

BAD AT SPORTS

Sarcastic Flowers: Karen Reimer & Conceptual Craft

December 12, 2011

Guest Post by Michael Milano



Karen Reimer, embroidering on cotton pillowcases, detail. 2011.

Among the many forms conceptual art of the 60's and 70's took, two major threads can be identified. The first, following Sol Lewitt's definition of conceptual art in which the "idea becomes the machine that makes the art,"# is characterized by developing a set of rules or instructions that are then slavishly followed in the production of the artwork. The goal of this method of working is to limit or eliminate the subjectivity of the author by dividing the production of a work into two phases: a mental phase, which consists of planning, designing, and constructing a set of rules or system that will produce the work; and a second, manual phase, the physical construction of the art [object], in which the "execution is a perfunctory affair," and where the "fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better."# The second major thread of conceptual art follows Joseph Kosuth's definition that art should question the nature of art. This thread, characterized by its use and reliance on language, accepts the imperative that art ought to interrogate the foundations of its own being.

Karen Reimer's work has explored both of these threads of conceptual art, albeit through the use of traditional craft methods and materials. In 2008 Reimer exhibited "Endless Set" at Monique Meloche Gallery. Following Lewitt's definition, it is a highly systematic work that obeys a pre-established set of rules. The work is a set of pillowcases, pieced together from scraps of fabric, with a prime number applied onto it. "Each pillowcase is made of the same number of fabric scraps as the prime number decorating it, i.e. prime number 3 is applied onto a pillowcase made of 3 scraps of fabric. The white fabric prime number is the same inches high as itself, i.e., prime number 3 is 3 inches high. As the prime numbers get larger than the pillowcases, the excess white fabric is folded back and layered over. As the prime numbers get increasingly larger, there is more and more layering and they more completely obscure the pillowcase made of increasingly smaller scraps."# The pillowcases retain their conventional dimensions (20 x 32 in.), but as the white applied prime number grows in size and increasingly

obscures the multi-color fabric fragments, the excess material folded back upon itself gives the works increasing thickness and the appearance of mere stack of white fabric. The work is theoretically open ended, running off to infinity as the prime numbers do. However "Endless Set" will inevitably come to an end at the point in which the fabric scraps that make up the pillowcase support become too many and too small to physically stitch together. "Endless Set" also fruitfully disrupts the goal of working systematically, as defined by Lewitt, which sought to eliminate expressive content and problematize authorship. Rather than eliminating the subject, the author reappears in the form of handicraft, complicating the delineation between mental and manual labor. In "Endless Set" the hand returns devoid of expressionism, and the author returns equipped with an ambivalence about authorship. Because it is important that the work is hand-made, but irrelevant whether the artist's own hand made the work, Reimer has converted the author from a *who* to a *what*: an author is present, but their specific identity is negligible. In this way, Reimer allows conceptual art to be embodied as well as abstract. While the idea is still the engine, it is a hand that is the machine which makes the art.

On the other hand, Reimer's current show at Monique Meloche Gallery follows Kosuth's definition. The work again consists of a number of standard size pillow cases hand embroidered/embellished with either text or image. The majority of the works are text based, consisting of quotes from poet Emily Dickinson, scientist Richard Feynman, art historian John Ruskin, and author Mark Twain, among others. A central motif, whether pictorial or textual, is the flower—a quintessential form of domestic embellishment. Some of the of the quoted texts warn against using flowers or flowery language, consistent with early modernism's negative assessment of ornament. For example, in the embroidered Mark Twain quote, "Don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. An adjective habit, a wordy, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice," the words flower and flowery are highlighted in red and ~~struck through~~. It is this floweriness that is at the heart of the work, revealing its logic and its relationship to Kosuth's definition of conceptual art. Because it is non-utilitarian and decorative, embroidery is inherently flowery; it is a useless, lyrical embellishment upon a utilitarian form. Reimer, however, by her choice of texts creates work that is simultaneously an embellishment (embroidery on cloth, that is not structurally integral), and an interrogation of embellishment (texts that question the function or justification of embellishment itself). Likewise, the treatment of the texts is not overly flowery, and yet their existence on the pillowcases can be described as nothing other than a flowery embellishment. In this context, the few works which actually picture flowers must be understood as tongue-and-cheek gestures, or at least "Sarcastic Flowers" as another pillowcase states.

Reimer's work would be central to working out what a conceptual craft might mean. In this context, conceptual would merely mean that the idea is the most important aspect of the work; i.e. "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," or that craft, like art, must question its own grounds for being. And by craft we would not necessarily mean craftsmanship, skill, specialization, or a fetishism of the handmade. We merely mean that labor (both mental and physical) can not be ignored; i.e. that it is integral to the content of the work. This is one of the things that a conceptual craft would have to offer the historical category of conceptual art: labor, whether mental or manual, is not negligible. The pillowcase embroidered with the Ruskin quote states: "I believe the right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this; was the maker happy while he was about it?" Conceptual craft, however, would ask: was the maker rigorous and systematic in their making? did the maker interrogate or problematize the methods and materials they are employing? is the maker's labor part of the content of the work? Reimer's art answers yes to all these questions. Whether working systematically within a set of rules or using traditional craft techniques to question themselves, the work of Karen Reimer is a conceptual craft.

footnote-ie stuff:

1. Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", Artforum, June 1967
2. Ibid.
3. from Karen Reimer's website: <http://www.karenreimer.info/work/endless-set/text/endless-set>

<http://badatsports.com/2011/sarcastic-flowers-karen-reimer-conceptual-craft/>