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Elizabeth Ingraham
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, eingraham2@unl.edu

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MAPPING TEXTILE SPACE: STITCHED AND WOVEN TERRAINS

ELIZABETH INGRAHAM
eingraham2@unl.edu
http://mappingnebraska.posterous.com

"Repetition can be a guard against vulnerability; a bullet-proof vest of closely knit activity can be woven against fate." Lucy Lippard

I am looking at artists who stitch and weave and who are making what I regard as maps, and I'm stitching and weaving words and images together, in an attempt to see, understand and celebrate some aspects of their work. I am looking at some contemporary artists—makers—from the perspective of a maker, at some contemporary female artists from the perspective of a woman, and my interest comes from my passionate response to their work.

I am connecting together two types of ground, the material ground of cloth and the physical and psychological ground of a terrain, exterior or interior. And I'm connecting together two types of action: the physical action of stitching, weaving, embroidering, and the mental action of mapping, locating, communicating, knowing and understanding. (Fig. 1)

Figure 1. *Some terms. Karen Ruane embroidery (detail) (karenruane.blogspot.com)*

Stitching is intimate and immediate, haptic and tactile, and always related to the body, if only the body of the one who stitches. And stitching is epistemological—about what we know and how we can know and the limits of what we can know. Stitching can be inquiry, investigation, meditation, translation, commentary. It is this stitching-as-knowing and stitching-as-inquiry that relates it to mapping.

My interest in the multiple functions of stitching began with my re-reading an essay by the critic Lucy Lippard about the sculptor Eva Hesse, who subverted minimalism with a feminist twist and who chose to work with flexible and non-permanent materials like rubber, latex and string—textile materials. Lippard reflects on Hesse's fascination with repetition, not just the repetition of repeated forms but the repetition of binding, wrapping and layering. Lippard notes that Hesse's process makes the viewer relive the intensity of the making in a way that's different from the more abstract way most men use process.

Lippard says: "Women are always derogatorily associated with crafts, and have been conditioned towards such chores as tying, sewing, knotting, wrapping, binding, knitting, and so on. Hesse's art transcends the cliché of 'detail as women's work' while at the same time incorporating these notions of ritual as antidote to isolation and despair . . . . that ritual which allows scope to fantasy, compulsive use of the body accompanied by a freeing of

the mind." Lippard argues that Penelope's weaving was a positive action, not a negative one: "The act itself can be known, safe, but the result can be highly unexpected. Repetition can be a guard against vulnerability; a bullet-proof vest of closely knit activity can be woven against fate." (Lippard 209) (Fig. 2)

Figure 2. *Penelope and Telemachus (www.clipart.com)*

Stitching—this ritualistic, repetitive and intense activity—thus creates both space—the space between maker and object, an intimate, cerebral space which gives scope to fantasy and frees the mind— and relationship—either inviting the viewer to engage, or keeping the viewer at a distance.

"Mapping is a fundamental way of converting personal knowledge to transmittable knowledge." Arthur Howard Robinson, The Nature of Maps

My consideration of the various functions of stitching began to connect with my reading and thinking about maps and mapping because I had begun to make a map of my own. I began to think about how powerful maps are for encoding personal knowledge—and how they are like art this way. We long for meaning, and maps tantalize us with this promise. We persist in believing they can be deciphered, if only we have the key. (Fig. 3)

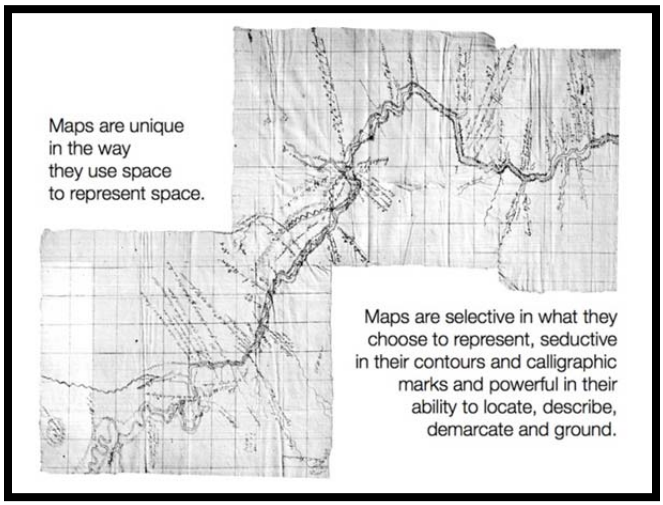

Figure 3. *Lewis and Clark, Sketch of the Missouri from Fort Mandan to the Rocky Mountains (Thwaites, Atlas, List of Maps 14 Part II).*

I began to see mapping as the confluence of mark making, repetitive activity, space, relationship and meaning:

- Maps are unique in the way they use space to represent space. (Robinson 67)
- Maps are alluring, both promising and withholding information. They are seductive in their contours and calligraphic marks and selective in what they choose to represent.
- Maps are powerful, able to locate, describe, demarcate and ground.
- Maps are participatory. They are about relation and counter isolation and they require both a maker and a reader.
- Finally, mapping is a fundamental analogy about knowing, organizing and presenting which is itself never fully analyzed.

While we have experiences *on* the ground we don't really know the *space*—we don't know its relationship to other spaces and we can't really communicate about that space—until it's been mapped. Maps often depict a view that hasn't actually been seen, as shown by the now familiar aerial view. Google Earth and airplanes have made these aerial views familiar to us, but we still perceive things this through this view that we can't know on the ground. (Fig 4)

Figure 4. *Cornhusker Mariott and Pioneer Park, Lincoln, Nebraska. GoogleEarth.*

Four Artists Who Map by Stitching

Linda Gass is a computer scientist turned textile artist who lives in California and whose works for the last sixteen years are informed by site, by maps, by history and by her own environmental concerns. She uses painted and resisted silk with machine quilting to make compellingly beautiful and yet unnatural landscapes which have been affected by human activity in some (negative) way (a subject matter which she shares with the photographer David Maisel).

Gass' quilt, *After the Gold Rush* (Fig.5), is described by her as follows: "The landscape is I-5, a major transportation artery, crossing the California Aqueduct, the man-made river that moves water from north to south and irrigates farm fields in what once was a desert. This is the second mining of California and hence the name of the quilt." (http://www.lindagass.com/GoldRush.html)

Gass's stitching is how she expresses her environmental activism. She's showing the human marks on the land that affect water resources—impacting water quality and water scarcity—and so her textured aerial landscapes

are also maps of human activity. What look like farm fields on her quilt, *Fields of Salt*, are in reality industrial salt ponds which use to be wetlands near San Francisco Bay. (Fig. 6)

Figure 5, left. *Linda Gass, After the Gold Rush, 26" x 21" (www.lindagass.com).*
Figure 6, right. *Linda Gass, Fields of Salt, 29.5" x 29.5" (www.lindagass.com).*

Gass' work is powerful in its beauty, its accessibility and its subversive strategy, using the decorative to speak about the toxic. Gass chooses to work with inviting silk surfaces and saturated colors even when describing environmental degradation. "I deliberately work in textiles with the intention to reach as many people as possible with the issues expressed in my work," she says. "Textiles are an unintimidating medium; people feel a familiarity and comfort with fabric since it plays such an integral and basic part in our lives." (Linda Gass: Artist Statement, http://www.lindagass.com/ArtistStatement.html)

Jessica Rankin grew up in Australia but moved to New York City in 1989. Educated at Rutgers, she's exhibited widely since her first solo show in 2004. She does hand embroidery on cotton organdy at a large scale—four feet and larger—using a variety of threads. Her work, *Nocturne*, is seven feet square. (Fig. 7)

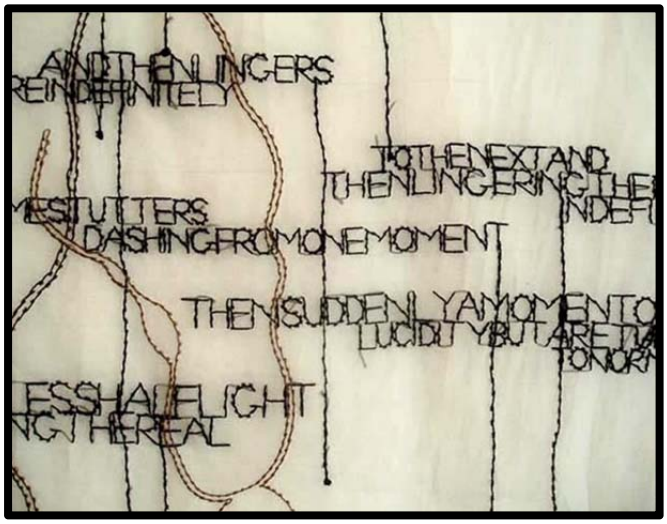

Figure 7, left. *Jessica Rankin, Nocturne, 84" x 84"(ps1.org/exhibitions/view/103).*
Figure 8, right. *Jessica Rankin, Coda, 84" x 48" (detail) (www.studiovisit.net/SV.Rankin.pdf).*

Rankin's structures hang a few inches from the wall, so that the embroidered shapes, lines and text are echoed in cast shadows, referencing memory and further adding to the delicacy and dreamlike quality of her work and making us conscious of the space behind the embroidery as well as the space we're creating by viewing the work. She's using the decorative qualities of embroidery, not in a regular pattern but in fragments of patterns, much the way a drawer would work on paper.

Rankin's maps are less representational and less illustrative than Gass's maps. Rankin starts with references to the landscape—land forms, plant forms, the constellations of the night sky—and then begins to explore an interior landscape, with dreams and thoughts and associations. She incorporates information (data) from a wide variety of sources—text, topographic outlines, thermodynamic charts, astronomical plans and genetic diagrams—so that her constructions become a kind of mind map. She is giving form to thought but in a way that's grounded by her observations of the natural world.

The use of text makes explicit that Rankin is describing an interior landscape. In *Coda* (Fig 8), the text is fragmented and obscured by its lack of spacing, becoming glimpses of fleeting thoughts:

ANDTHENLINGERS
THEREINDEFINITELY
TOTHENEXTAND

Linda Gass's works are fairly small scale yet substantial. Rankin's are large scale and more delicate. We can't decipher everything in Rankin's maps but we can see the references to the landscape and to the natural world and we can start to decode the fragments of information. After I'd looked at Rankin's work it didn't come as a surprise to me to discover that she was raised in Australia and that she acknowledges the pervasive influence of Australian aboriginal art (another kind of map) on her work.

Tilleke Schwarz is a Dutch artist in her sixties who's been working professionally since 1990, although she began stitching as a little girl. Her embroideries on linen have an incredible diversity and vitality in their marks and can be mistaken at first glance for works on paper.

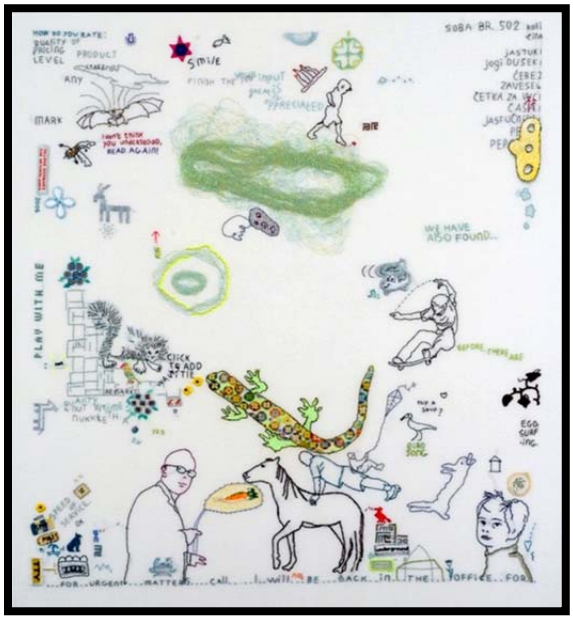

Figure 9. *Tilleke Schwarz, On Colour, 29.5" x 28" (www.tillekeschwarz.com).*
Figure 10. *Tilleke Schwarz, Play With Me, 29" x 26.5" (www.tillekeschwarz.com).*

Like Rankin, Schwarz also incorporates text, but Schwarz uses fragments from daily life and popular culture. Schwarz has a darkly humorous and ironic point of view, which she ascribes to her Jewish heritage and which she describes as “a mixture of a laugh and a tear.”

On Colour (Fig. 9), typical of Schwarz’ work, is a map which reveals the background noise of her mind (like the background noise of the universe). Some of the symbols are intelligible and some are enigmatic but we can delight in the color, the line, the marks, the phrases and the characters (there’s often a cat). She, and we, meander through an intuitive and personal landscape, which combines decorative stitching with vaguely ominous warnings and evidence of the failures of technology. She hand embroiders, but often adds a machine stitched label, “Tilleke Schwarz, the Netherlands.”

In *Play With Me (*Fig 10), Schwarz combines the conventions of samplers and traditional embroidery with a postmodern narrative in a lively and eccentric way. There’s a “ground” line in the work at the bottom which helps establish this personal landscape space, but other motifs appear with a dreamlike scale and a surrealistic perspective. Scribbles and contemporary jargon collide with motifs that could have been stitched centuries ago, reminding us of the long history of embroidery. The mass of tangled lines (expressed by couched threads) reflects the sort of mental muddles of dead end thought we’re all prone to.

There’s a more intimate textile space in Schwarz’ work than in Rankin’s work. Rankin’s work emphasizes the space—the distance—between the work and the wall and the space between the viewer and the object; Schwarz’ work, much smaller in scale, creates a more intimate, more intense, and more empathetic space between the work and the viewer.

Ismini Samanidou is a young artist from the UK who’s had considerable critical success the last two years, including representing Great Britain in the 13th Tapestry Triennial in Poland. Her woven work reflects both her training in mathematics and her Greek heritage.

Figure 11. *Ismini Samanidou, Timeline, 9.8’ x 53’. Dovecott Installation (www.flickr.com/photos/isminisamanidou).*
Figure 12. *Ismini Samanidou, Timeline, 9.8’ x 53’. Jerwood Installation (www.flickr.com/photos/isminisamanidou).*

In her installation work, *Timeline*, Samanidou is using textile space to map the history of a particular space or place, the Jerwood Space in London, which began as a Victorian school and in its current incarnation is a contemporary arts center. Samanidou’s work, like Linda Gass’s work, is more pictorial, although the images are fragmented. (Fig. 11)

Samanidou is mapping the history of an historic architectural space by creating a new architectural space in this large scale piece—which is almost 10 feet high and 53 feet long, one of the longest, if not the longest, continuously woven textile pieces ever exhibited. Her work extends the textile space by recording a history in time and creating a physical environment that can be entered and explored. Like Jessica Rankin, Samanidou's mapping incorporates disparate sources of information: ancient maps of the site, patterns of its bricks, text from its archives, and dancing figures alluding to the building's current use. (Fig. 12)

This is a cerebral work but it's also a sensuous one, with its rich textures and mysterious spaces which invite close readings. Samanidou uses the physical connections of weaving to connect herself, and us, to the history of the site. In the process, *Timeline* reflects what all of this work has to do with maps, reminding us:

- that stitching can be inquiry, commentary, boundary and marker;
- that we can use mapping to locate, soothe, describe and ground;
- that we want to explore, we fear being lost, and we long for discovery.

Stitching a Sense of Place

This yearning for location brings me to a brief look at my current project, *Mapping Nebraska*, a stitched, drawn and digitally imaged cartography of the (physical and psychological) state where I live.

It is my longing for a sense of place and my frustration at my ignorance of my state that fuel this project. I want to locate myself in a literal way by understanding where I am. In the process, I am grappling with how a terrain can be at once physical, cultural and emotional; how we fabricate our identity, history, and understanding of the world; and how the digital (pixels) can inform and be informed by the digital (the work of the hand). I hope, eventually, to contrast the abstract knowledge obtained by mapping with the experiential knowledge obtained by standing on the same ground.

Using topographic software, I've divided Nebraska into an eccentric grid of 95 sections, 33 miles square. (Trapezoidal sections at the east and west ends of the state reflect the curvature of the earth.) For over a year, I drew the physical features of these gridded sections—every town, every city, every railroad, every park, every lake, every river, every creek—with graphite on 12" squares of Tyvek. Section numbers are blind stamped and embroidered in Braille and the squares are stitched together to form a fifteen foot by seven foot Locator Map so that I, and the viewer, can see and comprehend the state as a whole. (The scale of the Locator Map is 1 inch = 2.75 miles.) (Fig. 13)

Figure 13. *Elizabeth Ingraham, Mapping Nebraska, Locator Map (in progress) (15' x 7'). Images by author.*

Using the same topographic software, I'm going deeper into selected sections of the state. At these larger scales (1 inch = 596 feet), boundaries are lost and a given area becomes terrain, with heights and depths expressed as contour lines. I'm describing this physical topography in quilted *Terrain Squares*, using, but extending, conventions of quilting and embroidery. I'm translating the topographic terrain as stitched relief, with the same vocabulary I use when drawing: meandering lines and eccentric hatching and a sort of scumbling—decorative, but not too decorative—for the lakes and rivers. (Fig. 14)

Figure 14, left. *Elizabeth Ingraham, Mapping Nebraska, Locator Map and Terrain Squares (24" x 24").*
Figure 15, right. *Elizabeth Ingraham, Mapping Nebraska, Haydon Installation.*
Images by author.

The backs of the Terrain Squares contain fragments of a hand-stenciled graphic of Nebraska grasses, rendered much larger than life size. These "ghost grasses," filtered through memory and distant from botany, provide a vertical and organic counterpoint to the horizontal geometry of the quilted terrain. The blue of the water appears white on the reverse, forming "ghost lakes" and "ghost rivers" which combine with the stenciled grasses and with the stitched lines in unexpected and unpredictable ways, contrasting, I hope, with the rigid accuracy of the topo maps.

The Terrain Squares fasten together in any order desired with a system of buttons and tabs which echo the grid markings of my drawn Locator Map, and stamped symbols on the Locator Map show the specific location of each Terrain Square.

The first portion of the project, the Locator Map and seven Terrain Squares were recently displayed at the "Stitch" show at the Haydon Art Center in Lincoln. In the installation view you can see how I'm interested not only in the mapped space of Nebraska but in the space created by the relationship of viewer and object. (Fig. 15)

In Paleolithic sites, Soft Goods Outnumber Hard by Twenty to One

My maps, like all maps, are translations and like all translations, something is both lost and gained. While absolute completeness and total accuracy are beyond my capabilities, I can aim for fidelity, for truthfulness, and for a visceral connection between how boundaries and contours look on the map and how it feels to journey over and through rolling hills and waving grasses.

The decision to work with fibers may seem perverse, the cloth disintegrating, microscopically, right in front of us. But textiles are also surprisingly durable and stitching is a powerful way of thinking, making, mapping, communicating and knowing.

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