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When This You See Remember Me:
Sampler Making as a Material Practice of Identity and Selfhood

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*Whence did the wondrous mystic art arise
Of painting speech and speaking to the eyes
That we by tracing magic lines are taught
How both to colour and embody thought*
Anonymous Sampler, 1828.

Knowledge of the self (the thinking subject) takes on an ever-increasing importance as the first step in the theory of knowledge.
Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 1988

I would like to acknowledge the extensive research done by Textile historians, curators and collectors. I owe a huge debt to their research and all the documentation that is available. It is my hope that I can build on this strong body of knowledge and offer some new thoughts to this historic, vibrant and diverse practice.

I want to share with you a short survey of the terrain I have been cultivating on the topic of needlework and sampler making. I want to talk about how I use samplers as a pedagogical tool and as an assigned project in my first year surface design class. I want to talk about Samplers within the context of narrative and how I use them as narrative devices in the developmental process towards creating reflective selfhood in my textile arts students. My thinking and conceptualization of Samplers is influenced by narrative theory and I will depart from the simple claim that the stories we tell about ourselves construct our identities. What I want to focus on is the construction of identities through the development of narratives. It is the narration of the self, or self-writing, and the construction of these material narratives that I see as important in the development of my students as emerging textile artists. I have been assigning a Sampler Project in my Surface Design Class since 2000 and I have witnessed the creation of over 100 contemporary Samplers made by my students. What strikes me most about these Samplers is how the students draw upon their own experiences and knowledges to create works that reflect their own needs, values and interests. These needs, values and interests foreground how their subjectivities are deeply tied to their memories and are embodied within the narrative form of the Sampler.

Before I go further I need tell you how I interpret Samplers and the meanings I make from them. I read Samplers as material, textualized objects as well as visual aesthetic objects. As if these material, textual objects were cloth pages, or remaining fragments blown out of larger, albeit incomplete, cultural text. These fragments, often read in isolation, need to be read or viewed within a larger context. Other disciplines such as archeology, social theory, history and museum practices all aid in their visual and textual interpretation, highlighting Sampler's interdisciplinary, or, transdisciplinary nature.

The lens that I view Samplers through is one that sharpens the focus onto self-knowledge through the practice of writing or in this case stitching/writing. My interpretation draws from Foucault's *Technologies of the Self*, particularly his work on Self Writing where he outlines how the act of writing produces subjectivity. Foucault states, "that to write is to show oneself, to project oneself into view and is a way to offer or open oneself to the gaze of others" (Foucault, p.217. 1988). A lot like Samplers. He views writing as embodied thought in which the act of

writing simultaneously produces the self for oneself as well as for others. A lot like Samplers. In describing the origins of writing in ancient western culture, Foucault asserted that writing was associated with rigorous scholarly meditation, where the self exercises thoughts on itself, reactivating or remembering what it knows, assimilating, formulating and integrating knowledge into social and cultural practice. Much like Samplers. The practice of writing then, trains oneself, to be a “self”. Again, a lot like Samplers.

The parallel between these two rhetorical practices, writing and Sampler making, have compelled me to place Samplers within a continuum of practices that produce self in western culture. In addition to this, I also conceptualize Samplers from a materialist, feminist position as outlined in Rosika Parker’s *Subversive Stitch*. Although, I believe she makes a thorough, compelling and brilliant argument for Samplers inculcating the Feminine during the 19th century, the more I read and viewed Samplers and women’s writing from this period, the more I wondered if indeed Samplers did or ever could produce and/ or inculcate a coherent category of the feminine?

I am not denying the category of the feminine, during the 19th century, or for that matter now, as a powerful social construct and I don’t deny that Samplers and stitching inculcates the feminine, then or now. But what interests me is the development of more diverse narratives of the self and I see Samplers as a location and/ or site where this happened and is happening. The evidence is there that 19th century women were taking up different positions to the category of the feminine. They used Samplers to develop narratives through the practice of this self-writing to embody their diverse thoughts and their diverse selves. I’m not talking about a huge proliferation of divergent voices, and certainly the majority of Sampler’s collected, do not reflect the diversity that I am claiming. But it is the cracks, fissures, leakages and the absences that I find compelling. I want to share with you a Sampler that I believe is a watershed and I think is a strong example of the leakages I’m talking about.

Elizabeth Parker’s Sampler, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s collection, was made in 1830. She tells us in her own authentic voice, in her writing/ stitching, a narrative of trauma, pain, and suicide attempts, self-loathing and despair. There are no rote sayings in this piece; it is one long monologue without punctuation. And although it’s tempting from a modern perspective to pathologize her, while resisting the urge to label her malaise, we nonetheless can empathize with her and read this piece very clearly as a narrative outside of the established genre of Samplers up to this point. She begins her sampler: “As I cannot write, I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully entrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weakness.”

Elizabeth’s Sampler predates any Goth horror narrative that the Bronte sisters could have written. Parker is not the angel in the house, but the madwoman in the attic and her narrative establishes her identity and represents a new emerging subjectivity. Her narrative Sampler, positions her into view; into the gaze of others as she leaks out of any coherent category of the feminine, at the same time breaking out of the traditional Sampler form. There is only text, no image, motifs or variety of stitches, only a single cross stitch in red. Regardless of the origins of her malaise or our label for her, she clearly feels disgraced and her narrative ends with a huge question “what will become of my soul?” Some have said this sampler is unfinished, but I ask, what more does Elizabeth need to tell us?

What more can we ask of her, she has embodied her thoughts and herself into the form.

If the Sampler could hold such subjectivity, such as Elizabeth's, I asked myself what positions are taken up in relation to the needle and the self now? What cracks, fissures, leakages and pronouncements are on the current terrain and what narratives and/ or self-writings take place? Although, Sampler making has a questionable, perhaps even sordid history as a teaching tool, as explimplified in needlework as "school girl art", it is these questions about the material practice as it connects to identity and selfhood via narrative that have moved me to reinstitute sampler making into my classroom curriculum. I set the Sampler project up for my students by offering two narratives one historical one contemporary.

The first narrative is a letter dated 1563, and is about a Sampler, allegedly stolen by a Lady Barbara. This letter is an appeal to get it back. I use this example to stress the importance of Samplers, as I quote the maker, "Be assured that we would regret the loss of that sampler more than the loss of our great treasure." Samplers at this time, 1563, are defined in the original sense of Samplers as literally a sample to copy or used as a reference. They were sites of invention and would have been shared. Against this historical narrative I overlay a contemporary narrative about the loss of a zip disc. Several years ago I had found a hand written poster with "HELP HELP HELP," scrawled across the top. The poster explained that a Media Technology student had lost a zip disc with two years of work on it, and needed for their portfolio. Now I'm sure your thinking Lady Barbara strikes again. Although we don't have any evidence that the zip was actually stolen, we do, however, have evidence that this zip is a valuable treasure, with two years of work for a portfolio, a lot like a sampler.

I use these two narratives to illustrate the absolute importance of information generated by the self and the need to remember it and retrieve it. These stories also illustrate how, although the tools or technologies of storage have changed over time, the importance of the retrieval, and/ or remembrance of this information remains imperative. In presenting these two narratives I encourage students to reflect on the changing meaning and function of Samplers over time, how information can be stored and what kind of information to store, retrieve and ultimately remember, before they make their own Sampler. I then give the students a slide lecture on the use and function of Samplers from the 14th to the 21st century. From here my directive is simple, I ask my students to create a sampler that may take any form but must contain, a name a date and a piece of text.

I have been assigning a Sampler project in my surface design class since 2000.

Over the past 6 years it has been my experience that the students create unique textual objects that represent themselves, their experiences and place in the world. Their narratives are often moving pieces of self-writing and their symbolic visual references are often unique and deeply personal. Many lift idioms, slogans and sayings from popular culture and recontextualize them, serving them up with a challenging twist. Through the Sampler project I have had the opportunity to view and witness the making of over 100 samplers. These Sampler's, made by my students, can be placed into three basic thematic categories. These categories are, Non Linear Narratives with use of representational and/ or symbolic imagery, Commemorative Narratives and Challenges Narratives. For the purposes of this paper I have selected one image along with a short description of it to illustrate each category.

As an example of the first category, Non-Linear Narratives, I have selected *A Symbol is a Representation*, by Bronwyn Morris. Morris creates a mood of curiosity through random patterning and repetition of intriguing imagery. The gessoed out text referencing "white out",

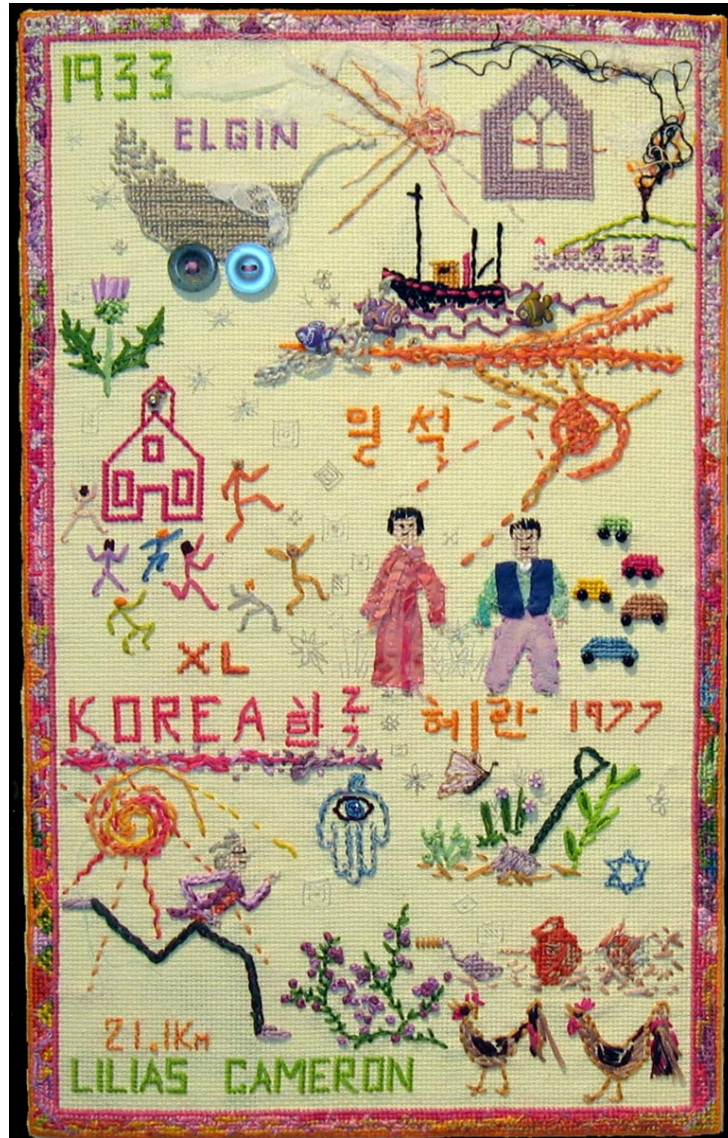
fuels our curiosity further as we wonder why she has done this and what is written underneath. The strategy employed by Morris in this work was inspired by historical Samplers symbolic references that sometimes only the maker or those around them could decipher. In her own words, from her artist statement, “Mary Queen of Scots was known to embroider a rooster in a sampler she gave to her sister. It is unknown what this symbol represented to the sisters, but that’s why I found this fact intriguing.” Morris goes on to explain her own fascination with ambiguous readings of imagery and symbols and their function as inter-subjective devices, “Each of the large symbols in this piece represent ideas that mean a lot to me. The symbols may represent something else to others, but they will represent something, this is the point of a symbol.”



*Bronwyn Morris, 24”X24”
In the collection of Bronwyn Morris.
Photo credit: Mary Lou Trinkwon.*

The sampler I have selected to represent the Commemorative Narrative category titled *Autobiography*, was stitched by Lilia Cameron. This sampler charts the life of the maker. She has divided her life into three sections: childhood, working years and retirement. Cameron also uses symbols to represent aspects of her life, but in contrast to Morris’s they are literal representations. The baby carriage represents her birth in Elgin Scotland in 1939, reading from right to left we can read the images that commemorate her life, ending with the runner, who represents Cameron in retirement running marathons! Historical Samplers and Lilia’s wish to perpetuate the practice of sampler making also inspired this Sampler. In Cameron’s own words, “my interest in embroidery is part of my involvement in history as I try to portray aspects of crafts, which are disappearing such as the traditional Victorian sampler.” This sampler has a

determined positivity surrounding it, much like the maker herself. Cameron describes her Sampler this way, “I have used bright colours because this is how I see my life.”



Lillas Cameron, 16"X 24"
In the collection of Lillas Cameron.
Photo credit: Mary Lou Trinkwon.

Asa Mori's Sampler represents the last category, Challenge Narratives. This Sampler is uncannily reminiscent of Elizabeth Parker's sampler of 1830. Mori references Parker by using the same cross-stitch with red embroidery floss. The sparseness of the text is in direct contrast to the denseness of Parker's, but the resonance of the question "What if we are wrong" fills the space as much as Parker's question, "What will become of my soul". Mori's sampler challenges the viewer to contemplate the implications of an action, a decision, or even a thought that may be wrong. Mori was troubled by the religious morality of some 18th century samplers especially as they often took the authentic voice away from women and young girls, and uses the form itself to ask this rhetorical question.



Asa Mori, 30"X36"
In the collection of Mary Lou Trinkwon.
Photo credit: Mary Lou Trinkwon.

I have briefly described how students have taken up Sampler making in my Surface Design Class. Using historical Sampler making as a point of departure, I have mapped some of the current narrative terrains and shifting subject positions as a result of the needle being taken up in a contemporary Textile Arts educational context. This Sampler project provides students with an opportunity to explore issues of personal identity and artistic practice, while integrating historical, theoretical, technical and design elements. Working against the spectral background of traditional Sampler making, my students' Samplers reflect how they position themselves in relation to their needs, values, interests and perspectives; demonstrating how our subjectivities are deeply tied to our memories and our narratives. By stitching their narratives, my students stitch themselves into view and into the gaze of others. In this sense they make more than a Sampler; they make themselves.

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