

There is no match for a skillful hand

Typical themes and trends of contemporary embroidery art

DLA thesis

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Theses

„There is no match for a skillful hand” – I borrowed the title of the thesis from ethnographer Ákos Kovács's collection of inscriptions on embroidered wallhangings.¹ A phrase that may seem ridiculous at first glance actually raises interesting questions about embroidery. Does the skillfully executed embroidery have the unique signature of the artist? After all, one of the most damning stereotypes surrounding the technique is the view that anyone can learn embroidery, from amateurs to artists.² And if the text of the wallhanging praises the virtues of a woman who excels in needlework, does the recognition only refer to the competences of a good housewife, or does it extol the creative abilities of the creator? Moreover: who appreciates this unparalleled skill and in what capacity? I covered such and similar questions in my writing, but not with the aim of proving that embroidery really is a potential medium of fine art (because few people dispute that today). My main aim was to summarize the typical themes and trends of contemporary art related to embroidery.

In chapter one, I reviewed the decisive historical processes from the point of view of textile art starting from the twentieth century, paying particular attention to the aspirations of the fiber art movement.³ In terms of textile-based works, I primarily examined how and when the sharp line between applied art and fine art was blurred, and how the products of textile art ended up in the representative spaces of high art – museums and galleries. Although my thesis specifically focuses

¹ KOVÁCS Ákos (szerk.): *Feliratos falvédők*, Budapest, Corvina Kiadó, 1987.

² PARKER, Rozsika: *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and The Making of The Feminine*. London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010.

³ PORTER, Jenelle: *Sympathetic Medium*. In: PHAIDON EDITORS: *Vitamin T: Threads and Textiles in Contemporary Art*. New York, Phaidon Press, 2019. 10-17. o.

on embroidered pieces, in this chapter I still considered important writing about textile art as a whole, since the fate of textile-based mediums is closely intertwined.

I dedicated chapter two to those embroideries that are dealing with female gender roles. Textile art, including embroidery, is strongly linked to the concept of women's work.⁴ Artists working in a feminist perspective often choose this technique as a symbol that reflects on the social status of women. These works are usually about the tasks assigned to women, which remain hidden within the four walls of the home, and examine the social position of women on a reflective level, such as housework, motherhood, and the idealized image of women and wives. Dividing the chapter into further units, I analyzed the legacy of wall hangings with inscriptions, embroideries organized around the concept of invisible work, and confessional works dealing with the biological processes and sexuality of the female body through the work of contemporary artists.

In chapter three, I examined the role played by an inherently difficult, manual activity in today's digitalized reality.⁵ Through the work of four contemporary visual artists I tried to prove that embroidery can talk about the differences between online and offline reality. For all of them, embroidery is a means of processing nostalgia or, as the case may be, trauma, and the key issue in this process is the idealized memory of a childhood lived – mainly – offline.

In the fourth and last chapter, I examined the time devoted to embroidery through the work of four visual artists. I was curious to know why do they choose this particularly slow, time-consuming technique against the time- and performance pressure of nowadays society⁶ Embroidery is a repetitive, monotonous process, but for many it provides a meditative experience. This is the state of mind that also gives opportunity for quiet contemplation and observation of the small, fleeting moments of life. The common theme of artists who approach embroidery as a matter of time is the observation of everyday phenomena, thinking about transience and eternity, and recording the imprint of time.

The categories set up in the thesis – works dealing with femininity, offline presence and temporality – cannot of course be sharply separated from one another. Within a single art piece, several themes can be summed up, and the artists do not approach the technique exclusively from a single point of view. However, for the sake of a logical structure, I tried to create easily separable thematic units

⁴ PARKER: *id. mű*

⁵ GULD Ádám: *A Z generáció médiahasználat. Jelenségek, hatások, kockázatok*. Budapest, Libri Könyvkiadó, 2022.

⁶ BYUNG-CHUL Han: *A kiegészítés társadalma*. (ford. MIKLÓDY Dóra, SIMON-SZABÓ Ágnes), Budapest, Typotex, 2019.

from the analyzed works, and I also examined the artists based on their most characteristic creative attitude.

The intention of my dissertation is to present artists who have either influenced me or who are my contemporaries and who embroider from a similar motivation. Among them, Hajnal Kazai is the youngest, being a representative of Generation Z, and – an important aspect for my thesis - she has personal experience of offline life from her childhood. In ten years' time, however, the oldest members of Generation Alpha will be 23 – the earliest age at which an arts degree can be obtained. What will a fully analogue, time-consuming technology mean for those who have lived in the internet world from birth? Will they be able to identify with this medium and will it have added meaning for them? Will they even want to engage with the relationship between digital and manual processes? How much will embroidery be linked to traditional gender roles? Only time can answer these questions, but I believe that whatever happens, the relationship of future generations to the digital will determine the survival and development of embroidery.

Thesis 1: The technique of embroidery is particularly well suited to the representation of women's social status and the tabooed biological processes of the female body

The period of the sixties and seventies was a decisive one in the history of embroidery, due to the fibre art movement on the one hand and the emergence of second-wave feminism on the other. Artists working in the context of feminist activism often explored themes of women's roles. They preferred textile media, which are strongly linked to the domestic sphere in terms of their materials.

The ways of expressing femininity and exploring women's position in society remains an important theme in art, and still has a strong link with textiles. Embroidered works can speak to the status of women in many different ways: in their traditional uses, they can be status symbols of the expectations of the majority society towards women, or representations of the perfect home. At the same time, embroidery can be used explicitly to question and critique traditional female roles. A significant amount of contemporary embroidery addresses this dichotomy in some form. In terms of their subject matter, they are generally about the invisible work done by women, the social status of women, and the breaking down of taboos surrounding sexuality. In the second chapter, I have presented the work of contemporary visual artists who associate embroidery with themes related to womanhood. Although I have explored the theme from several angles, in each case I have

essentially sought to answer the question of why embroidery has been confined for so long within the four walls of the home, what social expectations have been attached to it, and how, from the twentieth century onwards, it has become a means of self-expression for women reflecting on their own destinies.

In the context of embroideries that deal with women's work, I first wrote about how the legacy of wall hangings with inscriptions proclaiming the classical ideal of women inspires today's artists - Ágnes Eszter Szabó, Zsófi Pittman and Andrea Dezső - who are rethinking the genre primarily from a satirical perspective. Their works are playful, provocative and easy to take in, challenging the stereotypical view that embroidery has regressed in the 20th century into a decorative technique that mimics folk art but lacks its symbolic content.

I then examined the works of contemporary artists - Judit Lilla Molnár, Eliza Bennett, Eszter Ágnes Szabó - who deal with the issue of invisible work. For them, embroidery is a conceptual expression of women's social and economic dignity, since for centuries needlework has been primarily part of domestic work.

Finally, I analysed the potential for representing the female body through embroidery. Traditional needlework is associated with the image of modesty and virginity, but if we look at the typical themes and trends in contemporary embroidery, there is a visible group of works that deal with sexuality and physicality. Some of these works are raw and taboo, but there is also a more lyrical strand, in which the biological processes of the female body take centre stage. In this context, I have presented three artists - Vlasta Žáková, Ana Teresa Barboza, Willemien de Villiers - who explore inherently taboo themes of womanhood. Žáková focuses on unbridled partying, sexuality and stories of pregnancy and loss, while de Villiers tells stories of infertility and domestic violence, and Barboza's self-mortifying images reveal hidden bodily processes.

Thesis 2: Embroidered artwork can be a tool for critical thinking about the automated world

Analogue, manual activities can help people to step out of the digital space for a while and experience a process in real time, through actual physical contact - for example, the experience of creating. In this chapter I have written about artists who use embroidery in some form as a means of thinking critically about the automated world. Many of them clash the development of digital imaging, the expansion of the range of graphic possibilities, with the inherently 'clumsy', 'childish' nature of embroidery. A good example of this is the juxtaposition of cross-stitch embroidery with

pixel graphics, where a pixel can be mapped one-to-one to a photograph by matching a stitch to a pixel. Another aspect of the study is that while digital imaging does not directly provide a tangible experience, embroidery can affect multiple senses - sight, touch - in combination.

In my research, I found that working with the differences between the analogue and digital worlds through embroidery is a popular theme among Generation X, Y and Z artists. Following this line of thought, I thought it would be interesting to explore from a media research perspective the relationship between generational life experiences of media use and contemporary embroidery. Is there any scientific support for the hypothesis that artists who capture the visuality of the digital world through analogue processes, which is becoming increasingly popular in contemporary embroidery, are working through generational issues?

While there are no consensus truths about the topic, certain patterns can be observed, for example, artists' choice of subject is often linked to some defining life experience, including the emergence of an electronic mass medium. The individuals in this age group are collectively referred to as the media generation. In the third chapter, I introduce four of these artists who have in common that they process their relationship to the digital world through embroidery using analogue techniques. Diane Meyer stitches on photographs, Peter Frederiksen and Eszter Metzger base their embroideries on existing cartoons, and Hajnal Kazai goes beyond cartoon references to incorporate iconic children's games of the 1990s into her work. They all explore the past but, due to their age, they have a different approach to memory. In their paintings, the dissonance between the digital world of stimuli and the slow nature of the handicraft is evident, and they also convey generational dilemmas.

Diane Meyer is a Generation X artist working with the historical and personal memory represented by the Berlin Wall and, in a broader context, with the memory of the pre-digital revolution. In Meyer's work, analogue embroidery symbolises the transition between past and present, the changes in human life, and serves as a memento of moments that have passed. Given her age, Meyer is a 'digital immigrant'⁷, and her ability to use digital media is not innate, as evidenced by the very clear distinction between digital and manual image-making tools. She tries to process the changes in the world as an objective observer, but she is still personally affected and her images radiate a melancholic nostalgia. In her work, the offline world appears as an almost inaccessible island, which is suspected to be a victim of oblivion - and she is one of the last who can still keep this bygone age alive with their memory.

⁷ GULD: *id. mű*, 22.o.

Peter Frederiksen and Eszter Metzinger are Generation X artists, both of whom are interested in reworking memories of television, specifically the cartoons they consumed as children. In neither of their works is there a clear dividing line between past and present. The media stimuli - violent fairy tales, frightening cartoon characters - that both artists experienced as very young children have become an integral part of their vision and have organically shaped their visual language.

For Generation Z artist Hajnal Kazai, embroidery is a return to naturalness, a 'rebellion' against the digital world. Of the artists presented, she is perhaps the one with the most radical approach to the medium. Clearly socialized after the rise of the internet, she has a conscious desire to move away from automation in her creative practice - for example, she does not use a sewing machine to stitch her work, she works with recycled textiles, and she sees old pieces of fabric as valuable. Just like Peter Frederiksen and Eszter Metzinger, Hajnal Kazai does not sharply separate the past from the present. Her embroidered cartoon heroines suffer from loneliness, depression and eating disorders. By putting into the mouths of idealized female figures such far-reaching statements as 'I am bulimic', Hajnal also passes judgement on the body-image-destroying and alienating dangers of the media.

Thesis 3: The embroidered artwork can also be interpreted as a critique of a meritocratic society

Embroidery may seem like a rather unnecessary, time-wasting activity in today's heightened performance pressures. By 2023, virtually any hand-embroidered motif could be produced by machine, without the need for human labour. The man of the twenty-first century is conditioned to spend their active hours in profitable activities and to create something useful. Moreover, according to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han⁸, we do not act in this way today because of external pressure, but because of internal motivation, and unfortunately the mental state of contemporary society is suffering greatly from a constant profit- and recognition-oriented attitude.

In my research, I found it particularly interesting to investigate how embroidery artists perceive the time-consuming nature of the technique, and whether there is any added value for them in this type of work. After reading a number of interviews, ars poetica and exhibition reviews, I found that the artists who choose embroidery, even for a single project, mostly consider the long-term process to be important. The more monotonous and time-consuming a technique is, the more it

⁸ BYUNG-CHUL: *id. mű*, 26–27.o.

tests the practitioner, but it also provides a slow-down and reflection time for the individual who is removed from the constant stimuli. Many artists claim that embroidery puts them in a relaxed, concentrated state of mind, the monotonous rhythm of repetitive stitches lulling them into complete tranquility as they work. However, it is this monotonous process of shaping that can create a sense of boredom. According to Byung-Chul Han, this is a positive thing, since it is a state of mind that is a prerequisite for the creator to immerse their whole being in the object of observation.

In the context of embroidery, the question of temporality is worth exploring from the point of view of in-depth observation, a repetitive, almost mantra-like work process. If we consider art as a profession, it is assumed that the artist is a participant in economic processes and that their creative activity provides them with a livelihood. Some artists consider the market value of embroidery as a function of the time spent on sewing, and wonder whether the time invested can be recouped in an institutional system where the art market encourages artists to produce continuously, and where the price of the artwork is often determined by the technique used and the factor price calculated on the basis of size.⁹

In this sense, embroidery as a slow, time-consuming, consciously undertaken artistic act can be the key to liberation from the soulless, profit-driven merry-go-round. Of course, this requires that the artist surrenders completely to the creative process, and that they perceive embroidery as a ritual activity, experiencing it in a concentrative state of mind. Embroidery only becomes a critique of the exploitative capitalist work ethic when the artist (or amateur) deliberately detaches the activity from the notion of 'utility' and instead focuses on the contemplative, calm and immersive process of experiencing it in the midst of stitches. This state of consciousness is considered more valuable than the material goods that embroidery can potentially bring, such as the proceeds from the sale of needlework, otherwise it would be a matter of rapid, efficient production.

In chapter four, I introduced artists who strive to represent time in some form, and who consider embroidery as the appropriate method of expressing that. While Emese Benczúr's embroidered inscriptions reflect on the time invested in the work at the level of words, Mariann Imre and Richard McVetis are more concerned with the invisible imprints of time. In the case of all three artists, the time invested in stitches is of particular importance and can be interpreted as tangible evidence of the work being done. They are all driven by the desire to make the passing of time visible, to capture fleeting moments.

⁹ JANKÓ Judit: „Az emberek igenis akarnak kortársat vásárolni. Beszélgetés Sáfár Zoltánnal” *ÚjMűvészet* 2019/10. 45.o.

Today, all media compete for human attention, so it's not easy to resist the myriad temptations and instead concentrate on the small manifestations of existence, immersed in the slow, monotonous process of embroidery. The phenomenon has a name: time pressure. By this we mean, precisely, 'the constant tension between the unlimited amount of exciting content available and the finite amount of time available for leisure and media consumption.'¹⁰ Artists who devote a significant amount of their time to the utterly ordinary are, wittingly or unwittingly, making a statement of faith against the rush of the twenty-first century.

¹⁰ GULD: *id. mű*, 47. o

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