SAMPLER (TENNYSON) AND ELAINE REICHEK’S POSTMODERN PARODY

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ABSTRACT

Kelly Koupash: Sampler (Tennyson) and Elaine Reichek’s Postmodern Parody
(Under the direction of Cary Levine)

In Sampler (Tennyson), Elaine Reichek parodies Tennyson’s The Lady of Shalott to contest the Romantic values that have enabled the exclusion of women from the Western canon. The following essay argues that this work demonstrates a negotiation of competing desires: the desire to interrupt the gendered logic of artistic production that has defined the canon, and the impulse to preserve a stable connection between embroidery and femininity. This essay demonstrates, first, that the sampler format is coded “feminine” throughout Reichek’s work; second, that Reichek grapples with questions of identity and authorship in a manner that protects the creative contributions of women without explicitly endorsing the canon; and third, that Reichek’s work invites not only a structural critique of the canon, but a critique of individual works at the level of content.
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**INTRODUCTION**

In *Sampler (Tennyson)* (1998), Elaine Reichek parodies Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s iconic poem *The Lady of Shalott* to contest the Romantic values that, historically, have enabled the exclusion of women’s work from the Western canon: genius, originality, and individuality (figure 1). Reichek’s parody of this canonical poem negotiates a pair of competing desires: the desire to interrupt the gendered logic of artistic production that has defined the canon, and the impulse to preserve a stable connection between embroidery and femininity. This conflict is representative of one of the key tensions animating feminism in the 1990s: the question of how to “do” feminism when the category of “woman” is unfixed.

Since the Victorian era, embroidery has been characterized as a feminine mode of production.¹ Critics have been quick to point out this gendered dimension of Reichek’s work.² By preserving this longstanding connection between embroidery and femininity, Reichek engages with practices popularized by feminist artists in the 1970s – namely, the use of craft media to create an (allegedly) authentic feminine form.³ She is, in this sense, indebted to a feminist lineage, although her work conforms only partially to earlier models.


² David Frankel, for example, observes in “... Remember Me” that “As work, [embroidery] is a woman’s task of household repair; as pastime, too, it is usually female.” David Frankel, “... Remember Me,” in *When This You See...* (New York: George Braziller Press, 2000), 8.

Lynne Cooke observes, “To the extent that it can be characterized as feminist... Reichek’s stance cannot be conjugated as one of simple contestation or opposition, as can those that provide arguments for the dissolution of the canon; nor is it based on the offer of alternatives, that is, on suggesting substitutions within the established hierarchy.”  Instead, Reichek parodies the canon to prompt inverted readings of canonical works. These inversions enable a multidirectional expansion of the canon – that is, an expansion beyond the token inclusion of female artists and other marginalized persons – while recognizing that the canon, in spite of recent critiques, maintains a presence in the academy and popular culture.

Scholarship on Reichek has tended to focus on one of three things: her critiques of Western ethnographic practices and documentary photography; her efforts to re-imagine the relationship of embroidery and women’s work to the Western canon; or the role of contemporary technologies in her otherwise ‘traditional’ work. Jimmie Durham addresses the first two of these themes in an essay for the 1992 Native Intelligence catalog, “Elaine Reichek: Unraveling the Social Fabric.” Looking at Reichek’s knitted copies of ethnographic photographs, Durham argues that Reichek “employs [knitting] as a system through which to expose other systems” – that is, seemingly indexical media like photography can be exposed for the fabrications they are when remediated in thread. In “Sins of the Fathers,” an essay from the same catalog, Thomas McEvilley frames Reichek’s work as a self-critical

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gesture, observing that the artist is invested in exposing the processes of denial by which Western civilization has preserved a positive self-image. 

When This You See..., published in 2000, contains an essay by David Frankel that attempts to situate Reichek relative to modernist painting, Conceptual Art and Pop Art. In 2004, Frankel also published a brief essay on the role of mechanical reproduction in Reichek’s work. In 2008, Paula Birnbaum expanded this theme in an essay that considered Reichek’s work in terms of remediation – the translation of a form or idea from one medium to another – and claimed that Reichek’s work demonstrates skepticism towards contemporary notions of originality and authenticity. This idea of remediation is akin to the notion of parody used throughout this essay.

In A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms, Linda Hutcheon offers a definition of parody that deviates from its colloquial use to describe comically exaggerated imitations. According to Hutcheon, parody is a form of “imitation characterized by ironic inversion” or repetition with critical distance. In Hutcheon’s usage, these ironic inversions need not be comical, but they must “refunction” a particular work of art or form of coded discourse (the “target”). This essay relies on Hutcheon’s formulation of parody to describe the strategy present in Sampler (Tennyson) and Reichek’s

\[ \text{6 Thomas McEvilley, “Sins of the Fathers,” in Native Intelligence (New York: Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, 1992), 17 – 22.} \]

\[ \text{7 Frankel, “Remember Me...” 7 – 14.} \]

\[ \text{8 David Frankel, “Elaine Reichek: Stitchelated Pics,” Aperture 175 (2004): 36 – 38.} \]


other samplers. In this instance, Reichek has two targets: first and foremost, Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*, but also John William Waterhouse’s paintings of Tennyson’s tragic heroine. All three works achieve new functions when they are “trans-contextualized” in the sampler format. For Hutcheon, trans-contextualization – the removal of a text or work of art from its original context and subsequent re-situation in a new, ironic setting – is one of the key methods by which an artist might perform a parody.\(^\text{11}\)

*Sampler (Tennyson)* is a strong candidate for a case study because it most directly targets the Romantic values that Reichek implicitly critiques in the rest of her oeuvre. Like the other samplers alongside which it was installed in *When This You See...* (figure 2), *Sampler (Tennyson)* features embroidered text from the Western literary canon and visual quotations from the realm of fine art. Some basic principles govern both the organization of the exhibition and that of the samplers themselves. Both are modular: the sampler is composed of miniscule stitches that cohere to form a complete image, whereas the exhibition is a set of 31 samplers organized serially in an intimate setting. Although the samplers are installed next to one another in a linear fashion, the logic behind their order remains unclear. Some are grouped together thematically. Samplers 20 – 25, for example, all revolve around sisters Emily and Charlotte Brontë, quoting their literary works, personal correspondences and even samplers that they made themselves in the nineteenth century. Where the appropriations themselves are concerned, however, the samplers are not installed chronologically; *Sampler (Tennyson)* appears after *Sampler (Andy Warhol)*, which mimics Warhol’s 1983 *Yarn* project, but before *Sampler (World Wide Web)*, in which a free association of words having to do with weaving are plotted across an embroidered

image of an Apple laptop screen. Reichek is not interested in rehearsing a conventional history of art, literature and technology; rather, she reweaves themes and narratives to point out previously unrecognized connections and interrupt myths. In *Sampler (Warhol)* (1997), for example, Reichek achieves a multilayered parody by trans-contextualizing Andy Warhol’s parody of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings (figure 3). Warhol’s original parody had transformed Pollock’s intuitive, athletic improvisational painting into something mechanical. Reichek reverts Warhol’s strategy to focus once again on the labor of hands, but as Frankel observes, “like Warhol and unlike Pollock, she has no faith in the mystique of spontaneous improvisation.”  

By using strategies forged by artists like Warhol and Jasper Johns to critique the canon, Reichek enters into a dialogue with the heroes of art history. Although the discipline has already announced its verdict on artists like Pollock, Reichek is keeping the conversation going in an effort to address the persistent issue of gender and canonization.

A preliminary formal analysis of the work will enable further assessment of Reichek’s parodic readings of Tennyson and Waterhouse. Like a conventional sampler, *Sampler (Tennyson)* is intimate in scale, measuring approximately 114 centimeters in width and 47 in height. The artist has organized three discrete blocks of text on a wide but short linen ground. Each block is a quotation, and each is paired neatly with a corresponding illustration printed on silk and sewn to the linen. These illustrations, sampled from paintings by John William Waterhouse, are circular fragments of the original works. The effect of this fragmentation is twofold: first, it narrows the viewer’s attention to the figurative subject of each painting; and second, it enlivens an otherwise static composition.

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12 Frankel, “Remember Me...” 11.
by juxtaposing a series of fluid contours against the rectilinear grid of cross-stitched text.
The artist has delineated the boundaries of her sampler with a thin green border. Floral
motifs adorn the inner and outer corners of this wall, and miniature birds flit about inside.

The text in *Sampler (Tennyson)* comes from two sources. The first is Alfred, Lord
Tennyson’s classic poem *The Lady of Shalott*, published first in 1832 and again in 1842.
Reichek has not reproduced the entire poem. Rather, she has selected verses that
summarize its central conflicts while foregrounding the protagonist’s role as a weaver. In
Tennyson’s original text, the central character – the titular “Lady of Shalott” – is the
archetypal damsel in distress. She is imprisoned in a tower on the Island of Shalott. The
tower overlooks the city of Camelot, but the Lady is cursed never to look upon the city
directly – she can only view it obliquely, that is, with the aid of a mirror. She spends her
days recording the mirror’s sights on her loom. One day, the Lady hears Sir Lancelot
singing on his way to the city, and she is tempted to look out her window. This
transgression causes the curse to take effect, and the Lady dies, but not before reaching the
walls of Camelot in her rowboat.\(^\text{13}\) In its canonical interpretation, *The Lady of Shalott* is an
allegory of life and art.\(^\text{14}\) The artist – Tennyson himself, represented by the Lady – must
remove himself from the concerns of everyday life, observing it from a distance in order to
do his best work.

\(^\text{13}\) Alfred, Lord Tennyson. “The Lady of Shalott,” in *Idylls of the King and a Selection of Poems*

\(^\text{14}\) According to the original allegorical reading, the poem is a lesson in the necessary
separation of life and art. The artist is an observer of life, but not a producer of knowledge –
that is, not an active participant. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Strange summarize this
position in their anthology *Victorian Poetry and Poetics.*
Reichek has devoted two-thirds of her embroidered text to quotations from Tennyson’s poem. The third block of text comes from English author A. S. Byatt’s 1992 novella *The Conjugial Angel.* In the novella, Byatt imagines Tennyson as a memory, a dream or a ghost, remote from the present but still figuring prominently in the histories of other characters. Byatt hints that Tennyson may have had an emotional or even physical love affair with his close friend Arthur Hallam. By recalling their friendship in romantic, sensuous prose, Byatt displaces Tennyson from his role as authorial subject and makes him instead an object of speculation. Like Byatt, Reichek is more interested in creatively reimagining the poet laureate than recording or commenting on his career. The quotation she includes threatens Tennyson’s iconic status by imagining his humanity: his fears and his fallibility.

The artist has paired each block of text with an image of the Lady of Shalott by Pre-Raphaelite painter John William Waterhouse. These, as mentioned previously, are digital transfers that recreate in miniature the precise details of Waterhouse’s original work. Two of the paintings are simply titled *The Lady of Shalott* and were painted in 1888 and 1894, respectively. A third painting, completed in 1916, takes one of the poem’s most famous lines as its title: ‘I am Half sick of Shadows,’ said the Lady of Shalott. The paintings were done at different moments using different models, but all image the same character. Each depicts the Lady of Shalott at a particular moment in the course of the poem. In the first, the Lady sits at her loom, stretching her arms above her head as if weary of her work. She looks sidelong at a mirror in the background, which reflects her loom and the world outside but not the viewer. In the second transfer, the Lady is in motion. Half-crouched, she appears to have just left her seat in front of the loom, and sees – or is about to see – the road that
carries Sir Lancelot to Camelot. The last image depicts the Lady moments before her death, poised with her chin high as she floats toward the city that she once saw only in reflections. Although subtle shifts in mood differentiate the images from one another, they all possess a romantic, ethereal quality, and each idealizes Tennyson's heroine.

The chapters that follow achieve three primary objectives. Chapter one situates Sampler (Tennyson) relative to histories of craft, embroidery and feminist practice, arguing that Reichek is engaged in a strategic revitalization of seemingly passé feminist practices. By relying on the historical affiliation of embroidery with femininity, Reichek deploys a sort of “strategic essentialism” that enables her to maintain a “feminine” authorial presence. Chapter two assesses Reichek's work in light of the “death of the author” theories in vogue throughout the second half of the twentieth century. While they offered a solution to the problem of the canon, these theories created problems for female artists at a moment when, for the first time, they had begun to achieve canonization themselves. Reichek's work negotiates this conflict by parodying a canonized author and the work that made him famous. Chapter three assesses the parodic trans-contextualization of the three paintings by J.W. Waterhouse, demonstrating again that Reichek is not only interrupting the hegemony of canonical works, but also inviting new readings of their content.

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CHAPTER 1

Throughout Elaine Reichek’s body of work, the sampler format operates as a vehicle for the critical trans-contextualization of canonical works of art and literature. The effectiveness of this trans-contextualization rests in part on the historical relationship of fine art to craft media such as embroidery. As a consequence of its utility and affiliation with the feminine, embroidery has been relegated to craft status for much of its recent history. The following chapter assesses the particular histories to which Reichek refers relative to her practice: that of the sampler as an amateur medium used almost exclusively by women, and that of fiber arts and craft media generally as a strategy of feminist art practice. In Sampler (Tennyson) and in her work more broadly, the artist relies on this historical affiliation of embroidery with femininity, demonstrating a variety of the “strategic essentialism” theorized by Gayatri Spivak in 1987. Strategic essentialism, according to Spivak, might enable marginalized groups of unify around a shared identity or consciousness for political advantage. This strategy enables Reichek to identify and critique the privileging of “masculine” forms within the canon. Additionally, it enables her to assert the presence of “feminine” craftsmanship without demanding that she elevate herself within the same authorial hierarchy that she critiques.

16 Parker, The Subversive Stitch, 5.

In the 1970s, self-identified feminist artists engaged with a variety of craft media in an effort to define a truly feminist or woman-centered aesthetic. Some examples include: Faith Wilding’s “Womb Room” (1972), part of the *Womanhouse* project, which drew an analogy between the fibers of crocheted textiles and the fleshy material of a woman’s uterus; and Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, finished in 1979, which attempted to locate a sense of authentic femininity in the domestic realm, where a series of embroidered placemats played host to plates with painted and sculpted vulvas.¹⁸ In her 1972 essay “Woman as Artist,” Chicago claimed that the woman artist must turn away from masculine subject matter and “claim what is uniquely hers, her female identity.” According to Chicago, this would be “the most difficult of tasks... to embrace the untouchable and to love what is despised.”¹⁹ Chicago was pointing, first, to the general status of women under patriarchy, but second, to the status of craft and women’s cultural production in a long-established arts hierarchy.

Scholarship by Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker and Elissa Ather has been instrumental in uncovering the development of this hierarchy and the ideological forces behind it. Citing Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ather claims that “fine” art – particularly, painting and sculpture - enjoyed a privileged status different from that of craft beginning in the early modern period, when these media made their first bids for classification as “liberal” rather than “mechanical” arts. By the mid-eighteenth century, this

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distinction had solidified, assisted by the philosophies of Immanuel Kant.\textsuperscript{20} In his \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment}, Kant distinguished art from handicraft as follows:

“The first is called liberal, the second can also be called remunerative art. The first is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play, i.e. an occupation that is agreeable in itself; the second is regarded as labor, i.e. an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., the remuneration) and hence as something that can be compulsorily imposed.”\textsuperscript{21}

For Kant, fine art was a product of radical originality or genius. Craft could not be radically original because, first and foremost, it demanded utility. This bias persisted in twentieth-century art criticism. Clement Greenberg, for example, used the term “decorative” to describe work preoccupied with superficial embellishments and mechanical precision.\textsuperscript{22} He once described Georgia O’Keefe’s process as “lapidarian,” claiming that the care she lavished upon her detailed, neatly finished projects resulted in works too precious for inclusion in the canon.\textsuperscript{23} Critiques such as this enabled the persistence of the divide between the “masculine” domain of fine art and the “feminine” arena of craft.

By the 1980s, the proliferation of artists working in “traditional” women’s media, so prominent in the early 1970s, had begun to wane. The radical potential of craft was dissolving as it, along with the “central core” imagery so popular amongst certain 1970s artists...

\textsuperscript{20} Author, \textit{String Felt Thread}, xv- xvi.


\textsuperscript{22} Author, \textit{String Felt Thread}, xv – xvii.

feminists, was confronted by new feminisms that questioned the legitimacy of the category “woman.” Feminists were increasingly concerned with the question of essentialism – the belief that a person or thing has a true essence, a set of stable characteristics that constitute its being. Judy Chicago’s call for women to “claim what is uniquely hers, her female identity,” exemplifies this mode of thinking, which sustained the idea that women composed an already unified social class reducible to a series of shared experiences (menstruation, for example, or childbirth). This type of thinking was useful for purposes of political organization, but posed problems because it failed to recognize the diverse ways in which women experienced their own gender. Additionally, it naturalized womanhood as a category of social exclusion or difference.

By the time Elaine Reichek began work on the embroideries for the installation _When This You See..._ (1994 – 1999), craft media hardly seemed like viable options for the expression of feminist politics. By using the sampler format to parody canonical works, however, Reichek was able to contest the values that enabled the exclusion of women from the canon without relying on an essentialist conception of embroidery as “women’s work.” The history of the sampler plays a critical role in these parodies.

Reichek’s sampler replicates many of the strategies visible in more conventional samplers: cross-stitching; the compartmentalization of contents into discrete parts; the integration of text; and the inclusion of decorative borders and floral motifs. _Sampler (Tennyson)_ has all of these features. A border of green thread demarcates the edges of the sampler. There are flowers cross-stitched into each corner. Digital image transfers

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alternate with text in a mathematical rhythm, and each block in neatly situated within its own module. These conventions are associated with the amateur, the decorative, and the utilitarian; consequently, tensions emerge when works that have been canonized as evidence of genius are trans-contextualized in the sampler format. The work is no longer readily identifiable with high art or craft. Additionally, it is unclear whether the work is more “masculine” or “feminine,” as it incorporates formal elements that are associated with both genders. Embroidery is a technology that has been associated almost exclusively with the feminine since the Victorian era, when the English attempted to write the first histories of European needlework.\textsuperscript{25} The sampler in particular was a common part of a young girl’s education from the seventeenth century into the nineteenth. A sampler could feature pictures, text, patterns, or any combination of the three, all sewn in thread. The ritual of sewing a sampler taught young women how to read and count, how to sew, and how to conduct themselves morally through the spelling out of religious quotations and other homilies.\textsuperscript{26}

The works installed alongside \textit{Sampler (Tennyson)} in \textit{When This You See…} sample a range of works from the history of modern and contemporary art. In \textit{Sampler (Georges Seurat)} (1998), for example, the artist uses a series of irregular stitches to approximate Seurat’s pointillist technique. A similar strategy is apparent in \textit{Sampler (Chuck Close)} (1997), in which Reichek miniaturizes one of Chuck Close’s now-iconic self-portraits (figure 4). The 1983 portrait from which Reichek drew was composed with wads of pulp

\textsuperscript{25} Parker, \textit{The Subversive Stitch}, 17.

\textsuperscript{26} Parker, \textit{The Subversive Stitch}, 13, 85 and 88.
paper. Observing that Close thought of his process as "something that no one thought a serious artist could do anymore" – that is, something radically original - Reichek wrote,

"The funny thing is, though, that a process that seemed to unconventional was actually what women had always done in needlepoint. Close bases his works on a grid – he breaks the image down into tiny squares, then fills in each square one by one, until together they reconstitute the image. Embroidery, likewise, rests on the grid of a woven textile, and in cross-stitch you're basically filling in an image square by square. I've seen drawings by close that show how he plots the image as a kind of graph or chart – which is exactly what I often do before making a sampler."  

By parodically mirroring select technical elements of iconic works, Reichek highlights procedural similarities between embroidery and more prized forms of artistic production, effectively claiming that the logic behind needlepoint is similar to that which has structured canonical artworks. The critical difference between historical samplers and these famous artworks, however, is their reception – that is, their absorption into or rejection from the canon. While one is celebrated for its originality, the other is dismissed. Reichek is not necessarily arguing for the canonization of embroideries by making this comparison. Rather, she is pointing out that the supposedly radical originality that underscored Close's success was not, in fact, particularly radical. By exposing this contradiction, Reichek implies that perceptions of originality are, in some instances, conditioned by the gender of the author.

Reichek's use of the sampler format is analogous to the notion of strategic essentialism advanced by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak in her 1987 essay "Subaltern

27 Elaine Reichek, When This You See... ed. Elaine Reichek (New York: George Braziller, Inc, 2000), 46.
Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.” According to Spivak, strategic essentialism enables marginalized groups to unite on the basis of shared identity to achieve common goals.\textsuperscript{28} Art critic Hilary Robinson summarizes the benefits of this position in a 1995 essay titled “Reframing Women”: “If you are classified as a member of a category of people which is disenfranchised, silenced, objectified and otherwise disempowered, then to think of that category as contingent or non-unified can at times be both unsettling and a sign of weakness – in fact, it can be seen as compounding your problems.”\textsuperscript{29} Some constant, unifying factor is necessary for any group to take political action. By consistently maintaining an authorial presence coded “feminine,” Reichek makes herself visible as a woman artist, standing in solidarity with other women who have been excluded from the canon or who struggle against institutional bias. She does not, however, foreground her individual identity in an attempt to gain celebrity. To seek fame would require endorsement of the very canon that she parodies.


CHAPTER 2

By manipulating the Romantic aura surrounding the poet laureate in Sampler (Tennyson), Reichek negotiated contemporaneous debates surrounding postmodern theories of authorship and their usefulness for feminism – in particular, the “death of the author” theories advanced by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and others. Reichek’s sampler straddles two positions. The first undermines the role of the author as an authority, or originator of meaning. The second preserves a distinctly “feminine” creative voice that persists, in the form of embroidery, throughout Reichek’s work. This conceptual flexibility demonstrates what Norma Broude and Mary Garrard refer to as a “foot in both camps” philosophy that endeavors to make postmodern notions of authority useful for contemporary feminisms.30 By trans-contextualizing one of Tennyson’s most iconic poems, Reichek is able to disrupt the hegemony of an iconic work without sacrificing her own authorial presence as a woman and an artist. This parodic disruption is a contestation of the gendered values that have structured the Western canon: genius, originality, and authenticity.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson is an icon of Romanticism. Scholars of Victorian poetry Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Strange, for example, observe that by the time he died in 1892, Tennyson had “become a legend... it was not, at the end, so much the merit of individual poems that affected the public as ‘the impression of sublimity’ which shone

30 Broude and Garrard, The Expanding Discourse, 6.
around and through Tennyson's work.”³¹ This unique ability to capture the sublime was consistent with the core values of Romantic thought: genius, originality, and individuality. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant described genius as an innate mental aptitude that gave a person the ability to recognize and illustrate the sublime.³² Tennyson’s position as an emblem of Romantic values made him an ideal target of parody for Elaine Reichek.

According to the traditions of Romantic aesthetics and liberal humanism, the individual author of a text is the legitimizing source from which the meaning of that text derives. In the 1960s, French theorists Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes published critiques of the subject as conceived in these traditions. Their essays were translated to English in the 1970s and subsequently gained currency amongst English-speaking academics.³³ In “The Death of the Author,” translated by Stephen Heath and published in *Image – Music – Text* in 1977, Barthes prioritizes text over authorial intention, claiming that “it is language which speaks, not the author.”³⁴ The displacement of the author as an originating force enables the proliferation of meanings within and around a text. “Meaning” becomes destabilized as it is produced and reproduced in the mind of the reader. Barthes writes, “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into

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mutual contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author."35 Foucault's position also demonstrates skepticism towards the “godlike” creative powers attributed to authors and artists in the humanist tradition. Foucault articulates his stance in the 1969 essay “What is an author?” which was translated and published for English speakers in 1979. In this essay, Foucault retains the author as a functional character but argues that anonymity has the power to release the proliferation of meanings embedded within a text. Like Barthes, Foucault evaluates this elimination of constraints positively. He ultimately asks, “What difference does it make who is speaking?”36

This question both posed problems and created possibilities for feminist artists. On one hand, death-of-the-author theories offered potentially fruitful methods for dismantling the canon and its attendant notions of genius, which focused on individual achievement rather than structural forces.37 Simultaneously, however, these theories threatened to undermine efforts by women to achieve a place in the canon for the first time.38 The emphatic reliance on text promulgated by Barthes, Foucault and others refuted the


38 Broude and Garrard, The Expanding Discourse, 4.
presence of the woman artist by displacing the authorial subject and denying women a privilege they had never possessed. The climate was one in which canonization became a “politically incorrect” goal for women artists. Additionally, as Broude and Garrard observe, “critical theory’s privileging of text over author was potentially devastating for female artists, whose identities were already historically vulnerable to being subsumed into their art, the reverse of the situation for the male artist, whose art was traditionally explained by the heroic biography of the man.”

In 1991, Klinger observed an ongoing antagonism between poststructural critiques of authorship and feminist art practice. While early feminist artists had presented “woman as artist” and “woman as subject” as interrelated conditions, the late 1980s witnessed a metaphoric dissolution of feminine subjectivities in women’s art. Klinger points, for example, to Clarissa Sligh’s She Didn’t Know Who She Was (1987), in which the artist has juxtaposed a fragmented image of a nude body with repeated lines of text that read “She didn’t know who she was, but she knew she wasn’t who you all said she was.” Although this quotation is seemingly empowering – it rejects exterior perceptions in favor of an internally generated understanding of the self – the disembodied text and fragmented figure disconnect the author’s voice from her person. The face is invisible, and we are left wondering who is depicted in the photograph. It may be the artist, but visible body parts cannot confirm this as there are no identifying features. It is unclear, therefore, whose voice and whose body are actually present in the work, and whether or not there is any

40 Broude and Garrard, The Expanding Discourse, 17.
41 Klinger, “Where’s the Artist?” 44.
connection between body and speaker. For Klinger, this dissolution was indicative of a crisis in feminist politics rooted in confusion over personal and professional identities. This confusion is best summarized by a question Garrard and Broude posed a year later, in the introduction to *The Expanding Discourse*: “How can she, whose name is unknown, renounce authority and the canon?”

Reichek responded to this crisis in *Sampler (Tennyson)* by parodying Tennyson’s work and his position as an icon of creative genius. Her parody relies on two key strategies. The first of these, discussed previously, is the trans-contextualization of the poet’s work in the “amateur” format of the sampler. The second is the supplementation of Tennyson’s work with the following quotation from A.S. Byatt’s novella *The Conjugial Angel* (1992):

> “Tennyson was afraid – terribly afraid – of the temptations of overvaluing art. Art was what came to him easily and furiously; he knew the temptation to work wildly without a conscience or an aim, singing away like the nightingale.”

Contemporary literary scholars have debated the function of Tennyson’s ghost in Byatt’s novella relative to postructuralist critiques of authorship. While these perspectives are useful aids for analysis of Byatt’s rhetoric, what is ultimately at stake is Reichek’s

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42 Broude and Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse*, 17.

fragmentary trans-contextualization of her original text. Taking into account Tennyson’s legendary status, analysis of the passage excerpted above yields insight into Reichek’s stance on the question of authorship. Unlike the other elements that Reichek “samples” in *Sampler (Tennyson)* the A.S. Byatt quotation is not a target of parody. Rather, it is a second vehicle of trans-contextualization (the first being the sampler format itself) that prompts a revised perception of Tennyson’s iconic persona.

Reichek’s inclusion of Byatt’s text in her own work points out the inability of the author to determine the reader’s interpretation of his text. Byatt’s description of Tennyson’s fears and his compulsive nature threaten his godlike status; he is removed from what Broude and Garrard describe as “the tyrannically dominating presence of the author / artist in modern culture: a quasi-deified male, larger than life, compounded of ego and power.” According to Byatt’s re-imaginings, Tennyson is powerless to resist the seductions of poetry. He lives in fear of succumbing to his desire to work constantly, at a distance from the world outside. Simultaneously, Tennyson is powerless to control our reading of his canonical poem *The Lady of Shalott*.

While undermining Tennyson’s authority using layers of parodic trans-contextualization, Reichek is able to maintain a sense of authorial presence by working in her signature medium. The sampler format stops short of pointing to Reichek specifically – *Sampler (Tennyson)*, like much of Reichek’s work, is unsigned – but points instead to a broader network of producers: the women who have made samplers for centuries. The question of the signature re-emerges sporadically throughout *When This You See...* and Reichek’s ouvre generally. Some samplers do bear Reichek’s name. *Sampler (Chuck Close)*,

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44 Broude and Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse*, 17.
for example, features the full names of both Reichek and Close, stitched next to one another in the bottom right corner. The practice of signing some samplers but not others points, yet again, to a sense of ambivalence concerning claims of originality and authorial fame. By weaving her presence in and out of the samplers in *When This You See...*, Reichek negotiates this issue, maintaining her own presence without eclipsing the other creators and characters that appear in her work.

By using a needle and thread, Reichek answers Foucault’s question (“What difference does it make who is speaking?”) in the affirmative, pointing out that there are in fact instances in which identity matters. The gender identities of women artists matter because they have been, and in some instances continue to be, the reason for exclusion. In this manner, Reichek negotiates the uneasy truce between feminism and postmodern theories of authorship, disrupting the hegemony of canonized authors without erasing her own identity as a woman and an artist.
CHAPTER 3

J.W. Waterhouse’s paintings of Tennyson’s ill-fated protagonist are the secondary targets of Reichek’s parody. By integrating J.W. Waterhouse’s paintings into the composition of her sampler as digital transfers, Reichek is able to achieve two objectives. First, she interrupts the androcentric narratives that have structured histories of art and technology. Second, she offers a critique at the level of content, pointing out the didactic elements of Waterhouse’s paintings, which provided “acceptable” models of female sexual behavior.45

Reichek destabilizes Waterhouse’s iconic status much like she destabilizes Tennyson’s. In the Benjaminian sense, Reichek’s reproduction of Waterhouse’s paintings diminishes somewhat the aura of the originals.46 Reichek’s manipulation of the original works goes beyond mere reproduction, however, as they have been miniaturized, cropped, and hand-stitched to the linen ground of the sampler after being digitized and printed on silk. This technique has multiple consequences. First, it draws a conceptual parallel between digital reproduction – a mode in which an image is reduced to a grid of pixels – and the processes of manual production behind the making of samplers. Reichek has observed, “The pixel and byte are like stitches – tiny indissoluble elements that in


combination with thousands of other indissoluble elements make up a picture.” Paula Birnbaum interprets Reichek’s comparison of the pixel and the stitch as an effort to rewrite histories of technology that have largely erased the contributions of women. On the one hand, then, the work offers a critique of the dominant narrative surrounding technological development; on the other, it levels an art historical critique. Although Waterhouse is popularly remembered as a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, he was not, generationally speaking, one of their number. Consequently he is classified as a sort of ‘high’ Pre-Raphaelite, someone who inherited from his predecessors an interest in the medieval past, but painted those old narratives in a new, “modern” manner. In his paintings of the Lady of Shalott, Waterhouse was not only interpreting Tennyson, but also re-interpreting works on the same subject by earlier artists – most notably, William Holman Hunt, a founding member of the Brotherhood. There are, therefore, multiple reproductions, reinterpretations and trans-contextualizations layered upon one another in Sampler (Tennyson) with no clear point of origin. The ideas of authenticity and originality are, apparently, myths to Reichek.

The sexual element that is eclipsed in Reichek’s re-working of Tennyson’s verses appears in the three digital transfers described previously. All depict the Lady of Shalott, but each captures the protagonist at a different moment in the narrative. The inclusion of

47 Reichek, When This You See..., 76.


50 William Holman Hunt illustrated The Lady of Shalott multiple times between 1854 and 1905.
these paintings enables a double reading of the poem: not only is it a parable of artistic practice, but it is also a moralizing tale about the dangers of lust and, in particular, female desire. Reichek’s appropriation of these vignettes calls attention to the way Waterhouse reproduced Victorian ideals of sexual conduct in his work, effectively participating himself in the regulation of female sexualities. Here, Reichek relies on the educational function of samplers throughout history to undermine Waterhouse’s moral project.

The transfers embedded in Sampler (Tennyson) are arranged in narrative order. The first of these, ‘I am Half Sick of Shadows,’ said the Lady of Shalott (1915), depicts the Lady in her tower at the first moment of her distress. Upon looking in her mirror and seeing a funeral procession, then “two young lovers lately wed,” she realizes her dissatisfaction with the life of isolation that she leads. She realizes that she might die before finding love, and exclaims, “I am half sick of shadows.” This exclamation suggests that the Lady craves active participation in the world outside her window rather than vicarious engagement with the people in her mirror. Waterhouse manifests this desire by painting a young couple, arm-in-arm, reflected in the Lady’s mirror. As the Lady stretches her arms sensuously above her head, she looks sidelong in their direction with a wistful expression on her face. The reflected arches of the tower’s window make a heart shape that is emblematic of the Lady’s need for love. Reichek has preserved all of these elements in her vignettes.

In the second image, simply titled The Lady of Shalott (1894), the Lady is acting on her desire for the first time. Again, we see the mirror by which she has always viewed the

51 Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott,” 297.

world; this time, however, she has turned away from the glass to look outside for herself, and she meets our gaze directly. In the mirror, the figure of Sir Lancelot is just barely visible. His lance is erect, and it points to the growing cracks in the mirror. The juxtaposition of the knight’s phallic lance with the Lady’s broken mirror suggests a loss of purity. Comparison with William Holman Hunt’s 1853 painting *The Awakening Conscience* strengthens this interpretation. *The Awakening Conscience* depicts a courtesan who has just realized the error of her ways. In both paintings, the central figures are caught in motion, rising from seated positions but still half-crouched. Robert Upstone observes that in these works, “the subjects of female desire and moral capitulation are closely allied.” Both women are in transition, but their destinies differ. The courtesan is rising from a life in sin to a state of grace, whereas the Lady of Shalott is metaphorically to surrendering her chastity.

The third and final image – *The Lady of Shalott* (1888) – imagines the Lady moments before her death. This painting concludes the moralizing narrative by illustrating, albeit metaphorically, the consequences of succumbing to lust. The protagonist has boarded her rowboat and is departing the Island of Shalott. Her tower and its window are visible in the background. The Lady’s lips are parted in song, but they appear to exhale her last breath. Waterhouse captures the somber tone of the following lines from Tennyson’s poem, in which the people of Camelot hear the Lady’s ghostly song:

> “Heard a carol, mournful, holy,  
> Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,

Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darken’d wholly,
    Turn’d to tower’d Camelot;
For ere she reach’d upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.”

There are three candles at the prow of the Lady’s rowboat. Two have already blown out.
The last flame flickers in the wind in anticipation of the Lady’s expiration.

Reichek’s assembly of Waterhouse paintings clearly articulates his message regarding sexual conduct: a loss of innocence is akin to death. Rearticulated in the form of a sampler, however, the message loses its potency. Samplers, after all, were educational devices for young girls that rehearsed notions of ideal femininity; by integrating Waterhouse’s work as part of her own sampler format, Reichek foregrounds the instructive (patronizing) dimension of his paintings. The placement is ironic. When their didactic properties are taken into account, Waterhouse’s carefully composed paintings become, oddly enough, appropriate for the “amateur” sampler format. The cut-and-paste “porthole” views of the paintings in Sampler (Tennyson) hint at the restrictive nature of the ideological content inside. Waterhouse’s illusionism is at odds with the flattened surface of the sampler. It is as if each roundel gives the viewer a glimpse into another world, one where the subject of each painting is held captive within its close-cropped boundaries. By exposing this didactic function, Reichek effectively neutralizes it. Waterhouse’s participation in the construction of ideal femininities (as opposed to his ideas regarding art, life and desire) becomes the subject of the work.

54 Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott,” 299.

55 Upstone, J.W. Waterhouse, 112.
In this manner, Reichek offers a feminist critique of canonized artworks: while these works may be worthy of canonization at the level of craftsmanship, they are conceptually problematic for a couple of reasons. First, the alleged “genius” that makes the artist worthy of canonization is threatened when Reichek points out derivative elements in Waterhouse’s work. Because this strategy is present throughout Reichek’s work, it does not simply disqualify Waterhouse from the canon; rather, it shakes the canon at its foundation, demonstrating that revered artists are not inevitably geniuses, but rather, the beneficiaries of structural opportunities. Second, Reichek demonstrates the implications of Waterhouse’s paintings for female viewers, the targets of his didactic approach. The question that lingers throughout Reichek’s work is one of merit: while she acknowledges that the boundaries of the canon are relatively stable, Reichek demonstrates an awareness that the history of art is constantly growing and evolving. It is the responsibility of each generation to critically reassess the objects that it worships.
CONCLUSION

In a climate where authorial fame and canonization were supposedly empty goals, Elaine Reichek recognized the persistence of the canon and the consequences of its exclusionary dimensions. Reichek responded to this problem by creating works with layers of parodic trans-contextualizations and re-readings, advocating neither dissolution nor substitution, but multidirectional expansion of the canon. In her samplers, Reichek negotiated the cross-currents of second- and third-wave feminisms. She embraced the plurality and fluidity of the third wave by creating hybrid objects that were both “masculine” and “feminine,” art and craft; she also recognized, however, the political value of womanhood as a banner under which people could unite to achieve shared objectives. This “both / and” approach was Reichek’s solution to the contradictions of postmodern feminism.

The above exploration of Reichek’s work is instrumental for conceptualizing the intersections of theory and contemporary feminist creative practice. As scholars like Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford have observed, the metaphor of the “wave” is sometimes insufficient for conceptualizing past and present movements toward gender equality.56 To circumscribe an artist or artwork within the dominant currents of a particular wave would prematurely limit the scope of historical inquiry. As Elaine Reichek’s work demonstrates, multiple and seemingly contradictory trajectories can and often do

coexist in a single body of work. This observation will prove critical for scholarship on the so-called “next generation” or “fourth wave” of feminist artists like Maggie Dunlap, whose seemingly naïve embroideries about BDSM suggest the influence of an artist such as Reichel. The future of feminist practice will not be wholly new. By necessity it will draw on the strategies of the past while adapting to present conflicts, making its own contributions along the way. Students of this new praxis cannot fully comprehend it without knowing its legacy – that is to say, without studying the canon.
APPENDIX: IMAGES

Figure 1

Figure 2


