



Elaine Reichek, *Felt Monstera*, 2022. Felt, map tracks, 22.75 x 17.5 inches.

Elaine Reichek  
MATERIAL GIRL

Mar 5th – Apr 9th

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Marinero  
678 Broadway, Floor 3

New York  
Soho

You'll leave Elaine Reichek's second solo exhibition at Marinaro, "MATERIAL GIRL," with a slapdash bachelor's in art history. An artists' artist, Reichek has thrown a little bit of everything in this prolific show, which includes 50 works made only in the last few years, and spans both floors of the gallery with painting, embroidery, text, and textile works referencing nineteenth century teaching samplers, literary texts, fashion, Baroque art, conceptual art, and more. In *Darning Sampler: LeWitt's Color Grids* (2018), she riffs on Sol Lewitt's grids while entirely upending his conceptualist philosophy by rendering them as a darning sampler. She comments on Jackson Pollock in a series of critical texts stitched upon commercially-printed fabrics with a Pollock-esque pattern, even going so far as to stretch one bolt of the fabric around the corner of the room.

Sometimes, Reichek spells it out for us: she stitches "Marsden Hartley painted 'Insignia and Gloves,' 1936, in memory of Karl von Freyburg (d. 1914), and Alty & Donny Mason (d. 1936)" on her embroidered rendition of the titular work, *In Memoriam (Marsden Hartley)* (2021). We even get a little theory, courtesy of Susan Howe's "Bed Hangings II." Wry and well-read, she even embroiders an excerpt from Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), in which a character mends a sock, alongside with a real woolen sock. Reichek's obsession with fabrics extends to historical painting, from the glove Frans Hals painted on Dorothea Berck in 1644 to a dress by Wayne Thiebaud to the ripped jeans in a work by John Currin.

But Reichek's one true love, if we may speak from the evidence of this exhibition alone, is clearly Henri Matisse. A grid of swatches of a Matissean female figure with various background colors appears here, as does a layered pink and green Monstera leaf in his late cut-out style, and even a reproduction of his tapestry notes for *Michaela* (1943) in a hand-embroidered 2021 work. Reichek may be most drawn to the seamlessness — no pun intended — between home and studio for Matisse. She draws not only from his artwork, but also swatches from his parlor furniture and even commercial products drawn from his work — like a true "material girl." -Lisa Yin Zhang

# MARINARO



**robertasmithnyt** Why is a textile artist's work never done ? Because they never run out of material. (Sorry) Anyway, the point is proven by Elaine Reichek's lavish show at the new enlarged Marinaro space at 678 Broadway nr Great Jones, sadly through April 9. The nearly 50 pieces here range from small to quite large and date mostly from the past 4 years. JP Textile/Text 1 and 2 (images 2-4) consist of large scrolls of Pollock-derived commercially made fabric in blue or pink tones that Reichek has digitally embroidered with entires from the artist's bibliography. Perfect for the art lover's library. More modest works memorialize Marsden Hartley's memorializations of his soldier-love slain in the first days of WWI. (1) Still others zero in on famous garments from art history (6-8) in works titled Vuillard Dress, Miro Dress, Paschke Pants and Artemisia Gentileschi Robe and Oppenheim's Gloves. Things scale up again in a veritable Matisse salon that includes Screen Time with Matisse, a folding screen festooned with all kinds of Matisse and Matisse-adjacent fabrics, images, artifacts and whatnot reflecting Reichek's considerable archival instincts and a reprise of the artist's 'Sheaf,' a gathering of cutout leaf shapes (1953) converted into tiles for the pool patio of M/M Sidney Brody of Los Angeles. Here they are made of felt and pinned to the wall as they were in Matisse's studio. Yes, it's archival, and it's beautiful.

Edited · 1w



**ArtSeen**

# Elaine Reichek: *Material Girl*

By **Norman L Kleeblatt**



Installation view, Elaine Reichek, *MATERIAL GIRL*, 2022, Marinaro Gallery. Courtesy Marinaro Gallery.



Elaine Reichek scavenges among sources from literature, history, mythology, and art, fabricating images and texts she transforms into textiles.

Trained as a painter by avant-garde, intellectually rigorous icons, notably Ad Reinhardt, her career

has been defined by her strategic use of the textile medium—a feminist, postmodern strategy. But hers is more complex than the standard connection with craft materials, atavistic objects, decorative inclinations, and gendered imagery. Typically, reflecting Reinhardt’s influence on the next generations’ minimal and conceptual practices, Reichek’s art should be defined as conceptual despite the unlikely medium she deploys.

Reinhardt strictly compartmentalized his highly reductive, perceptually challenging painting practice from his other two endeavors. He kept his satiric illustrations and art historical/archival “collected” photography as entirely separate spheres. Reichek seems to weave all three of these aspects into whole cloth. There is a purposefully awkward complexity in her translating modernist theory as it has been applied from painting into a medium that is simpler and more basic. In converting painting’s tropes to fabric and thread, her works willfully attack modernist notions of medium specificity. They simultaneously play at the fringes of appropriation without entirely succumbing to its protocols. Reichek’s sources go well beyond appropriation’s routine focus on photography. Her “brand” of appropriation is expressed through a wide range of reproduction, copying, and transposition of arts’ varied means and media. Contradicting the proprieties of both modernist painting and conceptual art, her work is obsessed with narrative.

ON VIEW

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March 5 – April 9, 2022

New York

She traffics in indiscriminate marketplace images of masterworks that circulate in differing commercial materials, patterns, and everyday uses, while she cross-references texts that are at once literary and critical. She interrogates the slippage between production and re-production, mixing texts and images into discriminating free associations that undergird her personal logic. Her triptych of darning samples, 2018, all hand embroidered, are an excellent case in point of the intersections of the so-called high and low, practical and intellectual.

Reproducing a nineteenth-century style darning sampler in black and white as the central piece, two fields of colored squares on top and bottom confirm an uncanny connection between a practical illustration of simple darning motifs,

*Darning Sampler* (2018) and its pendant *Darning Sampler: Sol Lewitt's Color Grids*: practical DIY vs. the conceptual privilege of hired professional artisans. Reichek's stratagem makes these two seem virtually interchangeable.



Elaine Reichek, *Thiebaud Dress*, 2020. Digital embroidery on linen, 21.5 x 11.75 inches. Edition 1 of 2, with 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Marinaro Gallery.



*Material Girl* (all triple *entendres* intended) is a two-part show. A salon-style hang of 26 of Reichek's recent hand and digital embroideries forms a major focus of the first part. In each of these embroideries, Reichek takes details from the works of Western artists. Her sources range from Albrecht Dürer and Eugène Delacroix to Michelangelo and Kerry James Marshall. According to Reichel, details of drapery in the work of old and modern masters border on—in fact seem to dissolve into—abstraction. By extracting patterns and three-dimensional folds from the whole representational image, such elements enter the realm of abstraction proper. Within this group, mainly focused on details are two images of an entire figure or a full view of a garment. *Thiebaud Dress* (2020) is a frontal view of an intact garment, a dress with spaghetti straps with no accompanying body. It has the pop flavor of a paper doll's exchangeable wardrobe. Her *Watteau's Pierrot* (2021) is the isolated central figure from Antoine Watteau's masterpiece machine embroidered by the artist as she forces the technical limits of her sophisticated digital sewing machine. Here Reichek translates strategies from modernist painting to embroidery by leaving parts of the fabric support un-embroidered as if she were exposing unprimed canvas.



Her two large homages to Jackson Pollock, *JP Textile/Text 1* and *2* form another strategic part of the exhibition. These works offer yet another manifestation of Reichek's free-associative logic. Two large bolts of cloth—sold as “Spatter” by the reputable fabric house Kravet, are a lax re-interpretation of Pollock's drip paintings. With its unacknowledged artistic source and a commercial name indicative of one of the textual insults of action painting, one wonders whether the work is inspired or simply ripped-off? Each full bolt is mounted vertically to the wall on an industrial textile bolt rack. On to these partly unrolled swaths of fabric, Reichek has embroidered twenty-five titles of books from the extensive literature on Pollock.

Biography, criticism, and hagiography that have embroidered the Abstract Expressionist's reputation are here carefully stitched onto the fabric. The found object meets the custom-made; Reichek's highly crafted embroidered citations become a vast bibliographic landscape.



Elaine Reichek, *Watteau's Pierrot*, 2021. Digital embroidery on linen, 22.75 x 12.25 inches. Edition 1 of 2, with 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Marinaro Gallery.

The second part of *Material Girl* is an assembled and fabricated installation devoted to Henri Matisse. While rare, Reichek has created such gallery-scale projects before, notably her installations at PS1 (1979) and The Jewish Museum (1994). These are at once homage and critique, artistic anthropology, and art historical archivism. Importantly for Reichek they playfully deploy décor as both analysis and critique. Here is a *mis-en-scène* that takes *mise en abyme* to a new level.

A three-part folding screen divides the Matisse room in two sections. A decorative element in Matisse's homes and a familiar prop in his paintings, the screen contributes the period flavor of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. The front parlor/studio is set with facing Napoleon III chairs like those seen in some Matisse pictures. The floor in the front of the screen, is arranged on and around a black and white rug sourced from a readily available commercial vendor. The rug features a border of Matissian cut-outs, in the same indiscriminate way that the "Spatter" fabric recycled Pollock's drips. On the adjacent walls are Reichek's miniature Matisse-appropriated embroideries. Hung with reproduction scarves, photos of the Fauvist in many different locations, the screen implicitly references a *discreet* place where Matisse's models could dress and undress before and after posing. This furnishing element implies modesty. However, photographs of Matisse with some of his models and paintings of nudes or exotically dressed models show his "low-key" chauvinism, his primitivizing gaze, and allude as well to his ambiguous relationships with his models. The area in the back of the screen presents Reichek's appropriated felt versions of cut-outs à la Matisse.



Colored felt is a commercial given, a “color chart” ready-made for Reichek’s teasing. In fact, the arrangement of Reichek’s cut-outs become a kind of do-it-yourself project, almost like a toy where the artist can install these felt “replicas” as a ready-to-use puzzle. These seem to cry out for a limited-edition kit so that anyone might be able to play with them. Despite her scavenging, her playing with sources and reproduction, high, low, and middle brow, Reichek is a master of understatement. She plays with décor while critiquing—sometimes undermining both art history and good taste.

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## **Contributor**

**Norman L Kleeblatt**



# A Blockbuster Whitney Exhibit Shows How Feminists Reshaped The Macho Standards Of Art



Jonathon Keats Contributor

Arts  
critic-at-large

For 18th century American girls, embroidering a sampler served as a dress rehearsal for a life of repetitive chores. Stitching the alphabet into handwoven cloth required care and diligence that would not only serve the sartorial needs of a future family but also provided a template for household tasks ranging from cooking to cleaning. These lessons were often reinforced with needlework proverbs. “Do as you would be done by,” a girl named Hannah Brew stitched in 1756. “A fool and his money are soon parted,” embroidered Phoebe Smith a dozen years later.

The thread of these girls’ lives following their completion of their samplers has been lost to history. Those who know of their maiden “accomplishments” – as needlework was often called in the 1700s – most likely encountered the embroidered proverbs second-hand in the art of Elaine Reichek, who has studied samplers from the past as models for her own extraordinary work.



Liza Lou (b. 1969), Kitchen, 1991–96. Beads, plaster, wood, and found objects, 96 x 132 x 168 in. ... [+] LIZA LOU

A couple samplers by Reichek are included in *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019*, an engaging exhibition currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Executed with the consummate skill of her predecessors, Reichek's accomplishments additionally accomplish the task of questioning old distinctions between craft and art by juxtaposing the old-fashioned sayings with phrases used in text-based works by feminist artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger in the 1970s and '80s.

The contentious relationship between deeply interconnected creative endeavors – evoked in myriad craft-based works at the Whitney executed by artists ranging from Peter Voulkos to Liza Lou – is addressed from a scholarly perspective in *Craft: An American History*, a fascinating new survey of making from the seventeenth century to today by former Museum of Arts and Design director Glenn Adamson. Although the book and exhibition were conceived independently, and overlap only intermittently, they bolster each other by revealing patterns through the complementary crafts of curation and storytelling.

As Adamson observes, even the historical samplers of girls like Hannah Brew and Phoebe Smith could be more than just training exercises in marital servitude. “With their formulaic execution and inscriptions,” he writes, “samplers can seem somewhat disheartening, not so much evidence of young women's creativity as the lack of options that lay before them. Yet, once the stitches were learned, embroidery could be turned to ends as imaginative as any painting.” The skills could even offer emancipation. Although the story of Betsy Ross designing the American flag “turns out to be uncertain at best,” Adamson notes, she was successfully able to deploy her sewing skills to create an upholstery business that thrived for fifty years.

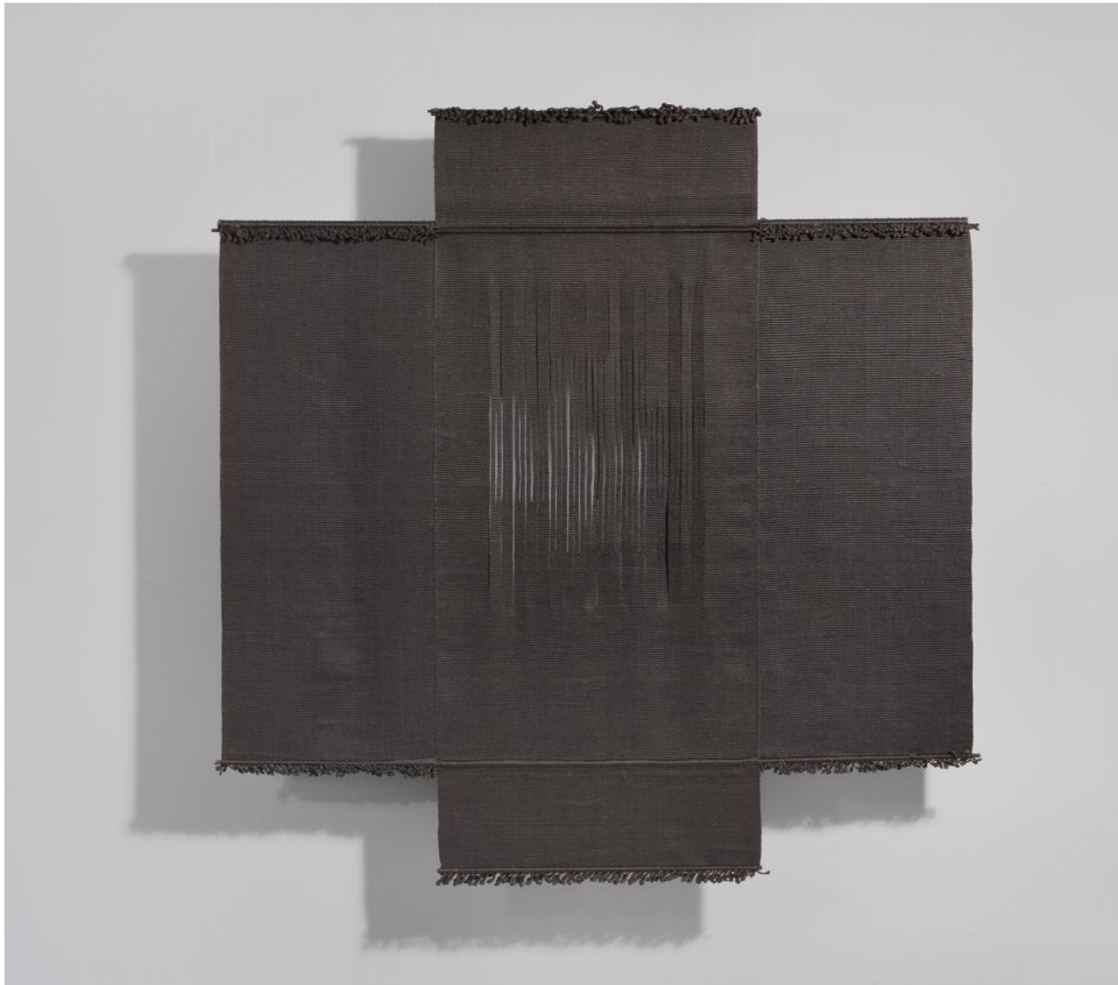
The personal autonomy that Ross achieved is a trajectory of craft as significant and as fraught as that of creative expression. Learning a craft has liberated people – including women and minorities – while simultaneously binding their futures to circumstances beyond their control such as the industrialization of their trades under capitalism. In fact, the threat of mechanization probably exacerbated the conflict between craft and art, by entrenching the values of skilled workmanship and functional utility. Traditional craftspeople militated against artistic dilettantism with guilded protectionism. Modern artists rejected crafty ornamentation as conceptually vapid, and purposeful practicality as anathema to the dictates of art for art's sake.



This conflict did not serve anyone well. The deleterious effects were especially apparent in the 1940s through the 1970s, when artists such as Voulkos and Ruth Asawa were held suspect for trying to use craft techniques in their sculpture. Trained in ceramics, and skilled at throwing pots, Voulkos pushed functional forms into the realm of abstraction, infuriating his fellow ceramicists. Asawa, on the other hand, trained as an artist but found her principal means of sculptural expression by learning a traditional technique for crocheting metal baskets for eggs in Mexico. Her work was shunned by the art establishment for years, even though her sculptures were never even once used for transporting eggs.

While not yet entirely gone, the animosity between art and craft has diminished for a number of reasons. Craftspeople have become less skeptical of artists as artists have demonstrated skill and commitment. Their ire has turned instead toward the unwashed masses stocking up at Hobby Lobby and selling on Etsy.

As for the art world, the embrace of craft largely came about through the artistic use of “craft”. In other words, artists came to use craft conceptually, not only deploying traditional techniques but also scaffolding meaning on historical references.



Lenore G. Tawney (1907-2007), *Four Petaled Flower II*, 1974. Woven linen and steel rods, 87 1/2 × 85 ... [+] LENORE G. TAWNEY

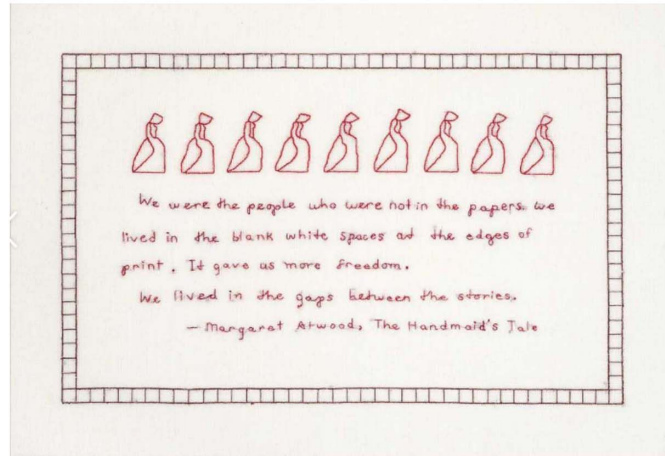
FOUNDATION



In the '70s, for instance, feminist artists began using the domestic arts and decoration as a political statement: a provocative stance against the male domination of “pure” art forms such as Minimalism. Staking this ground conceptually, artists such as Lenore Tawney came also to explore the potential of techniques such as weaving aesthetically, and the aesthetics gained legitimacy within the art establishment because the conceptual grounding tied the work to existing artistic standards. With her contemporary samplers, crafted in the 1990s, Elaine Reichek furthered this approach while simultaneously closing the gap between conceptual craft and other forms of conceptualism including the text art of Holzer and Kruger.

If the conceptual deployment of craft has given craft-based art a place in museums and galleries, the acceptance has diminished the conceptual impact. Simply put, using craft techniques is no longer provocative. However, this shift should not be construed as a loss. The expectation that craft techniques will be seen in an art museum like the Whitney allows the techniques to flourish, to facilitate new artistic expression, and to make new meaning.

## How a veteran feminist artist threads past and present together



I wanted to go straight to a library and catch up on a lifetime of reading after seeing “Elaine Reichek: Between the Needle and the Book” at McClain Gallery.

The contemporary samplers by the veteran New York artist are based on enticing quotations lifted from more than two dozen books I feel I should know. They are sourced from a wide swath — Romantic and contemporary literature to history and science. Goethe’s “Faust,” Herman Melville’s “The Tartarus of Maids,” Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” Stephen Hawkins’ “A Brief History of Time,” Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” and on and on.

An installer working while I was there said he felt the same way. Reichek says she doesn’t aim to intimidate. Reading has always been her safety net. “The idea is not to make anybody feel anything but quiet and engaged, and to shut out the noise of the constant cycle of news. It’s a way of privileging interiority. So much work is so hectoring. And although the texts are plenty political, you can walk away from them.”

Glentzer, Molly, “How a veteran feminist artist threads past and present together,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 22, 2020.

Reichek studied painting in the 1960s with Ad Reinhardt, coming of age as an artist alongside Richard Serra and Chuck Close. She hit upon the idea of using thread as a material to create formal lines in the early 1970s. “We wanted to ask what a painting was,” she says. “For me, the idea was to discuss what were the simplest means of making a painting: canvas, which, incidentally, is linen fabric. And it’s a grid, a warp and a woof.”

McClain has filled its west rooms with fine examples of Reichek’s early work. Stitching intrigued her in part because it pierced the canvas. “It says to you, there’s a back, a secret underneath. There’s some untold story. You can carry it around. It displaces air.”

She was horrified after her first show when she realized she was embroidering, she says, laughing. Sewing was a craft, and in her sphere, craft was not serious art. “I remember friends saying, ‘This is a career killer.’ But of course, being scared of it, I ran towards it because it’s just who I am, you know?”

Thread gave her a visual language that also could be adapted from a domestic practice to make a feminist statement. Some of the earliest works look sympathetic with the paintings of Agnes Martin but came “from a different place,” Reichek says. By the late ’70s, she was cutting organdy into parallelograms and triangles to create “systems work,” abstract compositions about using a single shape to create a multitude of other shapes. Organdy has a history as fancy dress fabric but allowed her to experiment with form and transparency. “That was the intent – to take the practice in its full astringency and to use these feminine materials,” she says.

Glentzer, Molly, “How a veteran feminist artist threads past and present together,”  
*Houston Chronicle*, January 22, 2020.



Later she also embraced traditional needlepoint techniques, although her latest samplers are a more minimalist tour de force.

They are all about invisibility, “which can be a choice ... but can also be used to make you feel neglected,” Reichek says. Women of a certain age often feel invisible, she notes. She also sees “the Gutenberg era” of the printed page slipping away, and storing information virtually creates another kind of invisibility.

Reichek stitches the text on canvas by hand to mimic handwriting or typeset pages, making each piece in a style that reflects its source. Family, friends and studio assistants supplied her with handwriting samples to stitch. “Those people are invisible to you, but they are part of my work,” she adds, noting that the art of handwriting is disappearing.

The small piece just inside the gallery’s front door contains a sentence from Vladimir Nabokov’s “Lectures on Literature”: “The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible.” (Reichek has great taste in quotations.)

“First Morse Message,” the show’s anchor, consumes an entire wall. Dating to 2003-06, it holds Samuel Morse’s first Morse Code message, embroidered with a vintage loop-stitch machine upon a transparent organdy curtain – a nearly invisible material that also provides a visual bridge to Reichek’s ’70s compositions.

The invisibility theme aside, she says, “It’s interesting for an artist to have the delight of seeing for themselves how things can connect.”

*“Elaine Reichek: Between the Needle and the Book” is on view through March 7 at McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988, [mclaingallery.com](http://mclaingallery.com).*

Glentzer, Molly, “How a veteran feminist artist threads past and present together,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 22, 2020.

**maharam**

# Shared Origins



Consider the word *text*. Perhaps what comes to mind first is your cellphone. Or maybe it's a printed page. Or possibly it's literary theory, and you're thinking about how a text is anything buzzing with communicative content. In Elaine Reichek's embroideries featuring quotes from celebrated writers, the artist taps into these multiple meanings, from the analogue to the digital, while reminding us that *text* and *textile* share their origins in the Latin word *texere* (to weave). She also draws attention to how the building up of lines in textiles is similar to the accrual of words into sentences, and then into paragraphs, as well as lines of text into code.

Thirty pieces from the past three years each excerpt from a story, a play, or a poem in Reichek's recent exhibition, *Sight Unseen*, at Marinaro Gallery.



They revel in the many ways words can be put to work, and disclose an unhurried pace, one reminiscent of the slowness and precision it takes for certain kinds of writing. Drawing her needle through linen to painstakingly produce a sewn script based on actual handwriting or font, Reichek largely explores a meditative deceleration.

This is not to say her works are devoid of drama. *Faust and Mephisto* (2016), which was installed in the gallery's downstairs grotto-like space, presents a quote in a gothic script from the contract corroborating the sale of Faust's soul. *The Purloined Letter* (2017) offers a simple wax-sealed note, as if to say not everything is meant to be seen. A work resembling a page from a book presents a line of text in serif font by Marilynne Robinson: "It was a source of both terror and comfort to me [then] that I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent." A similar (sister?) piece excerpts Elena Ferrante: "I didn't choose anonymity; the books are signed. Instead, I chose absence." That inconspicuousness is key to Reichek's work, too: she also chooses absence by highlighting other people's thoughts. In the few works displayed that were made with machine or digital embroidery, the distance from the artist was even more deeply felt.

For 2017's *A Damsel with a Dulcimer (Coleridge)*, Reichek mimics Samuel Taylor Coleridge's handwritten text from a 1797 draft of his poem "Kubla Khan." Taking his distinctive scrawl into her own hands, she also subverts Coleridge's notable views on imitation, namely this idea: "To admire on principle, is the only way to imitate without a loss of originality." And yet, as we know from Duchamp and Warhol, one can copy with originality. Reichek takes this one step further: her citational works are teeming with ingenuity, and, to be sure, admiration—not just for these writers but also for the long, interlaced history of text and textiles.

*Lauren O'Neill-Butler is a writer based in New York.*

# THE NEW YORKER

ART

## Elaine Reichek

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Anna Akhmatova, Elena Ferrante, and William Blake are among the writers whose work this Conceptualist feminist excerpts in thirty new needlework canvases, in which serif typefaces and wobbly cursive are rendered with labor-intensive precision. The quotes have been very carefully chosen; Reichek does not make words into images to divest them of their significance. Rather, her painstaking transmutations—from paper to linen, from ink to thread—slow down the reading process, drawing attention to the intimate quality of handwriting or the authority of mechanical printing. New meanings sometimes arise. Sophocles' lines "I stabbed out these eyes. Why should I have eyes? Why, when nothing I saw was worth seeing?" read quite differently when you imagine a woman working, needle in hand, rather than Oedipus wailing.

—*Johanna Fateman*



# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## The Ideas Hidden in One Artist's Embroidery

Elaine Reichek uses hand-embroidery to emulate the handwriting of authors whose ideas she makes her own.



Alfred Mac Adam June 8, 2019



Elaine Reichek, "Oedipus Rex" (2019), hand embroidery on linen, 23.25 x 22.75 inches (courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York)

Elaine Reichek reminds us that conceptual art may be about ideas, but it is still art. A look back at an archetypal example of conceptual art, René Magritte's 1929 painting "La Trahison des Images" or "The Treachery of Images," or "This Is Not a Pipe" — a parodic image of a pipe and a written denunciation that declares the image not to be the thing itself — signals Reichek's point of departure.

Words can be treacherous. Reichek likes the idea that their meaning can change without warning, and the title of her current exhibition, *Sight Unseen*, confirms this.

Isolate the phrase and you get a metaphysical

meditation on vision: the artist presents an image to be seen, not knowing if it will be seen. Or, the artist composes a work and then leaves it to the tender mercies of viewers, who will interpret the original however they like. Reichek alerts us that lurking in commonplace expressions like "sight unseen" are hidden ideas.



Elaine Reichek, "For Now (To the Lighthouse)" (2016), hand embroidery on linen, 16.25 x 22.75 inches (courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York)

These thoughts coalesce in Reichek's "The Purloined Letter," (2017) a hand-embroidered image of an antique letter, complete with a wax seal. She translates Edgar Allan Poe's letter, a floating signifier devoid of a signified (we never learn what the letter says), into a visual image. In the original narrative Poe's detective Auguste Dupin sees "a solitary letter" that was:

[...] much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle — as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless,

had been altered, or stayed, in the second.

Except Reichek's letter is pure white, intact, its seal unbroken. Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida battled mightily over the meaning of Poe's letter in the pages of *Yale French Studies* (issues 48 and 52), Lacan the psychoanalyst declaring the invisible letter to possess meaning, Derrida the philosopher calling that conclusion into doubt. Reichek short-circuits their polemic by remitting Poe's letter to a virginal state, before it was purloined, when it was still in the possession of the Queen. Rather than restoring the mangled letter to its rightful owner she announces it as a work of art, forever intact, as the invisible author leaves behind nothing but treacherous images.



Elaine Reichek, "The Purloined Letter" (2017), hand embroidery with wax on linen, 13.25 x 11.75 inches (courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York)

"Oedipus Rex" (2019) also leaves a key element intact. Below a hand-embroidered eye, intact but red, is Oedipus's final speech: "I stabbed out these eyes. Why should I have eyes? Why, when nothing I saw was worth seeing?" Why is Reichek's eye as intact as Poe's stolen letter? The familiar explanation of Oedipus's self-blinding is that it is a displaced castration, so it may be that Reichek is simply referring to a wound that is better left unseen, and thus again to the phrase "sight unseen." The artist leaves us with the commonplace "no one is blinder than those who will not see."

Reichek's play with presences that conjure absences and absences that are presences reappears constantly in the form of handwriting in this magnificent 30-piece show of modestly proportioned works (they range between 11 by 9 and 23 by 22 inches). She uses hand-embroidery to emulate the handwriting of authors whose ideas she makes her own, acting as a ghostwriter, not in the sense of composing a text signed by someone else, but of transmuting authorial handwriting into embroidery.

Elena Ferrante addresses the difference between anonymity and absence; anonymity means denying authorial identity. In "Absence (Elena Ferrante)" (2016) Reichek embroiders the author's claim that she signs her books but leaves them to take their place in the world without accompanying them as a parent might guide a child: "what counts most for me is to preserve a creative space that seems full of possibilities. The structural absence of the author affects the writing in a way that I'd like to continue to explore." Ferrante reprises what Borges says in "Borges and I," (1960), that the name on the book's spine is the name of the author, not of the person who wrote it. In





Elaine Reichek, "Absence (Elena Ferrante)" (2016), hand embroidery on linen, 21.25 x 15.25 inches (courtesy of the artist and Marinaro, New York)

"Absence," Reichek embroiders the handwriting of a woman who steps aside from herself as author to avoid being linked to the printed text, whose meaning will be determined by the reader.

The artist performs the gesture of writing as actor, as reader, and as creator. Like Magritte's denunciation, this is not Elena Ferrante but Elaine Reichek, sinking her identity into a vast panoply of identities — from Virginia Woolf to Anna Akhmatova to William Blake— and emerging with creations that are all her own, and that preserve both her signature style (embroidery) and her absence.

Elaine Reichek: Sight Unseen continues at Marinaro (1 Oliver Street, Manhattan) through June 23.

INTERVIEWS

## ELAINE REICHEK

April 10, 2018 • As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Elaine Reichek, *Toutes les filles (All the Girls)*, 2016–17, hand embroidery on linen, 50 1/2 x 79”.

*Everything old is new again, and vice versa. Elaine Reichek is a New York-born and -bred artist who has long engaged with some of the women of ancient Greek myths in her works, often via hand embroidery and digital sewing. Her latest exhibition, “Now If I Had Been Writing This Story,” which takes its title from a poem by Stevie Smith, features ten works from the past eleven years and is on view at the Secession in Vienna from April 13 to June 3, 2018.*

**FOR THIS SHOW,** I wanted to spotlight part of a long ongoing body of work. It consists of two series: “Ariadne’s Thread” and “Minoan Girls.” They’re really the same project. Because the Secession is historically a particularly rich place, I’ve chosen works that I felt would both comment on and amplify the site. Gustav Klimt’s *Beethoven Frieze* is in the building, and most visitors to the museum go to see that. And if they wander into the contemporary art shows, well, good.

This work deals with the telling, retelling, and deconstructing of rather primal narratives of desire and betrayal, but also of rape, incest, and bestiality. And now it’s sited in this unique building, in which classical motifs are married to a modern slab structure. The Vienna Secessionists’ Latin motto, “*Ver Sacrum*,” refers to classical art as an eternal and unending source of inspiration. So, for me, this presents a nice opportunity to go back and forth between the old and the new—which I always toggle between. There’s also a long tradition, of course, of the decorative arts in Vienna. One of the Secession’s main ideas was to level the



field, on the one hand, between traditional painting and sculpture and, on the other hand, bookmaking, design, textile production, and the “applied arts.” The kind of modernism that it introduced, which itself shuttles back and forth between high art and craft, is still a topic of conversation in the art world.

I was trained as a painter—I’m not trained in craft. But craft was an avenue for me to investigate and has a truly interesting and engaging alternative history, which I felt carried its own meaning. It also allowed me to develop a language that wasn’t as reliant on the dominant language of high modernism. So, after going to grad school at Yale in 1964 and getting out of an all-male mostly painting tradition, I began to use thread. It suited my purposes.

“Ariadne’s Thread” is named after the clue of thread that Ariadne gives Theseus in order to navigate his way in and out of the labyrinth and slay the Minotaur. Of course, the thanks she gets—after plotting the murder of her half brother—is that Theseus abandons her! They sail off together to the island of Crete, she goes to sleep—you snooze you lose—and when she gets up, he’s sailing away. The stories of the Minoan girls are about their unbridled desires and transgressions. Of course, the original myths attribute agency only to the gods, but in my retelling, each woman is conscious of her role in the story.

[video]

Excerpts from an interview with [Elaine Reichek](#)

The piece that will introduce the show as you go up the staircase is an appropriated [Eugène Atget](#) photograph of a statue at Versailles, a copy of a Roman copy of a Greek statue of Ariadne. Under it, I’ve quoted lines from [Giorgio de Chirico](#)’s poem “The Statue’s Desire.” Inside the main gallery, one wall will be covered with an eighteenth-century neoclassical wallpaper taken from the Hamilton House in Maine. I wanted this backdrop to function like a framing device. There’s a lot of framing and reframing in my work, which act metaphorically. I also wanted to highlight how neoclassicism in America is different from neoclassicism in Europe, and how in this young country we never really had a large artisanal class.

I felt I needed to represent all four of the Minoan girls: Europa, the grand matriarch; her daughter-in-law Pasiphaë; and her granddaughters Ariadne and Phaedra. So, I took an image of Klimt’s famous *Tree of Life* and turned it into the Minoan girls’ genealogy sampler. Because the gods produced a variety of offspring with numerous partners, it’s hard to keep track of who begat whom.

Pattern and repetition, both textual and visual, are other things I wanted to emphasize. Bulls appear repeatedly in these myths, the two sisters hook up with the very same Theseus, and you can barely keep track of the suicides. Visual patterns appear both in the wallpaper and in the textile pattern of *You Coasts (Ocher)*, which features Europa perched on Zeus who is in disguise as a bull. I found this pattern on the Victoria and Albert Museum’s website and had it silkscreened on linen, and then I added embroidery and stitched a quote from the ancient Greek poet Nonnus, in which Europa assigns Zeus three different roles: “You coasts, pray tell my loving father that Europa has left her native land seated on a bull, my *kidnapper*, my *captain*, and, I think, my *husband*.”

Then there’s *I Wonder Sometimes*, featuring a rather rapey image of Pasiphaë, with her own bull—a real one!—which I’ve taken from [André Masson](#)’s painting and paired with my own cobbled-together translation from *Pasiphaë: Chant de Minos* by the reactionary poet [Henry de Montherlant](#).

The show has both hand-embroidered work and embroideries made by a digital sewing machine. One of these digital embroideries, *I Wonder Why*, includes photographs of Sarah Bernhardt playing Phaedra, first as a young woman and later on a farewell tour. Another piece is a riff on Jasper Johns's work, with embroidered text highlighting the words *desire*, *dread*, and *despair* in the repeated names Ariadne, Theseus, and Phaedra. *Ariadne in Crete* remakes a poster created by John Currin for a production of the Richard Strauss opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In my rendition Ariadne is even more exaggerated than as he painted her, and the text by Seneca reads, "No daughter of Minos has ever got off lightly in love—sin is always attached!" Another embroidery on canvas mesh, *You Were the Heroine*, allows you to see the stretcher bars behind the surface, part of the backstory.

The newest and largest embroidery, *Toutes les filles*, trades language for gesture. Because the myths began as performances enacted by wandering poets, long before they were written down, gesture is an essential part of each narrative. *Toutes les filles* has twenty-four images representing Europa and her daughters, which I fished out of the sea of Google Images I trawl through regularly. I stitched each image on pink linen in four rows of six. Ariadne is well represented, in her coded pose—hand behind head—that was so well known to the moderns. Henri Matisse used it in *Blue Nude*, which appears here and in my nine-part *Swatch* piece that's lined up on shelves in a cabinet outside of the gallery space. Back to *Toutes les filles*—Pasiphaë appears, as do Phaedra, with arms thrown up in her iconic gesture of grief, and Europa, looking over her shoulder toward the shore as she is being abducted. These women convey their stories not only within the texts, but also through their bodies.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

#### **ALL IMAGES**

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## Artist Hand-Sews Odes To Greek Mythology's Baddest Women

Elaine Reichek brings the ancient Greek characters Europa, Pasiphae, Phaedra and Ariadne to life.

🕒 05/23/2016 09:44 am ET

### Priscilla Frank, Arts Writer

"I've always been interested in stories," artist Elaine Reichek explained to The Huffington Post. "And myths are fabulous stories, especially in how they serve as metaphors for a variety of human behaviors."

In her latest project "Minoan Girls," Reichek brings the ancient Greek characters Europa, Pasiphae, Phaedra and Ariadne to life through intricately hand-sewn embroideries.

"They're all very bad," Reichek laughed when expressing what drew her to the characters. "Lust, incest, bestiality, betrayal, passion, dread. They're all women of great passion, great energy and great bravery."

The show is a continuation of Reichek's previous exhibition, "Ariadne's Thread," which focused on the latter mentioned Minoan girl, whom the artist describes as "a woman of action." The clever character is known for giving warrior Theseus a ball of thread to help him navigate his way out of a labyrinth. The two run off together, but ultimately Theseus abandons Ariadne one night as she's sleeping. Although Ariadne is often portrayed as a victim in the scenario, myth tells us that she experiences a change of heart too, eventually finding her way to a god — Bacchus.

"It's a story of thread," the artist said. Fittingly, thread is at the heart of Reichek's practice, too. "My work is interested in thread — interns of thread as narrative, thread as family tree, thread as basic element."

Although she's been working with thread since the 1970s, Reichek formally trained as a painter. She studied at Yale under abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, at a time when there were no women on the faculty. Post-graduation, the art world was bent on rewriting history, doing away with art that looked too much like, well, art.

In the search for a mark-making medium that was decidedly un-art-like, Reichek stumbled upon thread. Considered a traditionally feminine craft material, Reichek was far more interested in thread's formal qualities than its gendered associations. "As a line it could pierce the support beneath it and come out the other end. It was an embodied line, something palpable, that sat on the surface and yet was attached to it."

At first, Reichek understood her technique as drawing with thread, not sewing. "It was only later, after I had my first show, that I realized I was embroidering and it terrified me. And because it terrified me, I just went for it."

In the early years, the art world's response was riddled with misogyny. "What I was doing was women's work, it was not taken seriously," she recalled. "People called it a career killer. For a woman to use thread and embroidery — it was seen as a hobby."

Frank, Priscilla. "Artist Hand-Sews Odes to Greek Mythology's Baddest Women." *Huffpost Arts & Culture*, May 2016.



Yet over time, art world hierarchies destabilized. Feminist art initiatives like Woman House and galleries like A.I.R. shattered the notion that artistic genius was a status attributed only to white men. No longer is serious art associated with a particular kind of artist, or a particular kind of material. "I used to be lonely," Reichek mused, "now I have all these new friends!"

To this day, most of Reichek's works are made by hand; she refers to herself as a "studio dinosaur." She starts by hunting for images, "google shopping" or scanning books, cataloging them on a computer. She then runs her composite images through a program that translates every pixel into a specific color, a potential stitch just waiting to come into being. Using this chart as a guide, Reichek embroiders her final image by hand. Occasionally, Reichek will use a digital sewing machine to create her works, which show up, unlike the handmade ones, completely flat. But for the most part, Reichek prefers to do things the old fashioned way.

"I've always been interested in old technologies," she said. She briefly explained the history of the Jacquard-loom, the 19th century mechanical loom that served as the model for early computers. "Textiles have always been at the root of computer technology," Reichek explained.

Indeed, mathematician Ada Lovelace, known for her work with Charles Babbage on an early mechanical, general purpose computer, summed up the connection between a sewing machine and a computer, recognizing the latter's ability to translate symbols as opposed to just process numbers. As Lovelace famously said: "We may say most aptly that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves."

The correlation, as Reichek describes it, between "pixel and stitch," remains at the core of her practice. "Even photoshop is based on the color wheel," she adds. "Text and textile. Etymologically they've always been tied."

There are countless additional parallels between text and embroidery. Both are densely layered, composed of many overlapping threads and just as many potential meanings. "When you work with old texts there are so many interpretations," Reichek said. "People will read it differently, see it differently, hear it differently. Things that are porous and open and allow for multiple interpretations are the ones that survive and feel relevant, we can inject ourselves into them." Although she's an avid reader, Reichek's first love has always been the image. In our modern day, image-saturated culture, she's quite at home, as visuals both virtual and physical are constantly veering into our lines of sight. However, as much of Reichek's work explores mass culture's obsession with image, it's no new phenomenon.

"Minoan Girls" features two embroidered versions of "The Rape of Europa," iconic paintings based on Greek mythology. In the ancient tale, Zeus became enamored of Europa's beauty and resolved to seduce her. To do so, he transformed himself into a white bull and, when Europa sat on his back, absconded to the island of Crete with Europa attached. He then revealed himself and crowned Europa the Queen of Crete.

The vision of Europa bolting into the sea atop a white bull has been immortalized throughout art history, notably by Titian and Peter Paul Rubens. "The great Rubens copied the great Titian!" Reichek said, noting how issues of copying, appropriation, and image saturation have existed long before the Internet. "Now it's called appreciation but then, that was how it was done. Everybody has always wanted visual information all the time because it's so intriguing. Now we live in such an image saturated culture, but it was always acceptable."

"Multiple versions of the same pictures, this one copying from that one," she concluded. "All of this, from the beginning."

*"Minoan Girls" runs until July 2, 2016 at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles.*

Frank, Priscilla. "Artist Hand-Sews Odes to Greek Mythology's Baddest Women." *Huffpost Arts & Culture*, May 2016.

## The Creators Project



Elaine Reichek, *Rape of Europa*—Reubens. All images courtesy the artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery

New York-based artist Elaine Reichek is best known for her takes on the embroidered sampler, which raise issues about the often gendered divide between arts and craft. Her newest collection of works, *Minoan Girls*, consists of thirteen new pieces and three large tapestries, and is now on display at Santa Monica's Shoshana Wayne Gallery. She's taken inspiration from Greek Mythology before, most notably in her series *Ariadne's Thread*, but here she focuses specifically on the women of Minos because, as she tells The Creators Project, "the Minoan girls are the original bad girls."

Reichek's 2010 piece *Ariadne in Crete* is the perfect entrée to the works from *Minoan Girls*. A piece embroidered in the style of a movie poster, it bears a quote from the philosopher Seneca: "No daughter of Minos has ever got off lightly in love—sin is always attached!" As she helpfully illustrates in a beautifully embroidered *Minoan Family Tree*, the royal women of Minos were a closely related clan whose lives involved forbidden romance, intrigue, and a disturbing amount of bestiality. The women who form the focus of *Minoan Girls* are Europa, who was kidnapped by Zeus in the guise of a bull, her daughter-in-law Pasiphae, whom Poseidon made fall in love with another, different bull, and give birth to the murderous half-man, half-bull Minotaur, and Pasiphae's non-monster daughters, Phaedra and Ariadne, whose illicit ball of thread helped Theseus navigate the Minotaur's labyrinth.

Bruney, Gabrielle. "This Artist Embroiders the Bad Girls of Ancient Greece." *The Creators Project*, May 2016.

Through a practice that encompasses hand and digital embroidery, as well as beading, photography, and tapestry, accompanied by texts from the likes of Ovid and Plutarch, Reichel recreates classic works by artists like Titian, Rubens, and Klimt that tell tales of the women of Minos. The mix of new media and old-fashioned embroidery perfectly compliments the content of the works, which, though they draw from ancient sources, tell timeless tales of women breaking the rules.



# ARTnews

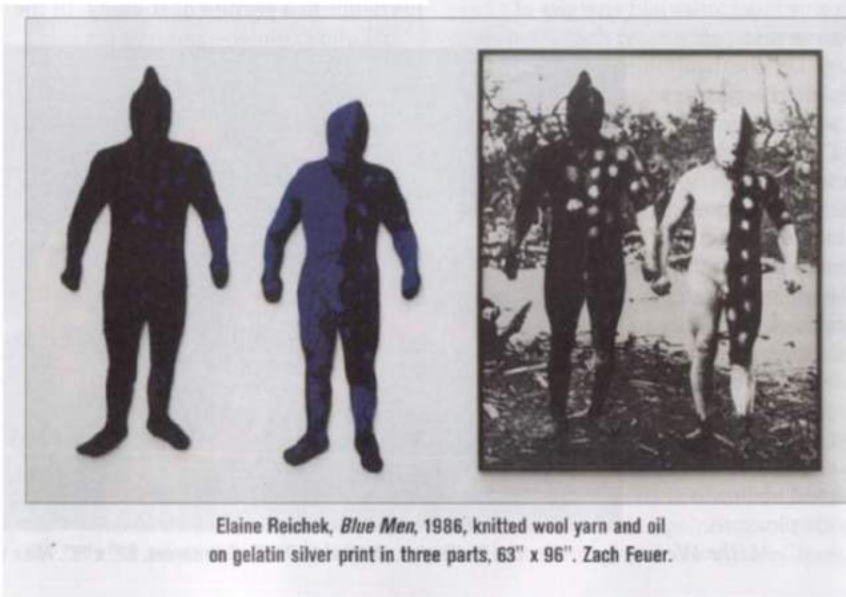
## Elaine Reichek

### Zach Feuer

Dissonance and disjunction are Elaine Reichek specialties, as she matches up the unlikely and makes oddly askew visual couplings that can be subtle or bold or both. Her recent “non-exhaustive” survey, an absorbing solo exhibition (her first at Zach Feuer), followed her art making from 1972 to ‘95, through fabric and knitted works, samplers, photographs, and installations. Reichek explores questions of gender, race, culture, power, appropriation, and the unreliability and interchangeability of signs through mediums often associated with the domestic and the second class. Her ideas, and they are many, are presented as quick, gleeful detonations that can downshift into impiety.

One striking work here was *The Artist's Bedroom* (1979). It's a re-creation of an airless little room in primary blue and has an overhead light like those used for interrogation. Lined with small replicas of modernist paintings in fabric, including a Mondrian, Reichek translates what was perceived as a privileged male pursuit into women's work. Shelters of all kinds were present in the show, many in the form of photographs of teepees (Native Americans were used throughout to exemplify otherness and marginalization). In *Navaho* (1992), a nearly life-size photo of a man in what seems to be tribal dress is paired with a knitted double next to it on the wall that looks like an extra-large, cold-weather onesie, suggesting, as one option, the infantilization and emasculation of a once fiercely independent people. There was also a sampler—a Reichek mainstay—from the same year that slyly proclaims, “Their manners are decorous,” although surely not always, to the infinite regret of certain colonizers, a fact that Reichek makes us relish as much as she does.

—Lilly Wei



# Weekend Arts II

The New York Times

## The Jewishness Is in the Details

Twenty years ago, the Jewish Museum commissioned Elaine Reichek, the artist known for embroidered and knitted social commentary, to create an installation about being Jewish. What she produced and exhibited in 1994 was "A Postcolonial Kinderhood," an exceptionally savvy and elegant instance of identity politics in art.

Now, with "A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited," the museum is reprising that exhibition with some minor additions. A pair of bulletin boards display reviews, letters and other materials documenting the original show, and a beguiling short film made from flickering home movies of Ms. Reichek's in-laws on their honeymoon in 1934 is shown

**KEN JOHNSON**  
ART REVIEW

Elaine Reichek: A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited, at the Jewish Museum, includes this sampler.

through a porthole in one wall, along with the sound of a piano playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

But the basic production, which the museum owns, is the same. It resembles a Colonial-era room in a historic-house museum. Framed needlework samplers hang on walls painted grayish green, and a four-poster bed stands in the center on a braided rug. There are also framed groups of snapshots of a well-to-do family, dating from the mid-20th century. You understand that what is actually being evoked

Continued on Page 29



## The Jewishness Is in the Details

From Weekend Page 23

is the lifestyle of a modern family whose ancestors might have arrived in the New World on the Mayflower. The antique furniture (in reality, reproductions purchased for the exhibition) has presumably been handed down from one generation to the next ever since. There's a child-size rocking chair stamped with the Yale University coat of arms, signifying, no doubt, a legacy of Ivy League graduates.

Further inspection peels back another layer. In one corner of the room, there are white hand towels hanging on a drying rack, each embroidered with a monogram made of the letters J, E and W. The samplers, you discover, have stitched into them quotations contributed by Ms. Reichek's relatives and friends. One advises: "Don't be loud. Don't be pushy. Don't talk with your hands." More seriously, another reads: "I used to fall asleep every night thinking of places to hide when the SS came. I never thought this was in the least bit strange."

This is the story of a Jewish family so determined to assimilate into American high society that it almost entirely erases evidence of its own ethnic heritage. Indeed, Ms. Reichek grew up in just such a family and married a man from a similar background. But you don't have to know the autobiographical details to get the point.

The implicit lesson is that there is a price to pay for hiding certain parts of yourself. What is re-

"Elaine Reichek: A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited" runs through Oct. 26 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 52nd Street; (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL BAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

pressed on the outside may come back to haunt you and your descendants on the inside. Someone brought up in such circumstances might feel a secret, three-pronged shame: shame for pretending to be something you're not; shame for being something that mainstream society regards as repulsive; and shame for lacking the courage to be publicly what you really are, whatever the prejudices of the dominant culture.

Identity understood from this perspective verges on the sacred. That people should honor their ancestral traditions and not turn



their backs on them is an ancient imperative. In the industrialized West of the 1960s, romanticizing ethnic, racial and other sorts of identity was part of the counter-cultural reaction against the soulless 1950s, when everyone wanted to be like everyone else.

One of the virtues of Ms. Reichek's installation, however, is that it doesn't hammer home a message but instead leaves questions hanging. You might wonder, for example, what would a room representing a family that had not suppressed its Jewishness look like? What if Ms. Reichek had grown up in an ultra-Orthodox family?

Furnishings at Elaine Reichek's installation at the Jewish Museum are adorned with embroidered quotations about Jewish identity.

You might also question a notion of identity that takes ethnicity as essence. Is the truth of who and what you are inseparable from your ancestry? How deep does Jewishness — or blackness or Asian-ness — go?

Historically, there have been good reasons for disguising or rejecting traditional identity. If you live in a society that regards your kind as inferior and unworthy of opportunities afforded its own, it may be pragmatic to unburden yourself of that part of you and pass it off as a big if for some minorities — as a member of the dominant group.

In a more positive sense, many people have come to this country partly to enjoy the freedom to reinvent themselves. Why not change your name, religion and whatever else in your profile that might impede you in your new home?

These are complexities and contradictions that Ms. Reichek's installation doesn't try to resolve, and they give it a resonance that a more didactic work would lack. But those contradictions might be among the reasons that identity art has faded for younger artists, who evidently are suspicious of identifying labels and the limiting expectations that can accompany them. Freely changing identities, putting them on and off like clothes, may be the order of the day, if Miley Cyrus's appropriation of signifiers from black hip-hop culture is any indicator. The political energy stirring art society today is different and more pointed. Now it's all about money.

Johnson, Kent. "The Jewishness Is in the Details." New York Times: Weekend Arts II, September 2013.



## The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

### Elaine Reichek: 'A Précis 1972-1995'



Christopher Burke/Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

Elaine Reichek's "The Artist's Bedroom," an intimate installation lined with images.

By KAREN ROSENBERG  
Published: December 12, 2013

*Zach Feuer Gallery*

*548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea*

*Through Dec. 21*

Elaine Reichek is well known for her needleworks, which put a feminist and multicultural spin on the embroidered samplers made by 18th- and 19th-century women. But painting and photo-appropriation played a crucial role in her art from the beginning, to judge by this elegant survey at [Zach Feuer](#).

It includes faint little grids from the early 1970s, which look like Agnes Martins but reveal themselves to be stitched or taped rather than penciled. Slightly later works from around 1980 juxtapose knitted bikinis and mittens with the patterns and diagrams used to make them, emphasizing that so-called "women's work" can be as coded, mathematical and rational as, say, a drawing by Sol LeWitt.

From around 1990 come knitted works with different kinds of source images: generally, ethnographic and typological photographs of people and architecture. "Painted Blackfoot," for instance, pairs an overpainted photograph of a tepee with a sacklike version in wool yarn. These works seem to argue that "crafts" like knitting come with the same historical baggage as mediums like painting or sculpture: They're as loaded and perverse, in other words, as Mike Kelley's soft sculptures.

Reinforcing that comparison is a closet-size installation in the back gallery, "The Artist's Bedroom." (A more elaborate bedroom installation from 1993, "[A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited](#)," was recently shown at the Jewish Museum.) This cozy, blue-walled chamber is lined with small framed assemblages that imagine famous 20th-century artworks as doll-size sheets and pillows, and although it sounds cute, it's actually sort of creepy and claustrophobic. It seems to ask whether there is such a thing as being too intimate with art.

Rosenberg, Karen. "Elaine Reichek: A Précis 1972-1995." *New York Times*, December 2013.



# The New York Times

## Art & Design

February 23, 2012

### Elaine Reichek: 'Ariadne's Thread'

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Nicole Klagsbrun  
534 West 24th St.  
Chelsea  
Through March 24

Ariadne, the clever heroine of Greek myth whose ball of thread helped Theseus escape from the Minotaur's labyrinth, makes an ideal subject for Elaine Reichek. Ms. Reichek has been working with thread since the 1970s, most recently in canvases embroidered with the help of sophisticated digital machinery. (She has a large-scale tapestry in the Whitney Biennial, which opens on Thursday.)

In a bookish but appealing series begun in 2008 Ms. Reichek uses digital and hand embroidery and silk-screen to reproduce a wide range of images and literary quotations relating to the Ariadne myth. She begins with a sample from the third century B.C. epic poem "The Argonautica," which is paired with Giovanni Crosato's "Bacchus Crowning Ariadne With a Diadem of Stars." Later we see Warhol's "Italian Square With Ariadne (After de Chirico)" and a Theseus motif from an Attic black-figure amphora.

Keeping this exercise from becoming pedantic, Ms. Reichek finds elements of the myth where we least expect them: in "The Shining," for instance (an image of the hotel's patterned carpeting appears below a poem about the Minotaur going mad). Comic books and other unexpected sources pop up in the photo archive "Minotaur/Labyrinth," on view in the gallery's front window.

The series is most insightful, though, when it focuses on Ariadne. We tend to think of her as a crafty gal Friday, but Guido Reni's "Bacchus and Ariadne" shows her as helpless nude, deserted by Theseus and about to enter a pity marriage with the wine god. Accompanying this image is a quotation from Nietzsche's "Ecce Homo." It reads, "Who besides me knows who Ariadne is?," and the words seem to come directly from Ms. Reichek.

A version of this review appeared in print on February 24, 2012, on page C26 of the New York edition with the headline: Elaine Reichek: 'Ariadne's Thread'.



Since the early 1970s feminist artists have been using embroidery as a vehicle to reclaim female agency in contemporary artistic practice and to question the validity of a hierarchy of genres in the history of art. Roszika Parker's *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and Making of the Feminine*, published in 1984, was the first text to research and evaluate the history of this art form and its important role, as a form of cultural production, in validating women's contributions to global history.<sup>1</sup> For the last four decades, the New York-based artist

Paula Birnbaum

## Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches

This paper was presented on February 15, 2007, at the annual conference of the College Art Association in New York, in a panel entitled *Tradition Unbound: Contemporary Responses to Art's Past*, chaired by Murtaza Vali and Anna Sloan. I am grateful to Vali and Sloan, as well as to Elaine Reichek, for their thoughtful input. Amy Lyford, Linda Nochlin, Sharon Siskin, and Jane Anne Staw provided valuable feedback at various stages. Thanks also to *Art Journal's* anonymous peer reviewers, who offered helpful suggestions. A special thanks to David M. Silver for turning me on to theories of remediation. The Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, and the Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, have generously provided photographs and documentation.

1. Roszika Parker, *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984).

2. See David Frankel, "Elaine Reichek: Stitches-ellated Pics," *Aperture* 175 (Summer 2004): 34–38.

3. Reichek's recent solo exhibitions include: *Pattern Recognition*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 2007; *Glossed in Translation*, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 2006; *After Babel Alpha Beta*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 2004; *madamsimadam*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (web and CD-ROM project), 2003; *Madam, I'm Adam*, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 2002; *At Home and in the World*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium, 2000 (traveled to Tel Aviv Museum, 2001); and *Projects 67: Elaine Reichek*; "When This You See . . ." Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.

4. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 45 and 11.

5. Patrick J. Cook, review of Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, available online at <http://rccs.usfca.edu/bookinfo.asp?ReviewID=49&BookID=63>.

6. See David Frankel, ". . . Remember Me," in Elaine Reichek, *When This You See* (New York: George Braziller and Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2000).

Elaine Reichek has been making work that unravels the tradition of the embroidered sampler—as an educational exercise designed to “frame truisms and life lessons for girls and young women within decorative patterns”—retooling this domestic format to critique the patriarchal and modernist assumptions of our culture.<sup>2</sup> In her most recent bodies of work Reichek uses the medium of

embroidery to interrogate the complicated relationships among art history, representation, and technology.<sup>3</sup> By juxtaposing hand-made cross-stitches with those produced by a computer-programmed sewing machine in samplers that simulate famous works of art, Reichek offers an incisive commentary on the many forms of translation and remediation that are integral to the history of mark-making and illusionism in Western visual culture. For those interested in cyber-based art practices, her longtime engagement as a classically trained painter-become-needlewoman with the history of technology and mechanical and digital production offers an interesting point of departure.

The new-media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as “the representation of one medium in another,” or the attempt “to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation.”<sup>4</sup> In the world of digital visual culture, this process can be executed in a number of different ways, from the simple scanning and digitizing of printed text or reproductions of works of art, to the more aggressive juxtaposition of different media in digital art, to “the nearly total absorption of one medium by another in the webcam site.”<sup>5</sup> In Reichek's case, the embroidered work she has produced over the past decade cleverly responds to the histories of both art and technology; for her, remediation questions the notions of authenticity, originality, and the canon by staging a powerful collision between different types of mark-making.

Reichek's interest in the relationship between art and technology was readily apparent in her 1999 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Projects 67: Elaine Reichek; When This You See . . .*, a collection of thirty-one pieces that critique traditional definitions of “high art” through musings on the female-dominated arts of embroidery, weaving, and knitting.<sup>6</sup> One of the final works in this series, entitled *Sampler (WorldWideWeb)* (1998), serves as an important bridge to understanding her most recent exploration of the relationship between digital technology and the seemingly traditional practice of “women's needlework.” In this hand-stitched sampler on linen, the viewer is confronted with the familiar image of an early Macintosh computer screen with a random assortment of scrolling text on the theme of weaving and fiber arts (“Spin spin-off spin a yarn spin a web web of deceit/net wove weave a spell . . . embroider the truth embroider a fantasy”). Reichek notes of this piece how the language of weaving and cloth “suffuses our consciousness as a deeply embedded metaphor”:





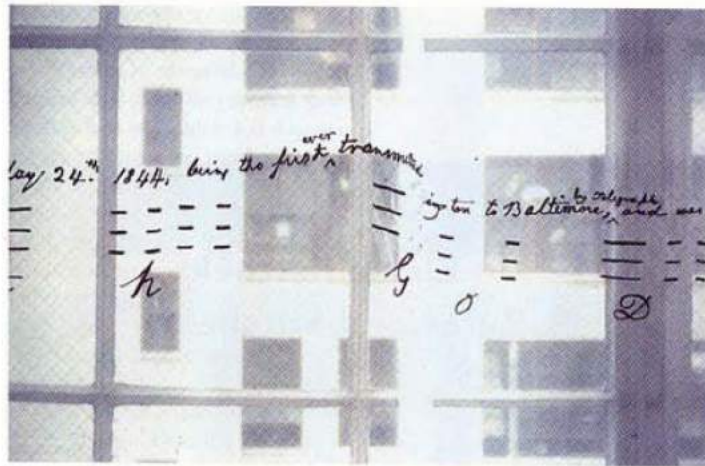
Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (World Wide Web)*,  
1998, embroidery on linen, 11 1/2 x 14 1/2 in. (28.6 x  
36.2 cm). Collection of Allen W. Frusis, New  
York (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph  
provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York)



**Elaine Reichek, *First Morse Message*, 2004,**  
 machine embroidery on fabric (artwork © Elaine  
 Reichek)

detail: 4 panels, totaling 14 ft. 5 in. x 13 ft. 10 in.  
 (439.4 x 421.6 cm), Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery,  
 New York, 2004 (photograph provided by Nicole  
 Klagsbrun Gallery)

installation view: approx. 16 x 60 ft. (4.9 x  
 18.3 m), Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica,  
 2006 (photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne  
 Gallery)



We even talk about the fabric of life. And this metaphor runs right up through the most up-to-date technology. In fact, there are links between the history of weaving and the computer. The jacquard loom, invented in the eighteenth century, is often considered an early example of a programmable machine—the prototype for that kind of thinking. Also, although the computer is considered a boy toy, in the early nineteenth century it was a woman, Ada Lovelace—the daughter of the poet Byron—who developed the mathematics and worked to refine a calculating machine, the Analytic Engine, devised by Charles Babbage. He provided the idea, she provided the logic. The pixel and the byte are like stitches—tiny indissoluble elements that in combination with thousands of other indissoluble elements make up a picture. Are there bugs in your computer? Maybe they're spiders.<sup>7</sup>

With references to Arachne and the gendered traditions of the textile arts, Reichek leaves her audience pondering the history of cross-stitching as “tradition unbound,” an age-old form of conceptual mark-making with direct implications for technological progress up to the present day.<sup>8</sup> Her MoMA exhibition in fact offered a metahistory of the relationship between needle arts and technology, and the exploration of this story has since infused her practice. The jacquard loom, widely adapted in France in the early 1800s for its accomplishment of automated weaving through the use of cards that programmed the loom, is a powerful point of reference. Reichek notes the masculinist associations of the history of technology and attempts to give agency to women and their unrecognized role within that history.<sup>9</sup>

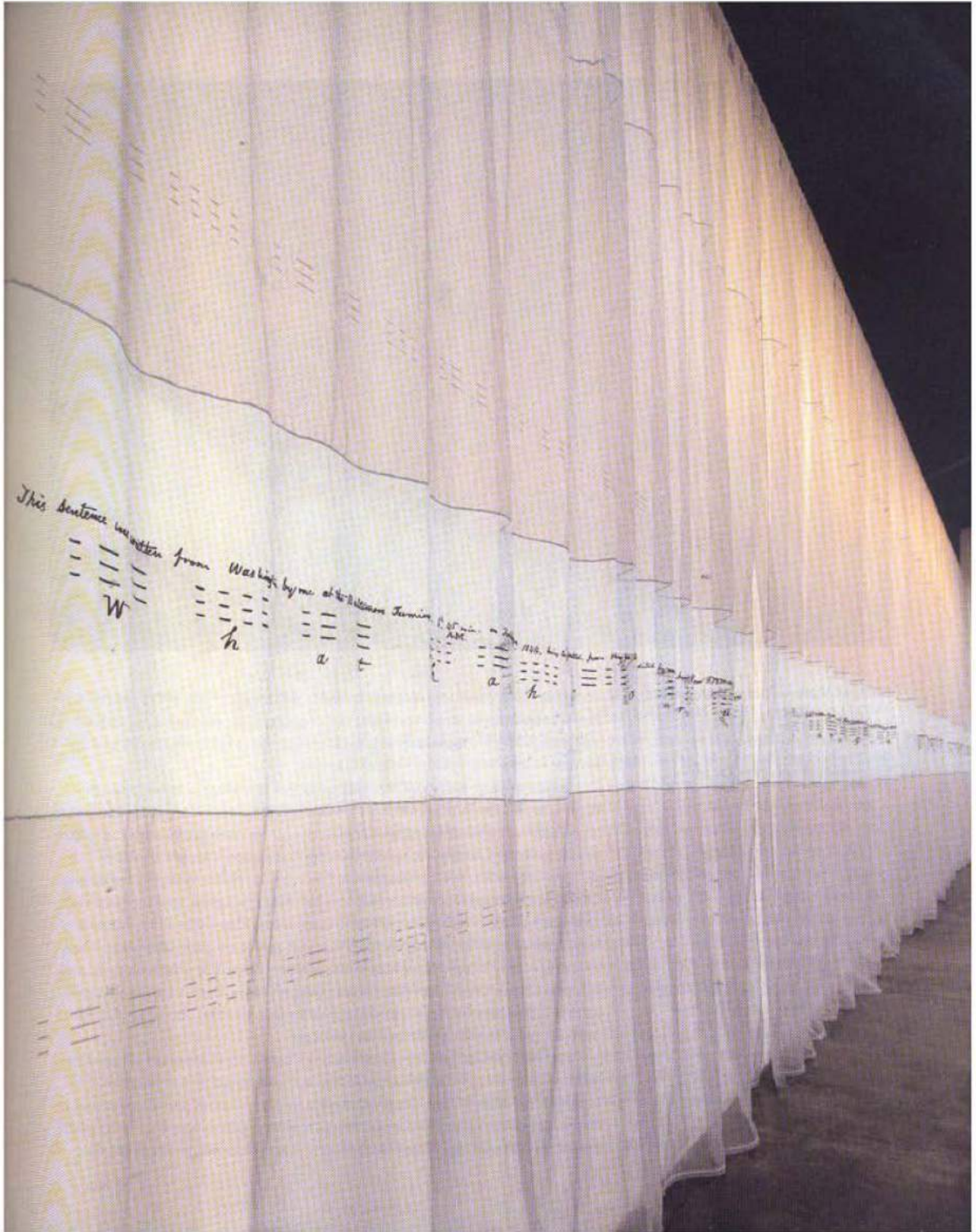
The integral relationship between the pixel and the stitch—both free from gendered attributes or stereotypes—lies at the heart of Reichek’s most recent work.<sup>10</sup> The pixel is the primary digital module from which the face of our electronic visual culture is constructed. Reichek’s embroidered computer screens address how the computer brings with it new ways of thinking about images and patterns, and also conventions of visual representation that are nonetheless rooted in tradition. Yet by hand-embroidering cross-stitches to simulate basic

7. Reichek, plate 29.

8. I have taken this term from the title of the 2007 College Art Association panel, *Tradition Unbound: Contemporary Responses to Art's Past*, where this essay was first presented.

9. The term “computer bug,” for example, has been attributed to a woman named Grace Hopper (1906–1992), an American computer scientist and United States Navy officer who programmed the Harvard Mark I calculator and is described as having developed the first compiler for a computer programming language. For a discussion of Hopper and the role of women in the history of the computer, see James Inman, *Computers and Writing the Cyborg Era* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); and Sadie Plant, “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics,” in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

10. See David Frankel, “Elaine Reichek: Stitchellated Pics.”



Birnbaum, Paula. "Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches." *Art Journal*, July 2008.





**Samuel F. B. Morse, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33**, oil on canvas, 73¼ x 108 in. (187.3 x 274.3 cm). Collection of Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago/Art Resource, NY)

11. Telephone interview with the author, December 13, 2006.

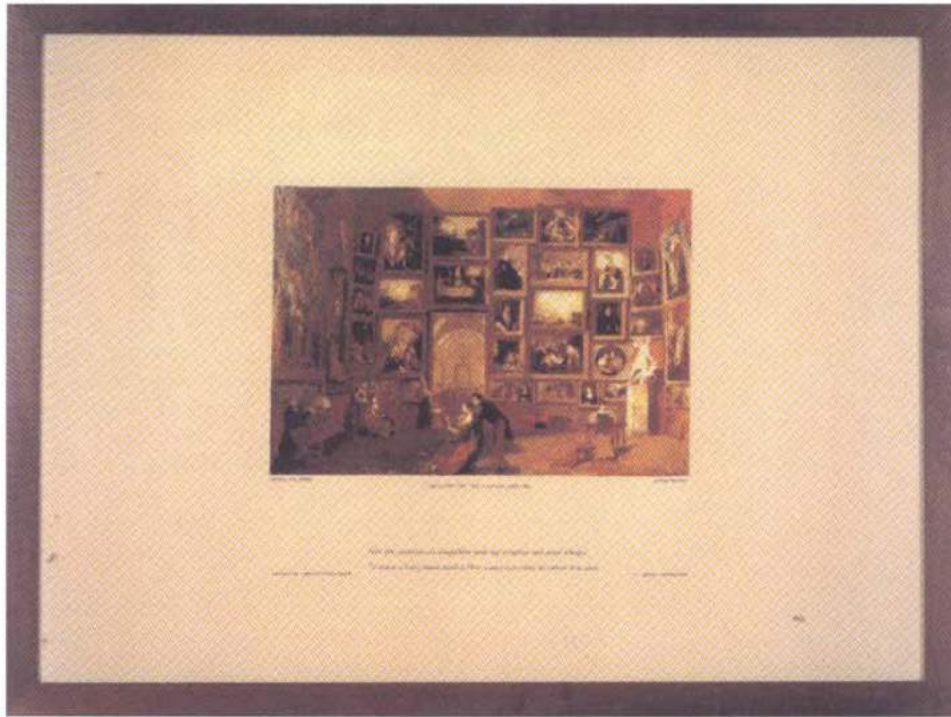
12. This piece was featured in the recent exhibitions *After Babel Alpha Beta* (2004), *Glossed in Translation* (2006), and *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* (2007). For Morse, see Paul J. Staiti, *Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); William Kloss, *Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York: Abrams and the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1988); Kenneth Silverman, *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (Boston, Da Capo Press, 2003).

computer code, interactive icons, malleable pictures, and fast-paced text messages, she turns the visual vocabulary of our electronic revolution on its head and embraces the interconnectedness among technology, craft history, and the history of art.

In her most recent work, Reichek takes this relationship as her point of departure and combines embroidery with the tools and history of technology to take on the subjects of language, art history, and representation, with their many forms, meanings, and potential for miscommunication. Reichek explains: "All of my work has to do with translation. The work is related to digital technology. Images are scanned through a computer, fed into a program; that program then spits out a chart in color, which I then embroider either by hand or machine. Each piece thus refers to its process."<sup>11</sup> Certain pieces are painstakingly stitched by hand, others by renovated nineteenth-century electric sewing machines, and still others with newly developed computer-programmable machines that transform Reichek's scanned and Photoshopped source material into beautiful, flat surfaces that reference celebrated works of art.

*First Morse Message* (2006) offers Reichek's luminescent vision of nineteenth-century America and the invention of functional telegraphic transmission.<sup>12</sup> Samuel F. B. Morse, whose telegraphic code helped open up global communication, made portraits and history paintings that were preoccupied with the problem of identity and reproduction in American art. Here Reichek presents the





**Elaine Reichek, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 2004.**  
embroidery on linen, 34½ x 46½ in. (87 x 117.5  
cm). Private collection (artwork © Elaine Reichek;  
photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery,  
New York).

viewer with a diaphanous, pale gray curtain that stands sixteen feet high and sixty feet long. The piece documents Morse's first telegraphic message, sent on May 24, 1844, from Washington to Baltimore, in both code and the English alphabet. With its loose and translucent folds, this massively scaled installation of embroidered fabric in motion plays off the hardness of the floor in each exhibition venue, engaging the viewer with its sheer, material presence and flexibility. Reichek has embroidered several layers of text from Morse across the horizontal expanse of this piece, repeating the stitched words "What hath God wrought?" the very first coded message, in which he quoted from the Old Testament, Book of Numbers. This text apparently was suggested to Morse by the daughter of a US patent official and likely was intended to humble Morse's own role while aggrandizing the invention; when used today, the phrase begs our consideration of the anxieties inherent in technological advances that have led not just to life improvements, but also to global destruction, from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the threat of global warming.

Reichek scanned Morse's original handwriting from photographs of his message and other documentation in the Library of Congress, enlarged it to scale, created a template, and then had it professionally embroidered using a recently salvaged mid-nineteenth-century Singer sewing machine—a machine just twenty years younger than Morse's invention. Her choice to use a contemporaneous machine for this piece reveals Reichek's material as well as conceptual

fascination with early technology. The piece also includes her reconstruction of the code Morse invented, using handpress type to create vinyl marks that appear to float and pull back from the gallery wall when the piece is installed. The effect is a visual layering of texts, both Morse's original cursive handwriting and the language of dashes and dots that is precursor to computer code. The power of this work lies in its ability to express what Reichek describes as "the inevitably flawed attempt to communicate, to translate content from one mind into another, to an otherworldly extreme."<sup>13</sup>

Reichek is also keenly interested in how Morse's practice as a painter had a major influence on his invention of the telegraph machine and code. He stated that he first conceived of the idea for the telegraph machine in 1832, just as he was completing the large painting entitled *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33. Reichek refers to the painting as Morse's virtual gallery or cyber museum, as it was his re-creation for an American audience of the Louvre's famous Salon Carré, the gallery intended to display the museum's greatest masterpieces of European art. Morse was apparently critical of the decision of Louis Philippe's administration to "alter the international flavor of the room by transforming it into a gallery of French art, ostensibly as a populist, nationalist gesture," and so chose his own arrangement of old-master paintings.<sup>14</sup> Paul Staiti has demonstrated how Morse made specific choices of works to include or exclude in his version of the Louvre's most famous gallery, creating miniaturized "facsimiles" of specific old-master paintings that represent distinct periods of European art history particularly meaningful to him.<sup>15</sup> He thus created his subjective interpretation of the Salon Carré to communicate his selection of canonical imagery from Old Europe to American audiences. According to Staiti, Morse deliberately arranged the facsimiles eclectically, "piled up without any regard for nationality or date," much as our present-day web galleries often remove the historical contexts of pictures in order to generate new meanings.<sup>16</sup>

Reichek was also drawn to the fact that Morse inserted into the pictorial space related figures, thought by scholars to include a self-portrait of him instructing his daughter, along with portraits of other prominent Americans, including the writer James Fenimore Cooper. When he finished the *Gallery of the Louvre* in 1833, Morse published a descriptive catalogue and key and exhibited it beside the other paintings in his studio in New York. While he had hoped that his work would inspire the American public to embrace the power of the museum to articulate democratic values, very few people came to see it, and the painting was recognized only later for its importance in the history of American art.<sup>17</sup> For Reichek, Morse's efforts to produce subjective "copies" of European art for American audiences raise questions about authenticity, originality, and remediation, given the complexities inherent in the processes of communication and translation.

Fascinated by Morse and the history and power of his simultaneous experimentation in art and technology, Reichek created a hand-embroidered sampler after a digital scan of *Gallery of the Louvre* that she found on the web, included in her 2004 exhibition *After Babel Alpha Beta*. Just as Morse played with the idea of long-distance communication and remediation in both his painting and the later invention of the telegraph, Reichek asks important questions about the power and failure of both art history and language to convey meaning effectively in our present-day cyberculture. The act of creating pixel-like cross-stitches on a canvas

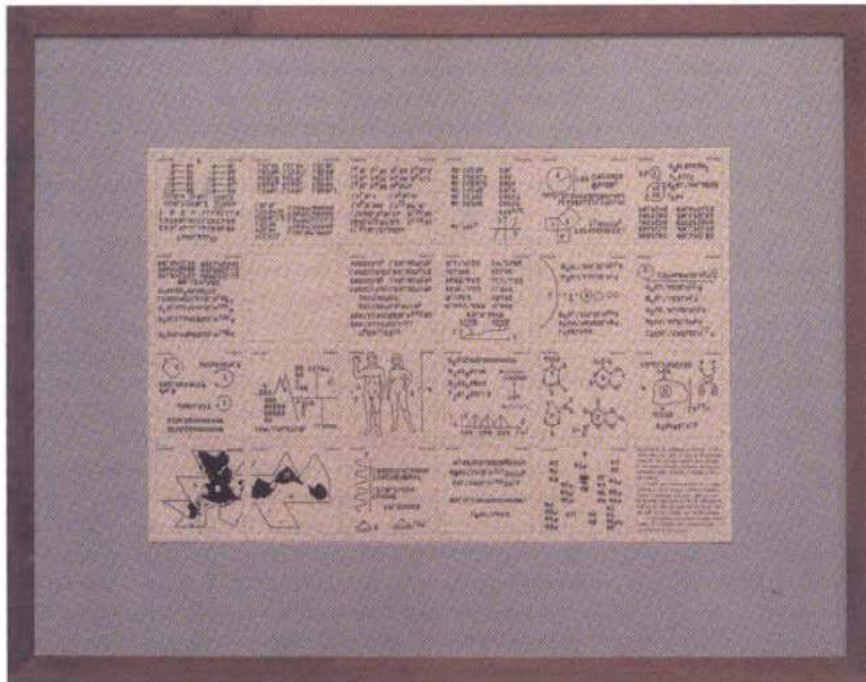
13. Elaine Reichek, *After Babel Alpha Beta*, exh. broch. (New York: Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, 2004).

14. Staiti, 189.

15. *Ibid.*, 175–206.

16. *Ibid.*, 196.

17. Ironically, Morse had been critical of American connoisseurs who collected copies and imitations of European art, and in spite of flattering reviews in several daily New York newspapers, he viewed his ambitious painting ultimately as a failure (he sold it for \$1,200 in 1834). See Staiti, 199–202.



**Elaine Reichek, SETI, 2004**, hand embroidery on linen, 45 x 57 in. (114.3 x 144.8 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

generated after a digital scan of an original work of art suggests many layers of referentiality, beginning with the original paintings selected by Morse from various galleries of the Louvre, to his painted rearrangement and reproduction of them as facsimiles in his famous 1833 painting, to the many photographic images taken directly after the painting. Of course, these photographs of Morse's painting were altered by the designers and printers who reproduced them over the years in various art-historical texts, then individually scanned by a host of "users," and altered yet again by others using Photoshop and other image-editing programs before uploading them as digital files onto the web. Enter Reichek, who searched the internet for what she deemed the best-quality image of the Morse painting, downloaded the file, altered it more, and eventually transferred it onto a template for the production of her own hand-embroidered version using factory-dyed threads. Reichek's piece after Morse's painting thus deliberately plays on the cycle of remediation and inserts the needlewoman into the physical processes of creation, reproduction, and translation. Indeed, Reichek's repetition of the cross-stitch in homage both to the pixel and to Morse's painting also references his invention of code and entices the viewer to think about the important links between creativity and the history of technology. This rich cycle of remediation is the reason Reichek embroiders, and it is this conceptual aspect of her choice of medium that interests her most as an artist.

In SETI (2004), another of Reichek's recent samplers, the artist further explores Morse's legacy of global communication and translation and its clear



implications for the history of visual culture. SETI is the acronym for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, a government-funded organization founded with the mission "to explore, understand and explain the origin, nature and prevalence of life in the universe."<sup>18</sup> Here the artist uses the laborious process of embroidery by hand on blue linen to confront the anxiety that millennia bring. Her piece offers, she tells us, a scanned replication of "a message blasted in 1974 from the world's largest radio telescope in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, toward the constellation Hercules, some 25,000 light years away. A string of 1,679 bits in binary code is assembled into a pictogram showing the numbers one to ten, the chemical formula of the DNA molecule, a human figure, a description of the solar system, the Arecibo telescope, and other data."<sup>19</sup> The accompanying text below the pictogram is an excerpt from a twenty-three-page document in *Lincos* or *Lingua Cosmica*, a language system transmitted into outer space. The hand-embroidered text in the lower right corner of Reichek's piece explains the scientists' goals in this process, as well as their formal request for a response: "Conception of an interstellar message is not a trivial task. . . . We tried to send an encyclopedia. Therefore the message contains basic notions of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and astronomy. More important, it formally asks for a reply."

Popular-culture aficionados may recall Jodie Foster's role in the 1997 movie *Contact*, after the novel of the same title by Carl Sagan. Foster plays a passionate radio astronomer who discovers an intelligent signal broadcast from outer space. She and her fellow scientists decipher the message and uncover detailed instructions for building a mysterious machine, which some fear will lead to the possible destruction of our planet and species. Reichek is fascinated by the fact that the United States government endorses this type of endeavor in the name of technological advancement, as traces of scientific knowledge and the history of Western visual culture are blasted into outer space in a code inherited from Morse. Yet the explicitly hand-made quality of the marks in SETI, the jagged cross-stitches of embroidered black thread against linen, emphasizes the impossibility of geometric perfection in any form of communication, no matter how sophisticated the technology.

In this regard Reichek has traced her focus on the subjective cycle of mark-making to her interest in George Steiner's theories of the construction of language and translation. Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) served as a direct inspiration for her 2004 exhibition of that title, in which SETI first appeared, and offered the artist a comprehensive theory for the investigation of the phenomenology and processes of translation in and between languages. Grounding his argument in linguistic history and theories of how language creates order (starting from the chaos caused by the fall of the biblical Tower of Babel), Steiner views translation as an elevated artistic act in itself: "Successive constructs of the past form a many-stranded helix, with imaginary chronologies spiraling around the neutral stem of 'actual' biological time."<sup>20</sup> Whether moving from Morse's code to the English language, or from one language, artistic medium, or form of technology to another, Reichek theorizes translation as an integral part of both history and everyday communication that creates an embodied effect, in itself a richly complex and meaningful subject matter.

For Reichek, the pictogram transmitted by SETI is explicitly connected to the way popular culture recycles creation myths, most notably the biblical story of

18. SETI home page, at [www.seti.org](http://www.seti.org).

19. Reichek, *After Babel Alpha Beta*.

20. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

following pages:

**Elaine Reichek, *Blade Runner*, 2001**, embroidery on linen, 30 x 46 in. (76.2 x 116.8 cm).  
Collection of Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

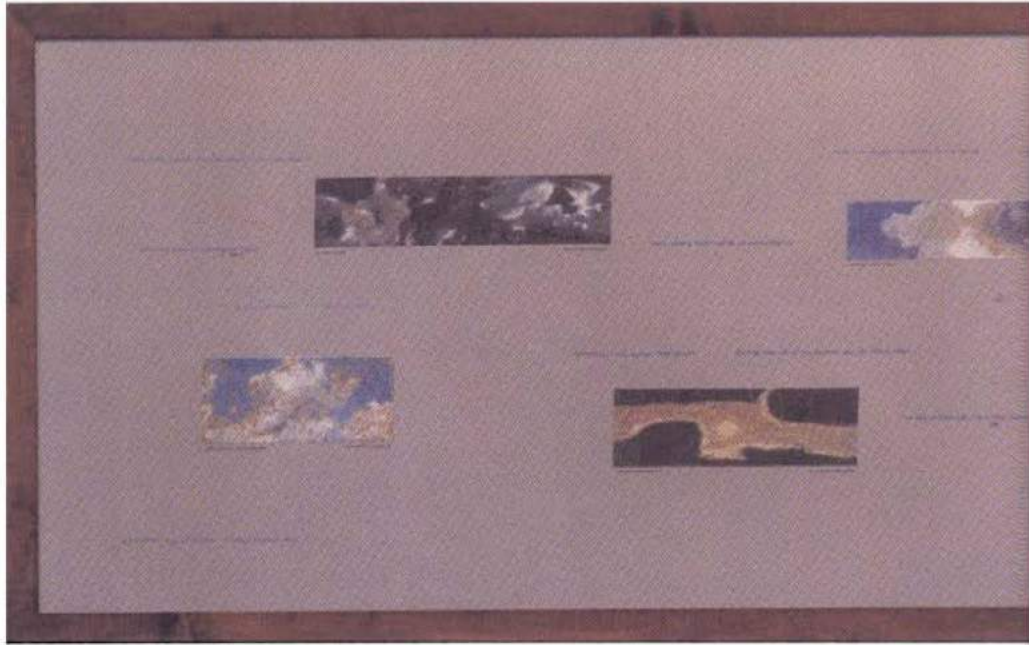
Adam and Eve. By evoking this fundamental, Old Testament image as a modern, extraterrestrial communiqué produced in old-fashioned needle and thread, Reichek emphasizes the ironies inherent in our present-day fascination with the binary codes of up-to-date technology and cyberculture. The image of Eve with her hand on her hip and Adam waving at the viewer recalls the artist's virtual exhibition, *madamimadam*, launched in 2003 on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where she had spent a residency two years earlier. At that time Reichek created a pastiche of hand-stitched embroideries in dialogue with sixteen of the museum's holdings of famous works of art that evoked the Adam and Eve theme. Reichek's pieces referred stylistically to artists ranging from Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer to Paul Gauguin, René Magritte, and Robert Smithson. The embroidered imagery was accompanied by quotations from a wide range of sources: the Bible, John Milton, Mary Shelley, Charles Darwin, Ray Bradbury, and *Blade Runner*, the popular "man versus machine" film of 1982 directed by Ridley Scott after the novel by Philip K. Dick. For this particular piece Reichek read the script of *Blade Runner* and scrutinized every version of the film while simultaneously studying the Gardner collection, with emphasis on works of art from the Renaissance onward that represent Western creation myths from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the resulting digital project, Reichek cleverly overcame restrictions in Gardner's will, which stipulates that her installation can never be altered, by installing her hand-embroidered samplers infused with modern, sci-fi references in the galleries on Sunday evenings, only to be filmed with a digital camera (so that artificial lighting would not be necessary) on Mondays, when the Museum was closed to the public, and then removed.

In *madamimadam*, Reichek thus staged the first digital exhibition in the Gardner Museum by installing her ironic samplers beside works in the permanent collection and then creating a digital record of the exhibition, available to viewers only on the Museum's website and an accompanying DVD. Not only did she intentionally subvert Gardner's legacy, she produced a digital project that investigates the role of the needlewoman in the processes of reproduction of both people and art.<sup>21</sup> Like her hand-embroidered image of the originary couple in SETI, *madamimadam* also offers a conceptual critique of the concepts of originality, creation, and communication in our current digital age. "As a virtual project it reiterates Reichek's fascination with the intersection of these themes in the visual and scientific practice of Morse: "If he made a virtual gallery at the Louvre, I made a virtual gallery at the Gardner; and I did it by using technology."<sup>22</sup> With her cross-stitches emulating Morse code, while simultaneously referencing the fusion of Western creation myths and science fiction, Reichek in fact pushes Morse's dual project in art and technology even further by offering a contemporary feminist twist on theories of remediation. Like Morse at the Louvre, she removes the famous works in Gardner's collection from their social-historical contexts both of production and collection, and deliberately juxtaposes images and texts referencing fertility, creation, and technological advancement from different historical moments.

Other recent hand-embroidered pieces explore even more explicitly the ways in which we interact with the history of art and technology in the age of the internet and search engines like "Google Images." In *A Lexicon of Clouds* (2006),

21. See Pfant.

22. Telephone interview with the author, September 28, 2007.



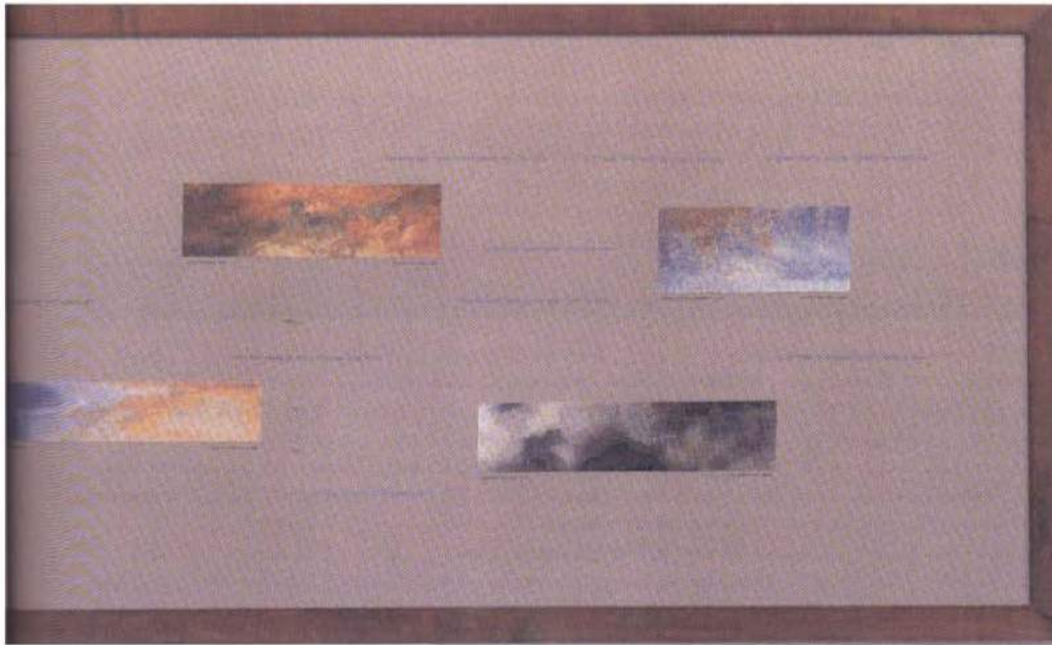
**Elaine Reichek, *A Lexicon of Clouds*, 2006**, hand embroidery on linen, 33 in. x 10 ft. (83.8 x 304.8 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

Reichek began her research process once again by surfing the web, this time looking for the best possible scanned images of famous art-historical representations of clouds by artists ranging from James McNeill Whistler to El Greco, Nicolas Poussin, Morse, J. M. W. Turner, and Gerhard Richter. She then digitally manipulated these selected scans and ran each through software to create a map of a small section of each image, resulting in a coded embroidery chart that became a template for her piece. The next step was to select embroidery threads from the enormous array of prefabricated colors available in commercial fabric outlets. Reichek has long been fascinated by another technological feat, Sir William Henry Perkin's invention of commercial dye in 1856, and takes great pleasure in revealing how the evolution of artificial color has influenced her practice of remediating the art-historical canon.

The result is a gorgeous, hand-embroidered "virtual gallery" of colorful clouds, carefully constructed from some of the "greatest hits" of art history, paired with text from Wallace Stevens's 1924 poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." The piece offers yet another ironic homage both to Morse and Google, and embraces all the connections inherent in the relationship between the pixel and the stitch. It communicates name recognition of canonical artists through precise combinations of dots and patterns, elucidating the concepts of color, line, image, and text. Who could have imagined that the disparate traditions of the Western art-historical canon, anonymous "women's needlework," and modern technology could be so integrally related? After contemplating Reichek's *Lexicon of Clouds*, how can we not?

*A Lexicon of Clouds* asks the timely question of how we know what constitutes





the “best” digital scan of any given image from the history of art or from popular culture. Reproductions of Richter’s paintings, for example, are impossible to read on the web, yet these are precisely the images that the public comes to know and appreciate, and therefore associate with the artist’s name. Reichek’s hand-embroidered work after a digital scan of his *Wolken-Clouds* of 1970 points to the element of accident in how those of us who are embroiled in the business of making, exhibiting, and writing about art and its history come to select, alter, and reproduce specific visual images based on our subjective interactions with digital images available on the internet. By taking that practice back to her studio in the laborious process of generating hand-made embroideries with pre-dyed threads, Reichek reveals the circular irony of the history of mark-making and recording—of visual culture.

A *Lexicon of Clouds* also raises questions about how so many of the digital images of art available on the web are often reproductions of objects that have recently or not yet been sold, the remainders, so to speak, that have now become the most publicly accessible digital traces of the artist’s hand. This fascinating aspect of our technological age is ripe for exploration by all branches of the art world; our field is fast becoming one of convenience, where artists and institutions that cannot afford to subscribe to costly digital archive services such as ArtStor or to create and manage elaborate digital-image databases are relying exclusively on the visual material available to them on the web (or on their own scans from reproductions in books). Indeed it has become common practice when researching lesser-known artists whose works are dispersed in private collections and largely invisible to the public to grab for analysis and even



**Elaine Reichek, *Translation*, 2006**, digital embroidery on linen, 15 x 52 in. (38.1 x 132.1 cm). Private collection (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

publication the first scan of a work that recently has sold at auction. What, exactly, do we know about the long and involved processes of translation from the original work of art to that digital file that we have so quickly downloaded? How do the arbitrary conditions of reproduction, translation, and remediation affect our ultimate selection of the works of art that are worthy of study, as well as our interpretation of them?

*Translation* (2006) is a pivotal piece in addressing these questions about what is lost in the artificial process of representation. Here Reichek moves from hand-embroidery to the computer-programmable sewing machine to comment on the complete erasure of the artist's hand in the processes of artistic creation and reproduction. She pays tribute to Lawrence Weiner, the sculptor whose medium is language and who in 1968 concluded that the actual construction of a work of art was not critical to its existence in the world. This digitally embroidered piece on linen quotes from Weiner's 1993 *Specific and General Works*.<sup>23</sup> Like many of Weiner's linguistic works of art, this one describes material processes and physical conditions; it delineates space and indicates the means of its own fabrication. In Reichek's piece the digital sewing machine mimics the motion of a hand, as we saw with Morse's handwriting on the curtain, yet in this case the sans-serif script in black thread on white linen refuses to let go of the canvas. Reichek deliberately left what are called "jump threads," the literal traces of horizontal thread that, while usually clipped off, here hold together the words that are the focal point of the piece. These Morse-like dashes demonstrate the artist's commitment to leaving as much evidence as possible of the translation process, whether references to digital scans, actual pixels, color or thread choices, or other traces of the artist's hand. Her goal is for her works literally to look like translations and, in so doing, to call attention to the subjective manner in which art history and visual culture are constructed, transmitted, and transferred.

Most recently Reichek has been engaged with the production of what she calls her "fabric swatch" pieces after the canon of modern and contemporary art history, produced on computer-programmed sewing machines. This series, created in 2006–7, features over one hundred small square pieces hung in varied groupings that isolate sections of famous works by well-known modern artists such as Piet Mondrian, Henri Matisse, and Andy Warhol, as well as living artists including Bridget Riley, Damien Hirst, and Kara Walker.<sup>24</sup> In each case, Reichek

23. Lawrence Weiner, *Specific and General Works* (Villeurbanne, France: Le Nouveau Musée/Institut d'art contemporain, 1993). For a recent analysis of Weiner's linguistic works, see Lawrence Weiner: *As Far as the Eye Can See*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

24. Press release for *Pattern Recognition*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, October 2007.

has produced uniformly scaled, machine-embroidered square “swatches” after icons of the artist’s best-known works and then stretched them onto stretcher bars and installed them in diverse groupings.

This series immediately indexes these classic modern and contemporary artworks and transforms them into something new by returning them to “fabric-based traditions of pattern and design” to which they are indebted and at the same time “updating them with a hyper-modern form of production.”<sup>25</sup> Reichek’s goal is to explore the relationship between the surface design of painting and its support—a flat piece of canvas or fabric. “I tried to turn contemporary art history into textiles, or a swatch book,” she explains of the series.<sup>26</sup> We might think back to the interpretation of Morse’s *Gallery of the Louvre* as an 1830s critique of the rehanging of the Salon Carré following “populist” tastes, though here Reichek moves away from Morse in her obvious desire to point to analogies between the fashion industry and the contemporary art market.

For her most recent exhibition of this series, *Pattern Recognition* (2007), Reichek created a swatch book to include in the gallery as “a set of duplicates of her own framed digital embroideries, now bound into the kind of sample-book used for centuries in the fabric industry.”<sup>27</sup> Her embroidered play on Marcel Duchamp’s last painting on canvas, *Tu m’* (1918), and on Warhol’s seriality inspires viewers to ask how specific images become the icons of any given artist. For example, the optical pattern used by Riley in black and white in her 1961 *Movement in Squares* existed in textile patterns long before the artist became famous for her paintings in the mid-twentieth century, yet Reichek applied eye-popping “fashion” colors in order to play with the concept of this bold imagery as the icon of the artist.

Matisse emerges as one of the forerunners of this practice for Reichek—the Frenchman, originally from the small French textile town of Le Cateau-Cambrésis, has been celebrated in an international exhibition for his lifelong fascination with the history of textiles.<sup>28</sup> One of Reichek’s recent handmade embroideries reproduces a detail of his *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948), a painting that includes a reproduction of a section of cloth from his own textile collection, referencing its profound impact on his art throughout his career. He referred to this collection—which included Turkish robes, African wall hangings, resist-dyed cotton found at Parisian flea markets, and *haute couture* gowns—as his “working library” and most significant source of inspiration for the imagery that recurred in his oeuvre. By restoring the decorative patterns that fascinated Matisse and others to their textile origins, Reichek probes the cycling of images among art, design, and popular culture. The integral relationship between the pixel and the stitch once again serves as the foundation for revealing how high-tech projects are grounded in a long aesthetic tradition, which is in turn based on the history of mechanical production and communication. Reichek also encourages her viewers to ponder the obvious connections between the economics of the commercial art world and that of the textile industry, where fashion has long served as a commodity that informs the remediation of popular imagery.

As a whole, Reichek’s digitally embroidered swatch series, by calling the viewer’s attention to multiple layers of translations and subjectivities (from the homogenization of color in scanned images to digital embroideries, and back and forth between “high” and “low” to “high” again), asks not only what is

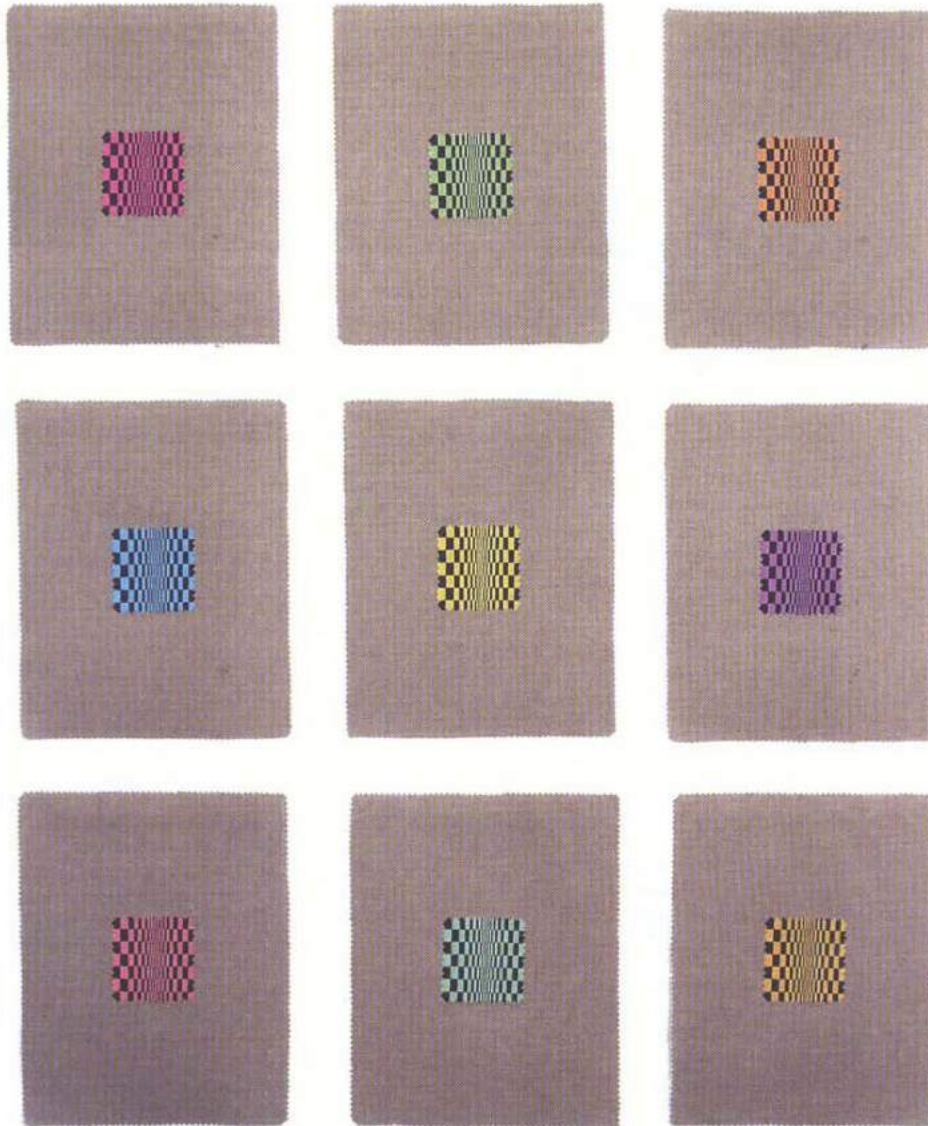
25. *Ibid.*

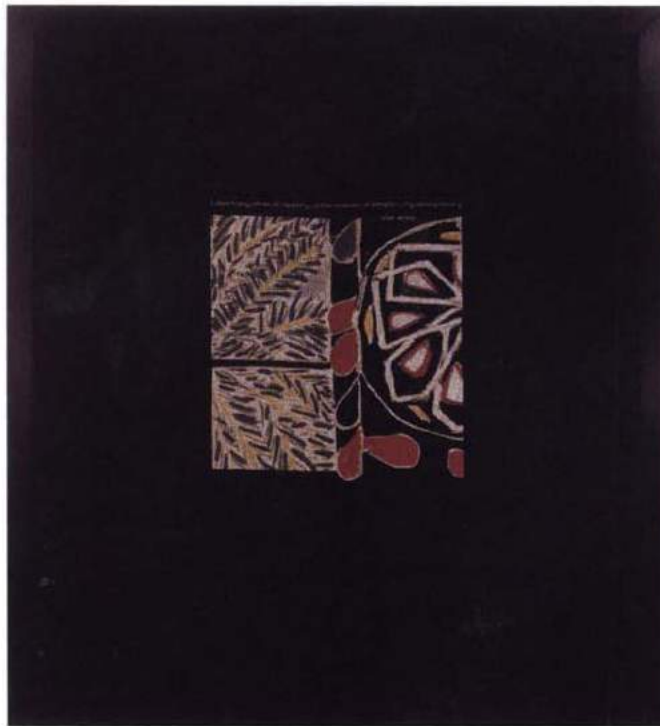
26. Telephone interview with the author, December 13, 2006.

27. Press release for *Pattern Recognition*.

28. *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams* took place at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2004. Le Musée Matisse, Le Cateau-Cambrésis, in 2004, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2005.







**Elaine Reichek, *Egyptian Curtain*, 2007**, embroidery on linen, 54¼ x 49¼ in. (139.1 x 126.4 cm). Collection of Museum of Arts and Design, New York (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York)

**Elaine Reichek, *Bridget Riley 1-9*, 2006**, digital embroidery on linen, 54½ x 42½ in. (130.8 x 108 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

the icon of any given painter in art history, but who chooses it, and whether it changes over time and according to fashion. How do they choose it, and which images read best? As a whole, this digitally embroidered series explores how fashion does, in fact, dictate what is in vogue in art history and also how much artists cater to the latest trend of what looks best in an image. By mining hand-embroidered samplers, a tradition long associated with feminine domesticity, Reichek infuses her work with both the history of technology and the most up-to-date questions posed by contemporary consumers of art in a digital age. Whether translating art history, the results of Google searches, or radio transmissions into space that have been funded by the American government, Reichek's most recent hand-, machine-, and digitally produced samplers offer a powerful critique of the concepts of originality, reproduction, and communication in contemporary visual culture.

Paula Birnbaum is assistant professor in the department of art and architecture at the University of San Francisco, where she teaches modern and contemporary art history and museum studies. Her forthcoming book, *Framing Femininities*, explores themes of embodiment in the work of international women artists who exhibited together in Paris in the 1930s.



THE ARTISTIC LIFE  
STITCHES IN TIME



Five years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition of tapestries from the Renaissance that turned into a spring blockbuster. Its sequel, "Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor," opened last week. Most New Yorkers have, at some stage (usually around tenth grade), been schlepped up to the Cloisters to see the Unicorn tapestries, and some remember from their "Hamlet" footnotes that when Polonius is stabbed through the arras Shakespeare is referring to a woven hanging from a town in France where great tapestries were made. But the appeal of the show, to both a mass audience and an esoteric one—the contemporary art world—came as a surprise to curators, and the editors of *Tate*, a journal published by the eponymous gallery, asked Elaine Reichek for her take on the phenomenon.

Reichek is a grandmother who does embroidery, but, whatever associations that image has for you, forget them. A conceptual artist with a degree from Yale and a punkish shock of platinum hair, she is a leading figure in the field of mixed-media art. The Museum of Modern Art gave her samplers a solo exhibition in 1999, and her latest show, "Pattern Recognition," opened last week at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery. "I think that what makes tapestry so topical is its relation to computer art," Reichek said recently, over lunch at her studio, in Harlem. "They both involve patterning, and reducing or enlarging an image to a charted form. A stitch, in essence, is a pixel. With any pixelated surface, whether it's a tapestry or a digital photograph, the more pixels you have, the higher your image resolution."

One assumes, wrongly, that Reichek learned to embroider at someone's knee. "My mother played golf," she said. One also assumes that, for an artist of her generation (she is sixty-four), choosing embroidery was a feminist statement about women's work. "I was one of four women in my class at Yale, which had no women on the faculty," she said. "But what I do isn't about being a 'woman artist.' Men historically did most of the major woven and embroidered pieces. When I started out, in the sixties, we, my peers and I, hated everything that looked like art. Chuck Close purged brushes. Richard Serra was throwing lead. I was looking for a different medium to make marks with, and my early works were minimalist line drawings with thread. But then I got interested in samplers, and that became my endeavor." Reichek's samplers include embroidered reproductions of a Web page, Seurat's portrait of his mother sewing, an Attic frieze, quotations in needlework from Freud and Colette, Charlotte Brontë's favorite collar patterns with a paragraph from "Shirley," and an extract from Darwin's journals. Her needlework literally gives depth to the texts and images that she translates. "Unlike a pen or a brush," she said, "a stitch pierces the surface that it covers and belies its flatness, becoming part of the supporting structure."

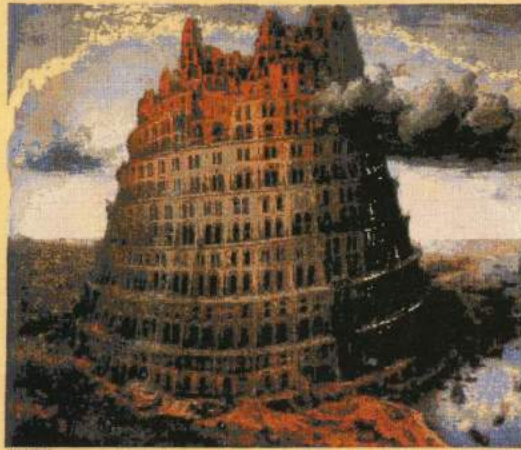
Reichek "shops" for her images on the Internet, and plots them on a computer. Until now, her embroideries have been executed by hand, each one requiring months of labor, but for "Pattern Recognition" all except two of the pieces were created by her "latest toy," a digital sewing machine. She calls the show "an alternative art history in swatches," and the swatches—twelve-by-ten-inch rectangles with pinked edges—include miniature versions of paintings by Mondrian, Warhol, Philip Guston, Ed Ruscha,

Magritte, Nancy Spero, and Damien Hirst. "Sampling, pastiche, appropriation—all those techniques that we think of as contemporary—have an ancient history," she explained. "Embroidery has been called 'the Hypertext of the Silk Route,' and as local patterns travelled by caravan around the world they were 'downloaded' by people who didn't know where they came from."

The Met's "Threads of Splendor" lives up to its name. At the preview, Reichek noted the affinities between the art world today and the Baroque court culture that produced the masterpieces on display: "Tapestries were the trophies of a gilded age with an overheated art market, and only the super-rich could afford them. A cycle like Rubens's 'Triumph of the Eucharist' took thousands of man hours to complete, with the weavers sitting cheek by jowl at a giant loom, each one, like an autoworker, responsible for a separate component of the product—feet or foliage or faces. This, too, is an era of megabuck commissions, and many of the gigantic pieces intended for art palaces are, in whole or in part, outsourced and produced industrially." She stopped in front of "The Battle of the Granicus," the scene of an epic confrontation between Alexander the Great and the Persian satraps. It was commissioned by Louis XIV, designed by Charles Le Brun, and woven in the workshop of Jean Jans the Younger, at the Gobelins factory, in Paris, between 1680 and 1687. The capes and banners of a great horde billow in the wind as trumpets blare, shields flash, flesh yields to spear, and, under a lowering sky, rendered in countless minute ivory and blue pixels, fabulously muscled warriors, human and equine, tangle in the surf. "Wow," Reichek said. "Now, there's a bio-pic."

—Judith Thurman





THE TOWER OF BABEL, 1563

THE LIBRARY OF BABEL, 1938

The implicit mission that nonsense is normal in the Library. They speak of the "everlasting Library whose chance volumes address, negate and confuse everything like a million galaxies." In truth, the Library includes all verses of the Torah, all of their apocryphal variations, but not a single example of absolute nonsense. Solitary, infinite, useless, incorruptible, secret, the Library is unimpeachable perfection. If an eternal traveler were to visit it in any direction after centuries he would say that the same volumes were registered in the same disorder which, thus repeated, would be an honor. The Order of the Universe is governed by this august chaos.

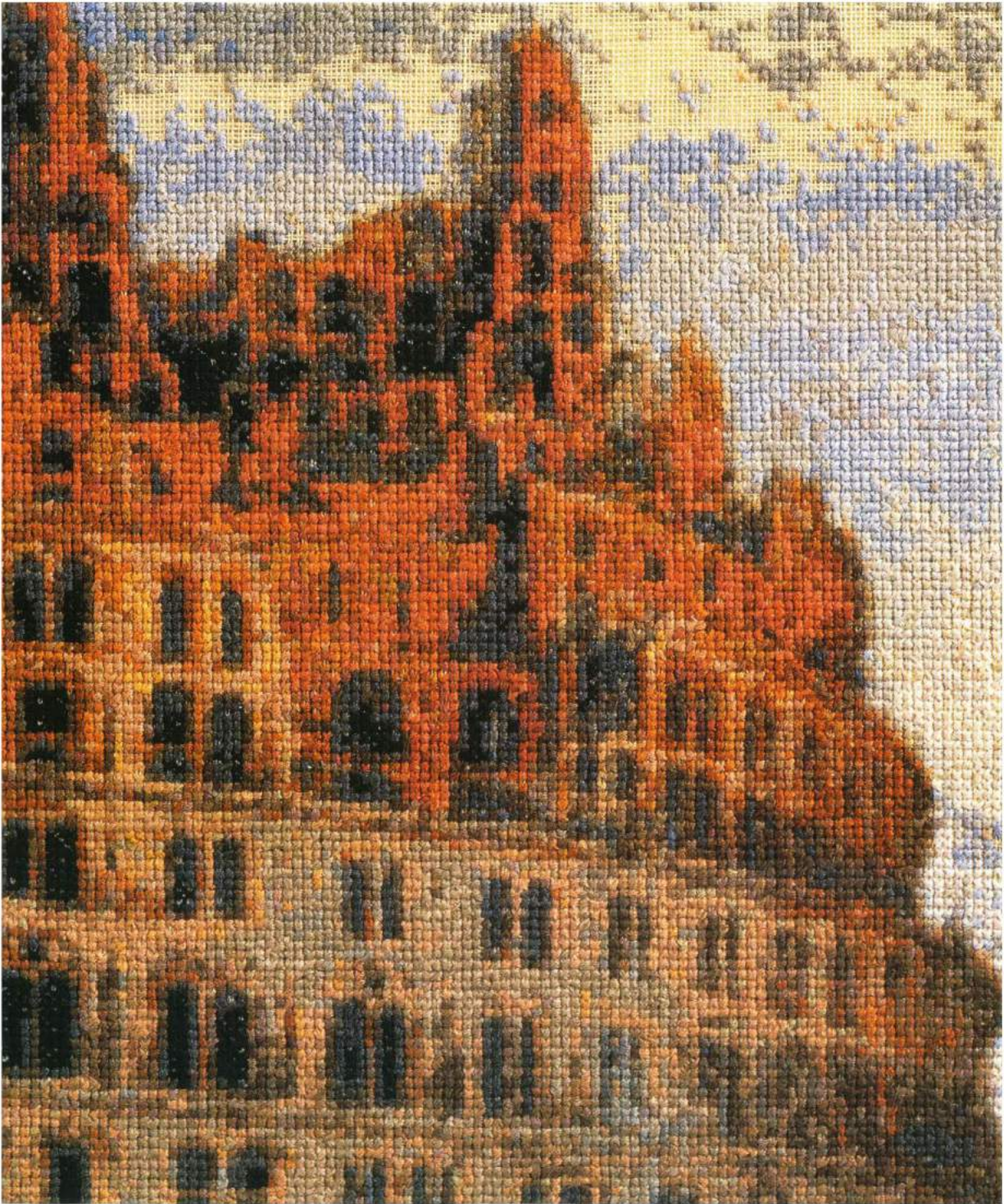
— Jorge Luis Borges

ELAINE REICHEK

# STITCHELLATED PICS


BY DAVID FRANKEL





Frankel, David. "Elaine Reichek: Stitchellated Pics," *Aperture*. July 2004.





The telegraph, in Elaine Reichek's view, marked the beginning of the global age, as the first medium of instant long-distance communication. Today, in the time of the computer, it is obsolete: it ushered the global in, but its protégé has shoved it aside. History is full of such outmoded technics, going back to the stone axe. Not necessarily useless—in fact producing the same effects they always did—they are slow, or inefficient, or inconvenient, or expensive, or at least their offspring make them so; and consequently they vanish, or surrender to specialist use. Picture, someday imaginable, the same thing happening to the gelatin-silver print.

Reichek's principal medium is itself outmoded and slow: she embroiders her pictures with needle and thread. But her thinking is tied to newer technologies, and her current work pushes beyond any one mode of art-making or communicating into a meditation on the relations among them all, and among all of us. Although the works shown here—sewn copies of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* (1563) and Samuel Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* (1831–33)—come out of the history of painting, they begin with mechanical reproduction: Reichek starts by researching printed images of the paintings, choosing one, scanning it into her computer, then running the document through software that maps it as a grid in which each square is coded to a colored embroidery thread. The method fuses the subjective and the impersonal, at many different points: a photographer must have decided how to light, shoot, and process a photograph of the painting; a printer must have worked on the reproduction, crafting the densities of the inks according to the capacities of his machines; Reichek

herself makes idiosyncratic picks, based on color and tone, among the printed versions; and then she turns the work over to the binary translators of the Mac, logical yet inscrutable, which filter the image through their digital combs. And that's just the project's first stage: next comes the matter of embroidering the final work, using a chart printed out from the computer that converts the painting's palette—those carefully hand-blended oils, patinated by time—into that of commercially available thread. The software has its foibles, and Reichek abandons its color choices at will and uses her own.

Duchamp, I suspect, would have smiled at these purchases of thread: where painters once mixed their own colors, by his day they bought them prepackaged, allowing him to write, "Since the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'Readymades aided' and also works of assemblage."<sup>1</sup> Reichek's blue is not Brueghel's; it is a dye job, and she, like Duchamp, is addressing problems of invention and replication, uniqueness and multiplicity. In her new work, though, those issues are less her particular interest than her basic vocabulary, and while in the past she has shown a complex Duchampian wit, her mood here is more elegiac: she is talking about the effort, inevitably flawed, to communicate, to translate content from one mind into another, and about the fragility of the means of the attempt. Morse, the painter of *Gallery of the Louvre*, is more famous as the architect of both the telegraph and the code on which it relies—a code that finesses language as dashes and dots, just as the computer jockeys zeroes and ones. But



Morse's inventions, if not defunct, are antiquated. (His famous code was dropped from the international maritime distress network five years ago.) As for his view of art students transcribing paintings in the Louvre, and of himself instructing a young woman in drawing—passing along his knowledge—at the picture's center, Reichek appends to it a passage by the Jacobean poet John Webster:

*Vain the ambition of kings  
Who seek by trophies and dead things  
To leave a living name behind  
And weave but nets to catch the wind.*

According to Genesis, "The whole earth was of one language" until, at Babel, the Lord saw it was in His interest that men "may not understand one another's speech." The fall of that doomed tower marked the end of translationless communication. Before Babel, writes George Steiner, in a text underlaid by the Cabala, "There was a complete, point-to-point mapping of language onto the true substance and shape of things. . . . The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second fall, in some regards as desolate as the first."<sup>2</sup> The Babel story, if taken as literal, explains the diversity of the world's countless languages; symbolically it implies the impossibility of true, unimpeded communication, since communication after Babel must always take place through a preexisting medium, a language—that is, through a system of secondhand signs.

The story of Babel is retold in the history of the photograph, which once was imagined as, more or less, "a complete, point-to-point mapping of language onto the true substance and shape of things." Today, certainly since the advent of computerized images and for many since long before that, we see the photograph's surface as an infinitely manipulable screen between us and its subject. And so it is with Reichek's Babel, which reproduces the continuous fluid pigment of Brueghel's oil paint with an aerated assemblage of stitches, gridded points of color—already implicit, at various scales, in the grain of the photograph, the dot pattern of the printed reproduction, and the pixel of the computer image, a new code modifying the image at every stage. If we could compile a library of all the world's knowledge—a "library of Babel," as in the story by Jorge Luis Borges—it would be the world's size; if we could make a true picture of the world, it would *be* the world. The impossibility of the *vera ikon*, the true picture whose message is as real as its medium, breathes through Reichek's works, and makes their poignancy. ●

An exhibition of Elaine Reichek's work will open at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, in May 2004.

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" 1961, in *Salt Seller: The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 1975 (reprint ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1998), p. 61.



SMYTH, G.B. 1800

GALLERY OF THE LOUVRE, 83-83

ELINE REICHEK

Use the ambition of kings/Who seek by trophies and dead things/

To leave a living name behind./And weave but nets to catch the wind.

VANITATIS VANITATUM, 1633

—JOHN WEBSTER

All works by Elaine Reichek.

PAGE 34: *Embroidery, Tower of Babel*, Embroidery on linen, 57 x 43 inches, 2004.

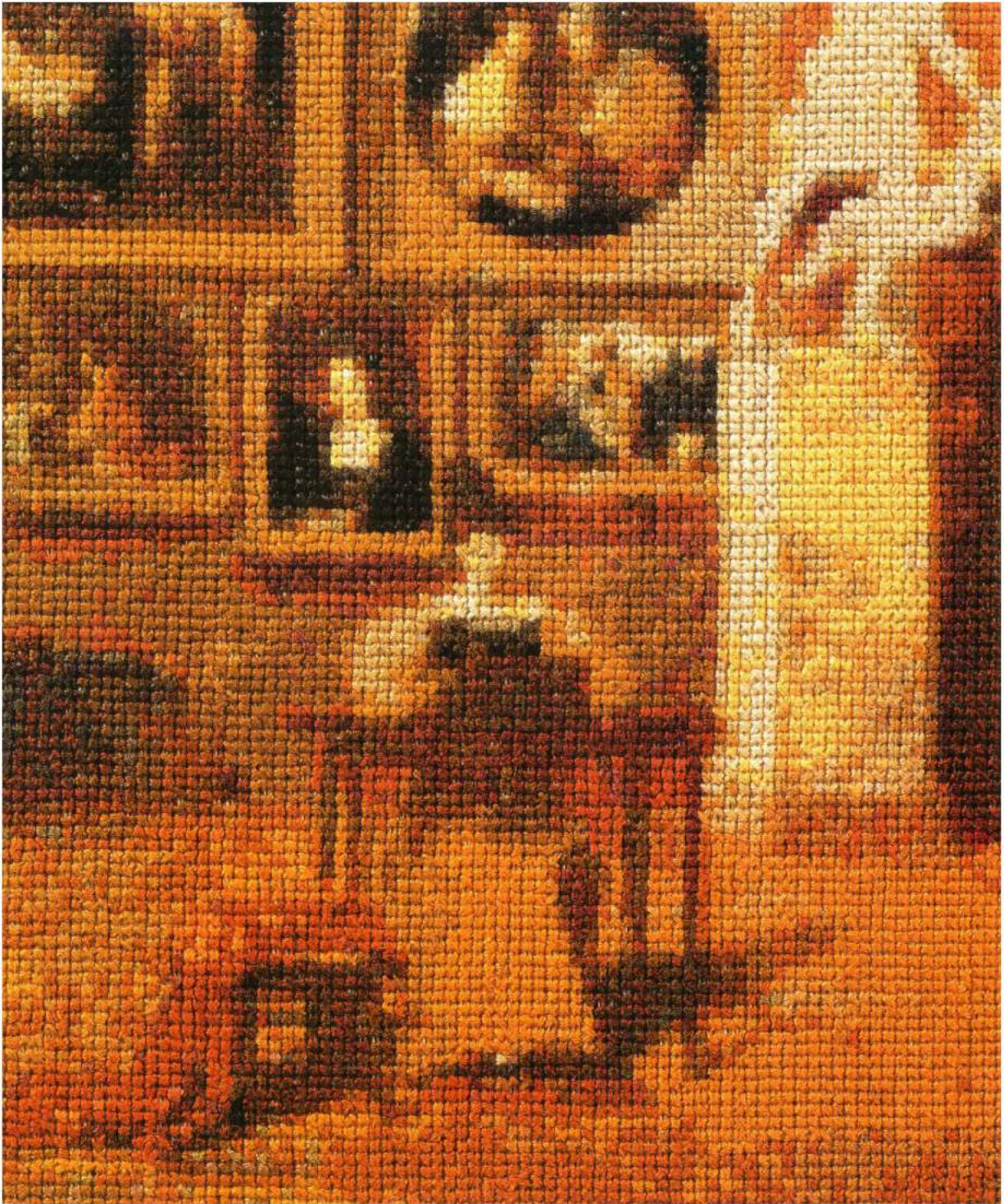
PAGE 35: *Embroidery, Tower of Babel*, (detail), 2004.

ABOVE: *Embroidery, Gallery at the Louvre*, Embroidery on linen, 38 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches, 2004.

RIGHT: *Embroidery, Gallery at the Louvre*, (detail), 2004.

All images courtesy/© Elaine Reichek





Frankel, David. "Elaine Reichek: Stitchellated Pics," *Aperture*. July 2004.



# The New York Times

## ART REVIEW; New Samplers That Give Old Pieties the Needle

By HOLLAND COTTER  
Published: Friday, March 5, 1999

In a series of smart, visually striking exhibitions over the past decade or so, Elaine Reichek has carved out a distinctive place for herself in New York art. She is a conceptualist who is also an ethnologist, a self-taught crafts artist, a historian, an indefatigable archivist and a shrewd cultural critic with a gift for unraveling the tangled politics of image making.

A concern with image making is evident from the moment one sets foot in her Projects exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which has been organized by Beth Handler, a curatorial assistant. The lobby gallery's walls, usually dead white, are painted a bayberry green. The floor is carpeted. The result has a comfy, salonlike ambiance associated with painting galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Instead of paintings, the Project space, devoted to contemporary art, is hung with two dozen embroidered samplers, of a kind produced by young women in America and Europe a century or two ago. Samplers were learning devices (alphabetic and arithmetic versions were common), as well as displays of dexterity that might enhance prospects of marriage.

They also incorporated words and images -- pietistic homilies, domestic scenes -- that reinforced societal norms. Among them was a feminine ideal that valued handiwork over intellectual pursuits, ingenuity over originality, stasis over movement.

None of the samplers in Ms. Reichek's show are historical, though they are certainly real: they were all embroidered by the artist. For this extended conceptual work, she taught herself embroidery through popular how-to instruction books, she researched traditional motifs and then added a generous helping of entirely untraditional information.

In place of standard pictorial motifs like farmhouses or mourning figures, her samplers quote from contemporary art. Instead of homely aphorisms and verses, she includes passages from literature -- Ovid, Virginia Woolf, Kierkegaard -- that in some way refer to needlework and the dynamics of gender and power that it implies.

Given this theme, some of her references are inevitable. The first piece in the show, for example, tells the story of Arachne, the over-achieving weaver transformed into a spider by a spiteful goddess. Another depicts Penelope of the Odyssey, pulling apart her weaving at night to keep importunate suitors at bay.

There's plenty of comic relief. One sampler brings together the corporate executive Maurice Saatchi and Dickens's infernal knitter, Madame Defarge, who watched heads fall without dropping a stitch. The former football hero Roosevelt Grier, the author of "Needlepoint for Men" in the 1970's, takes a bow. So does the World Wide Web on an embroidered computer screen.

Ms. Reichek's eye for absurdity has always been sharp. But so is her critical intelligence, which keeps revealing unexpected facets and depths in her material. No one will be surprised to read Freud's declaration, stitched in the sampler titled "Dispositional Hypnoid States," that needlework is an indirect cause of hysterical symptoms in women. But it is startling to find, in the same piece, words by the novelist

Colette that read: "I don't much like my daughter sewing. She is silent and she -- why not write down the word that frightens me -- she is thinking."

The idea of needlework as an instrument of psychic control and self-control runs through everything here. And it is distilled in a series of samplers devoted to the Brontes that include excerpts from Charlotte Bronte's "Villette."

In one passage, the novel's troubled governess-heroine writes that she is trying to "sustain and fill existence" by concentrating her energies on an elaborate piece of lacework. But in another she records that she is forced to abandon her needlework in the presence of a man "who considers sewing a source of distraction from the attention due to himself."

Women being interrupted in their work is one of the basic motifs of history. And such interruptions have, without question, cumulatively and drastically, shaped the course of art. But needlework has provided a surreptitious means for women to add to and comment on the fabric of culture in ways that Ms. Reichek clearly understands.

It is in this participatory spirit, one senses, that she both appropriates and, in some ways, expands upon work by art world colleagues. Her sparkling little version of a Jasper Johns painting manages to replicate in thread the low-relief sheen of his relief-like surfaces and to suggest the folk art sources for his work.

And when she imbeds one of Jenny Holzer's cautionary aphorisms ("Abuse of power comes as no surprise") in an alphabet sampler she both honors the sampler's original didactic function and Ms. Holzer's desire to send subversive messages out into the world.

Ms. Reichek's response to earlier modernist art is especially telling. In a sampler focused on the Bauhaus she matches dismissive comments by men about ornament and weaving as female concerns with an example of Anni Albers's snazzy textile designs. And in another piece she sets a beautiful quotation from Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) -- "Perfection of beginnings, eternal return, creation, destruction, creation" -- beside embroidered versions of his "black" paintings.

In these paintings, Reinhardt suppressed color and touch to create a timeless, egoless abstraction. Ms. Reichek, working in a medium that is so much about touch and time, even physical endurance, follows suit in what amounts to a tender homage.

Ms. Reichek studied with Reinhardt in the 1960's. And one suspects that the two artists share certain temperamental features. Both are intensely suspicious of what images hide and what they can be made to say. Both share a much challenged faith in art as a vital medium for clarifying ideas and feelings. And both use humor as part of the corrective, perfectionist impulse in their work.

That humor is evident throughout Ms. Reichek's exhibition, as well as in her short video on view at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in Chelsea, a hilarious compendium of cinematic scenes of needleworking, from Olivia de Havilland's thread-snapping triumph in "The Heiress" to Audrey Hepburn's free-form knitting mishap in "Breakfast at Tiffany."

But for all its inventive wit, the Projects show is also very moving, not just for what it says from piece to piece but also as an exercise in self-education, evaluative thinking, emotional empathy and sheer hard work. The energy that went into it was clearly enormous, but judging from the results and from Ms. Reichek's ambitious undertakings in the past, her illuminating work is far from done.

"Elaine Reichek: Project 67" is at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, through March 30. "Elaine Reichek: When This You See" is at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, Chelsea, through March 30.

A version of this review appeared in print on Friday, March 5, 1999, on section E page 40 of the New York edition.

THE  
NEW YORKER

**ELAINE REICHEK**—"Form Security Administration," an installation based on black-and-white photographs of Southern churches (three by Walker Evans, one by Martha Roberts). Reichek has enlarged the original photos, hung them upside down (thus stressing their formal compositions), and superimposed texts by Baudelaire, Flaubert, Marx, Evans himself, and others. Next to each photo is a knitted re-creation of the building, right side up, in white, black, and gray. Playing art against documentation, romanticism against modernism, she invites us to consider the use of poverty and misery as aesthetic subject matter. Through May 26. (Klein, 40 Wooster St.)



# The New York Times

## Perils of a Nice Jewish Girl In a Colonial Bedroom

By SUZANNE SLESIN  
Published: Thursday, February 17, 1994

DECOR can speak volumes. Seemingly innocent furnishings, like guest towels, beds, washstands and rockers, can be threads in a web of memories that tie together cultural differences, social divisions and personal identity.

Elaine Reichek, who grew up in Brooklyn in the 50's, remembers her bedroom on the top floor of a pseudo-Dutch Colonial house, with its ersatz colonial canopy bed from Ethan Allen's 1776 Collection, its braided rugs and its faux-Early American fire screen. Her parents, Hilda and Jack Reichek (he was in the furniture business), were "first-generation Jews." But, she said of her parents, "being Jewish was not discussed." She continued: "There was no Judaica in the house, nothing that remotely suggested Jewish culture."

More than 30 years later, Ms. Reichek, 50, has transformed the bittersweet memory of growing up in an assimilated home into a provocative art installation, entitled "A Postcolonial Kinderhood," that will be on display until Aug. 28 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92d Street. The exhibition is the first in a series at the museum entitled Cultural Conversations.

"Decors have subtexts," said Ms. Reichek, who explained that decorating in a traditional style offered a safe passage to the American way of life for many affluent and socially aspiring families.

"My parents had the hope that they could access a past; a family history that wasn't their own," Ms. Reichek said. "There we were, three little Jewish kids with our Schumacher wallpaper and matching Schumacher cafe curtains. My sister, Wilma, and I wore white gloves and had our hair cut at Best & Company. My baby brother, Yale, was always in a little blue Eton suit. Thanksgiving was the only holiday we celebrated. That was the American holiday."

The artist has transformed the impressive high-ceilinged space at the Jewish Museum -- once the grand dining room of the Warburg mansion -- into the alienated landscape of her childhood bedroom.

The four-poster bed is there, as is a wrought iron lamp, an Early American-style fire screen and the so-well-remembered braided rugs, in a series of pristine vignettes. The photographs and samplers are hung on the walls at a child's eye-level; a black lacquer rocker with its Yale University insignia in Hebrew is child-size.

"It's all seen from the perspective of a child," Ms. Reichek explained. "The room is about the anxiety of assimilation" that she felt growing up.

The room, whose aura of loneliness and nostalgia may strike a responsive chord for many visitors, includes a collection of 12 samplers sewn by Ms. Reichek in the last year and based on those produced by young women in the 18th and 19th century. Visitors are invited to take a closer look at the statements and quotations sewn on the samplers, the chair pillow and the bedspread. And to sort through a drawer overflowing with old photographs: Aunt Ellie with a hoop. Dad golfing, Mom in a glamorous pose. And Margery and Ellie with a horse. "They're part of the German side of the family," Ms. Reichek said of her husband's family. "They rode."

The samplers, on which Ms. Reichek has embroidered quotations from family and friends about their experiences of being Jewish in America, are both witty and poignant.

Her daughter, Laura Engel, 25, suggested the words for one sampler: "The Parents of Jewish Boys Always Love Me. I'm the Closest Thing to a Shiksa Without Being One." Ms. Reichek smiled. "She went to Bryn Mawr, and is apple-cheeked and outdoorsy," she said of her daughter. She also has a son, James, 23.

Ms. Reichek uses knitting and embroidery as another artist might use watercolors or clay; her pieces, she said, have "a feminist element."

"By using a woman's medium subversively," she explained, "I was undermining various assumptions about woman's work and art. I was seizing control of an art form that had been stuck in the craft ghetto, with its suggestion of nostalgia, domesticity and passivity."

Commenting on identity is a familiar theme for the artist. While this show is about her own family and friends -- and by extension, what she called "my ethnic family, my race" -- her previous work has centered on the identity of American Indians and how they were represented by people outside their culture.

"Even as a child," she said, "I had the idea that Native Americans were doing a lot of the giving and not getting any of the thanks."

At age 20, Ms. Reichek married George Clark Engel Jr., whose Jewish family "celebrated Christmas, with the full regalia, stockings and plum pudding, but not a creche."

About a year and a half ago, Susan Goodman, the chief curator of the Jewish Museum, suggested Ms. Reichek explore her own Jewish identity. "It was something I hadn't really thought about," Ms. Reichek said.

Norman Kleeblatt, the curator of collections at the museum, sees Ms. Reichek's work as part of larger context. "A number of Jewish artists who grew up in suburbia during the 1950's and 1960's experienced the tension between the pressure to embrace the image of the American as promoted in popular culture, and the reality of their ethnic and cultural difference," he said. "They are using these emotionally laden biographical memories as the subject of their art."

Ms. Reichek uses the sampler, historically a socializing and educational tool for young women, to comment on what she described as "issues of class." She said, "Class is something that people don't talk about in America because it's supposed to be a classless society." But there is "an elitism about having an ancestor who did a sampler," she added.

The notion of class is also reflected in Ms. Reichek's museum towel rack that holds freshly laundered antique towels, all monogrammed "JEW."

"Just having such pretty hand towels implied having people to embroider them and launder and press them," she said.

But it is the towering four-poster bed that takes center stage. On the headboard, a quotation from George Washington welcomes "the children of the Stock of Abraham" to America. On the footboard, a quotation from President Richard M. Nixon reads, "Aren't the Chicago Seven all Jews?" Ms. Reichek said, "There I was, trapped in the middle."

In the center of the spread, embroidered in German, is: "Was willst du von meinem Leben?" Ms. Reichek said, "They translate as, 'What do you want from my life?'"

What indeed?

Photos: Sampler by Elaine Reichek on assimilation. (pg. C1); Elaine Reichek in the installation at the Jewish Museum that depicts her childhood bedroom; Antique linen towel is monogrammed "JEW."; From top, a sampler, a photograph of Ms. Reichek's mother-in-law and her brother with an American Indian, and a rocker are part of the room's decor. (Photographs by Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times) (pg. C7)

A version of this article appeared in print on Thursday, February 17, 1994, on section C page 1 of the New York edition.

**ELAINE REICHEK**  
JEWISH MUSEUM

Elaine Reichek's "A Postcolonial Kinderhood" was the first show in the series "Cultural Conversations" developed by the Jewish Museum to "address issues of Jewish identity." This installation suggested, however, that the museum's project is bound to short-circuit itself, if, as Reichek posits, contemporary Jewish identity has been reduced to anxiety over its own absence. Ever since the "emancipation" of European Jewry in the 19th century, the problem has been how to postulate an irreducible difference that, one immediately hastens to add, makes no fundamental difference at all. While the accompanying pamphlet moralized about "the trap of self-negating over-assimilation," the installation itself gave rise to gloomier doubts about the possibility of ever achieving a "correct" relation to the big Other: goyish culture. As the sociologist John Murray Cuddahy has observed, "The cultural collision, the *Kulturkampf*, between *Yiddishkeit* and the behavioral and expressive norms we call the Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette came to constitute the modern form of the ancient *Judenfrage*." Reichek shows this struggle finding its only resolution in self-deprecatory Jewish humor—a representation of an intelligence able to see through its predicament but unable to see its way out of it.

A fantasia on the American colonial-style bedroom of the Dutch colonial house the artist was raised in, the installation included a four-poster canopy bed and a child-size Yale University rocking chair. The walls were hung with reproductions of family photographs such as one in which two relatives on a vacation "out West" pose with what the pamphlet anachronistically calls a "native American," and with a dozen traditional samplers whose texts, instead of the expected didactic sentiments, are quotations from the artist's family and friends. The entire ensemble carries the overwhelming suggestion that, at the level of formal and material culture, the Jewry Reichek knows had nothing of its own to contribute, only an empty mimicry of what, forty years ago, might really have appeared "native" to first-generation Americans. It is only through language that originality is found. Embroidered on the samplers, Woody Allen-ish lines such as, "As a child I fell off the merry-go-round at Coney Island. My parents were very disappointed. They knew I'd never be part of the



Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (Lenore Oremland)*, 1993, embroidery on linen, 20 1/4 x 12 1/4".

horsey set," or, "The parents of Jewish boys always love me. I'm the closest thing to a shiksa without being one," ruefully remind us that this inability to identify with our desire—and the ability to articulate the problem with humor—are the living legacy of Jewish difference.

Reichek's pun on the term "postcolonial" ironically signals the problematic intersection of her project with other contemporary investigations of subaltern cultures under the aegis of multiculturalism. Well aware that some cultures are more "multi" than others, Reichek perfectly captured the Jewish predicament: never assimilated enough, never ethnic enough.

—BS



## Elaine Reichek

IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

April - June 1993

New York based artist Elaine Reichek's exhibition *Home Rule* is a timely one. The recent quincentenary of Columbus' 'discovery' of America has forced onto the cultural agenda the continuing plight of the indigenous American peoples and their struggle against the colonialist legacy. We have seen attempts by artists and others to undermine the dominant historical narrative - Columbus as the harbinger of the great European civilising mission in the Americas - and to re-frame the quincentenary rather as a celebration of five hundred years of native Indian *resistance* to the European plunder of that continent. But Elaine Reichek's work brings this intervention closer to home.

Reichek explores through her assembled photographs, texts and woven works, two worlds normally thought of as oceans apart: that of the north American Indian and that of the Irish native and nationalist. The documents she assembles here - real and imagined - explore a common experience of colonisation. In particular, she attempts to plot the 'creation myths' that have come to enshroud the 'red Indian' and 'Gael' as figures within the mind of both coloniser and colonised.

At the centre of the exhibition is her uncovering of the story of Grey Owl. He was an English schoolboy from Hastings, Archie Belaney, who was enthralled with the stories of the Indians he had encountered through magazine and musical hall. In his later life in

Canada he tried to emulate this image of the noble savage by adopting Indian ways and dress. With a keen entrepreneurial eye, he sought to satisfy the growing commercial demand for Indian memorabilia, by marketing self-assembled 'Indian' costumes. Reichek's piece *Ten Little Indians* consists of a row of ten mail order 'Indian' coloured waistcoats hung up in a line as in a nursery school classroom, and bounded by a portrait of 'Grey Owl' and one of his printed clothing patterns. We are invited to reflect on our complicity in the fabrication of Indian identity and history as the stuff of popular myth. After all we've all played Cowboys and Indians - well at least all the boys. As one of her chosen texts puts it, '*Indians must be redefined in terms that white men will accept even if that means re-Indianizing them according to the white man's idea of what they were in the past*'. But the empty jackets strung up on hangers and hooks provide us also with a chill reminder of the bitter fruit of the frontier spirit - the decimation of the native American peoples at the hands of the white settlers and their armies.

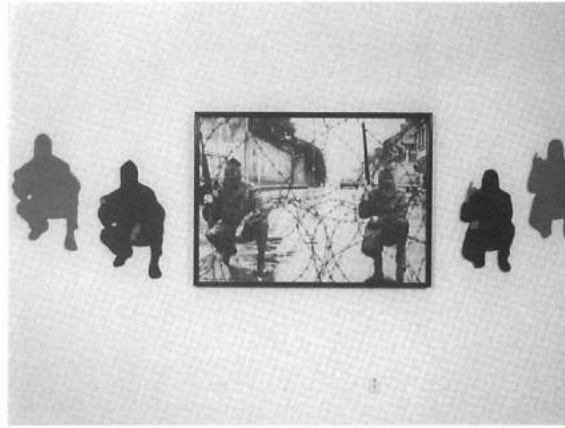
In a parallel manner, with *Men of Aran Knit* and *White Wash (Galway Cottage)* Reichek playfully explores stereotypical images of the west of Ireland. Besides the standard tourist photograph of islanders shouldering an upturned curragh, she positions a rendering of this image knitted in 'traditional' Aran gansey pattern, only here in black wool. The traditional whitewashed cottage like the woollen skirt beside it becomes a tourist icon that, as the title suggests, serves to obscure a real history of famine, exploitation and emigration. She deliberately employs womanly means - knitted works, texts stitched on flannel and above all the use of the embroidered sampler - to enter a

male dominated world of political discourse and historical account and to problematise it. It's strange how political rhetoric, in this case, the polemic of militant Irish nationalism, when it is embroidered neatly on a traditional sampler rather than engraved on a marble monument, changes its meaning. Other subtle transpositions of meaning occur in *Easter Lilies* where a large blown-up photograph of balaclava-hooded and gun-toting IRA Volunteers is echoed in representations of these figures in wool but shorn of their phallic props.

Reichek provides us with a series of conceptual signposts on our journey through the associative freeplay of Indian and Irish history and myth. She displays a selection of quotations from historians on the subject of colonialism. Again, their meanings are inflected by their spinsterly inscription on the fabric of male bourgeois respectability, the pin-striped worsted of the business suit. These draw to our attention the historical plantations in America and in Ireland, identifying a common colonialist mindset which either demonised or romanticised the native according to the ideological needs of the settler at a particular point in history.

Yet the artist's intentions remain unclear. Is she on the side of the natives or the nationalists? As we all know, they are not necessarily the same thing, located as they are in different class positions with access to different cultural capital. Indeed, nationalist intelligentsias have often sought to monopolise representations of peasant and native and in so doing have drawn on the language and myths of the coloniser. We have conspired in our own misrepresentation. Indeed, despite Reichek's best efforts to establish a historical parallel between the native American and Irish experience, one feels that the web woven to link the struggles of American natives distancing themselves from 'Indianization' and the case of Irish nationalists, many of whom actively embraced the 'Gaelicisation' of Ireland, starts to unravel rather quickly when picked at.

At one point in the exhibition, Reichek assembles a work within which the distant worlds of native American and nationalist Ireland are brought rudely together. During a visit to Canada in October 1919, Eamon de Valera, US citizen and Irish rebel, addressed the Chippewa and was adopted into the tribe as chief 'Dressing Feather'.



The promotional poster for the event, which Reichek displays, warns those planning to attend, to bring picnics as 'a regular restaurant is not available in the Indian village' [at the time, the Chippewa were suffering from the effects of famine]. Given the somewhat patchy record of Irish nationalism on racial oppression elsewhere, we don't know for whose benefit this encounter between patriot and Indian nation occurred. However, as with Reichek's other installations, by exploring the symbolic manufacture of identity and contesting the stereotypes around which images of identity calcify, she has set us thinking.

Above Right: Sean Keating, *Night's Candles are Burnt Out, 1928-19*. (Oldham Art Gallery).

#### Desmond Bell

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# «LES INFOS DU PARADIS»

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JO ANNA ISAAK

## Who's "We," White Man?

In a bus shelter in Vancouver a while ago I saw a poster proclaiming "We are the first world, You are the third," a slogan particularly pointed in the context of Canada where native people, realizing the importance "we" place on priority, especially in relation to property, have stopped calling themselves by Columbus's misnomer and now call themselves "First Nations." (Since the name change they have done much better on land settlements.) The poster, by Canadian artist Mark Lewis, points with economy and humor to the power of subject positions in our speech, to how dichotomies of "we" and "they" are established, and how commonplace understandings about others form our identity. In *Native Intelligence*, an exhibition traveling this year in the U.S., Elaine Reichek manages to sidestep this dated dyadic syntax which has always been the paradigm of

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When you name yourself, you always name another. When you name another, you always name yourself.

BERTOLT BRECHT

Western discourse. She engages instead in a paratactic style: nothing is fixed, all relationships are contingent, subject positions are constantly changing. Like the joke about Tonto, when the frantic Lone Ranger cries, "Tonto, the Indians have us surrounded—we're done for!" Reichek asks, "Who's we, white man?" Good question. What is the subject position of the second sex in the first world? Is it the same as the first sex of the third world... or is it the second world? It's hard to compute, and women are notoriously bad at math.

The work begins with information (in the sense of the Latin *informis*, without form, "un-meaning"): postcards, snapshots, magazine spreads, film stills, wallpaper, fabrics, even flour sacks, as well as various ethnographic and anthropological material culled from the Library of Congress and

the Smithsonian in Washington, and from the Museum of the American Indian, the Natural History Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These vast storehouses of photographs, documents, and artifacts were accumulated in the wake of the encyclopedic urge that so preoccupied the first world at the close of the last century. The burgeoning museum culture ostensibly grew out of the desire to preserve a record of peoples and customs before they vanished, but what was really at an end was the era of colonial expansionism: these are fragments we have shored against our ruin.

Adopting the presentational strategy of the museum exhibition, *Native Intelligence* postulates an information-processing circuitry that is intended to generate intelligibility, but the vast flow of data is kept moving too long. Metaphors compound upon metaphors without ever settling into the substantive. In a photocollage entitled RED DELICIOUS, a reproduction of a painting by Wright of Derby from 1785 is inset with smaller, circular photo-



graphs that lead, by a process of free-association, to other romantic heroines of the Wild West—Lola Albright in the Hollywood movie *Oregon Passage*, the blonde captured by Indians in *Unconquered*, the abducted brunette in *Comanche*, or that really feisty gal in *Red River*. There is a moment of Brechtian distanciation in each of Reichek's photocollages; in *RED DELICIOUS* the "device" is "bared" in a photograph taken from behind the scenes of a movie set revealing the cardboard canyon into which Indians chase the stagecoach.

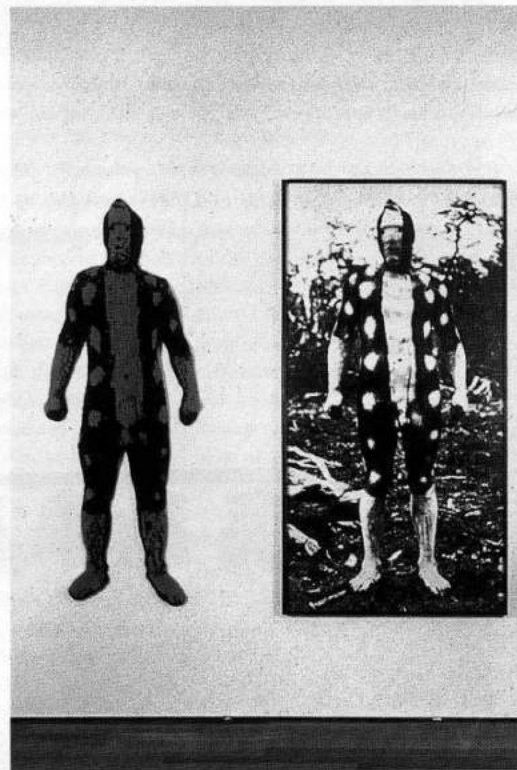
The operations that the information undergoes, the associations that are made between disparate data, the continuities that are recognized become too profligate, suggesting a problem in the processing system. The metaphoric connections that once provided a reassuring sense of cosmic togetherness begin to unravel under the influence of signals from so many sources and now seem only coincidental. The activity of classification and categorization—the whole drive to stabilize, organize, and rationalize our conceptual universe slips into irrationality, chaos, and fragmentation; we are brought too close to the margins and the marginalized, too close to what the museum has always promised to keep at bay.

Yet *Native Intelligence* is not about the failure of the museum to produce "truth," or an objective account of other peoples. Nor is it about first world culpability. Rather this is a text about textuality, about fabrication and about our imbrication in our own fabrications. Reichek reads our documentation of other peoples for their symptomatology, for what they tell us of our needs and desires. Finding two differ-

ent versions of Roland Reed's 1915 photograph showing Blackfoot Indians in Glacier National Park, for example—one in the archives of the Smithsonian, and the other in the Museum of Natural History—she also discovered that Blackfoot Indians never lived in Glacier National Park: Reed had taken a group of them there and had given them props and costumes to create scenes of the picturesque. Reichek gives us four versions of this same photo, and manipulates them in various ways, inverting them, coloring them, and giving them various formulaic captions like "The Indian Sun Himself before the Door of His Tepee," "After the Hunt," and "Shadows on the Moun-

tain." These multiple misrepresentations are not made to expose the fraudulence of Reed's photojournalism, or the credulity of the curators of the Smithsonian and the Museum of Natural History, or even the pretension of the positivist vision which photography has done so much to support. If these targets are hit, they are only collateral damage in a search-and-destroy mission against anything that is already culturally determined. Reichek is not the Ralph Nader of museum culture, demanding correct consumer information.<sup>1)</sup> She is an eccentric and generous reader who finds herself constitutionally alienated from divisions like "fact" and "fiction" and doesn't hold

ELAINE REICHEK, RED DOT MAN, 1988, photo and wool, 65 x 70" /  
ROTER TUPPENMANN, 1988, Photo und Wolle, 165 x 178 cm.



the text or the teller accountable for the misinformation they generate. Instead, "errors" are like cracks providing the opportunity to look behind these seemingly transparent texts, to the culture that requires them. Read through Reichek's methodology, Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in New Guinea* would be the story of a young American girl who writes a book that becomes enormously popular about her desire for a more sexually liberated culture, one in which women were not linked to property exchange.

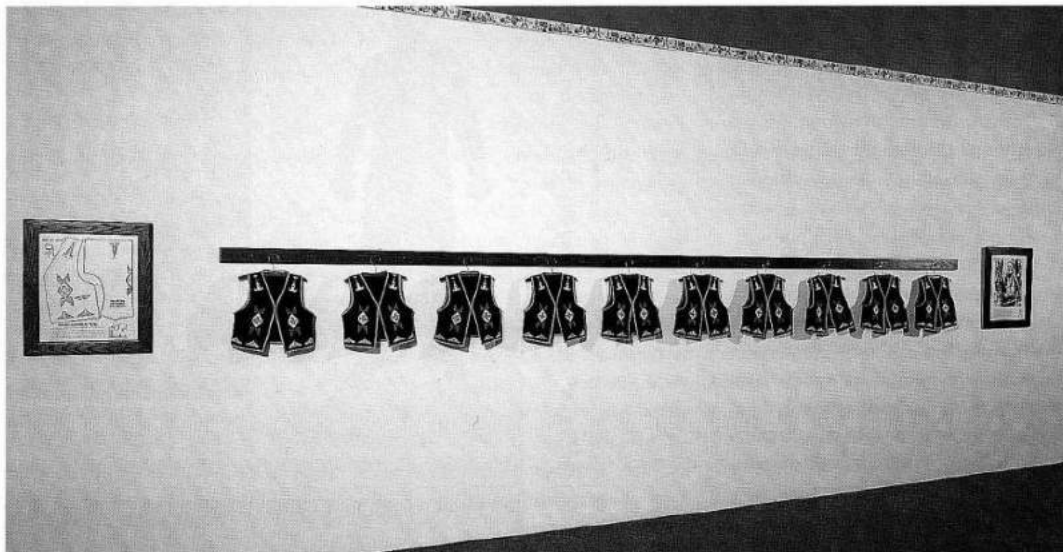
There is a flagrant and funny feminism weaving in and around Reichek's reworking of ethnographic and anthropological material. It is manifest most overtly in the female-identified medium of knitting, which she uses to reproduce documentary photographs of native peoples and their dwellings. Knitting is an "inappropriate" tool for

this purpose—so unscientific, one of those typical feminine misunderstandings, as if some dotty woman had gone on an anthropological expedition equipped with wool and knitting needles instead of a camera and notebook; or one of those comic cross-cultural misperceptions, like the moment in the film *First Contact* when a New Guinea aboriginal puts on a Kellogg's Corn Flakes box as a headdress. The culture that Reichek is misreading is her own, but her misrecognitions mark her distance from it and, at the same time, her deep familiarity with the machinations of its codes. It is as if she had taken literally Barthes' metaphor of the textuality of the text: "Text means tissue, but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in

the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web."<sup>2</sup>) Barthes' metaphor almost seems a reworking of a story told by Jimmie Durham in his catalogue essay for the exhibition—the Cherokee fable of Grandmother Spider, who sits unnoticed in the corner weaving, yet is the most powerful, for it is her activity that makes the yarn.

The knitted men in *Native Intelligence* are derived from Edward Curtis's turn of the century photographs of Apache Gaun or "devil" dancers and a Mandan dancer. The three-dimensional knitted versions hang beside large-scale versions of the original photographs. The knitting reproduces the information in the photograph in a

ELAINE REICHEK, *TEN LITTLE INDIANS*, 1992, paint on felt and photostats, 25 x 276" /  
ZEHN KLEINE INDIANER, 1992, Farbe auf Filz und Fotokopien, 63,5 x 700 cm.



way that is at once precise and quite unsignifying. It is not just that knitting, as “women’s work,” is out of place in this context; by miming and thereby undermining the discourse of knitting that “endows” the author with a possessive case so redolent of property, these knitted versions reveal the tenuousness of the web of lexical or indexical certitude that secures our confidence in the world.

The process of transcoding or reweaving of texts reveals the bias of the original fabrication, what in fact the anthropological and ethnographic accounts have tried to cover up—the body of the text or, rather, the bodies of the natives. Narratives of exploration and discovery are about nothing if not the human body. They habitually describe native bodies as monstrous, riddled with all manner of libidinal excess—naked, sexually licentious, and commonly engaged in every form of Western taboo from incest to cannibalism—a people *sans roi, sans loi, sans foi*, in short, just what the Europeans unconsciously wanted to be.<sup>3)</sup> The agenda of the narratives of discovery was to inscribe these people in Western systems of representations, a project that had something of a missionary aspect to it, as if the very act of encoding them would bring them into the realm of “normalcy.”

A significant side-effect of this inscription was that native peoples could then be made to disappear at the will of the author. Early explorers of the Americas invariably described the land as “wilderness,” unoccupied empty space to be claimed for some European monarchy; yet the central enigma of the wilderness was always the body of the wild man. We still have trouble seeing him. A photograph in



ELAINE REIGHEK, *RED DELICIOUS*, 1991,  
oil on photocollage, 48 x 59" / 122 x 150 cm.

the *New York Times* of September 18, 1990 shows in the foreground a row of three men. The identifying caption reads “Napoleon A. Chagnon, left, American anthropologist, and Charles Brewer-Cariás, Venezuelan naturalist at Konabuma-teri.” But the man at the left wears a loincloth and feathers; the two white scientists stand center and right. To the *Times* editors the native is “not there,” even though his is the body we are really interested in—the reason for the scientific study and for the newspaper’s story.

The bodies in *Native Intelligence* take on a presence, stand three-dimensionally, cast a shadow, have human stature (though they are a little short, like the artist). “Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body.”<sup>4)</sup>

Our erotic body is exactly what *Native Intelligence* invites us to explore. Instead of the detached, fetishistic pleasure to be had from viewing a photograph, the knitted bodies offer the pleasures of texture and proximity. They have a plenitude, a warmth, a sensuality. In this tacility we are given an implicit invitation to touch or rub these nude or semi-nude dark, fuzzy bodies, compelling ambiguities of cuddly life-size doll and dark, enigmatic, even slightly threatening Other. There is a *frisson* to the encounter. For those who accept the invitation to transgress or regress, this work will make you laugh. What is offered here is sensuous solidarity.

Everything presented in this exhibition is familiar to us, in fact we are awash in the comfort of the familiar. The final installation in *Native Intelli-*



gence is redolent with nostalgia. We are returned to our childhood, and to the childhood of our grandparents, when little girls labored over embroidery samplers and in the process of learning their ABC's, learned homilies of constraint, a constraint perhaps more anxiously imposed on women during pioneer times because of the proximity of "savages" on the frontier. Here, however, instead of those stultifying adages by which we are taught to pattern our lives, other voices speak through. Where the original samplers contained maxims such as "She walked with God and He was her support," or "Religion should our thoughts engage," now Mahpwa Luta (Red Cloud) says, "When the white man comes to my country he leaves a trail of blood behind him." Or Yellow Wolf says, "Only his own best deeds, only the worst deeds of the Indians, has the white man told." That these voices have infiltrated embroidery samplers suggests a deep deflection. If women, occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, have come to represent the necessary frontier between man and the supposed chaos of the outside, there is always the disconcerting possibility that they will identify with the marginalized. It looks now as though the patriarchy's worst suspicions are confirmed—Big Eagle, Yellow Wolf, and Red Cloud came to tea and chatted!

While little girls embroider their ABC's and learn their position in the symbolic order, little boys learn the same lesson playing cowboys and Indians. Childhood is the time of the great divides—between he and she, between us and them. A remark by General Norman Schwarzkopf embroidered on cowboy-pattern curtain material shows just how formative these

years were for him: of the Gulf War, he says, "It was like going into Indian country!" An old poster reproduced in another work depicts one little boy's quest to find out "Why don't We Live Like Indians?" The poster is in French, attesting to the internationality of this fascination with Native Americans.

Ironically, this is a shared childhood: even Indian kids play cowboys and Indians. My childhood playmates were Kwakiutl and Comox Indians, though I didn't know them by those names then and I doubt that they thought of me as Caucasian. One Halloween we all dressed up as Indians, making fringed buckskin jackets and skirts out of burlap potato sacks. I remember this not because any adult pointed out the absurdity of our choice of costumes, but because a firecracker landed in my skirt and the whole burlap outfit instantly caught fire. Our childhoods were divided when they were sent to the Indian school in Alert Bay and I had to stay home and take correspondence courses. Many years later, when I was a student at the University of British Columbia, Claude Levi-Strauss gave a series of lectures on the kinship relations of the Kwakiutl. As he spoke, at times in rapid French and at times in an almost impenetrable English, of "native conceptions" that were clearly to be understood as something other than his and the audience's own, the divide seemed to grow into an abyss.

This last installation in the exhibition offers a sense of reparation, of some amends having been made. Perhaps it's those ten-little-indian vests hanging on the wall, perhaps it's the care with which they have been stitched together from the patterns in an Indian craft catalogue, perhaps it's the

offer of another chance at childhood, another chance to do it again and get it right.

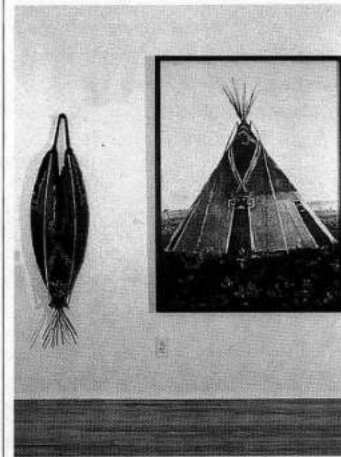
1) As I was writing this essay, I happened to hear a report on National Public Radio about the problems natural history museums were having in dealing with the obvious and embarrassing gender and cultural biases of their exhibits. One director explained that there simply wasn't enough money to "correct" all the mistakes in displays like dioramas. Instead, he has invented what he calls the "dilemma labels" for incorrect or misleading dioramas. For example, a diorama showing a lioness at home with her cub while the male lion is off hunting a zebra would be given a "dilemma label" explaining that it was the female lion that did the hunting. The male, he said, "was just a couch potato."

2) Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans., Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 64.

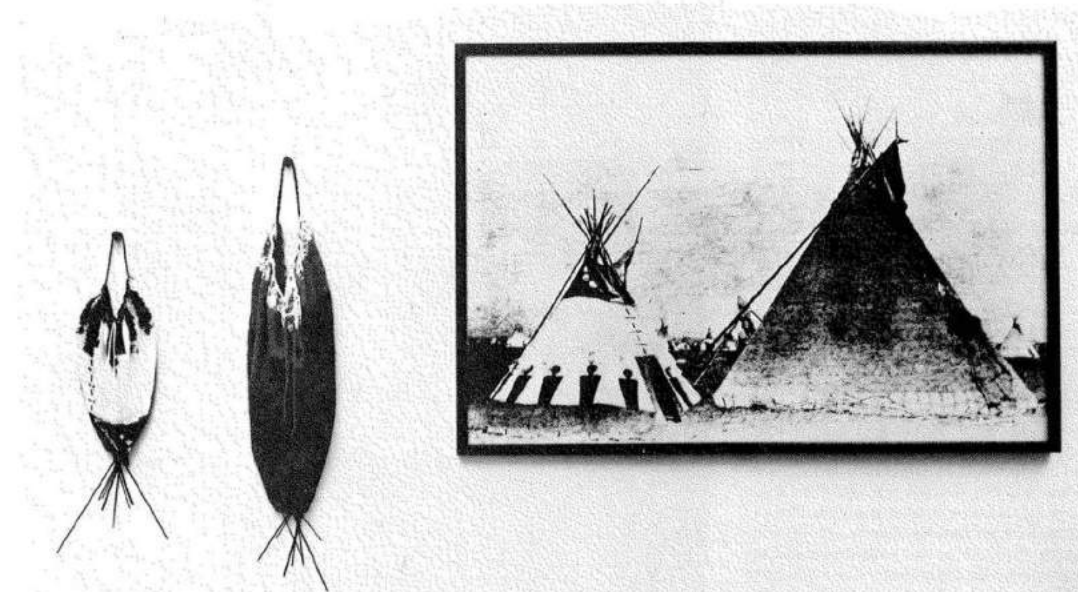
3) I am indebted in this discussion to Lennard Davis's unpublished essay "No Fable in Their Case': New World Explorers and the Problem of Narration." I am also grateful to Lennard for bringing to my attention the photograph from the *New York Times*.

4) Barthes, p. 17.

ELAINE REICHEK, ASSINIBOIN, 1990,  
wool and photo, 70 x 72" / 178 x 183 cm.



ELAINE REICHEK'S "NATIVE INTELLIGENCE" by Nancy Princenthal



Elaine Reichek, *Double Blackfoot with Children*, two wool tepees and oil on photograph (65x120 in.), 1990. Courtesy the artist and Michael Klein, Inc., New York.

"Here's what I can't figure out: Why can't Americans hate us? Here we are, a constant reminder that this country is profoundly evil, born in unspeakable crimes . . . and most Americans still like us. A lifetime of being Comanche and years of being a political activist and this still leaves me baffled." So mused Paul Smith in a 1987 catalogue essay.<sup>1</sup> In the same catalogue, Jimmie Durham wrote, "We want to figure out how *not* to entertain you, yet still engage you in discussions about what is really the center of your reality, although an always invisible center."<sup>2</sup>

The anodyne Indian, the Other we call our own, has been Elaine Reichek's subject for several years. With *Native Intelligence*, a show that opened at the Grey Art Gallery in New York and can be seen at the Greenville County Museum of Art from August 11 to October 4, Reichek looks in particular at how white Americans became, and remain, so comfortable with this paradoxical figure of domesticated alienation. The materials she uses are historical; this body of work began with existing documentary photographs of South and then North American natives. And it began with the conviction that there is nothing objective about the original construction or current use of these images. Writing in the current exhibition's catalogue essay, Jimmie Durham points out the dearth of contemporary images of American Indians—while other minorities in our society are routinely shown to have no past, his community is deprived of a present.<sup>3</sup> Reichek's principal target is this sense of timelessness and attendant intangibility—of deracination—in the representation of native cultures.

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The exhibition opens with work using Reichek's best-known procedure, in which enlarged, black and white archival photographs are paired with knitted wool replicas of their central subjects. The first of these works appeared in 1982 when Reichek created a series of *Dwellings* from documentation of structures in Fiji, East Africa, Lapland, and elsewhere. These were followed in 1986 with the *Tierra del Fuego* series, in which the knit replicas were of men, not their homes. The current work, which focuses on North American natives, includes both men and tepees. These knit figures recreate their subjects just as the photographs give them to us—nothing is inferred about the backs of the men or their shelters, or about features lost to shadow or glare. The photographs of men are all enlarged to roughly lifesize; the tepees are smaller. In both cases, the knit figures are made to the photographs' scale. Sometimes Reichek alters the photographs with hand-coloring, and then the knit figures are colored accordingly, but otherwise they are in shades of black and white. Tepees are hung upside down and unstretched, but supplied with sticks that inescapably suggest knitting needles; men are hung on metal armatures that keep their contours true.

Knitting is rich in metaphorical as well as practical applications. To knit is to integrate, resolve, and heal. It produces material of greater warmth but inferior durability than woven textiles; it is associated with hobby rather than industry. Perhaps because it conjures images of grandmothers making baby

booties, its appearance in the ski-hat masks of tabloid-publicized terrorists is particularly disturbing. There is something graphic, or artful, about the snake-charming way it allows an entire body of apparel to be conjured from a single skein. Most reliable of all associations is that knitting is women's work. Reichek avails herself of all this information, and more. The *Tierra del Fuego* natives she earlier depicted were entirely eliminated within 50 years of their first contact with Europeans, casualties largely of disease carried by clothing given in misguided charity. There is, clearly, violence in the knit figures, and it can be read not just in appended historical accounts but in their vivid suggestion of eviscerated skins, of shrouds, of relics. And, undeniably, there is humor in these unprepossessing objects. The juxtaposition of knitted form and photograph produces a compound that is humble and fierce, cozily familiar and profoundly alien.

Reichek works by herself and by hand, with skill and care, but her knitting and other handiwork does not aim for virtuosity. Its primary purpose is to register the kind of information suppressed or unavailable in traditional photography: tactility, volume, singularity, duration. Perhaps most important, it affirms the artist's presence. With every opposition in her work, Reichek stresses the complex relationship between her medium, her subject, and her own white, female identity. Sometimes she is explicit about this to the point of inserting photographs of herself in her work. In *Tears*

*Were Shed*, one among a group of new photocollages, she appears in an inset snapshot taken before a museum display case where the final "t" of "Indian Paint" is obscured by glare. Other inset photographs in this collage show a white man painting a portrait of a tribal chief and several commercial transactions—sales of jewelry and of various handicrafts—by which native culture is transformed into white cash. One cameo photograph documents an American Indian Movement march, which complements the self-portrait to distinguish this photocollage by its specific topicality. Its backdrop is a natural history museum diorama of Indian Life, the kind that has helped shape a generation's mythology.

Other photocollages use reproduced history paintings as backgrounds. A sweeping Frederick Church landscape of 1860 serves for *Church Ritual*, in which the photographic insets show a series of ceremonies staged in 1913 by businessman Rodman Wanamaker, enlisting tribal allegiance to his declaration of brotherhood. Wright of Derby's 1785 portrait of a very Caucasian-looking Indian maiden is the pretext for *Red Delicious*, where the insets are of white actors taking classic American Indian roles in Hollywood movies. *Westward, Ho!*, which builds on an Emmanuel Leutze pot-boiler of 1861, contains various telling cameos in its ornate frame, from portraits of white elders to a dead buffalo in the snow. On top of an image of a train forging westward in *Sign of the Cross*, inset photographs are arranged in cruciform pattern. Two offer comparisons of children before and after their transformation from Indian attire to Western; another shows two native American children staring quizzically at a bedraggled Christmas tree. *Noble Savage/Savage Noble* is the show's most succinct work, a pair of stereopticon images of an Indian Scout as white men conceived him. Here are the classic feathered headdress and moccasins, the slight crouch, the hand warily shading the eyes, all staged before the studio photographer's painted backdrop and copyrighted by him. Doubled, the image intimates a future of mass production as well as a history of oppression and cooptation; its median line suggests a virtual turning point between the consolidation of a myth and its capitalization.

The most recent body of work in *Native Intelligence* doesn't make use of photographs at all. Here, textiles stand alone, in the form of embroidered samplers. Traditionally, such samplers were multipurpose educational tools, providing young girls with practice in executing a variety of stitches and in rehearsing the homilies that would guide their lives, as well as providing an eloquent study in discipline and restraint. Reichek's samplers are appropriately tidy and composed; as with her knitting, we can measure the time they consumed, stitch by stitch. But, in each, something is misplaced: "Home Sweet Home" is a tepee, a funerary

urn bears the legend "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee." Some of Reichek's samplers are sewn on plain linen, others on printed fabrics that themselves replay vintage cowboy imagery in the graphic style and color schemes of the '40s and '50s. Like many of the objects in *Native Intelligence*, these embroidered retro readymades carry two sets of baggage, one for nostalgia, the other for ideology. They are evenly weighted, and the work bears them without preference.

As in an acclaimed fall 1991 Brooklyn Museum exhibition examining the provenance of American Indian artifacts gathered—and in many cases commissioned—by an early 20th-century curator,<sup>4</sup> the historical record that Reichek replays tells us more about the picture makers than their subjects. It is, indeed, well established that a progression of hopes, fears, misunderstandings, and simple cruelty is reflected in mainstream imagery of westward expansion. What sets Reichek's approach apart is that she accepts responsibility, however partial, for that pictorial record. One especially telling group of photographs in this exhibition shows children at play as cowboys and Indians. In images both commercial and amateur, the story of the white man's engagement with the Indian is brought forward sufficiently that almost any adult viewer can find a place in it. Here, as elsewhere, Reichek stresses the yearning for innocence—for youth, for exoneration, and for it all simply to have been different—that clouds every response to the latent and overt malfeasance revealed in conventional imagery. She wants to lay those components bare, knowing that their analysis and disposal may in some cases constitute a personal loss.

Reflecting on the impetus for his novel *The Death of Che Guevara*, Jay Cantor recalls that it began with newspaper pictures of guerrillas and with some snapshots reproduced in *Ramparts* magazine. Noting that most people approach history this way, through the deathless world of photographs, he writes, "I think that this continual consumption of images may make us feel immortal." And yet, he says, "I can't deny that I told a story about history because of its particular prestige, because it shared in the prestige of the dead body, the glamour of the corpse, its infrangible, undeniable, whispering of a transcendent truth."<sup>5</sup> With his novel, Cantor

aims—quite unerringly—to arrest the photographic dissolve, to make the image yield its portion of mortality. It is Reichek's achievement, too.

<sup>1</sup>Paul Smith, "Anadarko Calling," *We the People*, Artists Space, New York, 1987, n.p.

<sup>2</sup>Jimmie Durham, "Finally, I Address Matters at Hand," *We the People*.

<sup>3</sup>Jimmie Durham, "Elaine Reichek: Unraveling the Social Fabric," *Elaine Reichek: Native Intelligence*, Grey Art Gallery, New York, 1992, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>The exhibition *Objects of Myth and Memory: American Indian Art at the Brooklyn Museum* (October 4–December 29, 1991) examined objects collected by Stewart Culin between 1903 and 1911.

<sup>5</sup>Jay Cantor, "Blood for the Ghosts," *On Giving Birth to One's Own Mother*, New York, 1991, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

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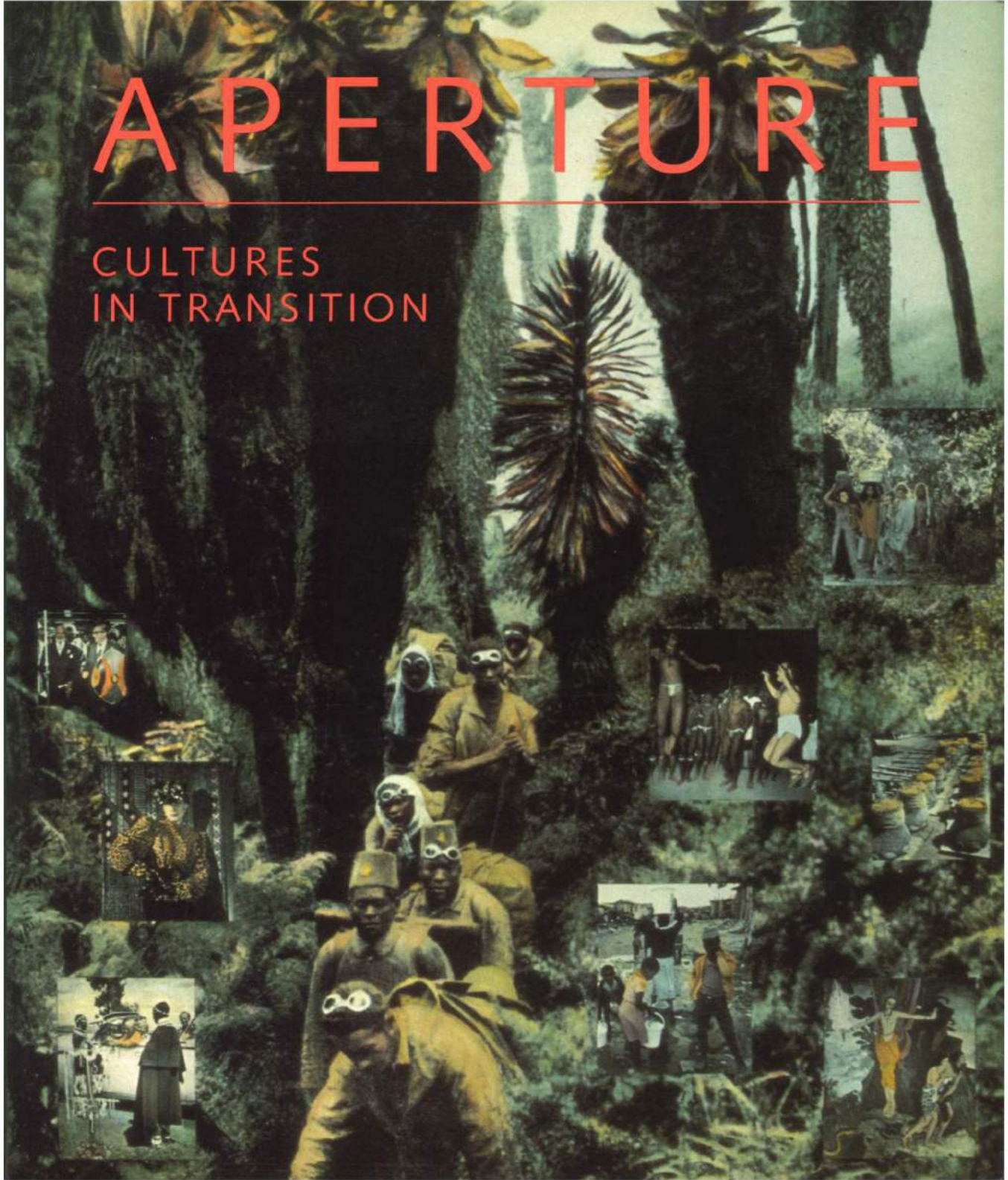


Elaine Reichek, *Samplers*, embroidery on linen, 1992. Courtesy the artist and Michael Klein, Inc.



# A P E R T U R E

CULTURES  
IN TRANSITION



Morgan, Sue. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions." *Aperture*, Spring 1990.

## Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions

By Susan Morgan

*My curiosity about alien cultures was avid and obsessive. I had a placid belief that it was good for me to live in the midst of people whose motives I did not understand.*  
—Paul Bowles

A traveler's curiosity courts a variety of uncertainties: unanticipated pleasures, tragic realizations, happy accidents. Elaine Reichek's work takes possession of that curiosity, orchestrating cultural questions through images. In the reclusive atmosphere of picture collections, second-hand bookstores, and anthropology museums, Reichek collects photographs taken at the ends of the earth. By carefully editing and altering (cropping, enlarging, hand-coloring, collaging) this borrowed material, Reichek coaxes new readings from old images. In re-presenting early-twentieth-century ethnographic photographs, Reichek turns the tables to reveal the cracks in anthropology's rigid, authoritarian method. "Preserving the antique is a colonialist mentality. All cultures are in flux. We are looking at them, they are looking at us." Free of nostalgia (a term invented in 1688 by Johannes Hofer, an Alsatian medical student; nostalgia, from the Greek roots meaning "return home" and "pain," was regarded as a medical problem until the late nineteenth century), Reichek's work does not sentimentally yearn for the past.

Photography has been described by Stanley Cavell as "a medium for making sense" and Reichek's work is about making sense, taking delight in cultural incongruities while avoiding a traditionally linear view of history. Reichek's photocollages and room-sized installations pointedly break down the notion of a correct and singular viewpoint. Her work is never didactic; her arrangements of photographs set up dialogues, introducing a range of considerations and contradictions. The inset images in her photocollages appear like rips in an otherwise carefully composed surface; like peepholes, the insets offer a surprising glimpse, reminding us that there is never one version to any story. In *I Drank The*



Elaine Reichek, right: *Red Man*, 1987; page 28; *I Drank the Zambesi*, 1986; page 29; *Desert Song*, 1987; pages 30-31; *Burden of Dreams*, 1987.

Morgan, Susan. "Other viewpoints, Other Dimensions." *Aperture*, Spring 1990.





*Zambesi*, 1986—the mysterious title taken from a travel guide—characters imbibe the exotic. It's the heart of darkness peddled as the flavor of the month as everyone tries to get a taste of the Other: monkeys in dresses, women in animal skins, rain umbrellas as parasols, light bulbs as necklaces. As so often in Reichek's work, the notion of exotic here has no fixed meaning.

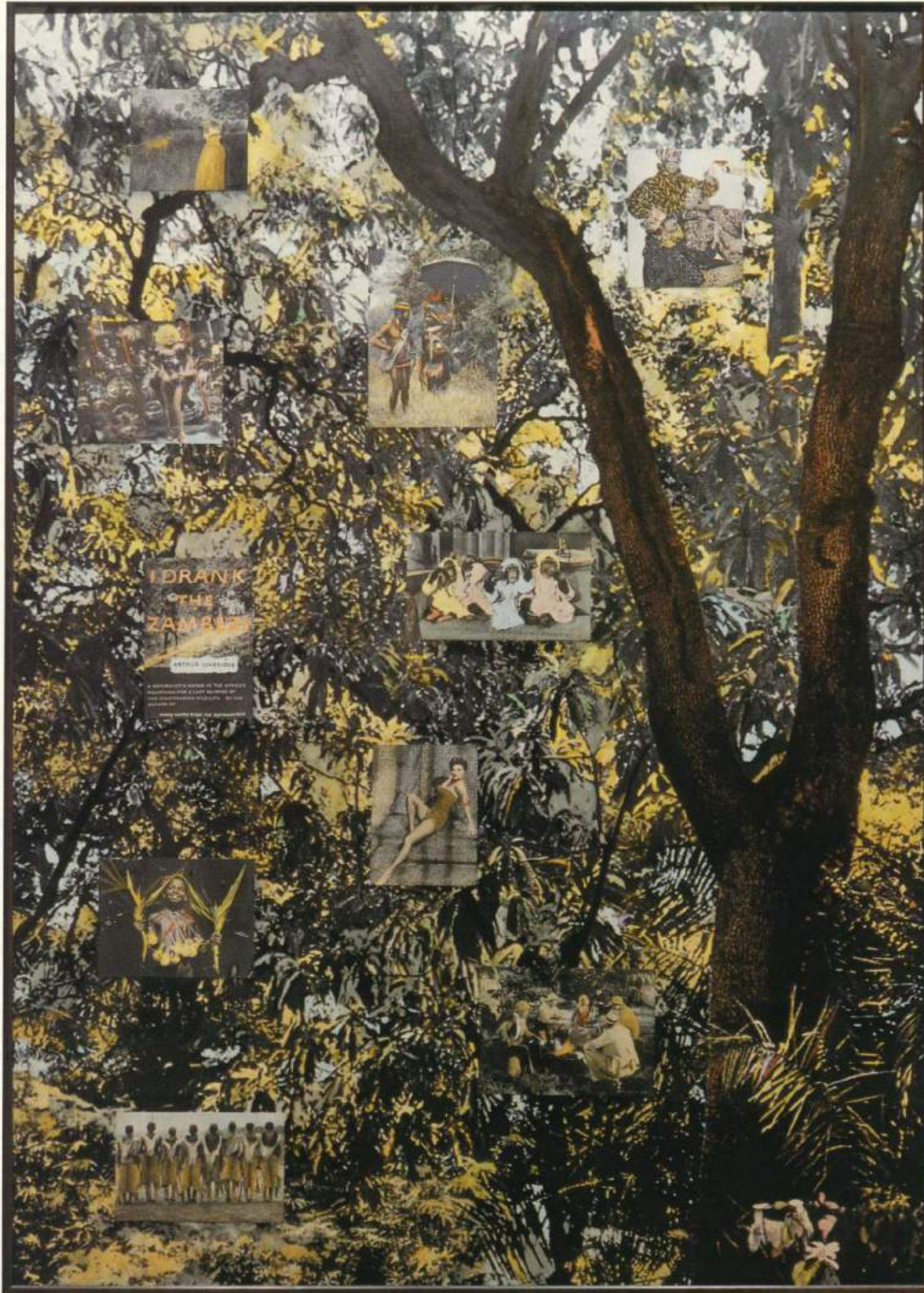
Reichek has referred to the hand-coloring of the photocollages as "homogenizing the time." It is a democratic gesture, diminishing any sense of priority among the images and establishing them as equal parts of a whole. In *Ticket to Paradise*, 1988, a painting of Jamaica Bay by the nineteenth-century American landscapist Martin Johnson Heade is hand-colored in pale postcard tints. The sublime landscape envisioned by the Hudson River painter dissolves over time into a tourist's souvenir. Once the wilderness has been tamed, nature is reduced to just another photo opportunity. As in the tradition of English landscape painting, the beauty and importance of the countryside rests in its commercial potential—it is beautiful because you can own it.

In Reichek's room-sized installations, the information surrounds us. The past and present appear in the same moment, creating yet another dimension. In the darkened room of *Desert Song* a pile of broken cameras lies discarded in a corner, a depleted oasis of voyeurism. "The desert is a place of great aestheticism and great luxury. The desire ranges from the spiritual to the carnal," Reichek notes. She has referred to her working method as "free associating"; references abound. In *Desert Song*, the Egyptian pyramids are presented simultaneously as architectural wonders of the world, ten-cent picture postcards, and a monumental movie stage for Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra. The central image from *Desert Song* is a classic scene; nomads and camels in the desert, palm trees swaying in the misty distance. The scene is both romantic and fraught with anxiety; all of the figures, men and animals alike, are looking in different directions. "If you look closely, something is happening. A storm is brewing." Reichek has located that ephemeral moment, changes occurring out on the horizon, and framed it. In *Desert Song*, a woman

Morgan, Susan. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions" *Aperture*. Spring 1990.

Morgan, Sue. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions." *Aperture*, Spring 1990.

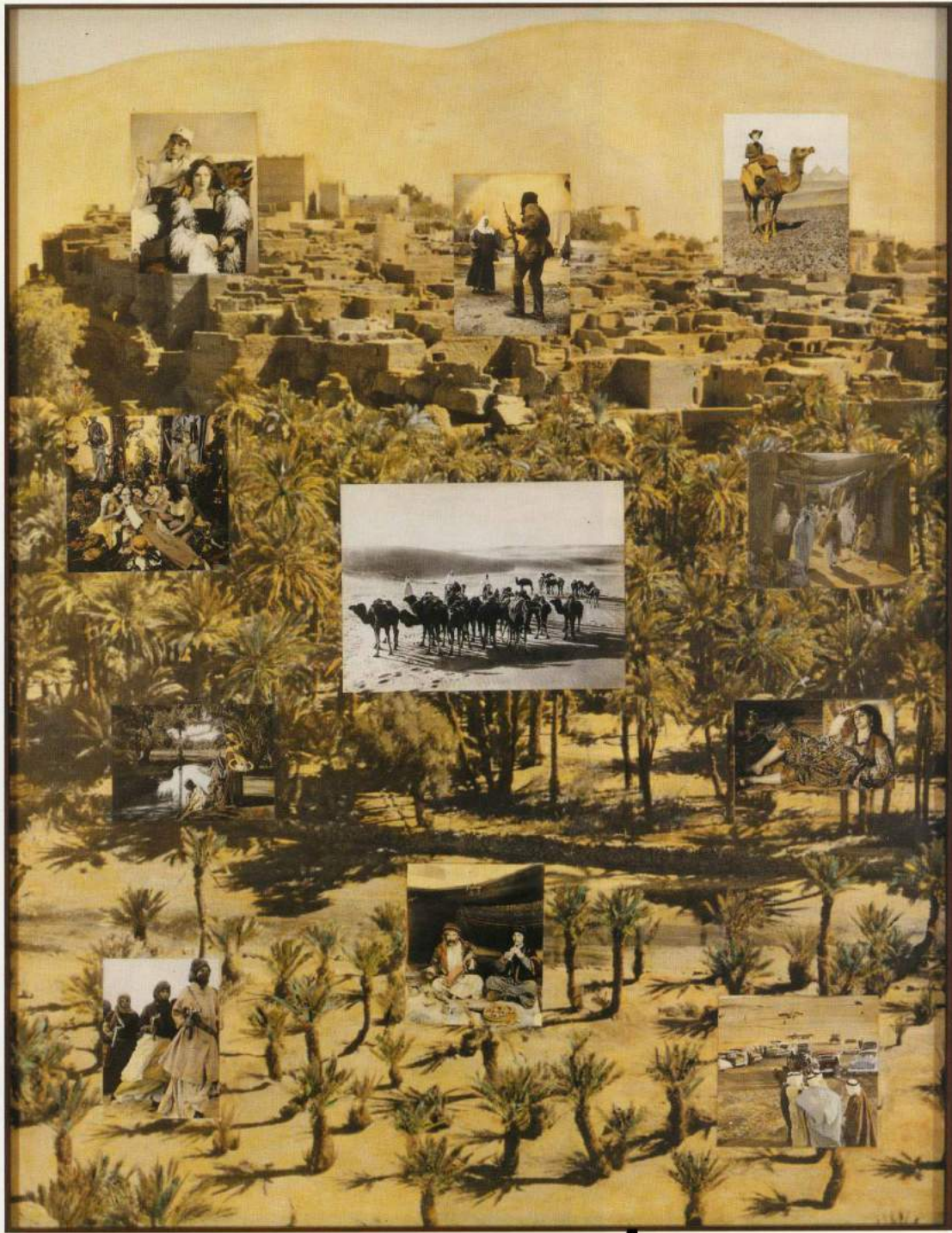




Morgan, Susan. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions" Aperture. Spring 1990.

Morgan, Sue. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions." *Aperture*, Spring 1990.





Morgan, Susan. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions" *Aperture*. Spring 1990.

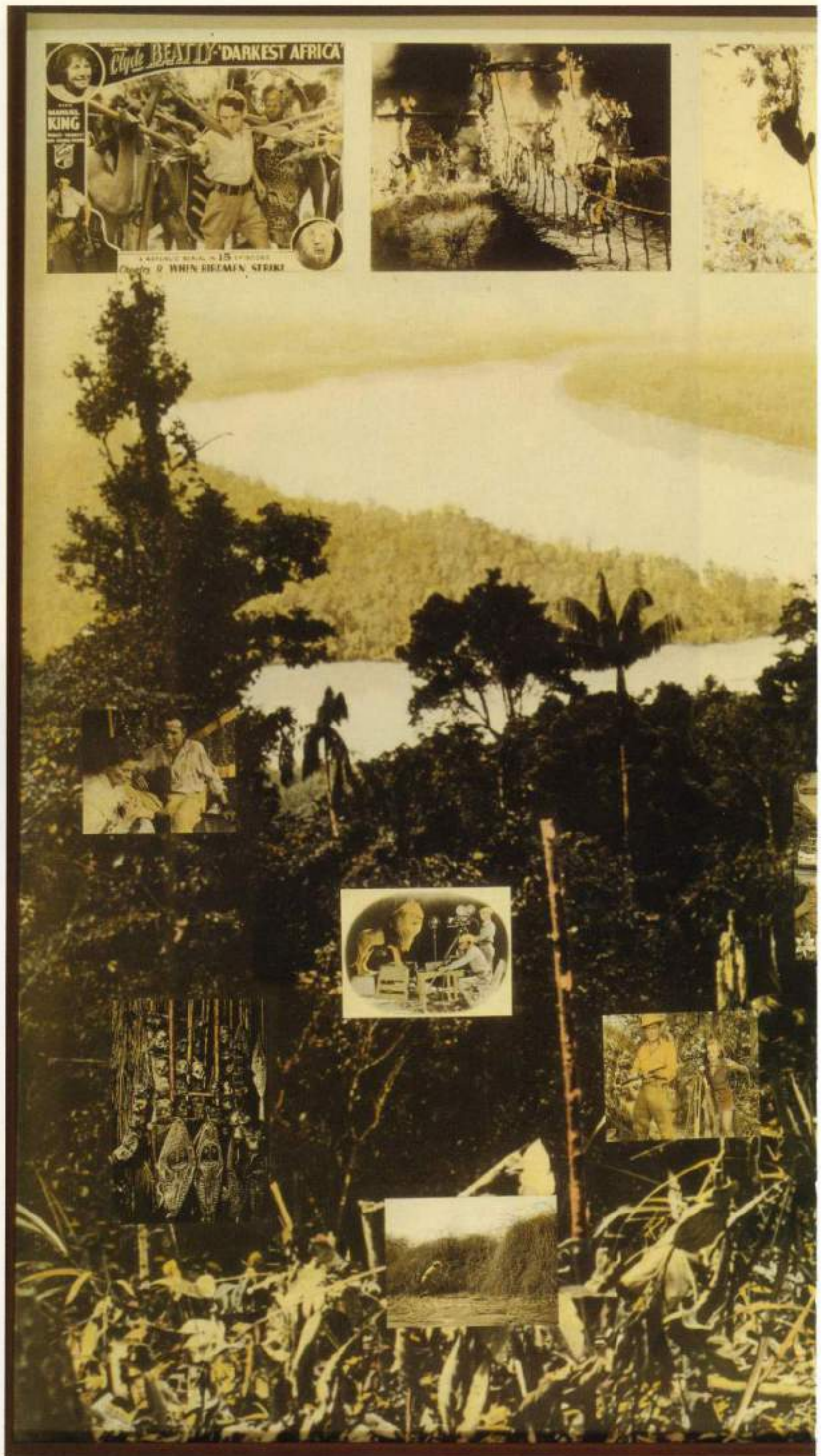
Morgan, Sue. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions." *Aperture*, Spring 1990.



in Victorian safari-wear poses on camel-back; the photograph is from the nineteenth century but the woman's face is Reichek's. "I try to include myself in the work. I am implicated. The work is about my own desire and guilt."

Since the late 1970s, Reichek has worked from "photographs into knitting," translating found images into three-dimensional objects. Working from a series of ethnographic studies of the Tierra del Fuegians, taken between 1908 and 1921 by Martin Gusinde, a German Jesuit anthropologist, Reichek has produced a series of knitted men, decoratively patterned after their now extinct, hand-painted human counterparts. Darwin loathed the Tierra del Fuegians, dismissing them as a people "with no form of art, only a crude form of body painting." Within fifty years of contact with Europeans, the tribes of Tierra del Fuego were decimated. The beauty of that lost culture is found, at least through allusions, in Reichek's work. The knitted men appear like shadows, visual puns on the embodiment of spirit. Displayed alongside Gusinde's photographs, they appear to be stepping outside the last remaining document, regarding their own lost history.

In Truman Capote's story "Music for Chameleons," the narrator visits the Caribbean island of Martinique. His conversation with a local aristocrat, an elegant woman "perhaps seventy, silver-haired, soigné," reveals the island's intricate culture and complex history. Nothing is simple, no natural "paradise" is serene. When the narrator takes notice of a black mirror, his hostess explains that in the late nineteenth century artists used black mirrors to "refresh their vision"; this one "belonged to Gauguin. You know, of course, that he lived and painted here before he settled among the Polynesians." The conversation continues. They talk about Carnival and murder; the narrator considers again the black mirror. "All the while the black mirror has been lying in my lap and once more my eyes seek its depths. Strange where our passions carry us, floggingly pursue us, forcing upon us unwanted dreams, unwelcome destinies." Reichek's work has captured the essence of the black mirror, refreshing our vision and unearthing our dreams.



Morgan, Susan. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions" *Aperture*. Spring 1990.





Morgan, Susan. "Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions" Aperture. Spring 1990.

THE  
NEW YORKER

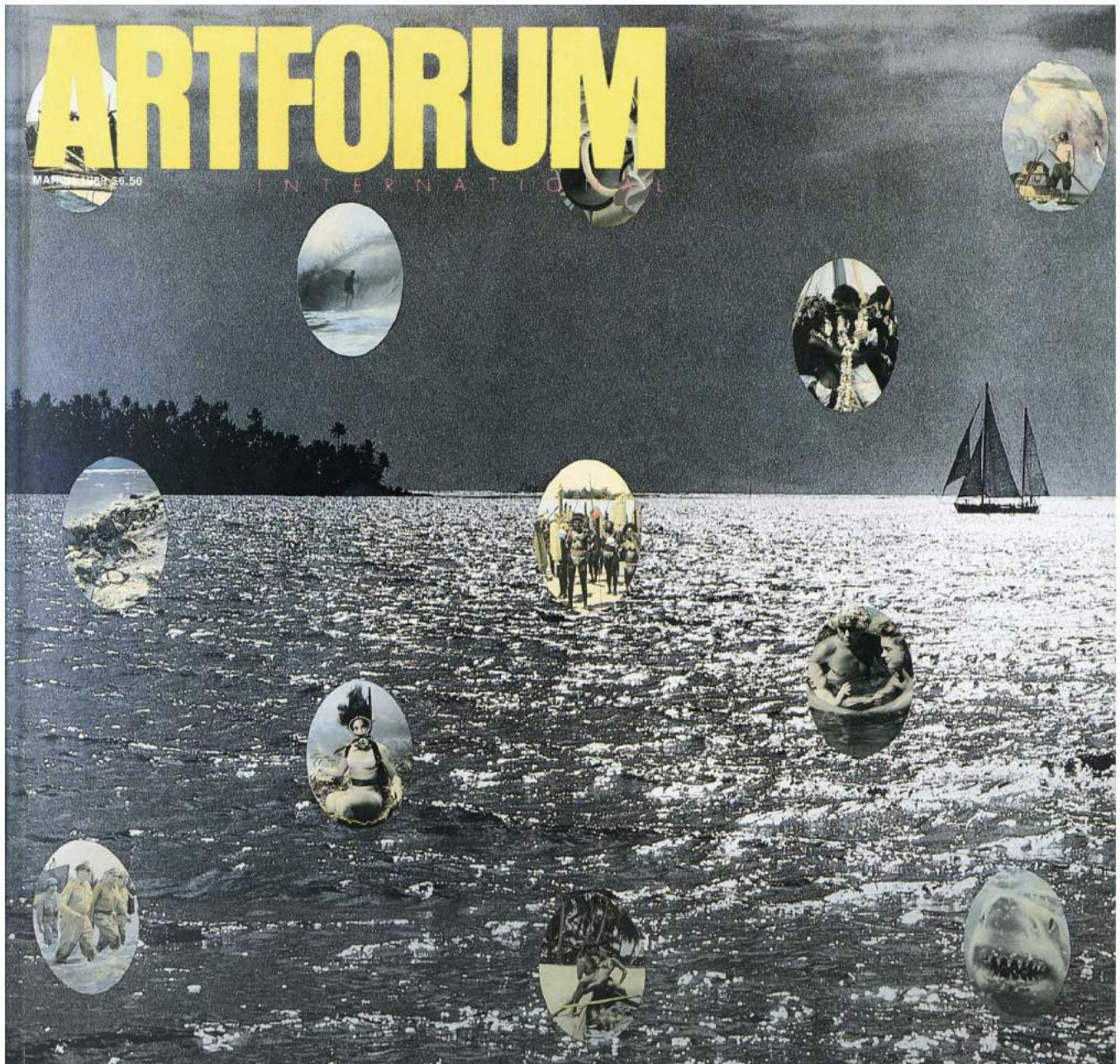
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

ART

ELAINE REICHEK is best known as the pioneer of the knitted documentary. Her breakthrough ethnographic work, the "Dwellings" series of 1985, consisted of blown-up and hand-tinted photographs of tents and thatched huts, mostly from East Africa and the South Seas, each accompanied by an architectonically exact but deflated double, made of yarn and sundries, hung on a peg alongside. In other words, each picture came with an empty knitted bag of itself. It also came with another, invisible bag of suddenly skewed perceptions. Here, for instance, was the whole idea of exoticism—of Kipling—turned inside out, with a trip to the library and an afternoon's browsing in Manhattan's notions district in lieu of some far-flung colonial mission or jungle safari.

Over the last few years, in metaphorically mixed collages as well as in full-scale installations ("Revenge of the Coconuts," "Desert Song"), Reichek has turned her quizzical eye on such amusing, if easy, targets as Tarzan epics, Victorian lady adventurers, American Express-style harem fantasies, leopard-spotted vinyl raincoats, Gauguin-mania, and chimps in drag. She has also taken to knitting men—in particular, the images of now vanished Tierra del Fuego tribesmen—and these new conceptual photographic-cum-craft works are on view at Lamagna through April 22nd. The yarn figures seem far more real, more embodied than those in the pictures, and while Reichek doesn't literally breathe new life into her long-gone subjects, her highly calculated, labor-intensive approach does suggest an absurdist, counter-colonial new erotics.





Miller, Charles. "Domestic Science." *ArtForum*, March 1989.



# domestic science

CHARLES V. MILLER



Elaine Reichek, Cameroon, 1984, mixed media, 56 x 52". From the "Dwelling" series.  
Collection of the Prudential Insurance Company of America.

"*Ernst ist das Leben, heiter die Kunst*" (Life is serious, art is frivolous). So read the placards of the villagers in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The old lady's visit, 1956, published in English as *The Visit*), and the work of Elaine Reichek almost suggests that she agrees: though she deals with the serious sciences of anthropology and ethnography, her art itself is always ironic, sometimes humorously—frivolously—so. Yet neither author nor artist is in the same position as the characters in the play. Applying the absolutes of myth to the morality of Europe's postwar economic recovery, Dürrenmatt shows us a people lured by the attraction of capital, and doomed by it—a people colonized by a richer outside power. His stance is critical and accusatory. Reichek, on the other hand, "decolonizes" colonized peoples,

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Elaine Reichek, *Feather Man* and *Striped Man*, both 1986, mixed media, ca. 66 x 116" overall. From the "Tierra del Fuego" series. The latter in private collection.

breathing new and different life into their images and shifting our perceptions of the colonial experience. Her figures, dwellings, and photocollages live in a spectral world of photographic halides and emanate from a mediated life of artistic materials.

The problems involved in representing and giving voice to the Other have been widely discussed in recent years, as a subject both of the social sciences and of art criticism. Perhaps any culture may have difficulty in understanding whatever seems to lie outside it, in perceiving in that unfamiliar presence anything beyond what its own eyes have learned to see. The issue for us, however, is that our Western culture, in the vast majority of its relationships, has been the dominant partner, and has set the terms of the exchange. It has been European and North American; its color has been primarily white, its sex male. And as it has spread around the world, always making pictures to send home, it has harmonized, homogenized, normalized the voice of the Other.

Today the West's expansionist spirit—the spirit of the explorers, to use a European model, or of the pioneers, in an American one—is running out of wide open spaces to colonize. (The "space" in the term "space program" may be more than the area above the air.) But the Romantic spirit, the all-encompassing Fichtean ego that tries always to re-create the world in its own image—to recolonize it—lives on, propelling artists such as Lothar Baumgarten, for example, to collect around themselves the vestiges of colonial power. For work like his is a kind of ventriloquism. The names or signs

of the Other may fill the gallery, but they speak with the voice of the artist, who has made them an extension of his or her own persona. The artist's world becomes *the* world; no other voice is heard.

Reichek's work, on the other hand, does not grow out of an "objective" ethnographic/anthropological method like Margaret Mead's (or like Baumgarten's, a group of whose works were inspired by stays in South America). Instead, a constant element of irony (directed at the artist as much as at anyone else) mediates between the actual references of the images she uses and our perception of them. In one of the several found images that make up the photocollage *Desert Song*, 1987, for example, Reichek's face replaces that of a properly clad Victorian woman atop a camel in the Egyptian desert, pyramids in the distance. The picture, beyond its chuckle factor, creates a distance between the artist (and, along with her, the viewer) and the entire colonial scene that makes up the rest of the work—an oasis-type village with a sand dune for a back lot and dotted with smaller images of the Arab world. These images vary in their "truth" from the apparently documentary to the quite unreal, but the context makes all of them suspect. For Reichek has not invented an artistic persona to participate in the action of the image, or to harmonize its disjunctive parts by providing a center for them to orbit. Where Baumgarten is the hero in a drama of his own devising, Reichek remains firmly planted in the here and now—even in Victorian garb. Her ironic smile breaks up the visual processes of identification be-



tween viewer, subject, and artist.

In an earlier photcollage, *Burden of Dreams*, 1986, Reichek has placed small reproductions of carnival announcements, postcards, movie stills (from *Tarzan*, *The African Queen*, and such), and other images over a photograph of a solar-topeed cameraman filming in a tropical forest—a man recording the kind of images that our culture has used to form our perceptions about such environments. His labor is part of what Kipling called “the White Man’s burden.” Yet the juxtapositions within the work debunk the mythology of colonialism. It is as if we were seeing, in the photographs scattered through the picture, what the white man shot—literally, in the case of the Hemingway type facing down the charging rhino, with moral (and physical) support from his safari rifle. Through the film’s camera we see the images that have been produced to mystify and mythify the non-Western world. The most recent of these images is only a few years old—a poster for *Burden of Dreams*, 1981, Les Blank’s documentary on the making of Werner Herzog’s film *Fitzcarraldo*. In this piece as in other works, the artifacts Reichek uses are the products of our own culture as it observes local societies rather than of the local societies themselves. She does not claim to bring the Other into the gallery. Instead, she unmasks the white man’s view for what it is: a Romanticized and idealized fictive image.

In her installation pieces—most recently *Revenge of the Cocoanuts* (at the 56 Bleecker Gallery) and *Desert Song* (at the Barbara Braathen Gallery, both in New York, in 1988)—Reichek builds upon the images in the photcollages, developing them into all-encompassing environments that accentuate the work’s ironies. *Revenge of the Cocoanuts* takes its cue from the photcollage *Aloha*, 1988, a view of a Solomon Island seascape broken by tondolike smaller photographs: General Douglas MacArthur wading ashore somewhere in the Pacific during World War II; Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins in the soft-porn Pacific-island adventure *The Blue Lagoon*, 1980, bathing their progeny in the womblike waters of the sea; a surfer; the shark called Jaws; a trash-marred shoreline; a group of headhunters; and so forth. No Romantic idylizing of the South Sea island is possible before the sum of these images, in which the waste of industrial society lies on the beaches beside the outrigger canoes. Phantasies of the Pacific are broken up by concrete historical realities and the absurdities of fictional illusion.

Over the past four years or so Reichek has applied her technique of altering appropriated photographs in two groups of three-dimensional works, the “Dwelling” and the “Tierra del Fuego” series. Each of the “Dwelling” series, from 1984–85, begins with an enlarged black and white ethnographic photograph, usually taken in the early 20th century, of a piece of the native architecture traditional to such places as Fiji, East Africa, Lapland, and others. These photographs Reichek has mediated through the hand application of color, from a small slit of burnt orange in the doorway of the Fijian hut to a lush scale of yellows, oranges, and reds covering the roof of the East African dwelling. Next to each photograph is a scale replica of the structure, handknitted in a variety of yarns, the materials of what was once known as “women’s work.” Stretched out, these fabric forms would take the shape of the dwellings in the pictures. Instead, they hang upside down on the wall, like limp parachutes or sacks. Reichek has not supplied them with the supports that would give them architectural rigidity. (In the Lapland piece, birch logs like those in the doorway of the hut in the picture lean against the wall under the knit bag.)

The manual work Reichek invests in these pieces is of an intimate and personal kind. Knitting, of course, is a common element in the old image of the housewife or homemaker; in a sense, Reichek has returned her art to the role of a woman’s cottage industry. The humanness of the process brings out the coldness and impersonality of the pictures themselves, which, even when people are present (a rare event), are eerily silent and still—or, rather, since silence and stillness are ordinary to photography, are revealed in their ordinary eeriness. The work comments on the objectifying processes of ethnography, of history, of the camera, of science. The effect is underscored by the work’s perspective—the tangible knitted pieces moving out from the wall toward the viewer, the forms in the photographs receding into the flat distance, the fictive picture space, unattainable behind the image surface.



Elaine Reichek, *Gray Men*, 1988, mixed media, 65 x 71". From the “Tierra del Fuego” series.

In these nondimensional regions only silent winds may blow, but nevertheless they are places of existence, into which we may peer to try to perceive a life that once was. The dwellings almost become gravestones, the markers of lost civilizations.

The “Tierra del Fuego” works, 1986–, exert an even stronger spectral presence than the “Dwelling” series. Here Reichek continues the technique of setting original ethnographic photographs—these ones from Martin Gusinde’s early-20th-century studies of the tribes of Tierra del Fuego—next to handknitted replicas of their subjects. Instead of dwellings, though, the photographs show men, in various masks, body paint, or, in one case, a tentlike cloak. Thus Reichek’s knitted shapes here are also all male figures, and they are haunting, even almost threatening presences. Inanimate yet more vital than their twins in the photographs—through the time and handwork in their making, perhaps, as well as their three-dimensionality—they seem ready to jump from the wall into the viewer’s space. At the same time, they seem still a part of the difficult South American environment to which their hardy models had adapted so well. The indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego died off in the early part of this century, the victims of diseases, to which they had no immunity, carried by outsiders who came to the islands for land and for gold, which was discovered there in the 1880s. Reichek’s materializations of the spirits of the aboriginal people, her reinvocations of a former existence, are not quite all that we have of them; we have the photographs, and the

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# Art in America



Installation view of Elaine Reichek's "Transfigurations," 1987, at Carlo Lamagna.

## Elaine Reichek at Carlo Lamagna and A.I.R.

Coinciding as it did with the decline of Neo-Expressionism and the rebirth of Conceptual art, the Primitivism show at MOMA—and the debates it engendered—seemed a swan song to Western art's dalliances with alien cultures. But as it happens, the issues then raised about the now popularly capitalized Other remain relevant to some very tenacious work that both preceded and survived the MOMA event.

Elaine Reichek has been concerned with primitive cultures since the early '80s. A few years ago, she began to knit little replicas of rudimentary South American and African dwellings—an extension of her practice of mimicking a wide variety of architectural forms with Western apparel. In "Transfigurations," as she called her show at Lamagna, greatly enlarged, early 20th-century photographs of Tierra del Fuego Indians were paired with knitted effigies meant to be as congruent as possible with the photographs' subjects. Most of the knitted men are stretched over wire armatures, which mitigates their

evocation of eviscerated skins without eliminating it. These Indians, one of the last Stone-Age tribes, were wiped out within 50 years of their first encounter with white men in the 1880s, largely by imported diseases. At first, the Indians mainly died of smallpox and measles, but later they succumbed to upper respiratory illnesses that evidently resulted from using the clothing the Europeans encouraged them to wear—lethal protection for bodies already adapted to surviving rigorous winters. Yet seeing Reichek's nice, tightly knitted shrouds, we can't help sympathizing with the oppressors: the wool looks so cozy, and the natives in the photographs so exposed, standing alone and often naked amid the rocks and snow.

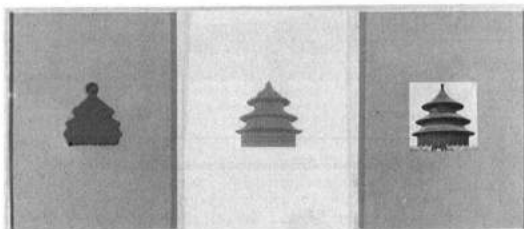
The curse of contact, the death-dealing bear hug of colonization even in its most benign form, is central to the esthetic of "Transfigurations." The Indians, who were just slightly smaller than is the norm for European men, are shown life-size in stances that are at once aggressive and defensive—lists clenched,

knees locked, chests hollow. Their mostly nude bodies (one is draped to the knees) are painted with stripes, dots and splotches or, in one case, feathered; almost all their faces are masked. In addition to the disguises the Indians devised for themselves, Reichek has applied further body and background paint, in conventionally Western primary colors. Keying up the photos and helping to "define" their contours, this graphic clarification also distorts their meaning.

Similarly, by enlarging to roughly 4-by-6 feet the 8-by-10 inch photos that the Museum of Natural History provided her with, Reichek engages the classic *Blow Up* paradox: the closer you look, the more obscure the image becomes. Details decompose and lose their meaning, threatening the coherence of the whole. Like the addition of paint and the translation of the images into tangible, homespun stuff, this attempt at analysis ultimately alienates its subject.

The melancholy of "Transfigurations" has its complement in "Trouble in Paradise," Reichek's simultaneous exhibi-

tion at A.I.R. A more freewheeling compendium, consisting of modified photographs, knitted shelter forms and variously altered coconuts, "Trouble in Paradise" is more humorous, or at least ironic, and more autobiographical. Bringing in personal photographs and references, it throws into higher relief the feminist concerns that it shares with "Transfigurations." After all, knitting is an activity with a gender, in our culture at least, and its use as a means of representation certainly implies a political choice. The feminine perspective on oppressed and alienated cultures can be called privileged, but Reichek doesn't insist on the prerogative. Instead, she asks us to recognize her subjects' fundamental inaccessibility to our understanding, and their tragic vulnerability to our ignorance. —Nancy Princenthal



Elaine Reichek: *Temple of Heaven*, 1982, mixed mediums, 36 by 82 inches; at Concord.

### Elaine Reichek at Concord

A former student of Ad Reinhardt, Elaine Reichek uses a feminine craft, knitting, to analyze the visual and symbolic languages of architecture in a form of post-Conceptual art. When she began to use knitting as an analytical tool four years ago, it supplied a bridge between the concrete and the abstract, the personal and the public, the intimate and the grand; it also permitted her to introduce explicit content into her system-oriented art.

In her earlier work in this vein, Reichek matched an already knitted garment such as a baby's bonnet with an example of vernacular architecture that resembled it. Now, she starts with a well-known building and designs a piece of clothing in its shape—an actual hat, say, set under glass on the left, a hand-tinted, black and white photograph of the building on the right, and in-between a two-color drawing detailing the structure of both.

Superficially, such work resembles Joseph Kosuth's "still lifes" which juxtaposed an actual object, a life-sized photograph of it, and its dictionary definition—but where Kosuth explored difference within sameness, Reichek explores the similarities between different things. In effect, she practices what philosopher Gilbert Ryle calls "category mistake"—"The presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another."

The result is a humorous irreverence reminiscent of much post-modern architecture. For exam-

ple, Reichek may place a photo of the White House with a baby bonnet, or an image of the World Trade Towers with a pair of hot pink pants. In a way, she also conceptualizes Claes Oldenburg's strategy of turning banal objects like baseball bats into oversize monuments.

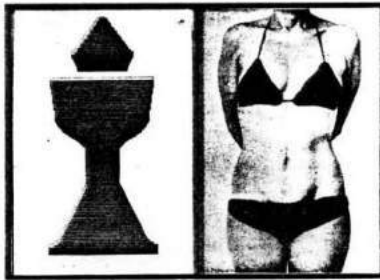
But Reichek's pairing of famous buildings and everyday clothing is not only debunking. Her work also questions how we read structure, how we detect similar forms in very dissimilar objects. Rooted in the conventions of Conceptual art, Reichek is also heir to both the feminist art of the early '70s that focused on crafts and the humorous art of the late '70s based on visual puns. In fusing these genres, she has forged a new way of looking at the world.

—Ann-Sargent Wooster

## ELAINE REICHEK

Concord Gallery

If the conceptualists of the late sixties were involved with facts and information—with semiotics and logical analyses of systems—many artists in the early eighties are more interested in making things and making unlikely connections between them. Elaine Reichek's post-conceptualist parody art equates knitting and building: humble women's craft and the loftiest edifices of man. She turns the modernist grid into knitting patterns for architectural façades—or vice versa, making knit/purl patterns from building elevations. She lines up a knitted garment, a diagrammatic pattern, and a tinted photo of the real building or the life-size garment being worn—as neatly and precisely as butterflies on display. Each piece is accompanied by a pattern book documenting the process.



Elaine Reichek, *Bikini (detail)*, 1982.  
Yarn, pencil, pastel print and book, 100 x 210 cm.  
Photo D. James Dee. Courtesy Concord, New York

She transforms the White House façade into a baby bonnet, makes house slippers that are sailboats (two sails equal one slipper), turns the Temple of Heaven and Chitchan Itza into colorful ski-caps, flattens a bikini into a pattern that could be a chalice or an ice-cream sundae, knits the World Trade Towers as a pair of upside-down pants—and does it all with perverse logic and wit, never losing equilibrium. They are all peculiar garments, strange abodes. Her free associations lead to mysterious resemblances, tenuous connections, inappropriate materials. Everything is slightly off, including the scale. Nothing quite fits. There are humorous discrepancies between shape and pattern, diagram and object, concept and actuality. The sparse, clean conceptualist surface of the work intertwines with a complex chain of connecting ideas—free associations about gridding and mapping, about patterns for making things and patterns of behavior, about familiar archetypes and familial conventions. Her new work is bolder, wittier, and more bizarrely logical than ever.

Kim Levin



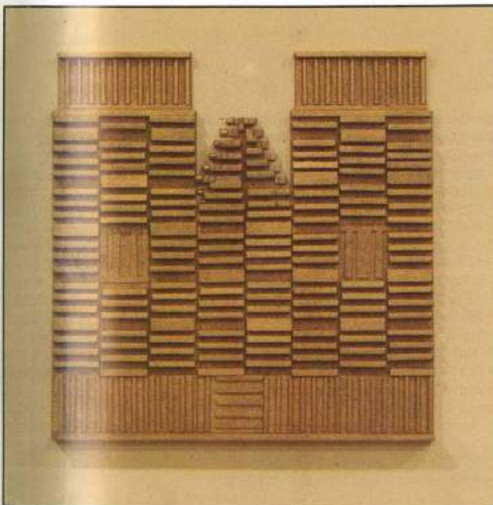


Elaine Reichek, *My House*, 1980. *Mixed media*, 3 x 17". *Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.*

## VERBAL IMAGE/WRITTEN OBJECT: CONNECTION AS MEANING IN THE WORK OF ELAINE REICHEK

CORINNE ROBINS

Elaine Reichek has been fearless about asking "who am I" and "what is my work about" in every area of her life. Her conceptual art is of interest because it gives us more to see and think about.

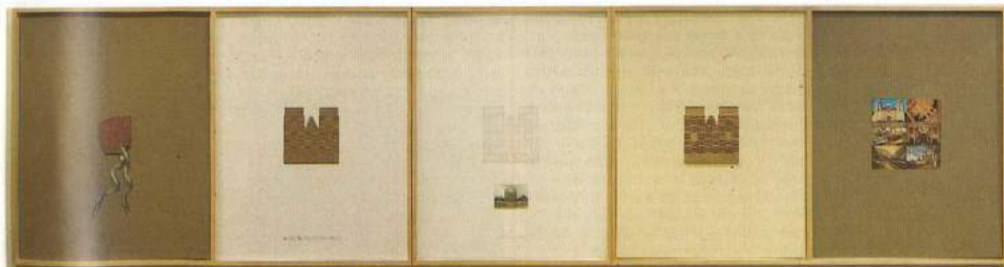


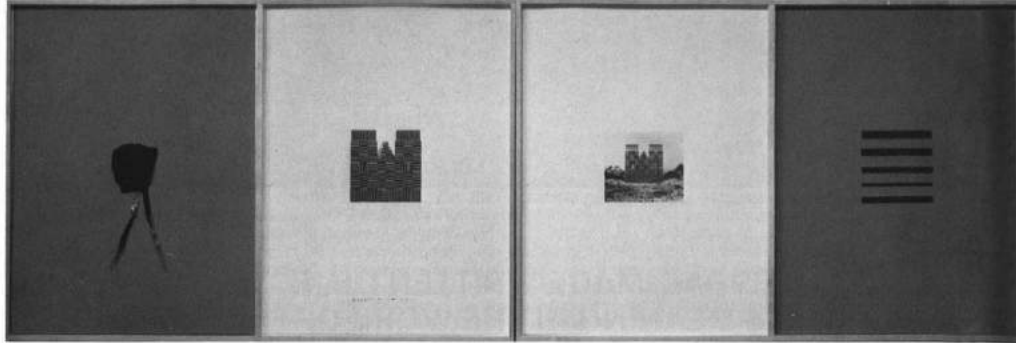
Elaine Reichek, *Sight-Seeing (detail)*, 1980.

Elaine Reichek, *Sight-Seeing*, 1980. *Mixed media*, 38 x 136". *Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.*

I have stepped through the looking glass as I travel, visually, from baby caps to castles, from mittens to archetypal houses, from knitting instructions in which movement operation is graphed to arrive at building moldings. In one piece, there is Whistler's *Mother* with a new face; in another, coloring book illustrations, both inferring that if you understand the process it will take you everywhere but, ultimately, the journey comes down to each artist's and each viewer's own way of being. Post-modernism, specifically after minimalism and the pattern painting reaction—are we truly back to more is more, to much of a muchness with centuries of art to be rifled, through which process, hopefully, we will then come out with ourselves—whoever that is? Conceptual art in the late Sixties was art reduced to semantics, to art about questions that became verbal statements on the wall. Conceptual art in the Eighties is still about questions, but about visual logic and a-logic, about images in space coming from and leading to the making of things, to real-life objects. It is associative, narrative, and cumulative without being haphazard. Conceptual art today is the opposite of the collage aesthetic which takes the found object as its starting point and builds a formal structure on the ritualizing of chance, upon a deliberately innocent reshuffling of ordinary and personal objects with conventional art materials. Conceptual art is almost hyperconscious in its concern with human thought processes, in its stringent analyses of how we perform the miracle of getting from one side of the street to the other, and in its examination of the inherent meanings in the ritual aspects of life.

Birth, death, puberty—the moments of change remain, even in the sophisticated 1980s, occasions for special, ceremonial dress. Birth, childhood, growth are traditional, aesthetic themes and/or women's themes. As for knitting, it is of course one of





women's traditional crafts. Thus, Elaine Reichek, by choosing to examine birth and growth through the craft of knitting, is, in true Wonderland fashion, looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope. Except that now, in 1981, no one feels certain about what is the 'right' or 'wrong' end—not to mention the serious or unserious way—of looking at anything. Reichek investigates the process of knitting, specifically the amount of different gestures (moves) involved in carrying out the rows of stitches required to make a baby's cap, and charts this information on graph paper. Her knitting graphs are made in two different colors and an assortment of different shades because the artist assigns a different color or color gradation to express differing stitch movements as part of her process of rendering the making of a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface.

A knitted black baby cap is represented as a two-colored (purple and black) edifice in the accompanying graph drawing. In another piece, a three-part work graphs a baby mitten, a mitten with a separate thumb, and a full-fingered glove, each represented by increasingly complex orange and black graph drawings (whose shape and coloring suggest ancient Greek pottery). The work, a 27" by 103" by 2' paper, yarn, and pencil piece done by the artist in 1979, is called *Direction/Translation/Operation*, which is a description of the artist's processes in making the objects as well as the work. "Direction/Translation/Operation" represents a description of one sort of natural learning process. Following directions, making translations (words to movements), and creating new combinations for ourselves are creative aspects of every person's normal growth processes, and the progression of graph edifices involved in Reichek's work is at once a witty and symbolic expression of the expanded world open to the grown hand. The artist literally confronts us simultaneously with three—little, big, and bigger—visual steps in both flat and objective representations, thus presenting a "think" piece as a wholly visual experience.

Reichek made the first of her pieces involving knitting codes in 1979. One such work, a two-panel piece entitled *Laura's Layette*, consisted of one panel on which is mounted a white sweater (a gift to Reichek's daughter Laura) on a dark ground and a contrasting panel of a graph drawing of the knitting operations required to make the sweater (which end up resembling two different views of a large apartment complex) on a white ground. Accompanying and part of *Laura's Layette* is a booklet of handwritten knitting instructions which ends with a family-type snapshot of a baby wearing the actual sweater. Shortly after finishing this work Reichek taught herself to knit, and she has made all the subsequent objects for the knitting series in her A.I.R. show. The family orientation (Laura is the name of Reichek's oldest child) is part of the work, according to the artist, as is also her choice to explore a craft such as knitting, which is usually specifically regarded as a women's craft. Reichek is very specific about this choice as one deliberately referring to her feminist orientation. But if her work is to be considered at all doctrinaire, the emphasis is as much or more on the conceptual approach. For Reichek, it is knitting as a

Elaine Reichek, *Interior/Exterior*, 1980. *Mixed media, 39 x 108"*.  
Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.

human motor activity, a human pattern-making construct, that she chooses to examine, to turn inside out, to break down, to free-associate with and fill up again with a host of new meanings and associations. The use of the elaborate baby sweater (which started out as a present given to her daughter) is, of course, part of Reichek's own family history. But the concluding work in the "Laura" series, *Laura's Bikini*, is built around a garment that Reichek knitted herself and which in fact her daughter consented to wear one time only—the time required for taking a picture of her in it for the work's accompanying knitting instruction booklet. Thus, the flesh-colored knitted bikini, as intended, becomes a wholly symbolic puberty garment, serving as symbol and reiteration of Laura's growth patterns in a set of 'funny' shapes.

For her show at the A.I.R. Gallery this February, Reichek made a series of many-paneled works, starting with a 17 foot piece entitled *My House*, which begins with two rust-colored mittens that make two twin house-graph drawings; these, in turn, become a red brick model of a house, which turns into a coloring book drawing of an archetypal country house, then moves on to photographs of houses and to coloring book images of little girls, and ends with a reproduction of *Whistler's Mother* in which Elaine Reichek knitting assumes the stance of the artist's model. *My House* is, by turns, funny, surprising, scary, and a little sad. On finishing the piece, one looks back to its beginnings to discover its rust mittens taking on a kind of funny poignancy. In a smaller work, *Interior/Exterior*, the artist moves from a black knitted cap to a wood construction of the knitting operation to a touched-up, made-up photograph of the same wood model placed *in situ* to black cornice molding. *Interior/Exterior* makes its associations appear at once unexpected and incontrovertible.

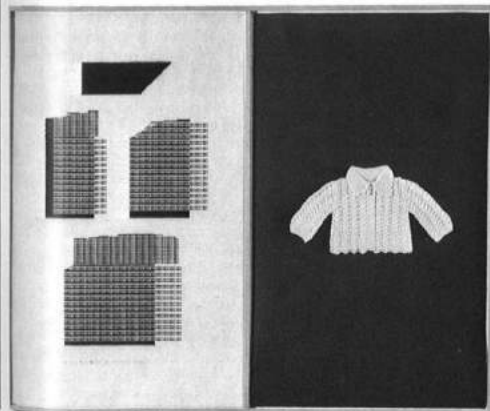
Because of her work's autobiographical subject matter, one is instantly aware of the feminist implications inherent in all of Reichek's knitting pieces, as well as in her earlier sewn paintings. But in her four solo shows to date, equally apparent has been her unremitting emphasis on meaning in terms of structure and sequence. Reichek is a formalist-trained artist, an artist concerned first and foremost with ideas. "Making work look good, be good to look at it," as she once put it, "is the fun part of being an artist." Ideas are the crux of the matter. Ideas and order, her own kind of aesthetic order, reflect the artist's

vision of the world, and the kind of terms and conditions she accepts from it and welcomes as her life. Reichek's world is ordered, wholly structured, and conventional—in exactly the same fashion as Lewis Carroll's in *Through The Looking Glass*. The basic human relationships, all forms as such, are unchanged. You may remember, at one place on the book, wool turns into water, after which point, logically enough, Alice finds herself at sea and having to row with all her might. Traditional leisure games are played with unexpected changes of actors and equipment. The famous croquet game takes place with flamingos for mallets and hedgehogs for balls, and it becomes understandably difficult in a short while to force the hedgehog to move through the wicket and to keep track of one's flamingo, etc. The game, though, does continue as a recognizable variation on formal croquet. In Lewis Carroll's work, the framework, the system, always remains intact.

In a similar fashion, Reichek takes the nuclear family as part of the recognizable beginnings of all our lives, or at the very least, of most of our adult origins, and therefore as logical frame-

work or form for her art. A few months ago, *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article concerned with "The New Extended American Family," profiling a family that was literally made out of the splitting of one half of a couple and the joining of that half with another halved family set, as a result of contemporary mores concerning the changing and adding on of parental partners. No one concerned with the magazine article questioned either the continuity, the importance, or the enduringness of the concept of family (in fact, the writer tended to regard this new extended family form as proof of the everlastingness of the familial concept for human beings). Reichek focuses attention on the formal patterning of our modes of operating in both knitting and in "family" life, as, for example, what we believe symbolizes our archetypal home and (Whistler's) mother. The family is a structure, a knitting pattern is a structure, a building is a

Elaine Reichek,  
Laura's Layette, 1979. Mixed media, 52 x 62". Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.



structure as a ground and a floor are locations having identical functions. Reichek presents all the foregoing ideas as visual statements or constructs connected in exactly the same way as her 1980 postcard piece entitled *Sight-Seeing* is: a piece which speaks of the notion of concepts being packed inside one another, i.e., the site and the sight both being something for someone to see.

The A.I.R. show consists only of examples of Reichek's knitting pieces, all of which are one kind of physical expression of this many-sided conceptual artist's world view. Since 1975, when she showed raw canvas paintings consisting of lines either penciled in or stripes made by using masking tape, the artist has been involved with making serial pieces. Her first show was a visual discussion of what was left to say about the grid in American art by 1975. The next year, in 1976, Reichek showed a series of black organdy pieces in 13-by-14-inch framed units, each exhibiting a geometric shape created by layering and overlappings of the material. Reichek, who studied with Ad Reinhardt in the early Sixties and received a heavy dose of formalist art training, was involved with carrying on a formalist, minimalist dialogue, but by using such flimsy feminist materials she rendered her intent suspect. By 1976, Reichek discovered for herself the importance of both materials and scale in representing her view of what were 'real' and what were 'art world' concerns. Since 1976, the artist's work has been divided between gently and exquisitely satirizing serial preoccupations—for example, by carrying them out in sewn pink squares on the one hand, and by constructing tiny beds with various patterned coverlets in one set and individual artists' images on another set to bring and somehow join together both these areas of her life.

Reichek has been fearless about asking 'who am I' and 'what is my work about' in every area of her life; in this, she exemplifies the Henry James American heroine and the Jamesian belief "that the unexamined life was one not worth living, and certainly one not worth writing about." At the same time, the autobiographical elements in Reichek's work are never finally the issue and, indeed, are often misleading. Point of fact: it was only after she became interested in the concept of the knitting operation and had pieces made concerned with knitting as a mode of working that Reichek herself learned to knit. Also, her being a feminist led to her preoccupation with the implications of knitting and women's needlework, not the other way around. It is the formal and structural processes these human acts engender that fascinate Elaine Reichek. Her work, above all, is her way of commenting on and registering for others the expanding domains of her private universe. In a closet at P.S. 1, Reichek built a room consisting of a large bed surrounded by 15 miniature 8-by-12-inch beds, each sporting its own art trademark—i.e., a Mondrian bed, a Matisse bed, a Frank Stella bed, etc. It was a dreamy, funny, and not to say a little nightmarish room for an artist to contemplate. More important, it was also a statement about the artist's sense of her own art history. The heroes of 20th-century art, the giants of modernism, surround and look down on the contemporary, post-modern artist who, in this case, is involved in thinking through a place for herself and her superconscious post-modernist vision of the double world she lives in.

In this world there are no innocent occupations, no processes that aren't finally informed and shaped by mental considerations. We knit with a variety of purposes and goals in mind. We knit to make something, to relax ourselves, and/or to "be busy" with our hands and to further fill up our time. We think to find what we know, what we feel, to find out about our own and others' drives and motives, and, finally, about the meanings of their and our acts. Reichek's art simultaneously thinks and sees, does and analyzes its own doing. It is a world of real objects, two-dimensional expressions of objects and associated visual images. It is a world that speaks about the shapes and patterns of our thoughts and moves. Her superconscious art is, finally, of interest in terms of the dictionary definition of "interest" as being "something that arouses curiosity, fascinates, holds the attention" and is "an excess or bonus beyond what is expected or due." Elaine Reichek's conceptual art is of interest because it gives us more to see and think about.



## ELAINE REICHEK

Reichek's use of colored and metallic threads sewn on geometric figures which are cut from organdy fabric deserves special consideration. By incorporating "handwork" into a complex structural system, the artist validates the use of a traditional craft for a purely pictorial context and assures that method will not be obscured. The artist uses simple systems, often derived from mathematical relationships, to create a complex visual experience. The work is made in series, but does not need to be read serially: the nature of the series is associative rather than progressive. Each series represents the clarity of an idea stated but not necessarily completed. The individual units are uniformly small, and the number of works included in a series range from six to forty-eight.

Materials employed by the artist—mesh, organdy in various shades, colored silk threads, and metallic threads of various weights—are rich with associations. The visual distraction which might have been caused by the sensuousness of the materials and the skillfully handcrafted details is avoided by the logical and austere structures in which the works are placed.

The artist considers the effects of both layering and transparency. Line becomes palpable and illusionism recurs. Her method of working is always in evidence, and no gimmicks are used to achieve the desired effects. Pieces are compressed between two sheets of plexiglass and can be removed from the wall so that both sides can be examined. The work is deliberate, methodical, and painstakingly executed. Accident plays a part only in the fact that these are hand-fabricated, not machine-made, objects. However, the concern for clarity and the formal attention to detail does not obscure the expressive nature of the statement which results.

Elaine Reichek's series can be viewed as personal diaries with a private language of the artist's devising. She makes statements about her life as an artist while simultaneously exploring the infinite varieties

of expression to be achieved by utilizing a small, intimate format.

One series includes twenty pink rectangles which were produced over an extended period of time. The separate pieces allude to Reichek's personal life which combines professional commitments with child-rearing. She has learned to structure her life into distinct units. Reichek finds that she lives "in small time segments, and these small blocks of time add up to a life." Hence her choice of a series of elements, all with a different internal configuration but universally giving evidence of the time and diligence taken in their preparation, is especially appropriate.

But individual units also make reference to a range of artistic antecedents. Some segments are derived from paintings by such artists as Frank Stella and Mark Rothko. Others allude to architectural forms: the modern skyscraper or a simple window. Crosses in medieval manuscripts or the decorative carpet pages of illuminated books are other sources. In addition, these handcrafted pieces recall artifacts created by women of the past. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, women often embroidered carefully designed objects for the court

or for the Church. Reichek's small pieces of fabric stitched with costly threads recall altarcloths, precious wall hangings, or personal linens created for a royal patron.

But her works also demonstrate the artist's interest in sophisticated pictorial systems. Each unit is the solution of a formal problem or a visual puzzle which the artist has invented. Contrasts abound: thick and thin lines are reversed, open and closed areas are alternated, and grid-like patterns of various proportions are considered.

A series of forty-eight units is also included in Reichek's current exhibition. Each segment includes four parallelograms of uniform size which have been cut from gray organdy. By overlapping the basic geometric figures and turning them in various directions, the artist has explored a full range of configurations which can result from the limited number of forms she has chosen. Because the organdy fabric is transparent, the overlapping parallelograms effect a complex visual presentation. Purple thread has been stitched around the outer edges of each completed configuration and serves to emphasize the sense of illusionism.

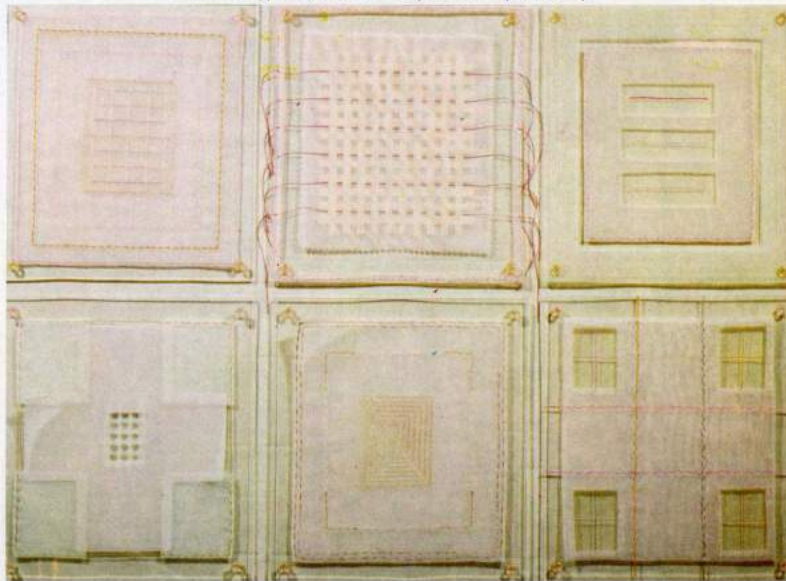
Fans or butterflies are suggested by another series

which Reichek refers to as "factoring pieces." The artist investigates color relationships which result from the overlapping of small pieces of sheer fabric in a variety of hues.

Systemic art has interested many artists in recent years, but Elaine Reichek challenges the impenetrable rigidity and austerity of the serial approach. She fuses her complex pictorial systems with personal experience. The materials chosen and the methods employed introduce strongly expressive qualities and visual excitement to the formal structure. Reichek refers to the small parcels of time which women use for their creative endeavors because they often must combine their work with other responsibilities. Her assertion of this kind of a statement is never trite, however. She prevents her artistic production from an overindulgence in feminist issues by the formal austerity of a series. The artist stimulates our perception of innumerable relationships between geometry and pictorial concepts while at the same time delighting the viewer with personally fabricated objects made of rich materials. (Parsons-Dreyfuss, *January 4-21*)

Joan Marter

Elaine Reichek, Untitled (detail), 1976-77. *Organdy, thread, paper, pencil on plexiglass (6 of 20 panels), each 9 x 10", entire work approx. 22 x 108". Courtesy Parsons-Dreyfuss Gallery.*



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