Stitching as Knowing

Mapping Nebraska with Textiles and Thread

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I’m mapping Nebraska . . .
making a stitched and digitally imaged cartography of the state—physical, social, cultural, psychological—where I live . . . .
I stitch, embroider, trace, stencil, screen, transfer, button, bind and connect. I piece and layer and quilt . . .
“Already been here and gone. Just the tops of the grass bending.”

—Michael Hannon
working with images and data, using both the digital (pixels and code) . . .
as well as the “digital”— the work of the hand . . .
archiving what is visible and what is hidden
Making a fabric... Nebraska
You're on earth. There's no cure for that.

—Samuel Beckett

... locating myself, and the viewer
grounding myself, and the viewer
Mapping is a fundamental way of converting personal knowledge to transmittable knowledge*

—Arthur Howard Robinson

*(But I’m also converting transmittable knowledge to shared knowledge . . . .)*

*Map of the Columbia River and Pacific Coast, showing tribes, measurements of streams, and elevations. From Volume 8, Atlas, of the Original Journals of Lewis and Clark*
Stitching, like mapping, is also a fundamental way of knowing but one which is situated internally, with reference to the body . . .

cloth  pliable, woven, felted fabric for covering, concealing, decorating, protecting

stitch  a loop of thread from a single pass of the needle for making, mending, joining, securing

embroider  decorate with pattern or design add invented details
Ground Cloth
Louisville, Section 052 (detail)

Ground Cloth
Merritt Dam, Section 018 (back)

Drawing is a patient search (Le Corbusier)
Stitching is a tactile exploration (Elizabeth Ingraham)
there is a ritual to repetition, which provides an antidote to isolation and despair, which gives scope to fantasy and frees the mind (Lucy Lippard)
My project began in naïveté and innocence.

I was enthralled with “the extraordinary beauty of abstract terrestrial science . . .”

I reasoned that I were going to look at topographic maps, why not look at Nebraska?

Imagine my surprise when I discovered you get Kansas for free . . . .

**Five levels of map detail**—from two National Geographic Atlas maps to a USGS 1:24,000 scale (7.5’) seamless topographic map—the most detailed outdoor recreation maps available!

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Looking at these topo maps, I quickly became frustrated. I didn’t know where I was . . .
My understanding of Nebraska was as uninformed and incomplete as that of someone living in Manhattan. Maybe more so . . . .
Being dissatisfied is a great start, because by being dissatisfied you can elbow your way into a space where everything can come from an original place right from the start.

—Chris Wink, Blue Man Group

*and ashamed of my ignorance and saddened by my lack of connection to the state where I live . . .
I needed to see ALL of the towns in Nebraska

I needed a map larger than any I could buy

I decided to draw my own . . . .
I divided Nebraska into an eccentric grid of 95 sections, 33 miles square, numbered right to left, then left to right ("boustrophedon" or "as the oxen ploughs")—a system also used by the US Survey.
For more than two years, I drew Nebraska. I drew every city, every town, every railroad, every river, every lake and every creek, to scale (1” = 2.75 mi) on 12” squares of Tyvek. (Trapezoidal sections reflect the curvature of the earth)
How I started and how I finished.
Tyvek is a non woven fabric and graphite has the same Greek root—graphein or “to write”—as the word “cartography” . . . .
Details of the Locator Map with the Tyvek squares stitched together and then topstitched. Section numbers are blind stamped and embroidered in Braille and a stamped graphic marks the location of the quilted relief squares.
Finally I am ready to stitch . . .
From topo software to printed map to traced contours to stitched square . . .
Since I wanted the viewer to see the back . . . I made the back different with stenciled fragments of a graphic of my memory of Nebraska grasses.
. . . combining masculine systems of mapping with feminine systems of stitching . . .
A life I didn’t choose chose me. Even my tools are the wrong ones for what I have to do.

—Adrienne Rich

We must use what we have to invent what we desire.

—Adrienne Rich

. . . . breaking all the rules . . .

Stitching tests
The blue lakes and rivers become white on the reverse, forming ghost lakes and ghost rivers, which combine with the stenciled “ghost grasses” in unpredictable ways.
Seven Terrain Squares with the Locator Map
I wanted to contrast the abstract knowledge I was getting from drawing the map with the experience of being on the ground, in that landscape.
I began my “Surveys” or on-the-ground documentation.

What would I see, feel, hear? What would I understand that I couldn’t know from the map?
I use a dashboard-mounted Flip video camera to film the roads as I drive. While left running, it filmed me as I stopped to photograph the Little Nemaha River south of Unadilla on Country Road 20.
I discovered the experience is very different on the ground. Although these contours seem familiar . . .
I discovered there’s always another road . . . .
Even when the road begins to disappear . . . .
I discovered that I couldn’t stitch these contours before I had traveled over them
These travels in turn inform the fourth component of my project, mixed media “Ground Cloths”
responding to a specific location, in this case, the confluence of the Missouri and Niobrara Rivers...
and my memory of the moonlight on the water . . .
Laminated paper on voile

or the sound of melting ice flows on the Platte . . . .
If stitching is knowing, what have I learned, mapping Nebraska?
I’ve learned that we could look at the topo map for Section 35 and the back of the embroidered square from section 35 . . .
And we could look at the drawing of Section 35 and I can remember my confusion, wondering how there could be so many lakes? What does this look like on the ground?
But my mapping, my stitching, my drawing record just a fraction of my experience on the ground, in that landscape . . . .
I’ve learned it’s hard to come to terms with the scale of maps

(When the scale is small, you can see a big area and you can orient yourself but can’t see the details. When the scale is large you can see the details but you don’t know where you are because you can’t see the context)
2 inches on the Locator Map is 5.5 *miles*

2 inches on the quilted Terrain Square is 1192 *feet*

or about 3/32 of an inch on the drawn Locator Map
I learned that driving through Section 35 is like driving through an ocean of grass...
I realized that my maps are translations . . . .

(I can’t have absolute accuracy or completeness)
but I can aim for fidelity, for truthfulness . . . .
...to convey something of how it feels to journey over and through rolling hills and waving grasses.
Terrain Square, Section 019, front and back (detail)
I have drawn and stitched and driven across Nebraska, from Toadstool to Gavins Point.
Pelican Point Section 026

From Pelican Point to Hay Springs . . . .

Hay Spring 009

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I’ve learned that the corn is never far away . . . .
... even in Arcadia, which has its own sorrows ...
I’ve learned that attention is a scarce resource . . . .
I’ve learned that technology is not just computers. Technology (téchnē + logía) is also art, craft, skill and study.
We are losing out ability to imagine and that is the quickest way to lose sight of the truth. (Paul Bowles)

I’ve learned that that imagination is also a technology . . .
that lines on a map can’t describe—or contain—the beauty of the landscape
which is often subtle, and revealed over a long time and across great distances
Much the way a line of stitching travels across cloth and gradually accumulates . . .
I learned I don’t want to just make objects.

(I want to make understanding.)
Vision begins to happen in such a life as if a woman quietly walked away from the argument and jargon in a room and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps . . . .

—Adrienne Rich, “Transcendental Etude”
There are very few human beings who receive the truth complete and staggering, by instant illumination.

Most of us acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a mosaic.

—Anaïs Nin

(layer by layer, seam by seam button by button, stitch by stitch . . . . )
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