

Submission: Body x Materials: A workshop exploring the role of material-enabled body-based multisensory experiences

Digital Stitch

‘How to insert slowness and feminist values into the process of digital design, using embroidery and sewing circles a tool’

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The digital world is not an immaterial universe of communication, as it can so often be perceived in endless notifications. More and more authors, artists and designers have pointed out that in order to keep our virtual world afloat, copper-wired transatlantic cables must be laid out by diesel-consuming ships or microchips which are made from rare materials are mined under often dehumanizing circumstances and that each transaction in virtual currencies requires huge amounts of often fossil-based energy. Even though these ideas are working their way into the mainstream, it still has been difficult for both users and designers to understand and to experience this in an embodied way. Designing can still feel like an ephemeral activity, where with the push of a key, actions can easily be erased and undone, but the real impact of our interaction with digital products remains hidden in slick interfaces that aim to turn life online into a ‘friction free’ environment. Through embroidery and embroidery circles, I have been exploring ways of highlighting this materiality of the ‘intangible’ in the digital design process.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human centered interaction • Interaction design processes and methods •

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Slow design, handwork, textile design, feminism, HCI, feminist HCI, design processes

1 INTRODUCTION

My background as a textile designer, digital designer, digital design studio coach and in design research have led me to a point where I have either been a participant of, or an observer of, various digital design projects and assignments. In these roles, I naturally question current approaches to digital design-including UI/UX design, fashion design, textile design, product design et al. and reflect on how digital designers could borrow from the design approaches and practices of needleworkers and some textile designers to become more socially/environmentally aware, reflective, empathetic designers and how this method can be a catalyst for positive change in the digital design industry and all that it touches. Eventually I would like to develop a method for digital design that incorporates slowness through hand work as a more reflective and embodied approach to digital design. I see a gap in the present-day approach to digital design and I believe that it is important to investigate this material/textile approach as a solution.

2 WHY STITCH?

2.1 Collectivity

Embroidery has a long history of being capable of opening up socio-political discussion, teaching and overcoming barriers. According to Sapelly in her paper *Pedagogies of Historical and Contemporary American Sewing Circles* (2016), "...the sewing circle cultivated varying degrees of female support networks. Although consistently divided by family, neighborhood, church affiliation, race, and class, sewing circles provided a space for women to participate in socio-political causes throughout the history of the United States". In today's fashion sustainability crisis, movements such as the Fashion Revolution have used virtual Stitch and Bitch gatherings to engage people from communities globally in conversations about less resource intensive manufacturing processes, fashion/ textile workers rights, mending and so on.

2.2 Economise and Abstract

'Documentary Embroidery', as used by researchers Aviv Kruglanski and Vahida Ramujkic, uses no previous planning and encourages the sewer to economise and abstract certain information. The sewer follows a process of encrypting and 'creating symbolic graphics' when limiting details. This allows them to highlight and focus on the information or details that are of most importance to them and can be an excellent exercise in reflection and (un)learning. In documentary embroidery, slowness is also considered an opportunity to engage with each other and share ideas.

2.3 Meditation, Embodiment and Tactility

Embroidery also has a meditative quality, as Tala Barbotin-Khalidy has been exploring in her meditative embroidery workshops. She draws a correlation between the two; meditation is seen to focus, and embroidery is the outlet that complements the work done in meditation. Just as documentary embroidery allows you to focus, understand and connect to the subject matter, there is also an important element to this exercise which should not be overlooked; focusing on the materials themselves and taking the time to notice a materials tactility, elasticity, sound, even smell. Embodying your subject through handwork. I believe that this allows for a new perspective on the subject matter.

2.4 The Medium is the Message

In addition to allowing for focused, meditative and communal experiences, embroidery also brings a in feminist perspective. The design industry in general is taking steps to diversify a field that can so often be male dominated, but it can still be an environment full of prejudice, unfair assumptions and unequal pay. By using embroidery as a way of challenging or reforming the digital design process we are also making a statement about the role of women within digital design and the tech world in general by using stitching in a subversive way. Traditionally and throughout certain periods of history, embroidery has been associated solely with the domain of women. According to Rozsika Parker in her book, *The Subversive Stitch*, women have been responding to ideologies of femininity as a form of repression from the renaissance onwards through embroidery, choosing patterns and verses and selecting those which had meaning for them. Sometimes embroiderers would reinforce this feminine ideal in their work, while others resisted or questioned ideologies of feminine subjugation and obedience through stitching. For example, some embroidery samplers that date back to the 17th century are full of hidden meanings and messages of defiance by the young women who were forced to sit quietly and work on them instead of going to school, out to play or reading. These verses often had a 'curious mixture of piety and rebellion, resentment and acquiescence'. Embroidery should not be overlooked as a powerful tool for design purely because of its associations with womens work and femininity. The qualities I have discussed underwrite that embroidery has a rightful place within the design studio, just as women do.

3 THE WORKSHOPS

How I have been approaching this research so far is through a combination of networking, desk research, hands-on making and workshopping. With these circles I hope to facilitate open dialogue, (un)learning, experiment and the embodiment of the materiality of the intangible digital world in order to gain a new perspective on the roles/responsibilities of digital designers and end users. I have held several workshops so far at the Modestraat (figure 1), the Waag (figure 2), the Master Digital Design and online (during lockdown). I deliberately try to have the input of field experts/educators, activists, students and community members; hence I hosted at several locations and with adapted formats for each. In the workshops I touch upon the following topics: digital waste, the essence of computing, data as a material, women's work, repair as a point of departure, slow design and convivial tools. I approach these themes in three different ways:

- Embodiment- explore the topic real time through stitch as an act of embodying
- Reflection- finding existing data to reflect upon, react to and talk about together
- Electronic/ technological abstraction- textile itself as a means of data/energy storage



Figure 1: Digital Stitch workshop at the Modestraat, Amsterdam Noord. Photograph by Laurence Rivest



Figure 2: Digital Stitch workshop at Waag, Amsterdam. Photograph by Waag NL

4 MY POSITION WITH RESPECT TO THE WORKSHOP TOPIC AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

4.1 The theme of ‘How materiality can be a tool for the design process’ resonates with me a lot. Around this I would like to discuss how embodied, slower design practices can be brought into the digital design field in a way that is conducive to more socially/ecologically sustainable design outcomes and ways of thinking about roles of the designer/user. I would like to also speak about women's work and feminism in this context; how inserting embroidery into this practice is a statement and what that implies. By that I mean how reintroducing the very essence of technology itself and histories of women in tech could lead to a new framing of the field of digital design.

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