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For What It’s Worth: The French Knot as a Basic Trade Commodity
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For nearly twenty years, my primary studio production has been in the form of mixed media quilts. These quilts draw—both visually and conceptually—on the abandoned houses that color the landscape of my North Carolina mountain home. They are constructed using traditional quilting techniques married with digital processes and acrylic paint—a hybrid product that lands at the intersection of fibers, photography, painting and digital media. Although their conceptual purpose is to investigate the narrative past, present and future of these homes and their values, the questions with which I am most often quizzed at exhibitions focus purely on time and technique: “How did you put the image on the fabric?” “Where did you find that abandoned house?” “What kind of printer do you use?” “How long did that piece take?” “How many stitches are in that?”

Left: “Set Up”, 59” x 71”, acrylic paint and inkjet printing on recycled fabric; machine-pieced and hand-quilted
Right: “Carry On”, 59” x 70”, acrylic paint and inkjet printing on recycled fabric; machine-pieced and hand-quilted

These questions—which I always happily answer—became the seeds of new questions I began asking myself: What is the actual value of the product of my labors? How many stitches—particularly French knots—really are in this thing? What is the true value of a specific stitch, like the French knot? Can I pay for a cheeseburger with French knots? Or, perhaps more appropriately, a craft beer? Does it matter whether or not my hands make the stitches? How does the value change when stitched by another? Is value contained in the product or in the process? How is the value of an idea quantified? Does the hand really matter?

And so, I began tentatively answering these questions through my art. Since 2010, I have employed the French knot as the basic unit of measure for the work of the hand. When I am not making quilts, I am stitching (and counting) French knots. These knots are a meditative undertaking for me. My hands make them automatically, freeing my mind to count repeatedly to ten and wander in between. The knots I make are absolutely, completely, entirely and only themselves and only about themselves. They are freed from the weight of imagery. Their existence is self-referential. I make them as the physical embodiment of my own questions about the value of making itself. Each piece is stretched on a frame and
finished with manufactured froo-froo lace. This finishing treatment is both a nod to traditional embroidery presentation as well as mild self-mockery of my own ridiculous process. Each piece is titled and priced solely based on the quantity of knots composing it. Quality of design, variety of colors, compositional success, and level of finishing froo-froo-ness have no bearing on their worth.

Interestingly, by preemptively answering the numeric questions of my audience, the conversations that arise when these pieces are on display have been elevated. Instead of pure interrogations about time and technique, we discuss how those variables translate into value and worth. We discuss the historic and ongoing undervaluing of traditional “women’s work”. We discuss the comparable valuing of different materials and processes within the art world: painting vs. quilting, photography vs. fabric, stone vs. stitch. We discuss the very definitions of art, craft, and design, and how these definitions limit or celebrate the perceptions of the work created within their parameters.

As I continued to obsessively stitch—and count—French knots, I dug further into the questions swirling around these stitches. Why—in fact—was it necessary that I actually create the stitches? Was their worth self-contained as isolated constructions, or did their value increase (or decrease) because of the particular composition in which I—and I alone—arranged them? Did my hand matter?

I began a series of diptychs in which I worked with an assistant to construct two identical compositions of French knots. The two pieces are displayed side-by-side and are virtually identical. The only meaningful difference between the two pieces is price: that which is constructed by my assistant is priced at exactly half of that which is constructed by me. This price discrepancy is by no means intended as a critique of my assistant’s technique—her careful knots are often even more perfect than my own. Instead, it is my strategy for making visual those intangible questions I am asking about locating the true value of art. When exhibited, it is my
intention to draw attention to the extremely subtle variations between the two pieces that necessarily arise when two different sets of hands construct them; to introduce questions of authenticity; and to lovingly tease an art world that is generally more concerned with name recognition than any other indicator of quality.

After producing tens of thousands of French knots over several years, many of my friends began to take notice. Rather than questioning my sanity for this undertaking, some of them began requesting French knots—stitched by me—to call their own. One friend in particular absolutely begged for just one perfect French knot that she could hang in her sewing nook to gaze at every day as inspiration. I was happy to oblige, but am incapable of stopping stitching with just a single knot, so instead made 250 knots—about an hour of work—in her favorite colors. I shipped the knots to her and she—in gratitude—sent me four quarts of homemade pickles. She is to pickles as I am to French knots: she makes way more of them than any one person really should, and they are as close to perfect as they can be.

That pickles-for-knots trade was a EUREKA!! moment for me. Embodied in that one trade was everything I had been trying to say with my knots: that they are valid and valuable; that the product of the hand has worth; and that the product of my hands has an equivalent product value produced by another’s hand. Essentially, my French knots became a basic trade commodity. Every accumulation of knots I produced could be assigned a trade value as an alternative to the standard pricing scheme of US currency.
Inspired by the pickles-for-knots exchange, I began a new project: French Knots for Trade. In this series, every tiny set of French knots is priced according to the number of knots composing it, with a specific alternative trade value alongside. The requirements for the trade are strict: it must be the product of another person’s individual labors (no mass factory production), and it must be a true fair equivalent value if placed side by side on the open market. The first works in this series focused on expected craft exchanges: 175 French knots available to trade for a pair of hand-knit wool socks; 595 French knots available to trade for a blown glass vase; 340 French knots available to trade for a handmade sterling silver necklace in a clean, simple design.

As I continued stitching, and continued thinking about the work of my fellow humans and how that work is valued, the alternative trade values expanded to include services as well as products:
420 French knots available to trade for two half-hour guided meditation sessions (because I know it’s supposed to be good for me, but I can’t wrap my head around it solo); 425 French knots available to trade for competently proofreading and editing an artist statement, bio, and resume; 170 French knots available to trade for an oil change and tire rotation on a 2012 Subaru Outback.

Some of the proposed trades were about personal care and maintenance: 390 French knots available to trade for a manicure with super fancy nail art; 590 French knots available to trade for a facial that simultaneously fights wrinkles and acne; 495 French knots available to trade for a complete set of dental X-rays; 540 French knots available to trade for a Pap smear (after basic insurance has kicked in its contribution).

Many of the trades revealed personal details about my family: 240 French knots available to trade for an evening of babysitting two little kids who go to bed really early and are very sweet and cute; 215 French knots available to trade for one month of weekly dance classes for a four-year-old; 525 French knots available to trade for installing the kind of fancy organizational system in my closet that took my husband three full weekends to complete in his closet, but that he claims anyone slightly handier could complete in a few hours.

Other pieces became political statements: 200 French knots available to trade for 158 French knots stitched by a man of equivalent educational background and professional experience (because, after all, the pay gap is STILL a thing, and women must work longer and harder to achieve the same purchasing power as men); 280 French knots available to trade for a $70 donation to Planned Parenthood.

Left: “Two Hundred French Knots”, 4” x 3”, 200 French knots on cotton in artist-altered frame, available to trade for 158 French knots made by a man of equivalent educational background and professional experience
Right: “Two Hundred and Eighty French Knots”, 4” x 3”, 280 French knots on cotton in artist-altered frame, available to trade for a $70 donation to Planned Parenthood
In my most recent project, Trading Time, I teach others how to make French knots in one-on-one lessons. Before each session begins, I ask the participant to fill out a card responding to four prompts: name, age, gender, and an open-ended question: “what is your time worth?” The lessons have varied in length of time—anywhere from 7 minutes to 70 minutes—and I take notes about the meanderings of our conversations throughout. At the conclusion of the lesson, I offer to trade the French knots I made for the French knots made by the participant during our time together. Afterwards, I type a short reflection on our conversation on the reverse of the response card written by the participant at the beginning.

When I first conceived of this project, I was convinced that I would simply announce my intentions to the world and the world would pound down my door, desperate to take advantage of my French-knot-lessons-for-free offer. Thus was not the case. Although I could have taught different versions of myself—female artists in their forties—every day of the week, I was determined to have a slightly more diverse demographic. With some haranguing, I finally convinced a few men to participate, including my Dad (who ended up bleeding after a mere 7 knots), my husband, and the husbands of several friends. When pushed to participate, the men consistently cited purpose as the reason for their reluctance: they simply couldn’t understand why anyone would possibly want to make French knots. Educators, on the other hand, were the most eager participants: their love of teaching translated into an equal love of learning.
Panel from “Trading Time”, French knots on cotton, hand-stitched by a writer, 4” hoop with 3.5” card

Panel from “Trading Time”, French knots on cotton, hand-stitched by a claims adjuster, 4” hoop with 3.5” card
Panel from “Trading Time”, French knots on cotton, hand-stitched by an EC teacher, 4” hoop with 3.5” card

Panel from “Trading Time”, French knots on cotton, hand-stitched by a nurse, 4” hoop with 3.5” card
This project—although still couched in the conceptual context of French-knots-as-commodity—has pushed me far outside my creative comfort zone. I enter each lesson with the outcome wholly unknown. I cannot predict what the work will look like, nor what kinds of conversations will arise from the intimacy of stitching. Each participant is a more important contributor to the visual result of the work than I am, and my own French knots essentially disappear afterwards (though one participant—so far—has declined my offer to trade).

In the end, all of these iterations of obsessive stitching have collectively generated a system for commoditizing and questioning the labor of art-making. I consider the value of my own French knot handiwork in relation to the value of others’ individual labors, and I also compare the values of those labors in the larger society as a whole. I question why my time is more valuable than some, and less valuable than others. I wonder why the cumulative reward for my work—as both a maker and a teacher—is such an extraordinary version of life, while others toil so much harder for so much less. I wonder why all our contributions are not valued equally. And as I wonder, I stitch. And stitch. And stitch.