

CONTEMPORARY TEXTILES



the fabric of fine art

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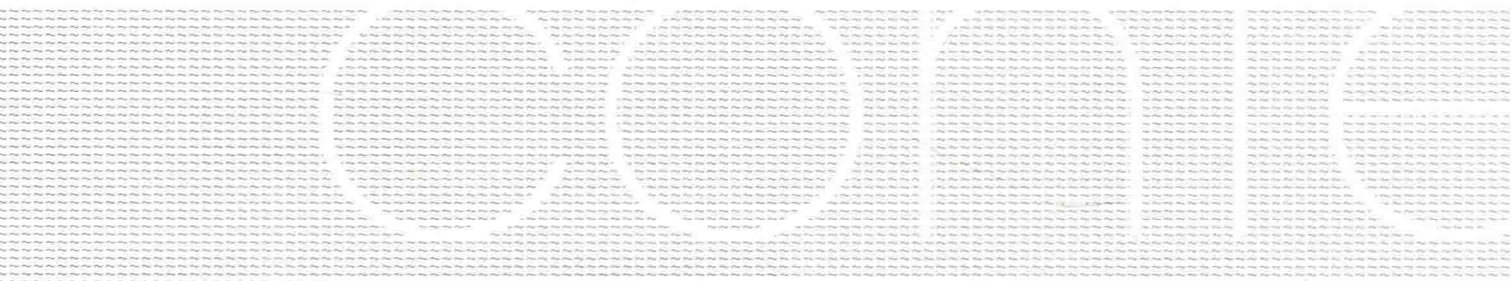
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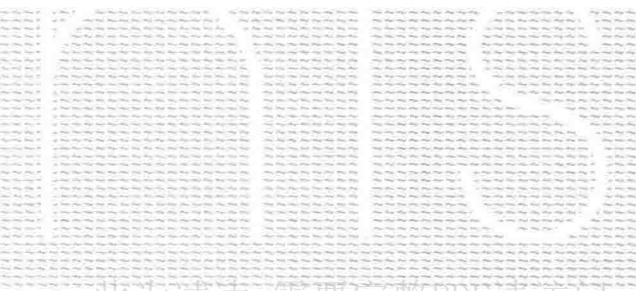
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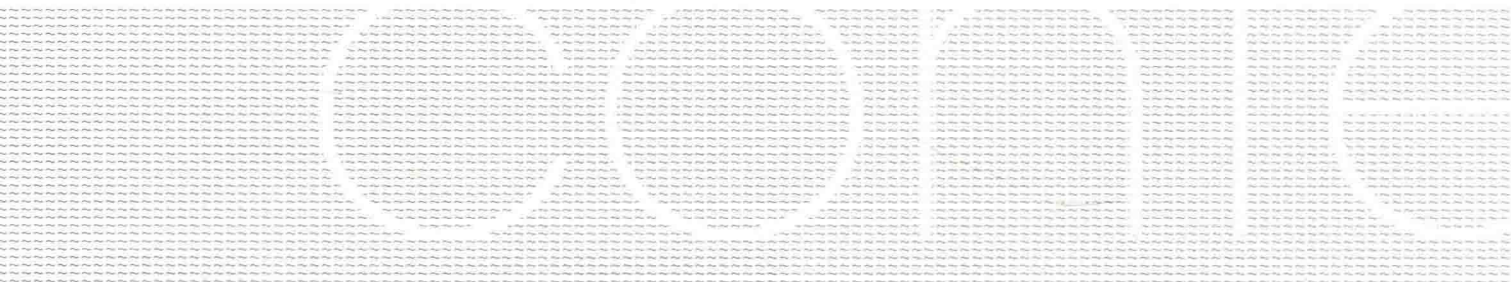
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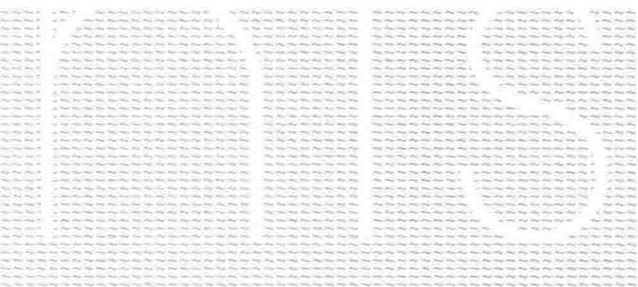
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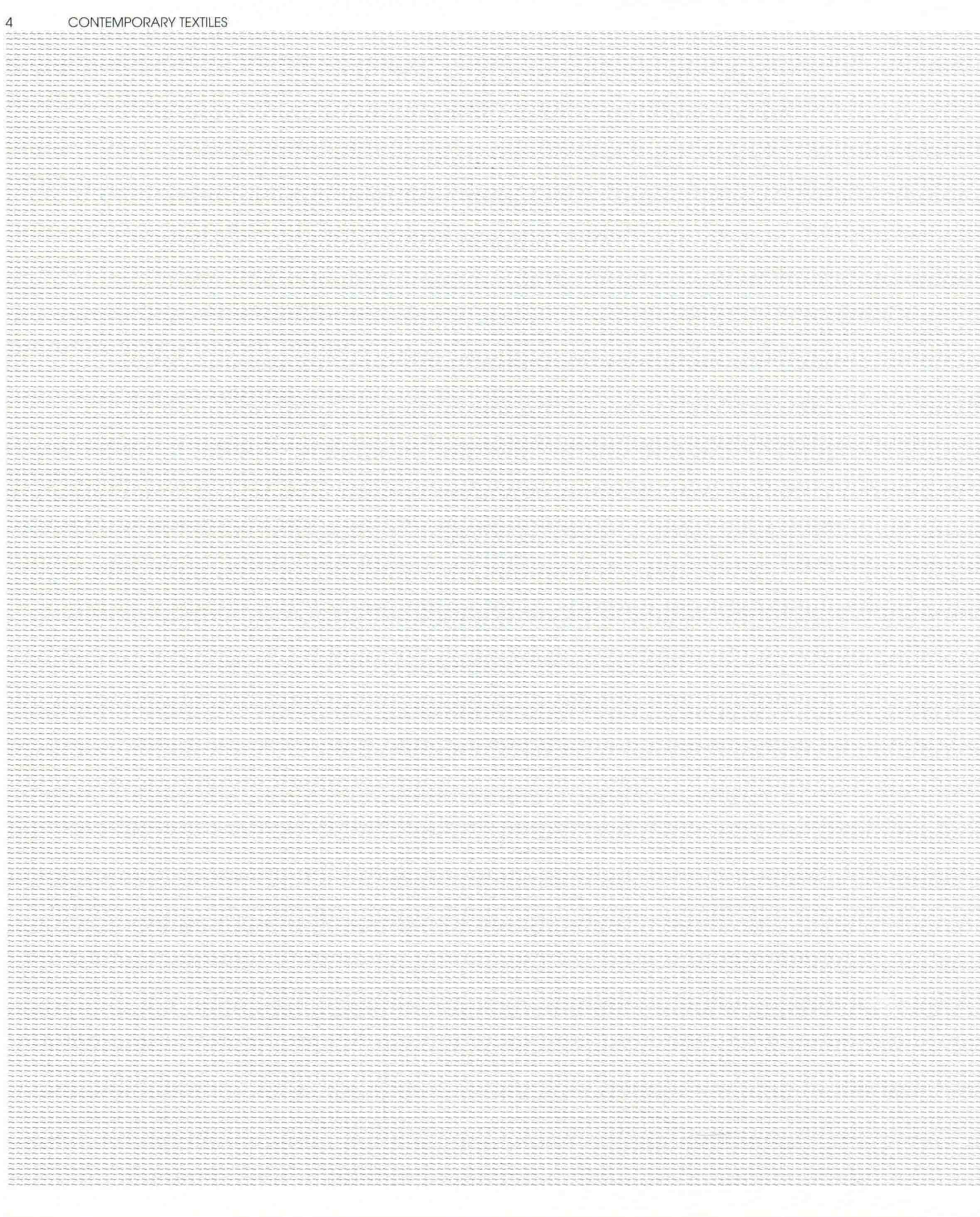
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# everything is the stuff of art

jann haworth

"Everything is the stuff of art". Tony Caro nailed us with this declaration as we were watching Phillip King working in the sculpture studio at St Martin's School of Art. We were working up a collaboration between ourselves—Slade painting students—and the Sculpture Department of St Martins. It was late 1962, early 1963. Yoko was due in for a gig with her partner, students were collecting bicycles for her, which she wouldn't use; and the *Black Bag* piece that she did with her husband was rumoured to be on the menu.

"The stuff of art"... he didn't just mean everything was ours for subject: from abstract ideas, random mark-making, urinals, beer cans, traditional figuration or mass media popular culture. He was pushing the freedom of materials and process at us. It was a validation that meant a great deal to me.

As an American student at the Slade, I felt increasingly isolated because of gender issues, cultural background and gaps in communication. I had begun to make sculpture in fabric. I had made *Flowers*, a bouquet of body parts on stems coming out of a ceramic sewage pipe; *Dog* made of an old black coat I got from Portobello Road with wooden Georgian furniture legs; and *Wardrobe* with wooden clothes and hats made of plates, bowls and random vessels. The best of the reactions to my work had been a mild-mannered indulgence—as one would give to an amusing child—the worst: Eduardo Paolozzi, then a tutor at the Slade, glancing at the work on a rare visit to the painting studio, "cast it in bronze", he'd said. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to bark after him "I've cast it in cloth!".

I failed to see the barriers between correct materials and incorrect ones—between 'high art' and 'the crafts'. I would hazard a guess that this is a sentiment common to many in this book. We are perplexed that something so obvious and simple as a wild, free use of materials and form can evoke such critical analysis. There are no rules in art. It's as simple as that. As our curators, professors, critics and art historians verbalise, the artist slips sleekly through the fence and is off on another unkempt escapade.

This book is a testimony to the intellectual freedoms of the twentieth century, created in part by the democratisation of information through education, the impact of photography (film, current event documentation, access to the history of art, foreign culture), travel and flight, the conceptual maps of relativity and psychology and the first steps toward the equality of women and ethnic 'minorities'.

We have vaulted away from an art tied to the illustration of gods, myth, narrative and the record of royalty and patrons. We live with the abstract, the emotional, diversified mark-making and impossible to tame materials. We embraced experiment and our mistakes. The nature of the truly creative is rebellion—against what has been, against habit, the norm, our stamina and the limitation of the 'known'. Art is a quest... It is a path into the unknown. You are about to embark.



# note from the editor

nadine monem

From their beginnings in craft-art and the decorative, textiles have fast become the fabric of fine art. This book offers a comprehensive introduction to textile art, complete with a rigorous theoretical foundation in the debates surrounding the medium's use, and profiles of the most cutting edge textile work emerging from the contemporary art world today.

Bradley Quinn situates textile art within the wider context of contemporary practice, citing the influences and initiatives that gradually drew the medium into the folds of 'high art'. Going on to discuss a wide selection of artists and their work, "Textiles at the Cutting Edge", offers an insight into the motivations and methods behind some of the best textile art emerging today, told with all the vibrance of Quinn's characteristically lively style. Janis Jefferies takes up some of the themes introduced by Quinn and goes on to offer a robust critical analysis of textiles' history in the ornamental and the decorative. Unpacking various theoretical, political and social motivations behind textiles' increasing prominence in the fine art context, "Contemporary Textiles: the Art Fabric" offers the insight and expertise necessary to fully understand and appreciate the work profiled in this book. And this is where the visual riot begins.

Within each of the four sections of artist profiles there is a staggering range of signifiers, concepts, materials and methods merging and colliding in work from some of the most important fine artists practicing today. The "Drawings" section focuses on the field of embroidery, with Andrea Dezsö's darkly humorous take on the sampler, Jessica Rankin's haunting psycho-cartographic assemblages and Tilleke Schwarz' urban bricolage, offering a first look at some of the most innovative artwork being done with thread and needle. The "Paintings" section profiles artists who work primarily in weaving or otherwise approach textiles with a painterly creative method. Silja Puranen's fantastical and unsettling appliques on found materials are presented alongside Devorah Sperber's stunning reimaginings of the Old Masters and Tracey Emin's shocking reimaginings of her personal experiences. The legendary Jann Haworth firmly grounds the "Sculptures" section in the tradition of fine art, which goes on to profile some of the most interesting new artists working in soft sculpture and costume. With Janet Echelman's monumental transformations of urban airspace and Matthew Barney's continually surprising transmutations of himself, this section acknowledges a wide range of practices that engage textile fine art in three-dimensions. Finally, "Spaces" presents some of the most exciting installation work to be expressed through a textile medium, with Christo and Jean-Claude's epic environmental work and Yinka Shonibare's startling socio-historical theatre evidencing the startling depth of the textile art installation currently exploding into the gallery space.

The artists in this volume are pushing the boundaries of traditional categories of fine art practice, and in the process they are producing some of the most important, inspiring and evocative work being done today, forever cementing textiles' place at the heart of contemporary art.







# BOXIO CHILDREN



bradley quinn

Southside



Torn fabric, shredded selvages and tightly-stitched embroidery threads are hallmarks of the textile trade, but in the hands of contemporary artists, they are also raw materials for some of the edgiest artworks produced today. As artists reclaim fibres as contemporary art-forms, they are finding fresh expressions as soft sculptures, woven installations and embroidered paintings. Cutting-edge artworks and tactile fabrics may have once seemed irreconcilably diverse, but today, there are threads that bind.

For many years, attempts to elevate fibre-based forms to the lofty heights of fine art were routinely overturned. The art world is a stock exchange of status and chic, and textiles were traditionally dismissed as functional forms or decorative expressions. Yet, throughout history, the exchanges between them have been undeniable, because neither exists independently of the other. Themes from nature, society and spirituality are expressed in both mediums, and movements such as Realism, Surrealism, Avant-Gardism and Abstraction are common to each. Their congruencies are not just surface deep; scrape away the layers of paint and primer, and the fabric underpinning them comes clearly into view.

As Modern Art aligned with movements such as Fluxus, feminist art, Land Art, Process Art and performance art, fibre-based works featured on contemporary agendas for the first time. American artist Robert Morris broke new ground in 1958, when he layered felt fabrics, slit them horizontally and mounted them on a gallery wall, then cited cutting and draping as artistic processes. In Japan, avant-garde artist Atsuko Tanaka wore a textile embedded with multi-coloured flashing lights onstage, and created an enormous red satin dress with sleeves that extended more than nine metres wide. Beat Generation artist Bruce Connor featured textile objects in his pop-culture 'protest' art, while artists such as Barbara Kruger, Mimi Smith and Judy Chicago transformed tactile materials into vanguards of the feminist genre. Ann Hamilton's works combine textile forms with sculptures, installations and performances; a process shared by Louise Bourgeois, who expressed her lifetime affinity with textiles relatively late in her career. Christo's unique oeuvre treats textiles as mega-materials, revealing that they can reshape whole landscapes as well as define architectural space.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, textiles gained currency among a new generation. Artists such as Lucy Orta, Andrea Zittel, Jorge Pardo, Tracey Emin, Rosemarie Trockel, Do-Ho Suh and Yinka Shonibare fused textiles with a diverse range of media, creating unexpected forms as a result. Their artworks, like those of their contemporaries, reveal how textiles bridge diverse narratives more easily than most other media, and spark interpretations that are both literal and metaphorical.

The relationship between textiles and contemporary art is forging fresh directions today, and it demands a new dialogue. Divided into five sections, the text that follows charts this exciting interface by bridging traditional techniques and contemporary expressions. As textiles find a fresh voice within contemporary art, their presence reveals that the cutting edge of art is not necessarily the shock of the new, but the soft, sensuous forms inspired by fabrics from traditional times. Whether stitched across supple surfaces or cut deeply into dense fibres, tactile textures and embroidered motifs articulate contemporary narratives in powerful ways.

## subversive stitching

With their rich history of instructing, educating and inspiring, needlework samplers are unique in their ability to communicate important values or offer sources of amusement. Samplers were first seen during the early Renaissance in the convents and courts of Europe, where they were an integral part of women's education. As girls learned to stitch letters, numbers, biblical verses, moral maxims and pictorial elements, they developed needlework skills necessary for a future of domestic duties.

Few records document the roles of western women as well as these intricately-stitched samplers. Some of those made between the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century are especially interesting to art historians today. As historians identify vestiges of imagination, memory and emotion in the samplers, traditionally tropes ascribed to fine art, their parallels with the artworks of the period become more apparent.

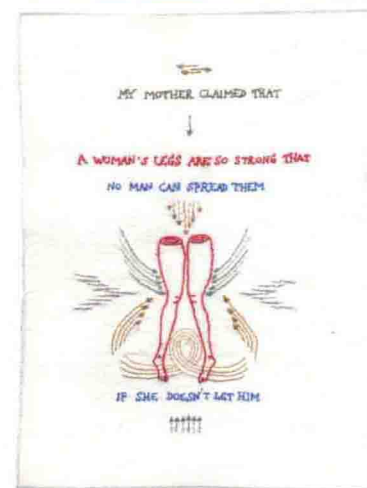
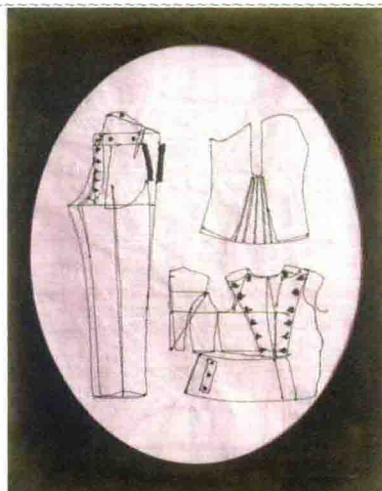
Digital technology provides textile practitioners with innovative processes that liberate them from tedious, repetitive stitching, yet many artists prefer the homespun





Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.  
Performance photograph. Image courtesy of Carolee Schneemann. Photo: Anthony McCall





## TOP TO BOTTOM

Annet Couwenberg, *Legs, Arms and Stomach*, 2001.

Based on a fable by Jean La Fontaine, 1621–1695. Digitised embroidery, flock, dressmaking patterns in shadowbox, 39 x 31 x 30 cm. Photo: Dan Meyers Photography.

Tilleke Schwarz, *Rites*, 2001.

Hand-embroidery, silk cotton and rayon yarn on linen cloth, pieces of material, lace and textile paint, 67 x 74 cm.

Andrea Dezso, *Lessons from my Mother*.

Embroidery, various threads on white cotton canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

appeal of hand-crafted textiles. Dutch artist Annet Couwenberg merges both processes in works created through a method she describes as digitised embroidery. Repetition is a theme in Couwenberg's work, and digital technology enables her to repeat a single motif in different sizes, stitch patterns, orientations and palettes. Couwenberg cites seventeenth century Dutch samplers as an inspiration behind some of her work, rooting them in the tradition of creating popular motifs or precisely-stitched ciphers that are easy to identify and decode. As digital scans outline a precise pattern for Couwenberg to work from, she rejects their regularity by making random stitches or incorporating unexpected materials into her work.

Also from The Netherlands, Tilleke Schwarz finds inspiration in traditional samplers, which she updates with graphic elements found in graffiti, texts, icons and imagery. Schwarz' embroideries feature narrative elements rooted in the tradition of storytelling. But unlike the historical accounts ascribed to the annals of history, Schwarz' narratives rarely include a beginning, end, or even a storyline. As she deploys a narrative structure, viewers are invited to decode their meanings or imagine the connections between them. Schwarz relies on the viewer to complete the work; as she launches open-ended narratives, she deliberately lets go of conventional notions of authorship.

Andrea Dezso is a radical revisionist. As she revisits the traditional samplers of her native Transylvania, she rewrites the social and moral narratives that their surfaces usually depict. During her childhood, Dezso had been taught to follow the lessons that the samplers gave so that she would become a good wife and housekeeper one day. As she embroiders samplers today, she relays the other lessons she was taught as a young girl: "A women's legs are so strong that no man can spread them if she doesn't let him", "My mother claimed that men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart" and "My mother claimed that if you let a man fuck you he will leave you because every man wants to marry a virgin." By updating and reinventing Transylvanian samplers, Dezso rejects the 'wisdom' that these textiles once espoused.

Anila Rubiku is Albanian but lives in Italy, where she combines needlework with artificial light to create luminous textiles. Using techniques based on traditional Albanian embroidery, she stitches images depicting her travels between Milan and Tokyo across 50 linen surfaces fastened within wooden embroidery frames. Rather than document the journey with photography or video, Rubiku chose to record the experiences in a textile archive. Rubiku also constructs fabric sculptures in the shape of miniature houses and embellishes their surfaces with scenes of the domestic tasks traditionally carried out inside. As she uses the craft practice to evoke the experience of domesticity, she brings the private world of family life under public scrutiny.

Embroidery engages with three-dimensional space in the work of Xiang Yang, a political activist and artist from Beijing who immigrated to America. Yang has been producing contemporary art based on social and political themes from the very start of his career. During the Tiananmen Square protests, he was arrested when his cynical portrait of Mao Zedong was discovered. These days, Yang is best known for clashing images of disparate political leaders, such as Saddam Hussein and George Bush, by embroidering their portraits onto clear plastic. Placing them back-to-back, with one a short distance behind the other, Xiang Yang pulls the threads from one embroidery to the other and back again as he stitches the images. The process results in long tubes of coloured threads stretching across the space between the two leaders, hinting at complicity between them.

Yang's unique work was sparked by experiments to transform a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional shape. He had conceived of 'floating objects' that would take shape in empty space as sculptural forms. Although Yang had never tried needlework before, colourful silk thread and embroidery seemed to be the ideal material and methodology for building up sculptural images. Once he found a needle strong enough to pierce plastic, he practised creating picture-perfect likenesses of his subjects. Because he uses tensile thread to bridge two points some distance away from each other, Yang has to be careful to maintain the thread tension between the two images throughout their creation. Otherwise, the threads will sag when the images are set in place.

Born in The Netherlands but based in London, Michael Raedecker studied fashion design and fine art in Amsterdam. His trademark combination of painting and