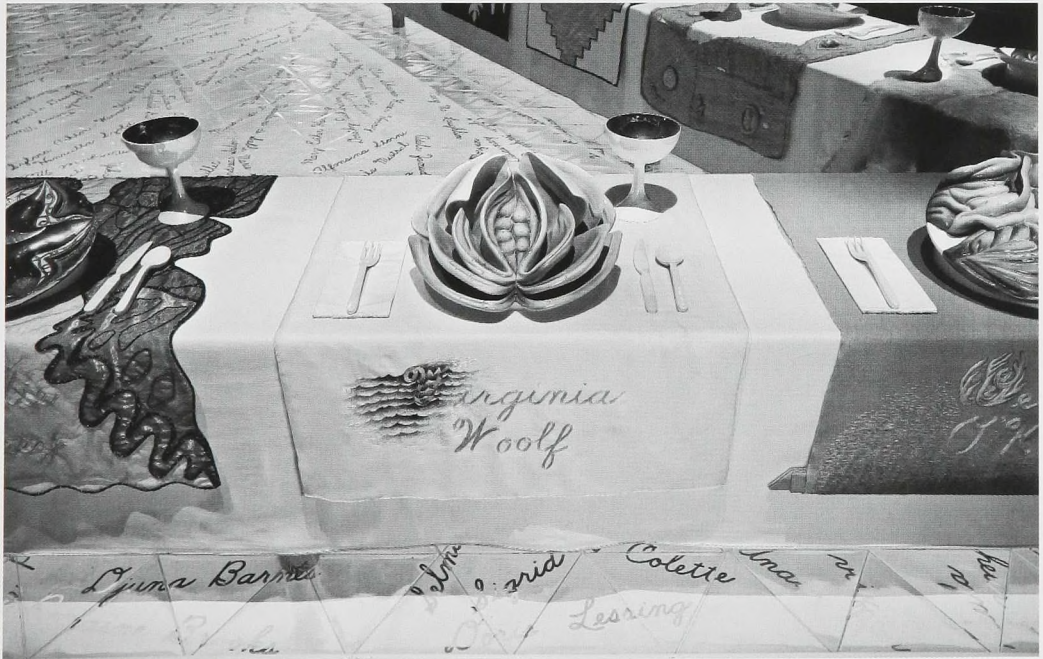
Revitalised by the Arts and Crafts movement and Bauhaus, embroidery became a field of active experimentation for the historical avant-garde. Sonia Delaney in France (1885–1979), Sophie Taeuber-Arp in Switzerland (1889–1943) and the French-German Jean Arp (1886–1966) are just a few of the artists who actively explored the possibilities of the medium. Also for Russian artists such as Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), embroidery was an essential tool in the work of uniting art and people. Embroidery acquired new relevance with developments in feminist art in the 1970s, but although its use during this period was part of a deliberate art-political strategy, it was not embraced with universal enthusiasm. To quote the art historian Jorunn Haakestad:

... embroidery was viewed in two different ways: it was seen as a way of controlling women ... But to embroider was also a subversive, undermining activity. Embroidery was an aesthetic and expressive medium. It became a tool of liberation.<sup>8</sup>

This tiny selection of examples illustrates the contribution of embroidery in situations where there is a need and urgency to make a statement. Paradoxically, it seems that the «gentle» art of embroidery has often been in the thick of the fight, where every move matters. One of the strengths of embroidery, as I see it, is that it figures simultaneously in a crafts field that is



Pillow embroidered by Karin Larsson.  
Photo © Karl och Karin Larssons släktförening, Sundborn



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, detail  
Photo: Jook Leung



global and highly diverse, and in a range of different social and cultural contexts. It is practised by and a source of joy and fascination to countless people, at every level of sophistication. From the simplest amateur to the most professional artist.

### Frictions

The Swedish art historian Anna Lena Lindberg believes the interest in embroidery in the contemporary art field may in the long run help to change an art institution which she regards as gender-infected. In her essay «Den broderande konstnären. Om genre, konstnärskap och kön» (The embroidering artist. On genre, artistry and gender) she questions the persistent notion that artistic techniques have a biological foundation.<sup>9</sup> The anachronistic tendency to view embroidery as a female preserve becomes particularly evident when men adopt the medium. It is here that a certain objectifying distance to everything conventional comes into play. One need only go a few years back to find exhibitions with titles like «Boys Who Sew». In the context of the latter, the critic Lucy Wilson wrote that, «[t]extiles is such a traditionally female medium that an exhibition of textile works made only by men inevitably creates sexual and political tensions».<sup>10</sup> Shortly after that, I came across the exhibition with the deeply satisfying title «Beware of Embroidery».<sup>11</sup> If this is illustrative of a contemporary attitudes towards the revival of embroidery, I certainly like the bold use of the «word of warning». Although embroidery alone is unlikely to bring about a paradigm shift in art, it is a fact that interest in crafts is growing steadily. The interest in handcrafts shifts the frame around what at any one time is regarded as art, raising ever more important questions such as «who does embroidery, why do they do it and in what ways?» – to quote the art historian Jorunn Veiteberg.<sup>12</sup>

For Israeli-born Orly Cogan (b. 1971), embroidering on top of embroidery done by women in the past provides a means to explore and expose the sexuality that is quite literally sewn into the fibres of the fabric. In surrounding herself with every figurative stereotype and cliché of the feminine that could possibly be embroidered, she is applying a strategy of sensory excess that encourages us to re-examine female roles. The Egyptian artist Ghada Amer (1963) uses embroidery explicitly as a means of infiltration. For her, painting is

still a male dominated field and the way to get to grips with this on the ideological plane is to introduce that which painting finds almost unspeakable – embroidery. Overtly feminist, she writes about her interventions using pornographic images and embroidery:

I create materially abstract paintings, but I integrate in this male field a feminine universe: that of sewing and embroidery. By hybridizing those worlds, the canvas becomes a new territory where the feminine has its own place ...<sup>13</sup>

Incidentally, Anna Lena Lindberg reminds us that in the past embroidery was often referred to as «needle painting», and that in the late 18th century, the Art Academy in Stockholm frequently exhibited embroidered pictures alongside paintings. It was a time before refined opinion had decided that embroidery was nothing short of *embarrassing*. When I myself was an art student, I once took a sewing machine into college, which was immediately dismissed as having nothing to do with art. When I pointed out that it was a *machine* that I was bringing into the sculpture department, it was admitted that it ought to be accepted. I finished my project without hearing any further objections.

### What is embroidery – today?

One thing is certain: contemporary artists do not just sit around with fabric in their laps repeatedly threading needles. They sew by hand, with sewing machines, use computers and countless different materials, embroider in groups, move between indoors and outdoors, and navigate both analogue and digital spaces. Their work can be aesthetic, conceptual, political, poetic, socially engaged, and more besides. Embroidery is classified as a textile art, but is often combined or merged with painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, installation and performance, to mention just a few key genres. Embroidery is both image and text. Most embroidery is done in safe surroundings, but some people embroider for dear life. It is simply not possible to reduce contemporary embroidery to a single, all-encompassing formula. Embroidery as such is just as prevalent as artistic projects. And if one includes everyone who uses a needle and thread in some way or other, the field grows even bigger.

Not only are there dedicated embroiderers, the



Orly Cogan, *Forget Me Not*, 2009  
Embroidery, appliqué and crochet on vintage table cloth

medium also plays a part as one of several techniques that artists use in parallel with others. One could name numerous intensely personal or politically oriented projects that use embroidery, from the intricate and technically challenging to the spontaneous and expressive; from those of an Anne Wilson to those of a Louise Bourgeois. And as if the front surface weren't enough, there are artists who turn their embroidery back to front, to expose qualities that wouldn't otherwise see the light of day. Synnøve Øyen's (b. 1974) embroidery

blurs the distinction between front and back. Each has assumed characteristics of the other, with stitches appearing and disappearing in a variety of playful movements.

For the German Jochen Flinzer (b. 1959), neither side is given priority. In his free-hanging embroideries, the figurative «front» and the abstract «back» function as two interdependent narrative inputs that illuminate and complement each other.

Redefinition tends to be a crucial strategy in art,

and in recent decades, embroidery has proved a flexible category. When the focus is on the process, one can say that the *work of embroidering* is just as important as the finished product. In this respect, embroidery is as much a matter of *method* and *attitude* as it is a range of techniques. The Italian Aligiero Boetti (1940–94) claimed that his best-known project, the series of world maps entitled *Mappa* (1971–94), was a work to which he personally didn't really contribute anything at all:

For that work I did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that: the world is made as it is, not as I designed it, the flags are those that exist, and I did not design them; in short I did absolutely nothing; when the basic idea, the concept, emerges, everything else requires no choosing.<sup>14</sup>

In a way he is right. For these embroidered world maps, on which each country is identified by its national flag, were produced not by the artist, but by Afghan women. The maps illustrate that national borders are not fixed once and for all but have changed over time in response to shifting geopolitical realities, rather than artistic considerations. While the women were embroidering at their own pace, the colours and boundary lines were changing at another tempo.

### **In and beyond art**

On first sitting down to work on this text, I realised I faced quite a challenge. As soon as one starts looking into it, one discovers just how immense the field really is. In the words of Rozsika Parker:

The range of twentieth-century embroidery is enormous. It is practiced professionally by artists, dressmakers, embroiderers, teachers, and by millions of women as a «leisure art».<sup>15</sup>

Today, embroidery is practised by leading artists who show their work in the most prestigious art arenas, but it might also take the form of an embroidered message stitched around a lamppost by some eager young crafts activist. Although embroidery features in the finest galleries, it is at the same time integral to the less sophisticated «indie» crafts communities, which use it as a medium for messages both trivial and profound

about humanity, society and the state of the world.<sup>16</sup> The first thing anyone learns on getting involved in this scene is that it was the American sociologist Betsy Greer who, in 2003, combined the words «craft» and «activism» to form the new term «craftivism», the mantra of so-called «craftivists» and of socially engaged crafts, including those of the embroidered kind.<sup>17</sup> Since then there has been an explosion in the number of websites, blogs, exhibitions, books, campaigns and events, which literally puts all hands to work in a rapture of DIY. I shall mention just two randomly selected projects from the years since this once subversive phenomenon gained institutional approval. In 2009 Jönköping Läns Museum mounted «Craftwerk 2.0», the first major exhibition of international «craftivism» in Sweden:

It appears that ... what makes crafts so highly relevant and popular to the latest generation of activists are the aspects of local tradition and history, their community building and meditative potential, their association with manual skills and their ecological soundness.<sup>18</sup>

The following year the renowned Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol showed the relational art project «Craftivism». Whereas the Jönköping event had cultivated an edifying tone, the Bristol show was more critically oriented. According to the curatorial statement, it aimed «to question, disrupt or replace the dominant models of mass culture and consumerism».<sup>19</sup>

Embroidery has returned to where things are happening.

### **The impulse to text**

It is a familiar principle of narrative journalism that small events in life often serve well as a means to illustrate broader circumstances. Thus the fate of one private person can reach out to move and capture the interest of a broader circle. For me, the raw, unadorned hand-made quilts by the British artist Tracey Emin (b. 1963) have this kind of quality. These intricate coverings, with their medley of scraps of fabric, their misspelled words and rough stitches, and a voice that pours out a cacophony of everything from tears to muck-raking, turn the viewer into a participant. One has to be pretty thick-skinned not to be touched on

some level by sentences like: «I do not expect to be a mother, but I do expect to die alone.» Or «How could I ever leave you. I love you.»

By any measure, the written word is a frequent feature of contemporary embroidery. The reasons for this are as diverse as they would be elsewhere in the art field. For anyone who wishes to communicate a specific message, it can be safer to use text than ambiguous images. Of course, it isn't always that easy. The use of textual elements, especially in combination with selected material and visual effects, can be vague and fluid, like the doodles and text fragments of the Dutch artist Tilleke Schwarz (b. 1946), yet many artists with a social or political agenda often feel quite at home with verbal language. The American Bren Ahearn (b. 1964) makes use of the sampler tradition, embroidering delicate alphabets, to which he adds phrases that send us off in other directions. For him these are about conflicting aspects of masculinity and gender identity in American society. The pensive sentence «I guess the flowered lunchbox was the wrong accessory choice» seems to open the door to a world of sensitive, conflicted emotion.

Sometimes just a single word is enough. Sidsel Palmstrøm's (b. 1967) five-part textile installation *Erindring og reparasjon* (Recollection and repair) (2007) presents piles of white men's shirts on pedestals and under glass, meticulously folded with neat, countable edges. Each pile is held together with a white ribbon. Everything seems so calm, so balanced. A little too calm. Which is why the single words embroidered on the ribbons have such an impact. One of the ribbons bears the inscription *Raseri* (Rage) in impeccably stitched letters, another reads *Lindring* (Relief).

Like their colleagues in the past, today's artists use embroidery as a medium of productive contradictions. In the embroidered series *Lessons From My Mother* (2006), the Romanian Andrea Dezsös (b. 1968) begins each cloth with the dependable words «MY MOTHER CLAIMED THAT». These are followed by a variety of claims, each one illustrated, about what it means to be a woman. Our initial expectation is that we are about to read examples of maternal wisdom, but what we are given instead is a mixture of lies and superstitions like the following: «... that a woman's legs are so strong that no man can spread them if she doesn't let him». <sup>20</sup> Some of the claims are almost hilariously funny, others rather sad. We can safely put quotes around the word

«lessons». *Lessons From My Mother* shows that, with all its associations to respectable, orderly upbringing, embroidery can convey unexpected twists with the combination of new texts and images.

Having said that, artists are fond of emphasising the importance of the knowledge received from people close to them. Siri Ensrud (b. 1973) has vivid memories of sewing together with her mother: «The mere sight of a piece of needlework from my childhood is enough to evoke moods and almost conjure up the smell». <sup>21</sup> The American Sonya Clark (b. 1967) learned a good deal more than just embroidery from her grandmother: «As long as I would sit and stitch with her, she would tell me stories about her life growing up in Jamaica.» <sup>22</sup>

For Maria Manuela Rodrigues, growing up on Madeira was an experience steeped in embroidery. The fact that she was surrounded by women who embroidered, and that so much of life revolved around handcrafts, amounts to a substantial resource for own life and work.

### Adding stories

Not all artists buy their materials brand new from a store. Some of them choose instead fabrics that have seen a bit of life and which reflect the places where people live or have lived. Used textiles carry traces of culture, society and values. Beauty and impermanence usually go hand in hand with the history of a textile, and these are qualities artists work with in a territory between restoration, critique and dialogue. Conscious attitudes towards consumption and growth are also part of the picture, either as something that they infuse into the actual work or as a form of artistic motivation. Two examples of artists who work on fabrics that already had a place in the world are Kristine Fornes (b. 1971) and Anne Ingeborg Biringvad (b. 1967). The former embroiders playful, naive and expressive stories, often onto old tea towels and tablecloths. The latter reworks embroidered cushions, bell-pulls and other decorative textiles, incorporating them into paintings and sculptures.

The word «upcycling» has now gained fairly wide currency. <sup>23</sup> It is a term that challenges and enhances the notion of recycling, giving it a more radical edge. <sup>24</sup> Art historian Jorunn Veiteberg wrote:



Kristine Fornes, *Furu, furu, gran og gran*, 2011, detail  
Embroidery on linen

Upcycling always involves an aspect of recycling. It is essential that materials, in the form of found objects or trash, have had a previous life. But if the products are to qualify for the «up» prefix – as opposed to «down» cycling – their reuse must clearly serve to raise their value.<sup>25</sup>

Torunn Halseid Marø (b. 1967) is another artist who can be said to have delved deep into the theme of up-cycling. To this end she uses darning rather than fine embroidery.<sup>26</sup> A few years ago she acquired the wardrobe of someone who had recently passed away, which contained many items that were thoroughly threadbare and had been patched so many times it was almost impossible to see the original fabric. This strange collection, so far removed from the modern world in which clothes are often chucked in the dustbin with their price tags still on them, became a source of inspiration.<sup>27</sup> But in seeking a well used foundation for embroidery, one isn't obliged to confine oneself to textiles. The traditional Norwegian eight-petal rose will

never be the same since the Dutch artist Regien Cox (b. 1977) emblazoned it across a garage door.

### The needle's trace

The needle isn't always the virtuous tool one might think it to be, especially when one considers the countless beautiful satin-stitch flowers that have been created over the years. An essential instrument to so many professions, there is no limit to where one could imagine a needle might take you. Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) once said:

I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.<sup>28</sup>

Rozsika Parker observes rather aptly that Louise Bourgeois' works are suggestive not only of repair; they also have an element of destruction in them. The

fact that the needle is also used in contexts other than embroidery is something several artists have explored. The tool one uses doesn't even have to be a needle; one can use a stapler instead, as does the American Elana Herzog (b. 1954). Here in Norway, Jorann Abusland (b. 1976) has combined embroidery and the surgical stitch in a very striking and direct photographic work. The words «BRODER MER» (EMBROIDER MORE) are incised into a surface resembling human skin. Each letter is successively being «sewn together», as if formed from lacerations in need of surgical treatment.<sup>29</sup>

The British artist Paddy Hartley (b. 1970) also works with themes that acquire an unusual dimension when addressed via embroidery. He is interested in how the human body, especially the face, is formed, changed and manipulated, both cosmetically and as a consequence of accidents. In his *Project Façade, Spreckley* (2007), he explores the fate of an English lieutenant who lost his nose during World War I, and the lengthy process to restore his face. The experience gained from this work has since been of benefit not only in medicine but also in cosmetic surgery. Here embroidery takes us into a realm beyond our comfort zone. We are brought uncomfortably close to the atrocities of war, while at the same time, the needle's ability to make things whole again exposes the many complexities associated with different reasons for intervention. Paddy Hartley presents embroidered texts, photographs, prints, lace and officer's uniforms, and part of this material is devoted to the life that had to be endured after the treatment had come to an end. It is said that although the English lieutenant's face was eventually restored to an almost miraculous degree, no one was ever able to treat his mental scars. Not even a needle could reach that deep.<sup>30</sup>

For some artists, their embroidery is no further away than their own bodies. Most people are familiar with the semi-masochistic game of inserting a needle beneath the uppermost layer of their skin. Although many of us have more or less vague memories of this kind of self-experiment, there are some who take it much further. Another British artist, Eliza Bennett (b. 1980), turned the hand that doesn't hold the needle into the fabric for her embroidery, covering it with countless stitches. *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (2014) is the eloquent title of the video she made documenting this embellishment of her palm. In this work, the artist's principal concern was not to produce a dec-

orative effect, but rather to draw attention to the grueling physical work that many people have no choice but to endure. Although Eliza Bennett's embroidered hand resembles that of someone used to hard labour, her dramatisation also carries a note of human dignity. The Cuban Diana Fonseca Quiñones (b. 1978) has used a similar embroidery strategy, albeit to address a more personal theme. In her video work *Pasatiempos* (2004) we see her sewing the contours of a house, a car, a boat – she even finds space for the Eiffel Tower – in the palm of her hand. Given her Cuban background, these thread drawings assume a significance far beyond a mere pastime. The objects she chooses to depict represent the yearning to travel freely. Each stitch captures the hope of change.<sup>31</sup>

It is said that Marco Polo once described tattoos as «flesh embroidery».<sup>32</sup> Both tattoos and embroidery have traditionally made use of symbolic patterns, and for the English textile expert Sheila Paine, this places embroidery in a closer relationship with tattooing than with weaving or knitting. Embroidery has been a language of identity, not least in non-Western cultures. In these, patterns and ornaments function as legible codes, but in the hands of contemporary artists the meanings of these elements are often subjected to a variety of displacements. The Italian Maurizio Anseri (b. 1969) embroiders onto old photo portraits of unknown people that he finds on flea markets, creating a fascinating intersection between the «here» of embroidery and the «there» of photography. Although he almost always leaves one eye unadorned, he covers the faces with strange and intricate mask-like compositions that sometimes trace and sometimes break with the lines of the features, clothes and hairstyles. The untouched eye is impossible to ignore; it stares intently back at the viewer. In Maurizio Anseri's embroidered portraits, form and fiction distort the human physiognomy in ways that could be described as almost «unheimlich».

### Loss and restoration

*– we touch the things and the things simultaneously touch us.*

Christopher Tilley<sup>33</sup>

As a way of encouraging people to talk, especially about violent events, the language of crafts has proved highly

effect. For refugees, crafts are often a fundamental expression of their material and cultural identity, an aspect of what they call «home». In 1999, work was in progress to rebuild Bosnia–Herzegovina’s war-ravaged National Gallery. But it wasn’t just construction workers who toiled away behind the netting that covered the scaffolding along the building’s façade. Five women had installed themselves there as well, and anyone who looked would have found them busily working at their embroidery. The women were Muslim war refugees from Srebrenica who had been hired by Maja Bajevic (b. 1967), herself a native of Sarajevo. Their embroidery work was the central element of a five-day performance entitled *Women at Work – Under Construction*.<sup>34</sup> The «invisible» embroidery traditions of the women were being interwoven with the visible restoration of an important public institution. For these women, embroidery was one of the few things they still possessed after having lost virtually everything else.

Although the Lebanese artist Aya Haidar (b. 1985) grew up in London, far away from war and trauma, the stories about her birthplace and family background have been an inevitable part of her life. Having transferred photographs of bombed-out buildings in Beirut onto fabric, she patches up the holes in the façades with needle and thread. It is a kind of tactile and symbolic act of caring that implicitly touches the lives of those who are conspicuously absent from the photographs. In addition, this embroidered restoration of the destroyed buildings suggests stories of loss, memories and migration.

Embroidery stitches and techniques have migrated around the world. As with other types of material culture we encounter frequently in our daily lives, embroidery is something we seem to understand intuitively. Embroidery is legible to people who do not share a verbal language. In this sense, Aya Haidar’s textiles are a contribution to an intercultural dialogue that transcends place and circumstances.<sup>35</sup> Much the same could be said of the investigations into identity by the Norwegian–Algerian artist Hans Hamid Rasmussen (b. 1963). As someone stranded between two cultures who lost his mother tongue, embroidery is a meaningful medium through which to explore the complex processes of memory.

## To embroider means community

*In this age of anxiety, burnout, war and greed, free embroidery is for many people a creative source of joy, solace and strength. A compensating resource.*

Elsa Agélie<sup>36</sup>

The communal meeting place is the driving force behind several embroidery projects. These are typically projects with a social or political agenda, such as *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* and the Arpillera Movement in Chile, both of which are impressive in their scope and can be classed almost as institutions in their respective contexts. In recent years, a number of interesting art related projects based on public participation have been initiated in Norway as well. One highly versatile and slightly subversive venture is *Geriljabroderi* (Guerrilla Embroidery), a project started by Mona Pedersen and Astrid Loraas in 2008.<sup>37</sup> In this, participants are able to express their frustrations about life in the form of terse, cross-stitched inscriptions, often in language that doesn’t mince its words (read: profanities). In this respect, embroidery’s conventional reputation as sweet and steadfast makes it an easy target for spontaneous laughter.

A very different project founded on a far more serious and far-reaching dialogical intention is *The Stitch Project*, initiated by Hilde Hauan Johnsen and others.<sup>38</sup> This project seeks to develop and strengthen collaboration between artists in the Nordic countries and in Palestine. During the course of the project, the initiators will make journeys of varying length, meeting people from all walks of life to exchange views, stories and thoughts about local and global issues. The unifying theme is embroidery. In their luggage, they have with them a ten-metre-long cloth, to which the people they meet will make their own personal, embroidered contributions. Here the aim goes beyond mere laughter.

The ongoing project *Desconocida Unknown Ukjent* (2006–) by Lise Bjørne Linnert (b. 1964) is powerful and compelling. Since 1993, more than 1,500 women have been brutally murdered and hundreds more have disappeared in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. Many of them were working in the textile industry, and the name tags they had sewn into their work clothes have been central to the attempts to identify them. This type of label has become the focus for Lise Bjørne Linnert’s personal commitment. She organises workshops around the world, where each participant is asked to embroider

the name of one of the murdered women.<sup>39</sup> The experience of seeing a woman's name slowly taking shape on the fabric one is holding is often deeply affecting for the people who give up a little of their free time to contribute. I imagine that at times these «sewing clubs» are places of silent concentration, at others the air is abuzz with anger and commitment.

The English critic Bradley Quinn describes textiles as «threads that bind» because they tie together a range of narratives more easily and effectively than other media, while at the same time allowing for interpretations that can be both direct and metaphorical.<sup>40</sup> This tactile presence at the crossover between life and art is an important aspect of Eline Medbøe's (b. 1974) courageous project *Minneteppe* (Memorial Tapestry), which she initiated in collaboration with the Landforeningen for etterlatte ved selvmord (LEVE; the National Association for Suicide Survivors).<sup>41</sup> Since 2008, the artist, who lost her own mother to suicide a few years back, has held workshops throughout Norway for suicide survivors and created a memorial in the form of patchwork quilts. Each contributor designs, sews and embroiders his or her own personal panel, choosing symbols and attributes to commemorate the deceased. So far the *Minneteppe* project has resulted in ten quilts. «When you sit together doing something with your hands,» Eline Medbøe says, «you start talking in ways you wouldn't do in a straightforward discussion group.» In this way she confirms the social and relational qualities of textile-making that people have been aware of for centuries.<sup>42</sup> Both her own project and that of Lise Bjørne Linnert explore the important but difficult overlap between art and humanitarian work. As art critic Kjetil Røed has written about *Minneteppe*:

There is little point in discussing the design of the individual panels as art objects, since each of them is entirely subordinate to the project's overall concept ... One could say that it is irrelevant whether this works as art or not, so long as it helps in the grieving process. Which it appears to do. And perhaps it is precisely this that counts as art?<sup>43</sup>

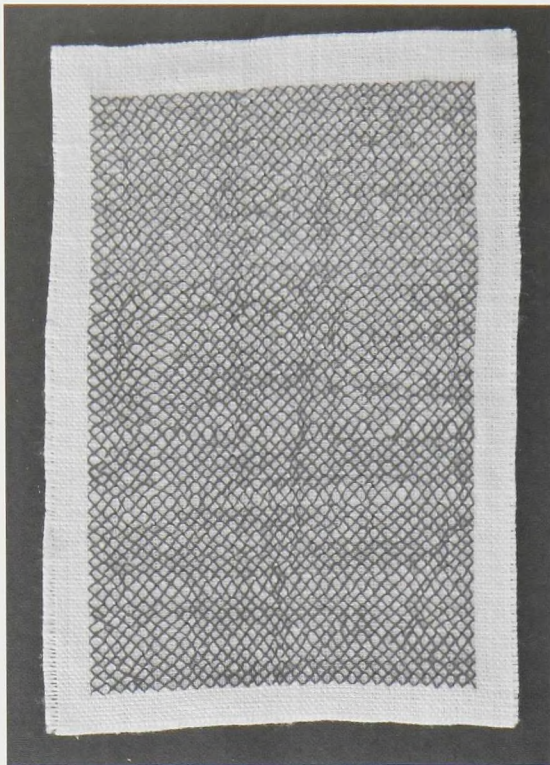
## Narrow and broad perspectives

One thing that has always fascinated me about embroidery is that it is concrete and tactile while at the same time invariably showing elegance and integrity. Even the most worn and torn embroidery fragment seems to transcend all the muck and dirt. To put it another way, despite its tangibility, embroidery is able to accommodate the universal themes. The American Anna von Mertens b. (1973), for example, embroiders momentous events in history together with surprising simultaneous occurrences. Onto a dark background, she places the configuration of the night sky at the time of some event that will forever be a milestone in world history; the moment in 1492 when Christopher Columbus glimpsed the coast of what are now the Bahamas, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, or the bombing of Baghdad in 2003. In her own words, she is quite simply documenting certain natural circumstances far beyond our Earth; the imperturbable motion of the spheres in realms untouched by human suffering and violence. On one level, Anna von Mertens works with scientific facts, on another her projects peer into historical and existential abysses that are bound to prompt reflection. The Italian Claudia Losi (b. 1971) opens up similarly broad vistas in her embroidery. We are all familiar with the picture of the Earth taken from the moon during the 1968 Apollo 8 mission. For the first time we were able to see how small, alone and vulnerable it appears, and how small, alone and vulnerable we are. Claudia Losi provides the same revelation in tactile terms by embroidering the globe onto balls of yarn. When held in the hand, they give the feeling of holding something as delicate as a bird.

## In the beginning was the cross-stitch

*Meticulously executed in blue or red checked fabric. Two, sometimes three letters. In rare cases, four. The initials distinguished one gym bag from the next. The aim was to refine a piece of textile work for the transport of one's personal items. At the same time, an exercise early in life in establishing distinctions. To sew one's initials, to mark one's identity. The needle could be rebellious, frequently adding spots of blood as casual decor. But in our hands the needle became a pen. A writing instrument that slowly marked out and separated «mine from yours». Bent over the cheap cotton fabric, with a big needle, small fingers, lips pursed in concentration, the eyes searched for the perfect spot in*





Ask Bjørlo, *Studie korssting*, 2013

Photo: Ask Bjørlo

*the corner of each square. Every stitch should be subject to the same regime. One of my first efforts at handcraft: red squares with three block capitals and an oh-so tiny chaos on the back.*

Compared with the proud, well-made samplers of earlier generations, it wasn't exactly first rate work my inexperienced hands had produced. My three cross-stitched capital letters from our crafts lesson in the 1970s could serve as a symbol as thin as a thread that the era of refining a young girl's skills was decidedly a thing of the past. By now it was compulsory for the whole class, regardless of gender, background and ability, to master a few of the most basic craft techniques. Most of us never got beyond that minimalist idiom of the gym bag.

Artists, on the other hand, have never ceased to explore the cross-stitch. The young Ask Bjørlo (b. 1992) has found his own approach. In a series of almost bashful works, he virtually obscures the cloth with row upon row of cross-stitching. Stark and quietly insistent.<sup>44</sup>

Every now and then, a stitch is slightly skewed, causing tiny irregularities in the repetitious rows. In Ask Bjørlo's pieces, «everything is peeled away, there is neither more nor less. The threads of each cross stand for themselves, they resonate alone – and in dialogue with each other. At one and the same time neutral and highly individual.»<sup>45</sup>

It never ceases to be surprising. Sometimes all it takes is the most humble of stitches. Albeit in the right hands, of course.

## Notes

- 1 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the making of the feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 84.
- 2 Ida-Lovisa Rudolfsson (b. 1979) is a Swedish textile artist. See [www.idalovisa.se](http://www.idalovisa.se)
- 3 See e.g. Karin Rydin, *Karin Larssons värld* (Stockholm: Bonnier Fakta, 2011).
- 4 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 10.
- 5 Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury 2013), 223.
- 6 The weapons were removed from the base in 1991, but the women continued their protest right up until 2000. They wanted the area returned to civil use and a memorial to be erected at the site ([www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/05/1](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/05/1)). See also [www.greenhamwpc.org.uk](http://www.greenhamwpc.org.uk)
- 7 For a discussion in the context of embroidery, see the section «Judy Chicago: The Vitality of Embroidery», pp.146–62, in Elissa Auther, *The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 8 From a catalogue text about John K. Raustein: [www.johnkraustein.com](http://www.johnkraustein.com)
- 9 Anita Göransson (ed.), *Sekelskiften och kön. Strukturella och kulturella övergångar år 1800, 1900 och 2000* (Stockholm: Prisma, 2000).
- 10 [www.a-n.co.uk/interface/reviews/single/153986](http://www.a-n.co.uk/interface/reviews/single/153986) – a review of an exhibition at the Crafts Council Gallery, London, 2004.
- 11 An exhibition of embroidered works by Kate Keara Pelen, Louise Riley, Tilleke Schwarz, Laura Splan and Tamar Stone. PM Gallery, London, 2010.
- 12 «Broderi og kjønn» in *Geriljabroderi*, Astrid Loraas and Mona Pedersen (eds.), (Oslo: Magikon Forlag, 2010), 141.
- 13 [www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascf/feminist\\_art\\_base/gallery/ghada\\_amer.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascf/feminist_art_base/gallery/ghada_amer.php)
- 14 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alighiero\\_Boetti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alighiero_Boetti)
- 15 Rozsika Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 189.
- 16 For a critical discussion of craftivism and its political implications, see Kirsty Robertson, «Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches», in Maria Elena Buszek (ed.), *EXTRA/ORDINARY Craft and Contemporary Art (USA)*: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 17 <http://craftivism.com>
- 18 Otto von Bush and Clara Ahlvik (eds.), *Handarbete för en bättre värld* (Jönköping: Jönköpings länsmuseum, 2009), 16. Quoted here from Christina Eveborn, «Gränsöverskridande handarbete – en undersökning om handarbetet som social plattform där olika generationer kan mötas», Konstfack, Institutionen för bildpedagogik Lärarutbildning, inriktning Design, 2009, 5.
- 19 [www.relational.org.uk](http://www.relational.org.uk)
- 20 [www.andreadezso.com/DRAWING\\_illustration.html](http://www.andreadezso.com/DRAWING_illustration.html)
- 21 <http://sites.web123.no/vnorskemunsthaandverkere/gf/?pArticleId=12250&pArticleCollectionId=101>
- 22 [www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-sonya-clark-20130707,0,6682390.story#axzz2w98LD5f2](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-sonya-clark-20130707,0,6682390.story#axzz2w98LD5f2)
- 23 This is a central concept in the book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* by William McDonough and Michael Braungart. Although the idea of reusing things does not guarantee «eternal life», «upcycling» nevertheless seeks to prevent materials being removed from circulation.
- 24 The Norwegian term «oppvinning» (upcycling) was coined by the research project *Creating Art Value: A Research Project on Trash and Readymades, Art and Ceramics*: [www.k-verdi.no](http://www.k-verdi.no)
- 25 Jorunn Veiteberg (ed.), *Ting Tang Trash, oppvinning i samtidskeramikken*. Book published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, Bergen National Academy of the Arts in collaboration with KODE Art Museums of Bergen, 2011, 27.
- 26 MA project, «Tekstilreparasjon, en historie om omsorg», Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2001.
- 27 [www.h-avis.no/puls/trad-pa-trad-1-1668793](http://www.h-avis.no/puls/trad-pa-trad-1-1668793)
- 28 Rozsika Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, xix.
- 29 Photographs in lightboxes, 2000–2013. [www.jorann.no](http://www.jorann.no)
- 30 See also Christer Dynna, «Et gerilja-uttrykks skiftende ansikt» in *Geriljabroderi*, 89–93.
- 31 *Pasatiempos* (= pastimes) was shown in the exhibition «Hjertebank. Unge cubanske kunstnere» at the Stenersen Museum in 2006. The exhibition toured extensively throughout Norway.
- 32 This is the term used in Sheila Paine, *Embroidered Textiles. A World Guide to Traditional Patterns* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 9.
- 33 «Objectification», in Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands, Spyer (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 63.
- 34 *Women at Work – Under Construction* was part of a performance trilogy that Maja Bajevic presented in the period 1999–2001.
- 35 Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 225–227.
- 36 [www.agelii.net](http://www.agelii.net)
- 37 The book *Geriljabroderi* (Guerrilla Embroidery) was published in 2010. The project can be viewed as part of a broader trend, one of the best illustrations of which is the American Julie Jackson's «Subversive Cross Stitch». See <http://www.subversivecrossstitch.com/>
- 38 This four-year project is scheduled to run until 2016. Other artists in the project are Omayya Salman, Kiyoshi Yamamoto Farias, Marie Skeie, Margrethe Brekke, Hildur Bjarnadottir, Britta Marakatt Labba, Ashraf Fawakhry and Aroub Rinawi-Fawakhry. See [www.thestitchproject.org](http://www.thestitchproject.org)
- 39 Each participant also embroiders the word «unknown» in her own language as a reminder that murder continues to be a common crime around the world. The project has been presented internationally at many exhibition venues. See [www.lisebjorne.com](http://www.lisebjorne.com)
- 40 Nadine Käthe Monem (ed.), *Contemporary Textiles. The fabric of fine art* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 10.
- 41 [www.minneteppe.no](http://www.minneteppe.no)
- 42 [www.minneteppe.no/www.minneteppe.no/Bakgrunn.html](http://www.minneteppe.no/www.minneteppe.no/Bakgrunn.html)
- 43 [www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/kunst-som-sorgmedium](http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/kunst-som-sorgmedium)
- 44 Shown in the exhibition «Tusen tråder – en historiefortelling i tekstil», Lillehammer Art Museum and Maihaugen 23.11.2013–01.06.2014.
- 45 Cecilie Skeide writing about Ask Bjørlo in the book *Tusen tråder*, Janeke Meyer Utne (ed.) published in conjunction with the exhibition, 79.

**Lou Cabeen***Studies for a Non-Historical Atlas:**Origins*, 2001

Søm på papir og pastell /  
 Stitched paper, pastels  
 118,8 x 83,8 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

*Studies for a Non-Historical Atlas:**Canal*, 2001

Søm på papir og pastell /  
 Stitched paper, pastels  
 118,8 x 83,8 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

*Studies for a Non-Historical Atlas:**Language*, 2001

Søm på papir og pastell /  
 Stitched paper, pastels  
 118,8 x 83,8 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

*Studies for a Non-Historical Atlas:**Mountain*, 2001

Søm på papir og pastell /  
 Stitched paper, pastels  
 118,8 x 83,8 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

**Sonya Clark***Afro Abe (progression)*, 2008

Broderi på dollarseddel /  
 Embroidery on US currency  
 92 x 45 x 4 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

**Orly Cogan***Forget Me Not*, 2009

Broderi, applikasjon og  
 hekling på gammel duk /  
 Embroidery, appliqué and  
 crochet on vintage table cloth  
 91,5 x 91,5 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

*Natural Habitat*, 2005

Broderi og maling på gammel  
 duk / Embroidery and paint on  
 vintage table cloth  
 124,5 x 124,5 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

**Susan Collis***Glory Days*, 2013

Cashmere, silke og bladgull /  
 Cashmere, silk, goldleaf  
 100 x 35 cm  
 Courtesy Meessen de Clercq  
 Gallery / Susan Collis

*Shoddy*, 2013

Cashmere, silke, gull, mohair,  
 ull/silke og gulltråd /  
 Cashmere, silk, gold, mohair,  
 wool silk, goldthread  
 53 x 34,5 x 7 cm  
 Courtesy Meessen de Clercq  
 Gallery / Susan Collis

*Better Days II*, 2010

Broderi på støvtrekk /  
 Embroidery on dustsheet  
 290 x 121 cm  
 Courtesy Seventeen Gallery /  
 Susan Collis

*100 % Cotton*, 2004

Broderi på overall /  
 Embroidery on overall  
 155 x 25 x 17 cm  
 Privat samling /  
 Private Collection, UK

**Regien Cox***Stjernerhimmel. Fra serien Winnowing**Sky Travellers*, 2013

Broderi på bearbeidet  
 betongblander / Embroidery  
 on modified concrete mixer  
 125 x 70 x 105 cm  
 VK.2013-011

**Siri Ensrud**

*snittmønster # III, rynket bluse, rynket  
 barmekjole, dunkåpe, fløyelskjole med  
 legg, barneskjorte, lang underkjole,  
 nikkers, lange bukser, minivest*

Del av serien snittmønster  
 # I – XIII laget i 2009-10  
 Broderi på bomull /  
 Embroidery on cotton  
 143,3 x 116 cm  
 VK.2009-016

**Jochen Flinzer***Adam und Eva: Gossaert*, 2010

Broderi, silke på papir /  
 Silk embroidery on paper  
 40 x 50 cm

Courtesy Holger Priess

Galerie / Jochen Flinzer

*Adam und Eva: Jordaens*, 2010

Broderi, silke på papir /  
 Silk embroidery on paper  
 50 x 40 cm  
 Courtesy Holger Priess  
 Galerie / Jochen Flinzer

*Adam und Eva: Riemenschneider*,  
2010

Broderi, silke på papir /  
 Silk embroidery on paper  
 40 x 50 cm  
 Courtesy Holger Priess  
 Galerie / Jochen Flinzer

*Adam und Eva: Van Eyck*, 2010

Broderi, silke på papir /  
 Silk embroidery on paper  
 40 x 50 cm  
 Courtesy Holger Priess Galerie /  
 Jochen Flinzer

*Adam und Eva: Tintoretto*, 2010

Broderi, silke på papir /  
 Silk embroidery on paper  
 50 x 40 cm  
 Courtesy Holger Priess Galerie /  
 Jochen Flinzer

**Kristine Fornes***Furu, furu, gran og gran*, 2011

Broderi på lin /  
 Embroidery on linen  
 54 x 169,5 cm  
 NMK.2011.0315

*Forår i sigte*, 2008

Broderi, trykk og stopping på lin  
 og bomull / Embroidery, print and  
 mending on linen and cotton  
 73 x 51,5 cm  
 VK.2009-057

**Flore Gardner***Rain (Woman Under Umbrella)*, 2014

Broderi på funnet foto /  
 Embroidery on found photograph  
 11 x 9 cm  
 Tilhører kunstneren /  
 Owned by the artist

*Chiasmus*, 2013

Broderi på funnet foto /  
 Embroidery on found photograph  
 21 x 20 cm