

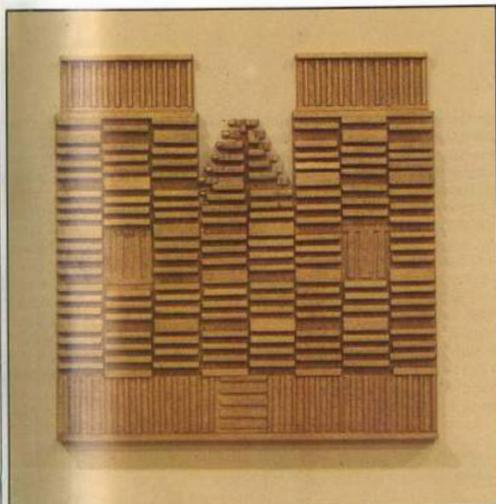


Elaine Reichek, *My House*, 1980. *Mixed media*, 3 x 17". *Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.*

## VERBAL IMAGE/WRITTEN OBJECT: CONNECTION AS MEANING IN THE WORK OF ELAINE REICHEK

CORINNE ROBINS

Elaine Reichek has been fearless about asking "who am I" and "what is my work about" in every area of her life. Her conceptual art is of interest because it gives us more to see and think about.

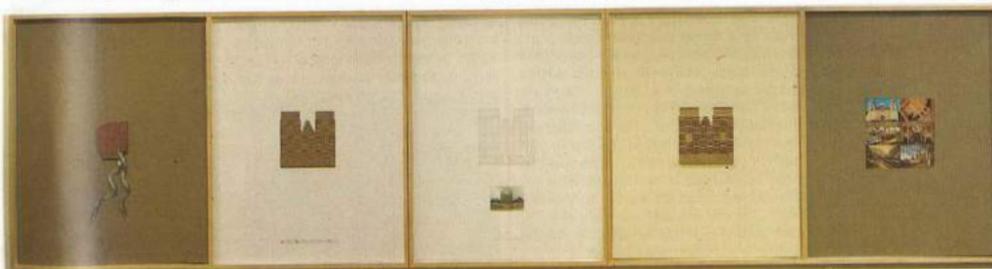


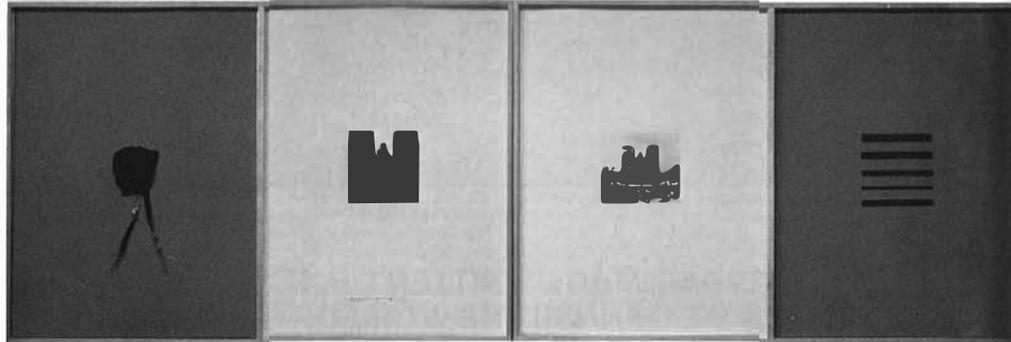
Elaine Reichek, *Sight-Seeing (detail)*, 1980.

Elaine Reichek, *Sight-Seeing*, 1980. *Mixed media*, 38 x 136". *Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.*

I have stepped through the looking glass as I travel, visually, from baby caps to castles, from mittens to archetypal houses, from knitting instructions in which movement operation is graphed to arrive at building moldings. In one piece, there is Whistler's Mother with a new face; in another, coloring book illustrations, both inferring that if you understand the process it will take you everywhere but, ultimately, the journey comes down to each artist's and each viewer's own way of being. Post-modernism, specifically after minimalism and the pattern painting reaction—are we truly back to more is more, to much of a muchness with centuries of art to be rifled, through which process, hopefully, we will then come out with ourselves—whoever that is? Conceptual art in the late Sixties was art reduced to semantics, to art about questions that became verbal statements on the wall. Conceptual art in the Eighties is still about questions, but about visual logic and a-logic, about images in space coming from and leading to the making of things, to real-life objects. It is associative, narrative, and cumulative without being haphazard. Conceptual art today is the opposite of the collage aesthetic which takes the found object as its starting point and builds a formal structure on the ritualizing of chance, upon a deliberately innocent reshuffling of ordinary and personal objects with conventional art materials. Conceptual art is almost hyperconscious in its concern with human thought processes, in its stringent analyses of how we perform the miracle of getting from one side of the street to the other, and in its examination of the inherent meanings in the ritual aspects of life.

Birth, death, puberty—the moments of change remain, even in the sophisticated 1980s, occasions for special, ceremonial dress. Birth, childhood, growth are traditional, aesthetic themes and/or women's themes. As for knitting, it is of course one of





women's traditional crafts. Thus, Elaine Reichek, by choosing to examine birth and growth through the craft of knitting, is, in true Wonderland fashion, looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope. Except that now, in 1981, no one feels certain about what is the 'right' or 'wrong' end—not to mention the serious or unserious way—of looking at anything. Reichek investigates the process of knitting, specifically the amount of different gestures (moves) involved in carrying out the rows of stitches required to make a baby's cap, and charts this information on graph paper. Her knitting graphs are made in two different colors and an assortment of different shades because the artist assigns a different color or color gradation to express differing stitch movements as part of her process of rendering the making of a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface.

A knitted black baby cap is represented as a two-colored (purple and black) edifice in the accompanying graph drawing. In another piece, a three-part work graphs a baby mitten, a mitten with a separate thumb, and a full-fingered glove, each represented by increasingly complex orange and black graph drawings (whose shape and coloring suggest ancient Greek pottery). The work, a 27" by 103" by 2" paper, yarn, and pencil piece done by the artist in 1979, is called *Direction/Translation/Operation*, which is a description of the artist's processes in making the objects as well as the work. "Direction/Translation/Operation" represents a description of one sort of natural learning process. Following directions, making translations (words to movements), and creating new combinations for ourselves are creative aspects of every person's normal growth processes, and the progression of graph edifices involved in Reichek's work is at once a witty and symbolic expression of the expanded world open to the grown hand. The artist literally confronts us simultaneously with three—little, big, and bigger—visual steps in both flat and objective representations, thus presenting a "think" piece as a wholly visual experience.

Reichek made the first of her pieces involving knitting codes in 1979. One such work, a two-panel piece entitled *Laura's Layette*, consisted of one panel on which is mounted a white sweater (a gift to Reichek's daughter Laura) on a dark ground and a contrasting panel of a graph drawing of the knitting operations required to make the sweater (which end up resembling two different views of a large apartment complex) on a white ground. Accompanying and part of *Laura's Layette* is a booklet of handwritten knitting instructions which ends with a family-type snapshot of a baby wearing the actual sweater. Shortly after finishing this work Reichek taught herself to knit, and she has made all the subsequent objects for the knitting series in her A.I.R. show. The family orientation (Laura is the name of Reichek's oldest child) is part of the work, according to the artist, as is also her choice to explore a craft such as knitting, which is usually specifically regarded as a women's craft. Reichek is very specific about this choice as one deliberately referring to her feminist orientation. But if her work is to be considered at all doctrinaire, the emphasis is as much or more on the conceptual approach. For Reichek, it is knitting as a

Elaine Reichek, *Interior/Exterior*, 1980. Mixed media, 39 x 100".  
Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery.

human motor activity, a human pattern-making construct, that she chooses to examine, to turn inside out, to break down, to free-associate with and fill up again with a host of new meanings and associations. The use of the elaborate baby sweater (which started out as a present given to her daughter) is, of course, part of Reichek's own family history. But the concluding work in the "Laura" series, *Laura's Bikini*, is built around a garment that Reichek knitted herself and which in fact her daughter consented to wear one time only—the time required for taking a picture of her in it for the work's accompanying knitting instruction booklet. Thus, the flesh-colored knitted bikini, as intended, becomes a wholly symbolic puberty garment, serving as symbol and reiteration of Laura's growth patterns in a set of 'funny' shapes.

For her show at the A.I.R. Gallery this February, Reichek made a series of many-paneled works, starting with a 17 foot piece entitled *My House*, which begins with two rust-colored mittens that make two twin house-graph drawings; these, in turn, become a red brick model of a house, which turns into a coloring book drawing of an archetypal country house. Then moves on to photographs of houses and to coloring book images of little girls, and ends with a reproduction of *Whistler's Mother* in which Elaine Reichek knitting assumes the stance of the artist's model. *My House* is, by turns, funny, surprising, scary, and a little sad. On finishing the piece, one looks back to its beginnings to discover its rust mittens taking on a kind of funny poignancy. In a smaller work, *Interior/Exterior*, the artist moves from a black knitted cap to a wood construction of the knitting operation to a touched-up, made-up photograph of the same wood model placed *in situ* to black cornice molding. *Interior/Exterior* makes its associations appear at once unexpected and incontrovertible.

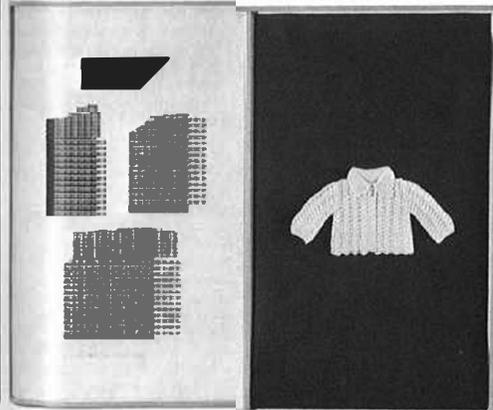
Because of her work's autoholographic subject matter, one is instantly aware of the feminist implications inherent in all of Reichek's knitting pieces, as well as in her earlier sewn paintings. But in her four solo shows to date, equally apparent has been her unremitting emphasis on meaning in terms of structure and sequence. Reichek is a formalist-trained artist, an artist concerned first and foremost with ideas. "Making work look good, be good to look at it," as she once put it, "is the fun part of being an artist." Ideas are the crux of the matter. Ideas and order, her own kind of aesthetic order, reflect the artist's

vision of the world, and the kind of terms and conditions she accepts from it and welcomes as her life. Reichek's world is ordered, wholly structured, and conventional—in exactly the same fashion as Lewis Carroll's in *Through The Looking Glass*. The basic human relationships, all forms as such, are unchanged. You may remember, at one place on the book, wool turns into water, after which point, logically enough, Alice finds herself at sea and having to row with all her might. Traditional leisure games are played with unexpected changes of actors and equipment. The famous croquet game takes place with flamingos for mallets and hedgehogs for balls, and it becomes understandably difficult in a short while to force the hedgehog to move through the wicket and to keep track of one's flamingo, etc. The game, though, does continue as a recognizable variation on formal croquet. In Lewis Carroll's work, the framework, the system, always remains intact.

In a similar fashion, Reichek takes the nuclear family as part of the recognizable beginnings of all our lives, or at the very least, of most of our adult origins, and therefore as logical frame-

work or form for her art. A few months ago, *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article concerned with "The New Extended American Family," profiling a family that was literally made out of the splitting of one half of a couple and the joining of that half with another halved family set, as a result of contemporary mores concerning the changing and adding on of parental partners. No one concerned with the magazine article questioned either the continuity, the importance, or the enduringness of the concept of family (in fact, the writer tended to regard this new extended family form as proof of the everlastingness of the familial concept for human beings). Reichek focuses attention on the formal patterning of our modes of operating in both knitting and in 'family' life, as, for example, what we believe symbolizes our archetypal home and (Whistler's) mother. The family is a structure, a knitting pattern is a structure, a building is a

Elaine Reichek,  
Laura's Layouts, 1979. Mixed media, 52 x 62". Courtesy A.I.R. Gallery



structure as a ground and a floor are locations having identical functions. Reichek presents all the foregoing ideas as visual statements or constructs connected in exactly the same way as her 1980 postcard piece entitled *Sight-Seeing* is: a piece which speaks of the notion of concepts being packed inside one another, i.e., the site and the sight both being something for someone to see.

The A.I.R. show consists only of examples of Reichek's knitting pieces, all of which are one kind of physical expression of this many-sided conceptual artist's world view. Since 1975, when she showed raw canvas paintings consisting of lines either penciled in or stripes made by using masking tape, the artist has been involved with making serial pieces. Her first show was a visual discussion of what was left to say about the grid in American art by 1975. The next year, in 1976, Reichek showed a series of black organdy pieces in 13-by-14-inch framed units, each exhibiting a geometric shape created by layering and overlapping of the material. Reichek, who studied with Ad Reinhardt in the early Sixties and received a heavy dose of formalist art training, was involved with carrying on a formalist, minimalist dialogue, but by using such flimsy feminist materials she rendered her intent suspect. By 1976, Reichek discovered for herself the importance of both materials and scale in representing her view of what were 'real' and what were 'art world' concerns. Since 1976, the artist's work has been divided between gently and exquisitely satirizing serial preoccupations—for example, by carrying them out in sewn pink squares on the one hand, and by constructing tiny beds with various patterned coverlets in one set and individual artists' images on another set to bring and somehow join together both these areas of her life.

Reichek has been fearless about asking 'who am I' and 'what is my work about' in every area of her life: In this, she exemplifies the Henry James American heroine and the Jamesian belief "that the unexamined life was one not worth living, and certainly one not worth writing about." At the same time, the autobiographical elements in Reichek's work are never finally the issue and, indeed, are often misleading. Point of fact: It was only after she became interested in the concept of the knitting operation and had pieces made concerned with knitting as a mode of working that Reichek herself learned to knit. Also, her being a feminist led to her preoccupation with the implications of knitting and women's needlework, not the other way around. It is the formal and structural processes these human acts engender that fascinate Elaine Reichek. Her work, above all, is her way of commenting on and registering for others the expanding domains of her private universe. In a closet at P.S. 1, Reichek built a room consisting of a large bed surrounded by 15 miniature 8-by-12-inch beds, each sporting its own art trademark—i.e., a Mondrian bed, a Matisse bed, a Frank Stella bed, etc. It was a dreamy, funny, and not to say a little nightmarish room for an artist to contemplate. More important, it was also a statement about the artist's sense of her own art history. The heroes of 20th-century art, the giants of modernism, surround and look down on the contemporary, post-modern artist who, in this case, is involved in thinking through a place for herself and her superconscious post-modernist vision of the double world she lives in.

In this world there are no innocent occupations, no processes that aren't finally informed and shaped by mental considerations. We knit with a variety of purposes and goals in mind. We knit to make something, to relax ourselves, and/or to "be busy" with our hands and to further fill up our time. We think to find what we know, what we feel, to find out about our own and others' drives and motives, and, finally, about the meanings of their and our acts. Reichek's art simultaneously thinks and sees, does and analyzes its own doing. It is a world of real objects, two-dimensional expressions of objects and associated visual images. It is a world that speaks about the shapes and patterns of our thoughts and moves. Her superconscious art is, finally, of interest in terms of the dictionary definition of "interest" as being "something that arouses curiosity, fascinates, holds the attention" and is "an excess or bonus beyond what is expected or due." Elaine Reichek's conceptual art is of interest because it gives us more to see and think about.

## ELAINE REICHEK

Reichek's use of colored and metallic threads sewn on geometric figures which are cut from organdy fabric deserves special consideration. By incorporating "handwork" into a complex structural system, the artist validates the use of a traditional craft for a purely pictorial context and assures that method will not be obscured. The artist uses simple systems, often derived from mathematical relationships, to create a complex visual experience. The work is made in series, but does not need to be read serially; the nature of the series is associative rather than progressive. Each series represents the clarity of an idea stated but not necessarily completed. The individual units are uniformly small, and the number of works included in a series range from six to forty-eight.

Materials employed by the artist—mesh, organdy in various shades, colored silk threads, and metallic threads of various weights—are rich with associations. The visual distraction which might have been caused by the sensuousness of the materials and the skillfully handcrafted details is avoided by the logical and austere structures in which the works are placed.

The artist considers the effects of both layering and transparency. Line becomes palpable and illusionism recurs. Her method of working is always in evidence, and no gimmicks are used to achieve the desired effects. Pieces are compressed between two sheets of plexiglass and can be removed from the wall so that both sides can be examined. The work is deliberate, methodical, and painstakingly executed. Accident plays a part only in the fact that these are hand-fabricated, not machine-made, objects. However, the concern for clarity and the formal attention to detail does not obscure the expressive nature of the statement which results.

Elaine Reichek's series can be viewed as personal diaries with a private language of the artist's devising. She makes statements about her life as an artist while simultaneously exploring the infinite varieties

of expression to be achieved by utilizing a small, intimate format.

One series includes twenty pink rectangles which were produced over an extended period of time. The separate pieces allude to Reichek's personal life which combines professional commitments with child-rearing. She has learned to structure her life into distinct units. Reichek finds that she lives "in small time segments, and these small blocks of time add up to a life." Hence her choice of a series of elements, all with a different internal configuration but universally giving evidence of the time and diligence taken in their preparation, is especially appropriate.

But individual units also make reference to a range of artistic antecedents. Some segments are derived from paintings by such artists as Frank Stella and Mark Rothko. Others allude to architectural forms: the modern skyscraper or a simple window. Crosses in medieval manuscripts or the decorative carpet pages of illuminated books are other sources. In addition, these handcrafted pieces recall artifacts created by women of the past. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, women often embroidered carefully designed objects for the court

or for the Church. Reichek's small pieces of fabric stitched with costly threads recall altarcloths, precious wall hangings, or personal linens created for a royal patron.

But her works also demonstrate the artist's interest in sophisticated pictorial systems. Each unit is the solution of a formal problem or a visual puzzle which the artist has invented. Contrasts abound: thick and thin lines are reversed, open and closed areas are alternated, and grid-like patterns of various proportions are considered.

A series of forty-eight units is also included in Reichek's current exhibition. Each segment includes four parallelograms of uniform size which have been cut from gray organdy. By overlapping the basic geometric figures and turning them in various directions, the artist has explored a full range of configurations which can result from the limited number of forms she has chosen. Because the organdy fabric is transparent, the overlapping parallelograms effect a complex visual presentation. Purple thread has been stitched around the outer edges of each completed configuration and serves to emphasize the sense of illusionism.

Fans or butterflies are suggested by another series

which Reichek refers to as "factoring pieces." The artist investigates color relationships which result from the overlapping of small pieces of sheer fabric in a variety of hues.

Systemic art has interested many artists in recent years, but Elaine Reichek challenges the impenetrable rigidity and austerity of the serial approach. She fuses her complex pictorial systems with personal experience. The materials chosen and the methods employed introduce strongly expressive qualities and visual excitement to the formal structure. Reichek refers to the small parcels of time which women use for their creative endeavors because they often must combine their work with other responsibilities. Her assertion of this kind of a statement is never trite, however. She prevents her artistic production from an overindulgence in feminist issues by the formal austerity of a series. The artist stimulates our perception of innumerable relationships between geometry and pictorial concepts while at the same time delighting the viewer with personally fabricated objects made of rich materials. (Parsons-Dreyfuss, *January 4-27*)

Joan Marter

Elaine Reichek, Untitled (detail), 1976-77. *Organdy, thread, paper, pencil on plexiglass (6 of 20 panels), each 9 x 10".* entire work approx. 22 x 108". Courtesy Parsons-Dreyfuss Gallery.

