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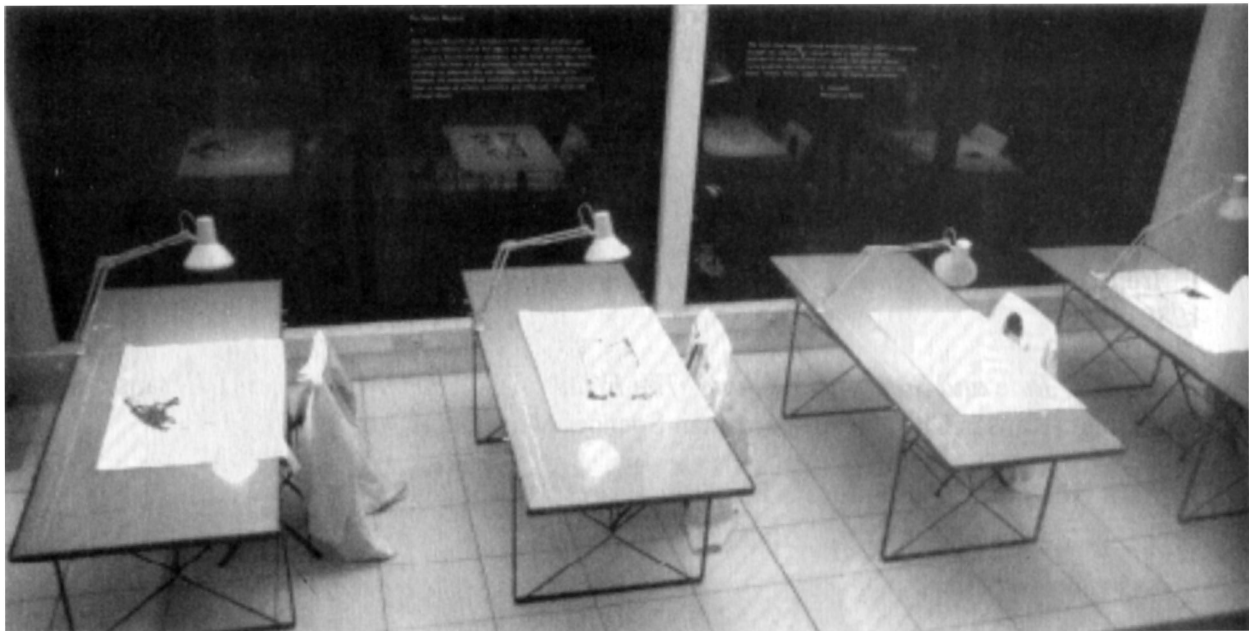
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Electronic Textiles: Hacking the Museum

Barbara Layne

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Installation Photograph of Glass Box Gallery

The subject of my presentation, *Electronic Textiles: Hacking the Museum*, is a project I orchestrated between the Marsil Museum of Textiles in St. Lambert, Québec and the Glass Box Gallery at Salford University near Manchester, England. The purpose was to manipulate images of textile objects as a way to reconsider the practice of collecting, question the system of classification (and thereby the authority of the museum), and open up new possibilities for the collected object. The Marsil is the only museum in Québec whose mandate is exclusively dedicated to textiles. Its catalogue system categorizes the collection according to function and gender, distinguishes between adult and children's wear, and has a small section of non-Western dress.

In 1996, I made several trips to the storage collection, under the guidance of Marsil's Curator of Costume, Cynthia Cooper. Historic textiles -- ranging from ready made structures such as a fox collar to those with compound weaves -- were photographed with a digital camera directly into a laptop computer. The photographs underwent a "normalization" process through manipulation in Photoshop, rendering each image similar in size and surface treatment. The catalogue system was disregarded, and in many cases, references to materials, gender, age and function were blurred. In this process of declassification, a mourning veil, a gentleman's top hat, and a well-worn nurse's cap received equal treatment.

It can be argued that by removing the object from its material source the essence, or *aura*, of the textile object is discarded. This predicament was described by Walter Benjamin in

his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Benjamin proposes that an original, "authentic" object emanates an aura, and warns of its loss through photographic processes.¹ My contention is that even though the objects in a collection continue to maintain a physical, material presence, they have *already* been deprived of their authenticity through the act of accession. The reframing of the object through the system of classification altered the meaning of that object, and how it was to be understood from that moment on. The goal of this installation, *Electronic Textiles* was to call attention to the loss of the original, and to reconstruct, or revitalize, these images into new material forms.

Each day of the first week of the exhibition, 10 images were processed and transmitted from Montreal to the gallery in England. The Glass Box is a veritable fishbowl: glass walls on all sides, a skylight, and an observation deck looking into the space. As the images arrived, they were printed on clear acetate and adhered to the floor. A group of textile students at Salford University began to embroider the images onto cloth surfaces, beginning with the first four transmissions. Each worker donned a lab coat with an image of the object they were working on imprinted on the back, positioning them in the space in an "official" way.

Internet projects such as *Electronic Textiles* forge new relationships by creating an international community of artists, technicians, students, faculty, etc. Human communication is not lost, but can be increased in the electronic world. The Salford team included faculty directors, Janet Bezzant and Karen Borland, Internet technician, Nicola Teece, and the stitching crew consisting of Mavis Hardman, Denise Hayes, Julie Clark, Alex Herbert, Jean Gaunt and Joanne Pollack. Their generosity and commitment provided sustaining support throughout the process.

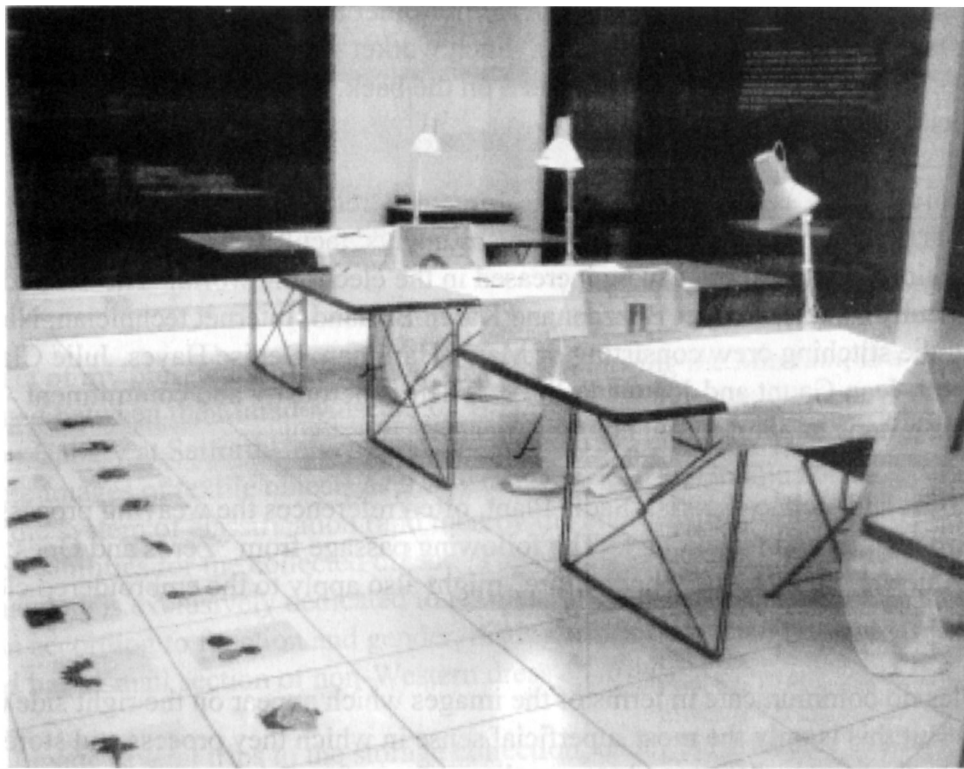
Cyberfeminist and techno-theorist, Sadie Plant, often references the weaving process in her ideas on women and technology. The following passage from "Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture" might also apply to the embroidered cloths in this project:

Textiles do communicate in terms of the images which appear on the right side of the cloth. But this is only the most superficial sense in which they process and store data. Because there is no difference between the process of weaving and the woven design, cloths persist as records of the processes which fed into their production: how many women worked on them, the techniques they used, the skills they employed...A piece of work so absorbing as a cloth is saturated with the thoughts of the people who produced it, each of whom can flash straight back to whatever they were thinking as they worked. Like Proust's madeleines, it carries memories of an intensity which completely escapes the written word...²

Various stitching techniques were assigned to each particular image, but precise details were left to the individual. Although a linear drawing of the downloaded image was printed on the surface, the students were unsure of how to approach the cloth, and asked

for further instruction. As it was impossible for me to describe the quality of each stitch from Montreal, they were directed to “feel” their way through the design. I wanted evidence of individual hands in each piece.

During the installation, a number of (male) gallery visitors offered infantile, derogatory remarks, such as “Hey, can you repair my pants?” The workers sent email messages, expressing confusion about sewing in such an exposed environment, and noted their embarrassment over the rude comments. We began an electronic dialogue in which I helped to contextualize the project in the tradition of *tableau vivant* and affirm the importance of needlework in the history of women. Their embarrassment soon turned to anger, then to a sense of pride in the work, and eventually this project inspired their own collaborative installation in which they interwove the collection of insults with a poem celebrating women and embroidery.



Installation Photograph of Glass Box Gallery

If my work is relevant to a discussion on compound weave structures, perhaps it is through the contribution to that great construction of interwoven data known as the Web. The Internet collapses the textile image into binary code, which is catapulted through a complex network of speeding light. Textile images become information, dematerialized and transmitted through this giant matrix, ultimately to be reconstituted into a new, material form. Not only was the invention of the computer grounded in the development of the Jacquard loom, but the Internet relies on terminology borrowed from textiles: webs, nets, strings, threads, etc. Sadie Plant’s radical essay, “The Future Looms”, affirms

that textiles are the model for the very structure of the Net itself. In response to Freud's dismissive assertion that weaving was women's only contribution to civilization, Plant retorts:

For weaving is the fabric of every other discovery and invention, not the least those of Freudian analysis itself...Hidden in history as the fabric of his world, weaving threads its way from squared paper to the data nets of artificial memory and machine intelligence.³

Further comparisons between hand technologies and so-called "high" technologies can be made in terms of skills and labor. In "Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand", Malcolm McCullough considers:

...the example of a skilled computer graphics artisan--if we may use this word. His or her hands are performing a sophisticated and unprecedented set of actions. These motions are quick, small, repetitive, as in much traditional handwork, but somehow they differ. They do not rely on pressure so much as position, velocity, or acceleration. The artisan's eye is not on the hand, but elsewhere, on a screen. The actions have a practical component, and the skill may be practiced for a livelihood and a trade identity. If we test a description of this work against Diderot's description of craft, almost every word fits.⁴

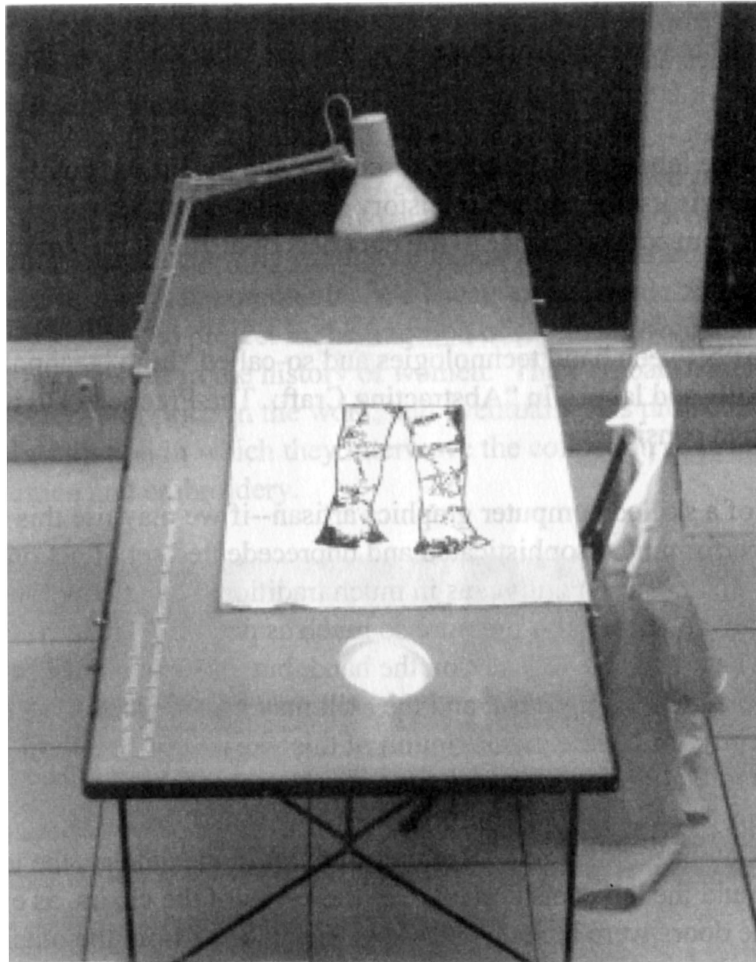
Following the week of embroidery and electronic activity in the gallery, the textiles were placed on the table, and the lab coats draped over the backs of the chairs, as evidence of human activity. The doors were locked, and viewing was done from the outside, looking in. Ironically, the gallery assumed the appearance of a textile conservation laboratory. White vinyl text had been applied to each table, referring to the contents of the Marsil card catalog. The reference was not so much to the original object, but an allusion to the system of classification and how the authority of text influences the understanding of material objects. Two examples include:

Chain Purse 1986-03-05

Engraved at the top, "Presented to Miss Bradshaw by her sincere friends on her leaving Carrier Pet. 1910" (She was a village nurse all her life).

Man's Coat 1985-83

Coat of black wool. Double breasted knee length. Worn by Honourous Richer (1874-1952) of St Andre Avellin at the age of 24 for his wedding with Malvina Jackson-Boyer (was adopted which explains why she has two last names) in 1898.



Installation Photograph of Glass Box Gallery

Electronic Textiles was a piece about process and about potential. While museums attempt to keep the textile object in an unnatural state of stasis, Cyberspace exists as a place of activity. It was understood that the idea of reconstructing all 50 images during the month of the exhibition was a futile one. Though the Internet harbours an abundance of data, the human capacity for absorption is limited. The project aimed to slow down the exchange of information, engaging the object in a more meaningful way. *Electronic Textiles* provided an opportunity to “perform” the textile museum.

This project was generously supported by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Photos: Janet Bezzant

- ¹Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968).
- ²Malcolm McCullough, *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand* (Cambridge, MS: MIT Press, 1996) , 19-20.
- ³Sadie Plant, "The Future Looms" in Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed., *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1996), 128-129.
- ⁴Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 1997), 65-66.