

Projects 67 : Elaine Reichek : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 4-March 30, 1999

[Beth Handler]

Author

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Elaine Reichek delights in making ideas material—in endowing them with the delicate physicality found in the medium of embroidery. Using this form of handwork, she lays bare a fabric of beliefs and preconceptions about aesthetics, and about culture more generally, by examining the images, texts, and objects that such conceptions have shaped. With an anthropologist's keen awareness of her own relation to her subject, Reichek seeks out stories that she can retell in the art she has mastered. Her materials, of course, are as riddled with meanings as the ideas and forms they dissect, so that Reichek engages in a self-referential inquiry that links disciplines and mediums, cuts across time, and is at once cerebral and corporeal.

In her newest installation, *When This You See...* (1996–99), Reichek, a New York-based artist, turns a critical eye on mediums she has been using as conceptual tools for over a decade. The project consists of about twenty-five samplers that Reichek designed and hand-made. Traditionally this type of embroidery framed truisms, homilies, and lessons within decorative patterns and motifs; Reichek replaces those conventional aphorisms, such as the "When this you see, remember me" that appears in abbreviated form as the installation's title, with an astonishing range of quotations she has collected from art history, mythology, literature, science, and popular culture. The quotations generally refer to some aspect of embroidery, knitting, or weaving, and through Reichek's careful selection, juxtaposition, and choice of visual context, they elucidate associations that have been made with those activities, both consciously and unconsciously, through the ages. The effect is to examine these domestic practices for signs of social critique—for what they reveal about relations between the sexes, and also for what they reveal about art.¹

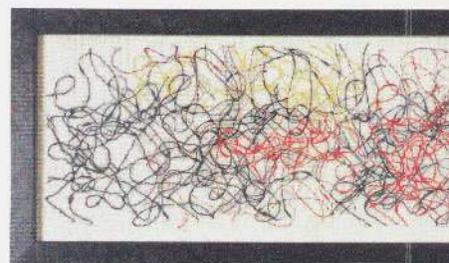
Punctuating the sequence of samplers are other embroideries—some based on the sampler model, others ranging away from it—that refer to modernist or contemporary artists, whom Reichek thereby aligns with the traditions and histories that she takes as her subjects. Thematic and rhythmic currents connect the works, contributing to the overall meaning of the installation in the same way as do the discrete content and style of each piece. While Reichek rephrases her medium for her own purposes, allowing the subject matter of each embroidery to shape its composition, colors, style, texture, and patterns, she also demonstrates her complete command of the medium in her ability to realize its enduring beauty. Although her samplers are often witty, they are not simply ironic, but celebrate the traditions of embroidery from which they are drawn.



Sampler (Starting Over). 1996. Embroidery on linen. 8¼ x 67½" (22.2 x 171.4 cm). Collection the artist. Photo: Thomas Powel

The sampler tradition is rooted in the education of women. From around the mid-seventeenth century through the first part of the nineteenth, young girls learned to sew by making embroideries. They also learned the alphabet and arithmetic by sewing letters and numbers. Pictorial samplers, mending and darning samplers, and occasionally map samplers could also be part of the curriculum. Framed and hung in the home, the sampler testified to the maker's expertise, knowledge, and practical skills.² The truisms that regularly appear in samplers were also meant to instruct, so that both form and content would "signify femininity—docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work."³

The sampler's educational value appeals to Reichek, but she selects an alternative and disruptive content. "I have always seen the artist's choice of materials as a political gesture," Reichek said in 1993. "In my knitted and embroidered pieces, it is



Sampler (Andy Warhol). 1997. Embroidery on linen. the artist. Photo: Thomas Powel

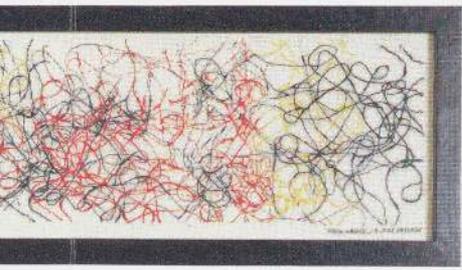
entirely deliberate that for tools historically associated with 'male' art—paint, brush, canvas—I substitute media usually seen as related to 'female' activities. But really my work is about trying to shake up categories like male/female or traditional/nontraditional."⁴ Reichek is not simply trying to move samplers up the ladder of art appreciation; she also—and perhaps more importantly—uses samplers to reveal that histories of art are as much about what they exclude as what they include. Exquisitely rendered and astutely informed by a thorough study of traditional examples, her samplers possess a visual beauty and aesthetic cohesion as worthy of art-historical analysis as any painting or sculpture. The belief that embroidery's connotations of femininity and domesticity segregated it from "high art" also influences Reichek's attention to context. Creating a display environment that is far from the "white cube of modernism,"⁵ she situates her samplers in a carpeted and painted room with molding on the walls, recalling at once the conventional home and the traditional museum space.

Sampler (Starting Over) (1996) combines modernist and classical allusions in one piece. Embroidered on the work's left side are images of three paintings and a statement by Ad Reinhardt (Reichek's teacher when she was an art student); on the right are lines spoken by Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* and a design from a Greek vase depicting women making textiles. Reinhardt's well-known black



mas Powell

paintings look monochromatic on first viewing, but eventually reveal themselves as rigorous geometric abstractions, in tones that Reichek is able to capture in her embroidery. She also defies the dogmatic nonreferentiality of Reinhardt's works by implying a similarity between his and Penelope's processes of artmaking. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, every night unweaves the shroud she is making, for its completion would signal her availability to remarry in Odysseus's absence. In this she parallels Reinhardt, who saw artmaking as "creation, destruction, ... eternal repetition." Wide and narrow, *Sampler (Starting Over)* is friezelike in format, and is framed by a "Greek key" design—a classical pattern of repeating rectilinear forms, which echo the squares in Reinhardt's paintings.



derly on linen. 10 1/4 x 30 3/4" (26 x 78.1 cm). Collection

Sampler (Andy Warhol) (1997), hung below *Sampler (Starting Over)* in the installation, returns Warhol's 1983 *Yarn Painting* to the stuff of cloth. In this context the image recalls Penelope's unraveled

tapestry, but Warhol must have been commenting on Jackson Pollock's allover "drip" abstractions of poured and spilled paint. Reichek's deliberate cross-pollination among different artists and art forms also includes embroidered copies of works by Chuck Close, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. *Sampler (Jasper Johns)* of 1997 is an exacting reproduction of Johns's painting *White Numbers*, of 1958; Reichek pairs it with the lovely gold, white, and green *Sampler (Anon.)* (1998), which copies an early nineteenth-century multiplication sampler—like the Johns work, a table of numbers. If Johns elevated generic stenciled numbers to the status of art, Reichek democratizes that principle one step further.

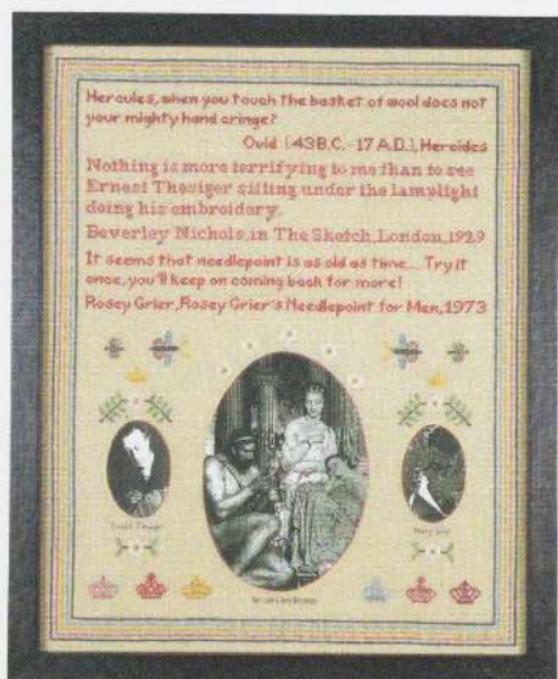
The result is a circuitry of influences, which spreads to encompass The Museum of Modern Art, where Reinhardt, Warhol, Johns, Close, and Pollock have all had major exhibitions in the last ten years. *Sampler (Georges Seurat)* (1998), which reworks Seurat's drawing *Broderie; La Mère de l'artiste* (Embroidery; The artist's mother) (1882–83), is also linked to the Museum, this time to its collection history, as MoMA previously owned the drawing. In these works Reichek produces multimedia implosions with museological implications, while also establishing her own artistic ancestry. She expands her frame of reference still further by quoting such diverse figures as Sigmund Freud, Colette, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Darwin, Alfred Tennyson, A. S. Byatt, Søren Kierkegaard,

Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Brontë, Herman Melville, Mary Queen of Scots, Charles Dickens, and Maurice Saatchi. Looking at *When This You See...*, we find ourselves amid a rich, heterogeneous, and contradictory mélange of historical and fictional subjects.

Sampler (The Ultimate) (1996) addresses the notion of craft in modernism, and specifically at the Bauhaus, the German art and design school of 1919–33. Exercising a multidisciplinary approach to arts education, the Bauhaus integrated art, applied arts, and industrial design. Yet founder Walter Gropius's proclamation "Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts!"⁶ was not without its prejudice. For example, the Bauhaus disliked conventional ornamentation, following the modernist credo that form should follow function; and ornamentation, as is articulated in the four quotations Reichek has chosen for this sampler, was often associated with femininity.⁷ Reichek accordingly contrasts a traditional decorative pattern of urns, flowers, and butterflies (sewn in pink, peach, green, brown, yellow, and blue) with an abstract black-and-white geometric motif based on a weaving by Anni Albers, a student and teacher at the Bauhaus and one of the directors of the school's Weaving Workshop. Albers's avant-garde motif, then, is combined with the conventional design that it supposedly rejects; and this takes place within a square, the preferred format of modernism. Even while celebrating the Bauhaus's advancement of textile design, Reichek contests the hierarchy of talent and aesthetic success it proposed. At the top of the border of Albers's geometric design, an organic green flourish escapes the constraints of Bauhaus theory.

The humorous *Sampler (Hercules)* (1997) further addresses this prejudice against embroidery, this time as it affects men. Reichek uses a time-honored art theme, the story of Hercules and Omphale, recounted in painting by, among others, Annibale Carracci, Peter Paul Rubens, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. To expiate himself of the crime of murder, Hercules must sell himself into slavery. He falls helplessly in love with his new master, Queen Omphale, and the amorous couple engage in a scenario of cross-dressing and role reversal unmatched in classical literature. In fact Hercules becomes a sort of ancient transvestite, and his gender-bending pivots on his adoption of the feminine task of spinning wool.

To tell this story Reichek uses a quotation from a letter penned by Hercules's wife, Deianeira, in Ovid's *Heroides*. She also incorporates a picture of Hercules sitting tenderly at the feet of Omphale with Cupid in attendance, a coy representation of erotic, though unconventional, domestic bliss. Reichek's tableau of men performing the unmasculine continues with a rather derogatory quote by the writer Beverley Nichols about actor Ernest Thesiger's embroidery work. A third quotation comes from Rosey Grier, the former football player for the Los Angeles Rams, who extols the pleasures of needlepoint. Grier's endorsement resuscitates, or perhaps redefines, Hercules's and Thesiger's machismo, and we see photographs of Grier and Thesiger embroidering in similar positions. Reichek's mediation between male and female is furthered by a "feminine" palette of pastel pinks, yellows, and blues, and she chooses "pretty" motifs of flowers, cute butterflies, and, of course, the crowns that stand for "queen."



Sampler (Hercules). 1997. Embroidery and transfer prints on linen. 22 x 17 1/4" (55.9 x 45.1 cm). Collection Melva Bucksbaum, Aspen. Photo: Thomas Powell

Reichek first used fabric and sewing in 1976, with pieces that layered and overlapped swatches of black, pink, or white organza to form complex themes and variations of geometric shapes. These pieces show Reichek taking on both modernist abstraction and the austerity and industrially produced repetitions of Conceptual art and Minimalist sculpture. In 1978 the artist introduced knitting into her work as an associative, critical, and theoretical device with which to juxtapose different codes—the visual, the verbal, the diagrammatic. Works from this period combine a knitted object, its pattern, and a photograph of a building, for example, with a similar shape. Reichek's "post-Conceptual equations"⁸ eventually shifted to ethnography with her *Dwelling* series, begun in 1984, and her *Tierra del Fuego* series, begun in 1986. In these she paired found archival photographs of non-Western dwellings or of South American Indians with their knitted replicas. The artist first introduced samplers in her 1992 exhibition *Native Intelligence*, which addressed the relation of the United States to its own indigenous people.⁹



A Postcolonial Kinderhood. 1994. Mixed-media installation. The Jewish Museum, New York. Museum purchase with funds provided by Melva Bucksbaum, Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Shaffran, Joan Kaplan, the Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Fund, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, Cheryl and Henry Welt, Paula Krulak, Toby Devan Lewis and Henry Buhl, 1997–1995. Photo © The Jewish Museum, New York. Photo: John Parnell

Reichek's 1994 exhibition *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, at The Jewish Museum, New York, addressed her own Americanized Jewish identity by re-creating her childhood bedroom, which had been furnished with Colonial-style furniture. The installation included a slightly scaled-down canopy bed, a washstand, a wrought-iron lamp, a fire screen, braided rugs, and a Yale University rocking chair (Reichek received her B.F.A. from Yale), along with family photographs. On the walls, Reichek hung samplers bearing quotations about Jewish identity collected from her family and friends, and other embroidered pieces such as hand towels stitched not with "His" or "Hers" but with "JEW."¹⁰ This meshing of decor and selfhood within the confines of a museum space is fully realized in *When This You See...*, the first of Reichek's installations to be based entirely on samplers. In the current installation at The Museum of Modern Art, however, the self is located at the revised crossroads of artistic, formal, and textual traditions.

The last samplers Reichek completed for *When This You See...* are *Sampler (White on White)* and *Sampler (Spot Sampler)* (both 1999), which she conceived to be displayed as a pair. Neither piece contains any text. The first of them, comprising patterned horizontal bands of white thread, indulges in the elegant texture and flatness of its material; it is an abstraction as declarative and self-referential as any modernist exploration of a medium and its support. The second, all in black, is both a study of the constant variations possible within a formula (another modernist trope) and a narrative of artistic influences and their modification. In the lower right corner, Adam and Eve are depicted picking fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, perhaps an ironic comment on origins and their legacies. The sampler repeats the tree motif in a number of stylized variations throughout the composition. Crowns often top the forms, as in the center, where Reichek's initials and the date "1999" replace the signature and date in the sampler that the artist copied. In humorously "crowning" herself for the installation's manifold accomplishments, Reichek emphasizes the sentiments expressed by Henry James in the passage she borrows for her *Sampler (A Spider)* (1997): "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue."

Beth Handler
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture

biography

Born and lives in New York

education

B.F.A. Yale University

B.A. Brooklyn College

selected solo exhibitions

- 1996 *Guests of the Nation*. Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia. Traveled
- 1995 *Form Security Administration*. Michael Klein Gallery, New York
- 1994 *At Home in America*. Center for Research in Contemporary Art, University of Texas, Arlington
- Model Homes*. Stichting de Appel, Amsterdam
- A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. The Jewish Museum, New York. Traveled
- 1993 *Sign Language*. Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida
- Home Rule*. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Traveled
- 1992 *Native Intelligence*. Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, New York. Traveled
- Tierra del Fuego*. Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio

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Elaine Reichek: Home Rule. Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, in association with Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1993. Essay by Jeanne Silverthorne. Exhibition catalogue.

Elaine Reichek: Model Homes. Amsterdam: Stichting de Appel, 1994. Text by Homi K. Bhabha. Exhibition brochure.

Elaine Reichek: Native Intelligence. New York: Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, 1992. Essays by Jimmie Durham and Thomas McEvilley. Exhibition catalogue.

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Slesin, Suzanne. "Perils of a Nice Jewish Girl in a Colonial Bedroom." *The New York Times*, February 17, 1994, pp. C1, C6.

Whittemore, Emily. "A Postcolonial Kinderhood: An Installation by Elaine Reichek." New York: The Jewish Museum, 1994. Exhibition brochure.

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notes

1. See Lisa Graziose Corrin, "Hanging by a Thread," *Loose Threads*, exhibition catalogue (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1998), pp. 8-20.
2. See Mary Jaene Edmonds, *Samplers & Samplermakers: An American Schoolgirl Art 1700-1850*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Rizzoli, and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 10-23, and Betty Ring, *American Needlework Treasures: Samplers and Silk Embroideries from the Collection of Betty Ring* (New York: E. P. Dutton, in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1987), pp. vi-3.
3. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 11.
4. Reichek, quoted in Reichek and Laura Engel, "Commentary: Mother/Daughter Dresses," *Fiberarts* 20, no. 3 (November-December 1993): 9.
5. Reichek, quoted in Beth Handler, "Projects 67: Elaine Reichek," *MoMA* 2, no. 3 (March/April 1999): 33.
6. Walter Gropius, "Manifesto of the Bauhaus," April 1919. Reprinted in Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 202.
7. My discussion of gender, weaving, and the Bauhaus relies on Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993). My thanks to Laura Galvanek for bringing this book to my attention.
8. Kim Levin, "Art: Hanging Ten," *The Village Voice*, March 12, 1985, p. 76.
9. See *Elaine Reichek: Native Intelligence*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, 1992). Essays by Jimmie Durham and Thomas McEvilley.
10. See Emily Whittemore, "A Postcolonial Kinderhood: An Installation by Elaine Reichek," exhibition brochure (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1994).

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Cover: *Sampler (The Ultimate)*. 1996. Embroidery on linen. 21¼ x 21¼" (54 x 54 cm). Collection Melva Bucksbaum, Aspen. Photo: Thomas Powell