McCLAIN
GALLERY

Paula Birnbaum

Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches

Since the early 1970s feminist artists have been using embroidery as a vehicle to reclaim female agency in contemporary artistic practice and to question the validity of a hierarchy of genres in the history of art. Roszika Parker's *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and Making of the Feminine*, published in 1984, was the first text to research and evaluate the history of this art form and its important role, as a form of cultural production, in validating women's contributions to global history.[1] For the last four decades, the New York–based artist Elaine Reichek has been making work that unravels the tradition of the embroidered sampler—as an educational exercise designed to "frame truisms and life lessons for girls and young women within decorative patterns"—retooling this domestic format to critique the patriarchal and modernist assumptions of our culture.[2] In her most recent bodies of work Reichek uses the medium of embroidery to interrogate the complicated relationships among art history, representation, and technology.[3] By juxtaposing hand-made cross-stitches with those produced by a computer-programmed sewing machine in samplers that simulate famous works of art, Reichek offers an incisive commentary on the many forms of translation and remediation that are integral to the history of mark-making and illusionism in Western visual culture. For those interested in cyber-based art practices, her longtime engagement as a classically trained painter-become-needlewoman with the history of technology and mechanical and digital production offers an interesting point of departure.

The new-media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as "the representation of one medium in another," or the attempt "to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation."[4] In the world of digital visual culture, this process can be executed in a number of different ways, from the simple scanning and digitizing of printed text or reproductions of works of art, to the more aggressive juxtaposition of different media in digital art, to "the nearly total absorption of one medium by another in the webcam site."[5] In Reichek's case, the embroidered work she has produced over the past decade cleverly responds to the histories of both art and technology; for her, remediation questions the notions of authenticity, originality, and the canon by staging a powerful collision between different types of mark-making.

Reichek's interest in the relationship between art and technology was readily apparent in her 1999 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Projects 67: Elaine Reichek; When This You See . . .*, a collection of thirty-one pieces that critique traditional definitions of "high art" through musings on the female-dominated arts of embroidery, weaving, and knitting.[6] One of the final works in this series, entitled *Sampler (World Wide Web)* (1998), serves as an important bridge to understanding her most recent exploration of the relationship between digital technology and the seemingly traditional practice of "women's needlework." In this hand-stitched sampler on linen, the viewer is confronted with the familiar image of an early Macintosh computer screen with a random assortment of scrolling text on the theme of weaving and fiber arts ("Spin spin-off spin a yarn spin a web web of deceit/net wove weave a spell . . . embroider the truth embroider a fantasy."). Reichek notes of this piece how the language of weaving and cloth "suffuses our consciousness as a deeply embedded metaphor":

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1. Roszika Parker, *Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984).
2. See David Frankel, "Elaine Reichek: Stitch-ellated Pics," *Aperture* 175 (Summer 2004): 34–38.
3. Reichek's recent solo exhibitions include: *Pattern Recognition*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 2007; *Glossed in Translation*, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 2006; *After Babel Alpha Beta*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 2004; *madamimadam*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (web and CD-ROM project), 2003; *Madam, I'm Adam*, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 2002; *At Home and in the World*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium, 2000 (traveled to Tel Aviv Museum, 2001); and *Projects 67: Elaine Reichek; "When This You See . . ."* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.
4. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 45 and 11.
5. Patrick J. Cook, review of Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, available online at http://rccs.usfca.edu/bookinfo.asp?ReviewID=49&BookID=63.
6. See David Frankel, ". . . Remember Me," in Elaine Reichek, *When This You See* (New York: George Braziller and Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2000).

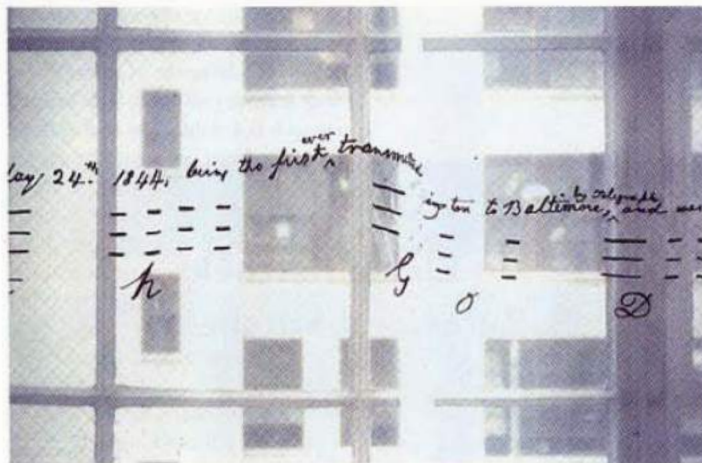
Birnbaum, Paula. "Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches." *Art Journal*, July 2008.

Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (World Wide Web)*, 1998, embroidery on linen, 11¼ x 14¼ in. (28.6 x 36.2 cm). Collection of Allen W. Prusis, New York (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York)

Elaine Reichek, *First Morse Message*, 2004, machine embroidery on fabric (artwork © Elaine Reichek)

detail: 4 panels, totaling 14 ft. 5 in. x 13 ft. 10 in. (439.4 x 421.6 cm), Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, 2004 (photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery)

installation view: approx. 16 x 60 ft. (4.9 x 18.3 m), Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 2006 (photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery)

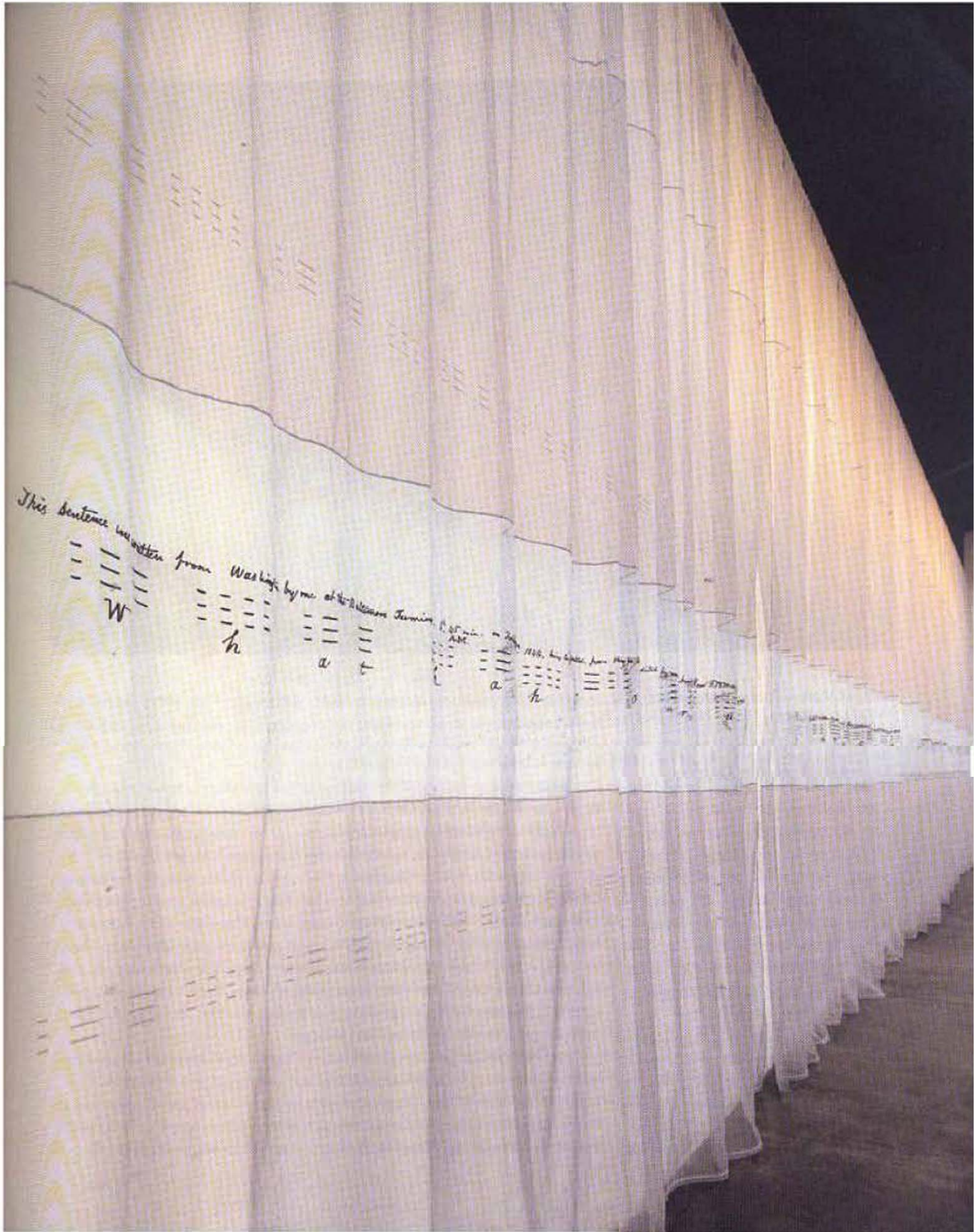


> We even talk about the fabric of life. And this metaphor runs right up through the most up-to-date technology. In fact, there are links between the history of weaving and the computer. The jacquard loom, invented in the eighteenth century, is often considered an early example of a programmable machine—the prototype for that kind of thinking. Also, although the computer is considered a boy toy, in the early nineteenth century it was a woman, Ada Lovelace—the daughter of the poet Byron—who developed the mathematics and worked to refine a calculating machine, the Analytic Engine, devised by Charles Babbage. He provided the idea, she provided the system, the logic. The pixel and the byte are like stitches—tiny indissoluble elements that in combination with thousands of other indissoluble elements make up a picture. Are there bugs in your computer? Maybe they're spiders.[7]

With references to Arachne and the gendered traditions of the textile arts, Reichek leaves her audience pondering the history of cross-stitching as "tradition unbound," an age-old form of conceptual mark-making with direct implications for technological progress up to the present day.[8] Her MoMA exhibition in fact offered a metahistory of the relationship between needle arts and technology, and the exploration of this story has since infused her practice. The jacquard loom, widely adapted in France in the early 1800s for its accomplishment of automated weaving through the use of cards that programmed the loom, is a powerful point of reference. Reichek notes the masculinist associations of the history of technology and attempts to give agency to women and their unrecognized role within that history.[9]

The integral relationship between the pixel and the stitch—both free from gendered attributes or stereotypes—lies at the heart of Reichek's most recent work.[10] The pixel is the primary digital module from which the face of our electronic visual culture is constructed. Reichek's embroidered computer screens address how the computer brings with it new ways of thinking about images and patterns, and also conventions of visual representation that are nonetheless rooted in tradition. Yet by hand-embroidering cross-stitches to simulate basic

7. Reichek, plate 29.
8. I have taken this term from the title of the 2007 College Art Association panel, *Tradition Unbound: Contemporary Responses to Art's Past*, where this essay was first presented.
9. The term "computer bug," for example, has been attributed to a woman named Grace Hopper (1906–1992), an American computer scientist and United States Navy officer who programmed the Harvard Mark I calculator and is described as having developed the first compiler for a computer programming language. For a discussion of Hopper and the role of women in the history of the computer, see James Inman, *Computers and Writing the Cyborg Era* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum, 2004); and Sadie Plant, "The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics," in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
10. See David Frankel, "Elaine Reichek: Stitchellated Pics."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Samuel F. B. Morse, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33, oil on canvas, 73¾ x 108 in. (187.3 x 274.3 cm). Collection of Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago/Art Resource, NY)

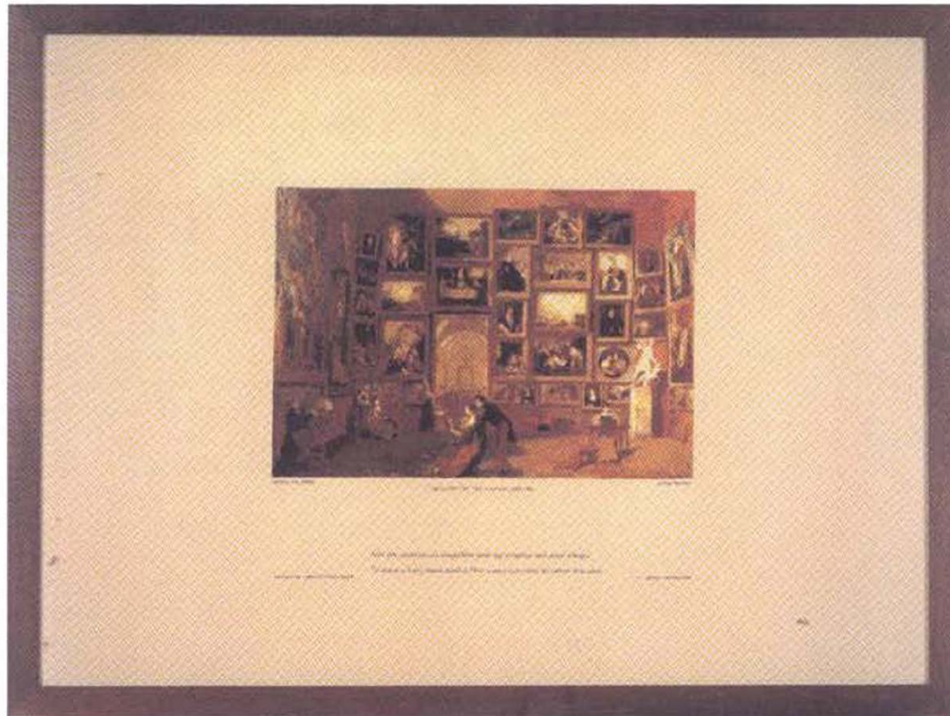
computer code, interactive icons, malleable pictures, and fast-paced text messages, she turns the visual vocabulary of our electronic revolution on its head and embraces the interconnectedness among technology, craft history, and the history of art.

In her most recent work, Reichek takes this relationship as her point of departure and combines embroidery with the tools and history of technology to take on the subjects of language, art history, and representation, with their many forms, meanings, and potential for miscommunication. Reichek explains: "All of my work has to do with translation. The work is related to digital technology. Images are scanned through a computer, fed into a program; that program then spits out a chart in color, which I then embroider either by hand or machine. Each piece thus refers to its process."[11] Certain pieces are painstakingly stitched by hand, others by renovated nineteenth-century electric sewing machines, and still others with newly developed computer-programmable machines that transform Reichek's scanned and Photoshopped source material into beautiful, flat surfaces that reference celebrated works of art.

First Morse Message (2006) offers Reichek's luminescent vision of nineteenth-century America and the invention of functional telegraphic transmission.[12] Samuel F. B. Morse, whose telegraphic code helped open up global communication, made portraits and history paintings that were preoccupied with the problem of identity and reproduction in American art. Here Reichek presents the

11. Telephone interview with the author, December 13, 2006.

12. This piece was featured in the recent exhibitions *After Babel Alpha Beta* (2004), *Glossed in Translation* (2006), and *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* (2007). For Morse, see Paul J. Staiti, *Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); William Kloss, *Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York: Abrams and the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1988); Kenneth Silverman, *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (Boston, Da Capo Press, 2003).



Elaine Reichek, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 2004, embroidery on linen, 34¼ x 46¼ in. (87 x 117.5 cm). Private collection (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York).

viewer with a diaphanous, pale gray curtain that stands sixteen feet high and sixty feet long. The piece documents Morse's first telegraphic message, sent on May 24, 1844, from Washington to Baltimore, in both code and the English alphabet. With its loose and translucent folds, this massively scaled installation of embroidered fabric in motion plays off the hardness of the floor in each exhibition venue, engaging the viewer with its sheer, material presence and flexibility. Reichek has embroidered several layers of text from Morse across the horizontal expanse of this piece, repeating the stitched words "What hath God wrought?" the very first coded message, in which he quoted from the Old Testament, Book of Numbers. This text apparently was suggested to Morse by the daughter of a US patent official and likely was intended to humble Morse's own role while aggrandizing the invention; when used today, the phrase begs our consideration of the anxieties inherent in technological advances that have led not just to life improvements, but also to global destruction, from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the threat of global warming.

Reichek scanned Morse's original handwriting from photographs of his message and other documentation in the Library of Congress, enlarged it to scale, created a template, and then had it professionally embroidered using a recently salvaged mid-nineteenth-century Singer sewing machine—a machine just twenty years younger than Morse's invention. Her choice to use a contemporaneous machine for this piece reveals Reichek's material as well as conceptual

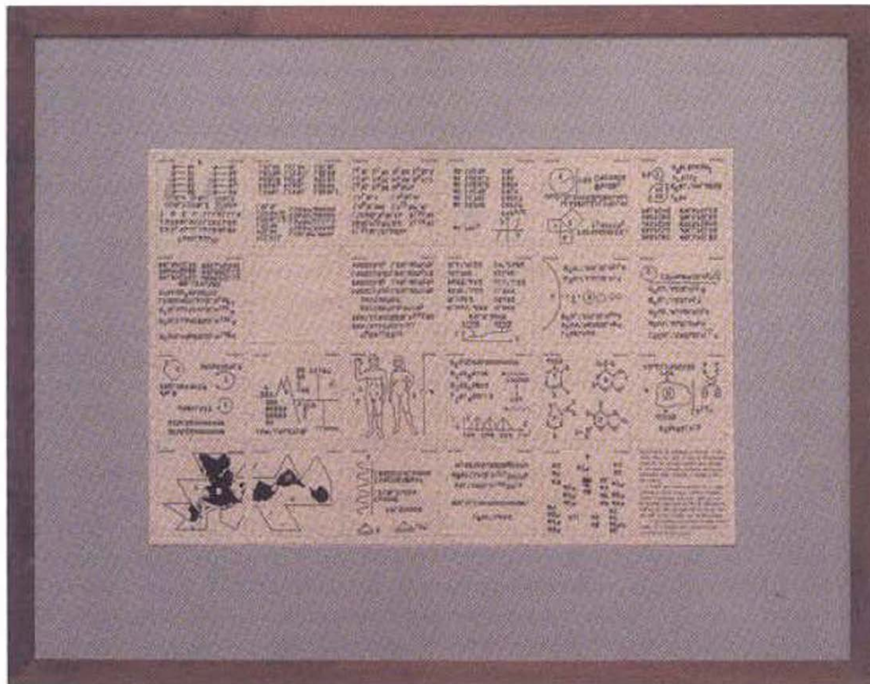
fascination with early technology. The piece also includes her reconstruction of the code Morse invented, using handpress type to create vinyl marks that appear to float and pull back from the gallery wall when the piece is installed. The effect is a visual layering of texts, both Morse's original cursive handwriting and the language of dashes and dots that is precursor to computer code. The power of this work lies in its ability to express what Reichek describes as "the inevitably flawed attempt to communicate, to translate content from one mind into another, to an otherworldly extreme."[13]

Reichek is also keenly interested in how Morse's practice as a painter had a major influence on his invention of the telegraph machine and code. He stated that he first conceived of the idea for the telegraph machine in 1832, just as he was completing the large painting entitled *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33. Reichek refers to the painting as Morse's virtual gallery or cyber museum, as it was his re-creation for an American audience of the Louvre's famous Salon Carré, the gallery intended to display the museum's greatest masterpieces of European art. Morse was apparently critical of the decision of Louis Philippe's administration to "alter the international flavor of the room by transforming it into a gallery of French art, ostensibly as a populist, nationalist gesture," and so chose his own arrangement of old-master paintings.[14] Paul Staiti has demonstrated how Morse made specific choices of works to include or exclude in his version of the Louvre's most famous gallery, creating miniaturized "facsimiles" of specific old-master paintings that represent distinct periods of European art history particularly meaningful to him.[15] He thus created his subjective interpretation of the Salon Carré to communicate his selection of canonical imagery from Old Europe to American audiences. According to Staiti, Morse deliberately arranged the facsimiles eclectically, "piled up without any regard for nationality or date," much as our present-day web galleries often remove the historical contexts of pictures in order to generate new meanings.[16]

Reichek was also drawn to the fact that Morse inserted into the pictorial space related figures, thought by scholars to include a self-portrait of him instructing his daughter, along with portraits of other prominent Americans, including the writer James Fenimore Cooper. When he finished the *Gallery of the Louvre* in 1833, Morse published a descriptive catalogue and key and exhibited it beside the other paintings in his studio in New York. While he had hoped that his work would inspire the American public to embrace the power of the museum to articulate democratic values, very few people came to see it, and the painting was recognized only later for its importance in the history of American art.[17] For Reichek, Morse's efforts to produce subjective "copies" of European art for American audiences raise questions about authenticity, originality, and remediation, given the complexities inherent in the processes of communication and translation.

Fascinated by Morse and the history and power of his simultaneous experimentation in art and technology, Reichek created a hand-embroidered sampler after a digital scan of *Gallery of the Louvre* that she found on the web, included in her 2004 exhibition *After Babel Alpha Beta*. Just as Morse played with the idea of long-distance communication and remediation in both his painting and the later invention of the telegraph, Reichek asks important questions about the power and failure of both art history and language to convey meaning effectively in our present-day cyberculture. The act of creating pixel-like cross-stitches on a canvas

13. Elaine Reichek, *After Babel Alpha Beta*, exh. broch. (New York: Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, 2004).
14. Staiti, 189.
15. Ibid., 175–206.
16. Ibid., 196.
17. Ironically, Morse had been critical of American connoisseurs who collected copies and imitations of European art, and in spite of flattering reviews in several daily New York newspapers, he viewed his ambitious painting ultimately as a failure (he sold it for $1,200 in 1834). See Staiti, 199–202.



Elaine Reichek, *SETI*, 2004, hand embroidery on linen, 45 x 57 in. (114.3 x 144.8 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

generated after a digital scan of an original work of art suggests many layers of referentiality, beginning with the original paintings selected by Morse from various galleries of the Louvre, to his painted rearrangement and reproduction of them as facsimiles in his famous 1833 painting, to the many photographic images taken directly after the painting. Of course, these photographs of Morse's painting were altered by the designers and printers who reproduced them over the years in various art-historical texts, then individually scanned by a host of "users," and altered yet again by others using Photoshop and other image-editing programs before uploading them as digital files onto the web. Enter Reichek, who searched the internet for what she deemed the best-quality image of the Morse painting, downloaded the file, altered it more, and eventually transferred it onto a template for the production of her own hand-embroidered version using factory-dyed threads. Reichek's piece after Morse's painting thus deliberately plays on the cycle of remediation and inserts the needlewoman into the physical processes of creation, reproduction, and translation. Indeed, Reichek's repetition of the cross-stitch in homage both to the pixel and to Morse's painting also references his invention of code and entices the viewer to think about the important links between creativity and the history of technology. This rich cycle of remediation is the reason Reichek embroiders, and it is this conceptual aspect of her choice of medium that interests her most as an artist.

In *SETI* (2004), another of Reichek's recent samplers, the artist further explores Morse's legacy of global communication and translation and its clear

implications for the history of visual culture. SETI is the acronym for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, a government-funded organization founded with the mission "to explore, understand and explain the origin, nature and prevalence of life in the universe."[18] Here the artist uses the laborious process of embroidery by hand on blue linen to confront the anxiety that millennia bring. Her piece offers, she tells us, a scanned replication of "a message blasted in 1974 from the world's largest radio telescope in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, toward the constellation Hercules, some 25,000 light years away. A string of 1,679 bits in binary code is assembled into a pictogram showing the numbers one to ten, the chemical formula of the DNA molecule, a human figure, a description of the solar system, the Arecibo telescope, and other data."[19] The accompanying text below the pictogram is an excerpt from a twenty-three-page document in Lincos or Lingua Cosmica, a language system transmitted into outer space. The hand-embroidered text in the lower right corner of Reichek's piece explains the scientists' goals in this process, as well as their formal request for a response: "Conception of an interstellar message is not a trivial task. . . . We tried to send an encyclopedia. Therefore the message contains basic notions of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and astronomy. More important, it formally asks for a reply."

Popular-culture aficionados may recall Jodie Foster's role in the 1997 movie *Contact*, after the novel of the same title by Carl Sagan. Foster plays a passionate radio astronomer who discovers an intelligent signal broadcast from outer space. She and her fellow scientists decipher the message and uncover detailed instructions for building a mysterious machine, which some fear will lead to the possible destruction of our planet and species. Reichek is fascinated by the fact that the United States government endorses this type of endeavor in the name of technological advancement, as traces of scientific knowledge and the history of Western visual culture are blasted into outer space in a code inherited from Morse. Yet the explicitly hand-made quality of the marks in *SETI*, the jagged cross-stitches of embroidered black thread against linen, emphasizes the impossibility of geometric perfection in any form of communication, no matter how sophisticated the technology.

In this regard Reichek has traced her focus on the subjective cycle of mark-making to her interest in George Steiner's theories of the construction of language and translation. Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) served as a direct inspiration for her 2004 exhibition of that title, in which *SETI* first appeared, and offered the artist a comprehensive theory for the investigation of the phenomenology and processes of translation in and between languages. Grounding his argument in linguistic history and theories of how language creates order (starting from the chaos caused by the fall of the biblical Tower of Babel), Steiner views translation as an elevated artistic act in itself: "Successive constructs of the past form a many-stranded helix, with imaginary chronologies spiraling around the neutral stem of 'actual' biological time."[20] Whether moving from Morse's code to the English language, or from one language, artistic medium, or form of technology to another, Reichek theorizes translation as an integral part of both history and everyday communication that creates an embodied effect, in itself a richly complex and meaningful subject matter.

For Reichek, the pictogram transmitted by SETI is explicitly connected to the way popular culture recycles creation myths, most notably the biblical story of

18. SETI home page, at www.seti.org.
19. Reichek, *After Babel Alpha Beta*.
20. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

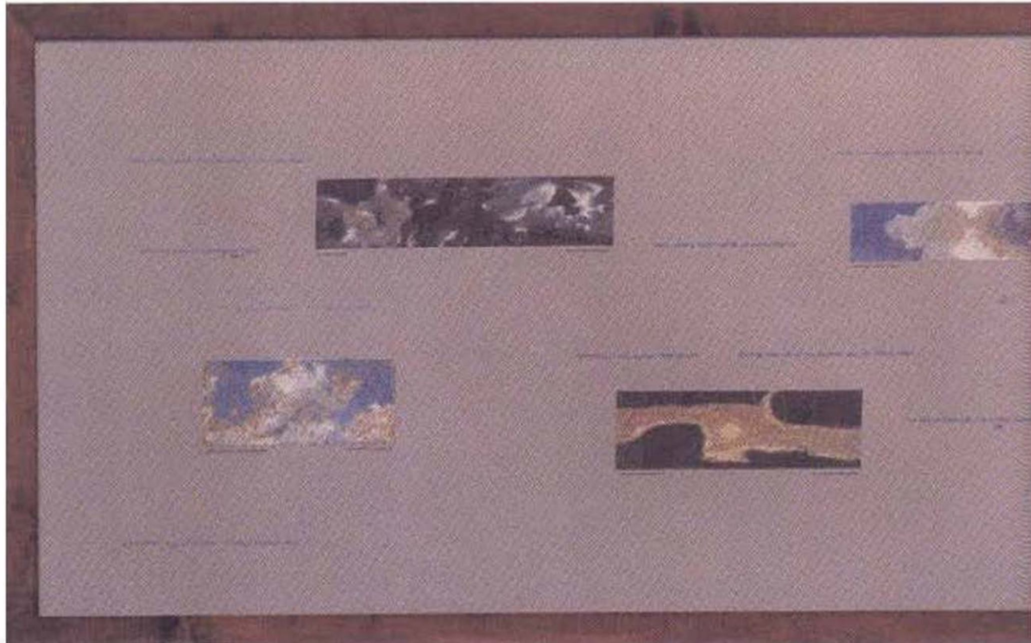
following pages:
Elaine Reichek, *Blade Runner*, 2001, embroidery on linen, 30 x 46 in. (76.2 x 116.8 cm). Collection of Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

Adam and Eve. By evoking this fundamental, Old Testament image as a modern, extraterrestrial communiqué produced in old-fashioned needle and thread, Reichek emphasizes the ironies inherent in our present-day fascination with the binary codes of up-to-date technology and cyberculture. The image of Eve with her hand on her hip and Adam waving at the viewer recalls the artist's virtual exhibition, *madamimadam*, launched in 2003 on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where she had spent a residency two years earlier. At that time Reichek created a pastiche of hand-stitched embroideries in dialogue with sixteen of the museum's holdings of famous works of art that evoked the Adam and Eve theme. Reichek's pieces referred stylistically to artists ranging from Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer to Paul Gauguin, René Magritte, and Robert Smithson. The embroidered imagery was accompanied by quotations from a wide range of sources: the Bible, John Milton, Mary Shelley, Charles Darwin, Ray Bradbury, and *Blade Runner*, the popular "man versus machine" film of 1982 directed by Ridley Scott after the novel by Philip K. Dick. For this particular piece Reichek read the script of *Blade Runner* and scrutinized every version of the film while simultaneously studying the Gardner collection, with emphasis on works of art from the Renaissance onward that represent Western creation myths from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the resulting digital project, Reichek cleverly overcame restrictions in Gardner's will, which stipulates that her installation can never be altered, by installing her hand-embroidered samplers infused with modern, sci-fi references in the galleries on Sunday evenings, only to be filmed with a digital camera (so that artificial lighting would not be necessary) on Mondays, when the Museum was closed to the public, and then removed.

In *madamimadam*, Reichek thus staged the first digital exhibition in the Gardner Museum by installing her ironic samplers beside works in the permanent collection and then creating a digital record of the exhibition, available to viewers only on the Museum's website and an accompanying DVD. Not only did she intentionally subvert Gardner's legacy, she produced a digital project that investigates the role of the needlewoman in the processes of reproduction of both people and art.[21] Like her hand-embroidered image of the originary couple in *SETI*, *madamimadam* also offers a conceptual critique of the concepts of originality, creation, and communication in our current digital age. As a virtual project it reiterates Reichek's fascination with the intersection of these themes in the visual and scientific practice of Morse: "If he made a virtual gallery at the Louvre, I made a virtual gallery at the Gardner; and I did it by using technology."[22] With her cross-stitches emulating Morse code, while simultaneously referencing the fusion of Western creation myths and science fiction, Reichek in fact pushes Morse's dual project in art and technology even further by offering a contemporary feminist twist on theories of remediation. Like Morse at the Louvre, she removes the famous works in Gardner's collection from their social-historical contexts both of production and collection, and deliberately juxtaposes images and texts referencing fertility, creation, and technological advancement from different historical moments.

Other recent hand-embroidered pieces explore even more explicitly the ways in which we interact with the history of art and technology in the age of the internet and search engines like "Google Images." In *A Lexicon of Clouds* (2006),

21. See Plant.
22. Telephone interview with the author, September 28, 2007.

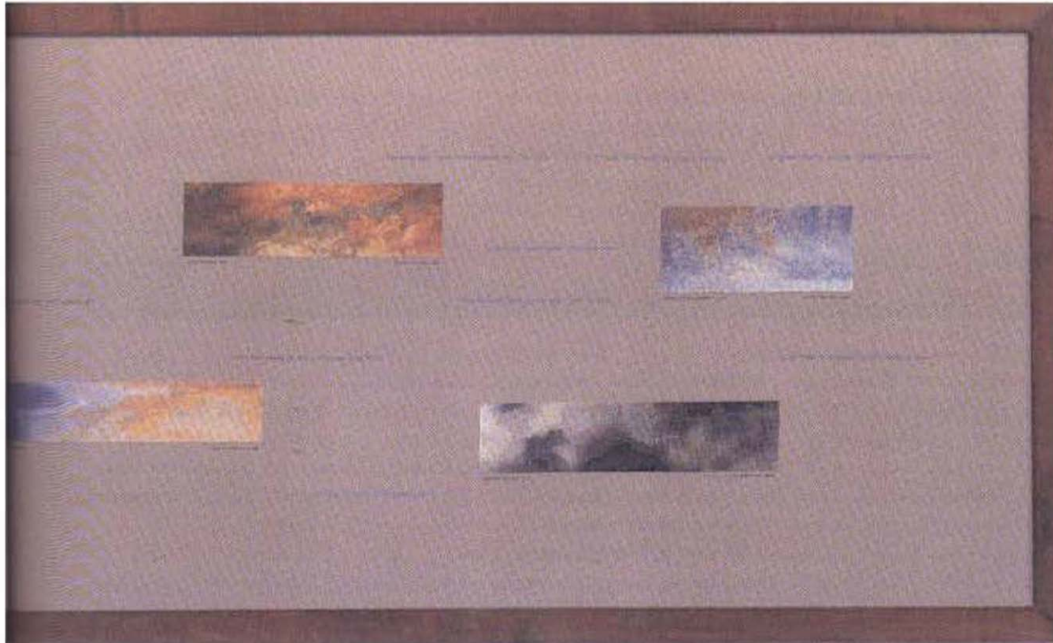


Elaine Reichek, *A Lexicon of Clouds*, 2006, hand embroidery on linen, 33 in. x 10 ft. (83.8 x 304.8 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

Reichek began her research process once again by surfing the web, this time looking for the best possible scanned images of famous art-historical representations of clouds by artists ranging from James McNeill Whistler to El Greco, Nicolas Poussin, Morse, J. M. W. Turner, and Gerhard Richter. She then digitally manipulated these selected scans and ran each through software to create a map of a small section of each image, resulting in a coded embroidery chart that became a template for her piece. The next step was to select embroidery threads from the enormous array of prefabricated colors available in commercial fabric outlets. Reichek has long been fascinated by another technological feat, Sir William Henry Perkin's invention of commercial dye in 1856, and takes great pleasure in revealing how the evolution of artificial color has influenced her practice of remediating the art-historical canon.

The result is a gorgeous, hand-embroidered "virtual gallery" of colorful clouds, carefully constructed from some of the "greatest hits" of art history, paired with text from Wallace Stevens's 1924 poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." The piece offers yet another ironic homage both to Morse and Google, and embraces all the connections inherent in the relationship between the pixel and the stitch. It communicates name recognition of canonical artists through precise combinations of dots and patterns, elucidating the concepts of color, line, image, and text. Who could have imagined that the disparate traditions of the Western art-historical canon, anonymous "women's needlework," and modern technology could be so integrally related? After contemplating Reichek's *Lexicon of Clouds*, how can we not?

A Lexicon of Clouds asks the timely question of how we know what constitutes



the "best" digital scan of any given image from the history of art or from popular culture. Reproductions of Richter's paintings, for example, are impossible to read on the web, yet these are precisely the images that the public comes to know and appreciate, and therefore associate with the artist's name. Reichek's hand-embroidered work after a digital scan of his *Wolken-Clouds* of 1970 points to the element of accident in how those of us who are embroiled in the business of making, exhibiting, and writing about art and its history come to select, alter, and reproduce specific visual images based on our subjective interactions with digital images available on the internet. By taking that practice back to her studio in the laborious process of generating hand-made embroideries with predyed threads, Reichek reveals the circular irony of the history of mark-making and recording—of visual culture.

A Lexicon of Clouds also raises questions about how so many of the digital images of art available on the web are often reproductions of objects that have recently or not yet been sold, the remainders, so to speak, that have now become the most publicly accessible digital traces of the artist's hand. This fascinating aspect of our technological age is ripe for exploration by all branches of the art world; our field is fast becoming one of convenience, where artists and institutions that cannot afford to subscribe to costly digital archive services such as ArtStor or to create and manage elaborate digital-image databases are relying exclusively on the visual material available to them on the web (or on their own scans from reproductions in books). Indeed it has become common practice when researching lesser-known artists whose works are dispersed in private collections and largely invisible to the public to grab for analysis and even

Elaine Reichek, *Translation*, 2006, digital embroidery on linen, 15 x 52 in. (38.1 x 132.1 cm). Private collection (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

publication the first scan of a work that recently has sold at auction. What, exactly, do we know about the long and involved processes of translation from the original work of art to that digital file that we have so quickly downloaded? How do the arbitrary conditions of reproduction, translation, and remediation affect our ultimate selection of the works of art that are worthy of study, as well as our interpretation of them?

Translation (2006) is a pivotal piece in addressing these questions about what is lost in the artificial process of representation. Here Reichek moves from hand-embroidery to the computer-programmable sewing machine to comment on the complete erasure of the artist's hand in the processes of artistic creation and reproduction. She pays tribute to Lawrence Weiner, the sculptor whose medium is language and who in 1968 concluded that the actual construction of a work of art was not critical to its existence in the world. This digitally embroidered piece on linen quotes from Weiner's 1993 *Specific and General Works*.[23] Like many of Weiner's linguistic works of art, this one describes material processes and physical conditions; it delineates space and indicates the means of its own fabrication. In Reichek's piece the digital sewing machine mimics the motion of a hand, as we saw with Morse's handwriting on the curtain, yet in this case the sans-serif script in black thread on white linen refuses to let go of the canvas. Reichek deliberately left what are called "jump threads," the literal traces of horizontal thread that, while usually clipped off, here hold together the words that are the focal point of the piece. These Morse-like dashes demonstrate the artist's commitment to leaving as much evidence as possible of the translation process, whether references to digital scans, actual pixels, color or thread choices, or other traces of the artist's band. Her goal is for her works literally to look like translations and, in so doing, to call attention to the subjective manner in which art history and visual culture are constructed, transmitted, and transferred.

Most recently Reichek has been engaged with the production of what she calls her "fabric swatch" pieces after the canon of modern and contemporary art history, produced on computer-programmed sewing machines. This series, created in 2006–7, features over one hundred small square pieces hung in varied groupings that isolate sections of famous works by well-known modern artists such as Piet Mondrian, Henri Matisse, and Andy Warhol, as well as living artists including Bridget Riley, Damien Hirst, and Kara Walker.[24] In each case, Reichek

23. Lawrence Weiner, *Specific and General Works* (Villeurbanne, France: Le Nouveau Musée/Institut d'art contemporain, 1993). For a recent analysis of Weiner's linguistic works, see *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
24. Press release for *Pattern Recognition*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, October 2007.

has produced uniformly scaled, machine-embroidered square "swatches" after icons of the artist's best-known works and then stretched them onto stretcher bars and installed them in diverse groupings.

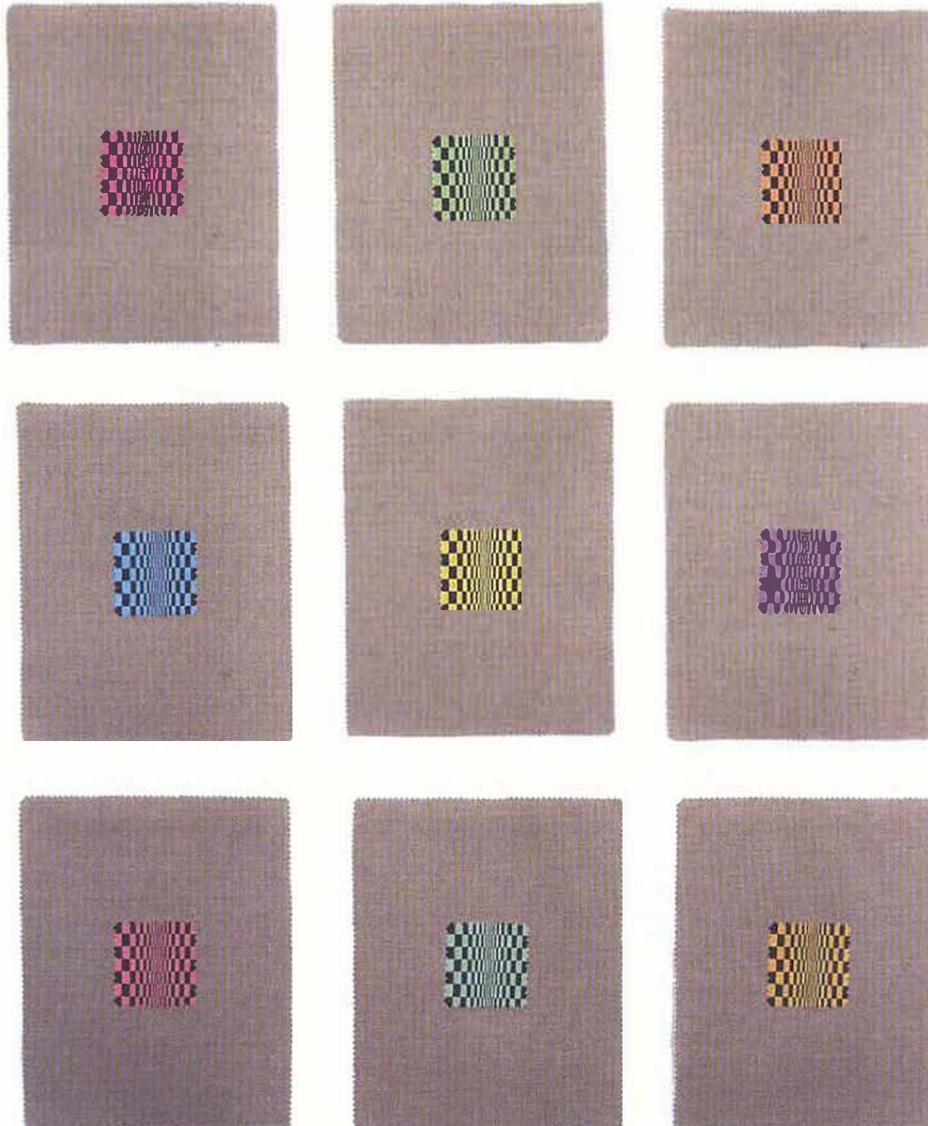
This series immediately indexes these classic modern and contemporary artworks and transforms them into something new by returning them to "fabric-based traditions of pattern and design" to which they are indebted and at the same time "updating them with a hyper-modern form of production."[25] Reichek's goal is to explore the relationship between the surface design of painting and its support—a flat piece of canvas or fabric. "I tried to turn contemporary art history into textiles, or a swatch book," she explains of the series.[26] We might think back to the interpretation of Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* as an 1830s critique of the rehanging of the Salon Carré following "populist" tastes, though here Reichek moves away from Morse in her obvious desire to point to analogies between the fashion industry and the contemporary art market.

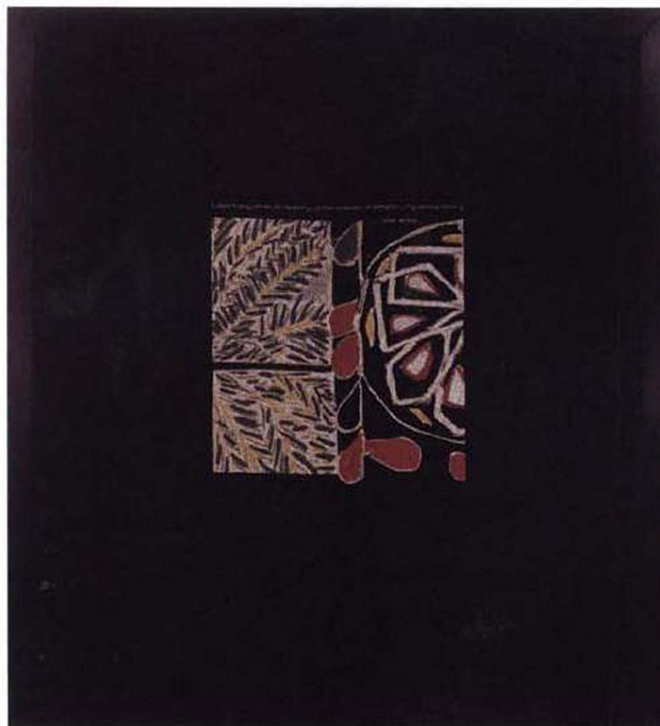
For her most recent exhibition of this series, *Pattern Recognition* (2007), Reichek created a swatch book to include in the gallery as "a set of duplicates of her own framed digital embroideries, now bound into the kind of sample-book used for centuries in the fabric industry."[27] Her embroidered play on Marcel Duchamp's last painting on canvas, *Tu m'* (1918), and on Warhol's seriality inspires viewers to ask how specific images become the *icons* of any given artist. For example, the optical pattern used by Riley in black and white in her 1961 *Movement in Squares* existed in textile patterns long before the artist became famous for her paintings in the mid-twentieth century, yet Reichek applied eye-popping "fashion" colors in order to play with the concept of this bold imagery as the icon of the artist.

Matisse emerges as one of the forerunners of this practice for Reichek—the Frenchman, originally from the small French textile town of Le Cateau-Cambrésis, has been celebrated in an international exhibition for his lifelong fascination with the history of textiles.[28] One of Reichek's recent handmade embroideries reproduces a detail of his *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948), a painting that includes a reproduction of a section of cloth from his own textile collection, referencing its profound impact on his art throughout his career. He referred to this collection—which included Turkish robes, African wall hangings, resist-dyed cotton found at Parisian flea markets, and *haute couture* gowns—as his "working library" and most significant source of inspiration for the imagery that recurred in his oeuvre. By restoring the decorative patterns that fascinated Matisse and others to their textile origins, Reichek probes the cycling of images among art, design, and popular culture. The integral relationship between the pixel and the stitch once again serves as the foundation for revealing how high-tech projects are grounded in a long aesthetic tradition, which is in turn based on the history of mechanical production and communication. Reichek also encourages her viewers to ponder the obvious connections between the economics of the commercial art world and that of the textile industry, where fashion has long served as a commodity that informs the remediation of popular imagery.

As a whole, Reichek's digitally embroidered swatch series, by calling the viewer's attention to multiple layers of translations and subjectivities (from the homogenization of color in scanned images to digital embroideries, and back and forth between "high" and "low" to "high" again), asks not only what is

25. Ibid.
26. Telephone interview with the author, December 13, 2006.
27. Press release for *Pattern Recognition*.
28. *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams* took place at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2004, Le Musée Matisse, Le Cateau-Cambrésis, in 2004, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2005.





Elaine Reichek, *Egyptian Curtain*, 2007, embroidery on linen, 54¾ x 49¾ in. (139.1 x 126.4 cm). Collection of Museum of Arts and Design, New York (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York)

Elaine Reichek, *Bridget Riley 1–9*, 2006, digital embroidery on linen, 54 x 42½ in. (130.8 x 108 cm) (artwork © Elaine Reichek; photograph provided by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica)

the icon of any given painter in art history, but who chooses it, and whether it changes over time and according to fashion. How do they choose it, and which images read best? As a whole, this digitally embroidered series explores how fashion does, in fact, dictate what is in vogue in art history and also how much artists cater to the latest trend of what looks best in an image. By mining hand-embroidered samplers, a tradition long associated with feminine domesticity, Reichek infuses her work with both the history of technology and the most up-to-date questions posed by contemporary consumers of art in a digital age. Whether translating art history, the results of Google searches, or radio transmissions into space that have been funded by the American government, Reichek's most recent hand-, machine-, and digitally produced samplers offer a powerful critique of the concepts of originality, reproduction, and communication in contemporary visual culture.

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