SUTURES AND WOUNDS IN A PAPER ARMOURY

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Paper armour: a material inovorent, 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 This sets the scene for my current body of work, which uses outdated South African school text books as material for the construction of a series of objects based on medieval armour.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 here 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 direction of education—what is to be taught here and by whom?

The format of the works is determined by a wire armature based on some aspect of armour: helmets, shields, gauntlets or body pieces. Test 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 medieval armours. Interestingly, embroidery and quilting were both present on the medieval 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 recurred by the stitch. It examines the contradiction between stitched lesions in remission and potential surge 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 require further exploration. International and local artists are increasingly turning to the stitch as a means of configuring an image. It is only when the stitch is deconstructed from its historical association with the redundant and the domestic, that we can begin to enjoy its metaphorical potential in art. For this reason, I have chosen to give a personal 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 in the domestic sphere. The story of the stitch is inseparable from feminism. Rutha Parker’s seminal text, The universe of stitch, archives its social history, drawing parallels between embroidery, submission and the feminine. She describes that attitudes towards embroidery were/are informed by Victorian ideologies which evoked medieval chivalric ideals of purity, purity and submission and conflated these with the image of woman as embodiment (she writes that this was an inaccuracy as Medieval embroidery guilds employed both men and women in the significant domestic stylistic and technical work that was done by men) (Parker 1984:20). The stitch’s emancipation from submission runs parallel to its democratization. It is fair to say that the majority of societies value embodiment—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 art of sewing, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries embroidery became associated with class and status as women of the leisure class with 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 art 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 Taeuber used stitching as a way of utilising her collage works of 1913, and the Russian Constructivists soon followed suit, using embroidery and textile design as the language of socialism. The Soutage movement further explored the symbolic potential of the stitch. Remmers were stitched with flags, celebrating feminine strength in an arena previously used to denote subserviation (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 contingent as it union separate units into a whole: it binds and metaphorically heals, suturing together wounds. Weaving and quilting are further uniting acts. The loom was the intersection of warp and weft bringing together opposing threads and the fabric is formed by their mutual support. In my case unstated threads are integrated by weaving. Quilting is a process that brings together independent parts. Similarly to my working method which uses redundant texts, it

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Introduction with age (1997) (detail)
Waxed paper, cotton fabric: 450 mm d.
The stitch is not exclusive to fabric works, but is also used in book production: suturing 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, any 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 reassembled into configurations that bear little significance to their intended sequence, alluding to the reshuffling of curricula, still to be tested in 2005. The reassembling denotes a logical reading of the text, and suggests a sub-text: that of literacy, a growing problem in South Africa. XV:Anne Paul Kennedy, a community book-maker writes that while writing 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. Arts Hamilton (Spector 1995:55) is an artist involved in altering books. In her 1995 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 Clares (Alexander 1995:218) 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 text project takes the form of a hammer and is made from Susan Lontos’s text, Illness as metaphor (1976) 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 compositional relationship with the book. It reveals its contents to the reader slowly. This suggests certain power relationships: the power of the knowledge contained provided he/she has the capacity to do so. The extent of respect in his novel, The name of the rose, where the church protects its hid groups also indicates a fear of the power of information.

This seemingly irrelevant desecration has implications for my working method, which destroys text books before reading them. Does this violate the unspoken trust between the reader and the text? Does ownership sanctify the right to knowledge, its destruction and formal reversion; 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 placing the works into impenetrable museum type cases, denies the texts impotence.

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

References:


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Pebble in the armour (1995)

Waxed paper, wood, felt, acrylic cases: 80 x 600 mm