

SUTURES AND WOUNDS IN A PAPER ARMOURY

Fritha Langerman

Paper armour: a material oxymoron, both permeable and impermeable. This sets the scene for my current body of work, which uses outdated South African school text books as material for the construction of a series of objects based on mediæval armour. The work is primarily concerned with education, accumulation of knowledge and systems of learning. This stems from both my personal interest in the volume of redundant and forgotten knowledge acquired at school level; and recent panic about the direction of education—what is to be taught, how and by whom?

The union of armour and didactic texts invariably prompts such clichés as “knowledge is power” and “arm yourself with knowledge”. Cliché often undermines truth and it is for this reason that I use these as titles for the work. A sound education is thought to provide opportunities and offer a defence against the outside world, the irony being that it affords no safeguards against unemployment. The armour has its chinks.

The format of the works is determined by a wire armature based on some aspect of armour: helmets, shields, gauntlets or body braces. Text books are deconstructed, stained and waxed, giving them a temporary layer of durability, selectively permeable. These waxed papers are stitched, woven, embroidered and quilted onto the armature in designs derived from the mediæval armour. Interestingly, embroidery and quilting were both present on the mediæval battlefield: quilting as a protective layer and embroidery in heraldic banners.

My work involves the contradictory acts of wounding and repairing: the books are symbolically torn to pieces and then reconciled by the stitch. It examines the contradiction between stitched lesions in remission and potential siege implied by the armour. This is complicated by the metaphor of education as armour. My selection of the stitch and the book as two primary devices requires further explication. International and local artists are increasingly turning to the stitch as a means of configuring an image. It is only when the stitch is denatured from its historical association with the submissive and the domestic, that we can begin to enjoy its metaphorical potential in art. For this reason, I have chosen to give a brief overview of the historic passage of the stitch.

In Europe, prior to the Renaissance, embroidery enjoyed an equal status with painting and sculpture, but the Renaissance saw a division of labour and the marginalisation of the stitch to the domestic sphere. The story of the stitch is inseparable from feminist theory. Rozika Parker’s seminal text, *The subversive stitch*, archives its social history, drawing parallels between embroidery, submission and the feminine. She stresses that attitudes towards embroidery were/are informed by Victorian ideologies which



Fritha Langerman
Wisdom comes with age (1997) (detail)
Waxed paper, cotton fabric: 450 mm d.

evoked mediæval chivalrous ideals of purity, piety and submission and conflated these with the image of woman as embroiderer. (She writes that this was an inaccuracy as Mediæval embroidery guilds employed both sexes and most of the significant ecclesiastical work was done by men) (Parker 1984:20). The stitch’s emancipation from submission runs parallel to its democratisation. It is fair to say that the majority of societies value embellishment: lavish stitching denoting wealth and status. This can be attributed to the connection between time and value—time and effort are incremental to value. Although all cultures and classes engage in the act of sewing, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries embroidery became associated with class and status as women of the leisured class with free time were able to produce finely stitched work. The stitched quilts produced in pioneer America had a very different significance. Although value was attributed to quality, quilting was an act of community and necessity, making use of remnants to protect and decorate the household.

The move towards a democratic stitch, free from class and gender, was further advanced by the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century. The movement, headed by William Morris, held the utopian ideal that beauty and craftsmanship had the ability to raise the moral tone of society. It was thought that domestic craft was understandable to all levels of society and thus the stitch developed social responsibility.

In the early twentieth century the stitch surfaced from the domestic sphere and moved into fine art. Dadaist Sophie Tauber used stitching as a way of unifying her collage works of 1915, and the Russian Constructivists soon followed suit, using embroidery and textile design as the language of socialism. The Suffragette movement further explored the symbolic potential of the stitch. Banners were stitched with slogans, celebrating feminine strength in an arena previously used to denote submission (Parker 1984:127). No survey would be complete without the mention of Judy Chicago’s *Dinner party* project (1974) which celebrated historical women by using media associated with female production. Runners were stitched in the style and period of each woman as a means of evocation, giving the stitch historical reference.

The significance of the stitch can be seen in terms of its symbolic act. The act is conciliatory as it unites separate units into a whole: it binds and metaphorically heals, suturing together wounds. Weaving and quilting are further unifying acts. The loom uses the intersection of the warp and the weft to bring together opposing threads and the fabric is formed by their mutual support. In my case unrelated texts are integrated by weaving. Quilting is a process that brings together independent parts. Similarly to my working method which uses redundant texts, it



Fritha Langerman
Chinks in the armour (1998)
waxed paper, wood, felt, acrylic cases:
830x600 mm

makes use of left-overs and configures them into a new format.

The stitch is not exclusive to fabric works, but is also used in book production: unifying pages and binding ideas. A book can broadly be defined as an object bearing text or image on a substrate (usually paper) connected by a binding (usually stitched). Within these parameters, my works can be seen as a collection of remade books. The original books used in the production have been disassembled, torn into small fragments and restitched into configurations that bear little significance to their intended sequence, alluding to the reshuffling of curricula, still to be tested in 2005. The reassembling denies a logical reading of the text, and suggests a sub-text: that of illiteracy, a growing problem in South Africa. X-Amos Paul Kennedy, a community book-maker, writes that skill training rather than education is the agenda of most governments, who are threatened by an educated, questioning populace (Alexander 1995:49).

The potential symbolic language of the book has inspired many artists to engage in book production and in the past few decades this has grown to such a degree that print journals dedicate almost as much space to artists' books as printed portfolios. Ann Hamilton (Spector 1995:55) is an artist involved in altering books. In her 1992 project for the New York Museum of Contemporary Art, she selected a number of novels and poetry books, dismantled them and randomly reassembled eight pages in a concertina format. Pebbles were then placed over each letter, making the text illegible. She works with projects of obliteration which rub, tear, and burn texts. Byron Clerex (Alexander 1995:128) is another artist working in a similar mode. He cuts wedges from books into shapes that are in some way symbolically connected to the text. His *Power tool* project takes the form of a hammer and is made from Susan Sontag's text, *Illness as metaphor* (1979) and *AIDS and its metaphors* (1990).

This prompts the question, "what is the appeal of the book?" The book provides new possibilities for the way in which images are accessed and accordingly, interpreted. An active dialogue is entered into between the viewer and the artist as the viewer is able to control how the book is viewed: its chronology, cross referencing, juxtapositions etc. The use of the book as a medium of art communication leads to a democratisation of art production as more viewers have an understanding of the mechanisms of the book than they do of fine art production. While this seems to include a greater audience, it also has the ability to alienate them by challenging and subverting commonly held expectations.

The book in its closed state commands a certain potency as its content is mysterious. The book demands a level of intimacy from the reader who develops a conspiratorial relationship with the



Fritha Langerman
Chinks in the armour (1998)
waxed paper, wood, felt, acrylic cases:
830x600 mm

book. It reveals its contents to the reader alone. This suggests certain power relationships: the power of the knowledge contained in the book and the power of the reader to release the knowledge, provided he/she has the capacity to do so. The extent of respect for the power of the written text is demonstrated by Umberto Eco in his novel, *The name of the rose*, where the church protects its hidden texts to the point of death. The burning of books by radical groups also indicates a fear of the power of information.

This seemingly irreverent desecration has implications for my working method, which destroys text books before reuniting them. Does this violate the unspoken trust between the reader and the text? Does ownership sanctify the right to knowledge, its destruction and formal reinvention; or is this a villainous act? I have ripped the book at the seams and thrown the texts open. This both denies the reader intimacy and, by the placing the works into impenetrable museum type cases, declares the texts impotent.

Books are generally referents to an outside existence. In my works they become self referential as the texts only bear significance as specific kinds of books. The information they contain is illegible and irrelevant and the armour of education offers only a paper protection susceptible to lesions.

References:

- Alexander, C. 1995. *Talking the boundless book: art language and the book arts*. Minnesota: Center for the Book Arts.
Parker, R. 1984. *The subversive stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine*. London: The Woman's Press.
Spector, B. 1995. Residual readings: the altered books of Ann Hamilton. *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, May-June, 55.

Fritha Langerman
Wisdom comes with age (1997)
Waxed paper, cotton fabric; 1350x900 mm (450 mm d.)

