



Hanging on by a thread

**Confronting mental illness and
manifesting love through embroidery**

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Abstract

In this paper I investigate the emotional benefits of textile crafts in general and embroidery in particular. How can embroidery be used to express love and care for others? Can embroidery be used as a therapeutic tool? Using my own embroidery project *Flower heart* as a starting point, my research goes into craft as a manifestation of love, from handmade gifts in the 18th century to contemporary art, and crafting as a therapeutic medium, from rehabilitation of soldiers after WW1, to a recent study on 92 Finnish craft makers. My material is based on research on (textile) craft, research on occupational therapy, interviews with contemporary embroidery artists Michelle Kingdom, Alexandra Drenth and Willemien de Villiers, as well as my own experiences with the project *Flower heart*. My conclusions are that there are many emotional benefits to textile crafts. Our crafts can comfort us from sorrow, help us deal with pain, both physical and mental, make us connect to one another, provide meaning to our lives, anchor us in the present and live on long after we are gone as a manifestation of our lives and our love.

Keywords: embroidery, textile craft, occupational therapy, eating disorders, body image, love

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Introduction: Why I embroider

The first time I tried embroidering was about four years ago. I was staying at my mother's place during the summer holiday from school. After a long and tiresome break up, I needed something to focus on, something to occupy my mind and my hands. I don't know where the idea came from but that's when I started embroidering.

First on small pieces of leftover fabrics, then on my clothes, and then on other people's clothes. I always made my own patterns, but in the beginning they were quite traditional, fairly simple motifs. It mostly became flowers.



Figure 1: Embroidered sweater detail, 2016

I fell madly in love with the technique, it felt like coming home. I had been studying art for four years then and tried many different techniques, nothing had ever felt quite this right. Still it would take over a year until I allowed embroidery into my artistic practice, I think I liked having it be something separate. Whenever I had a break from doing art, I would embroider. I think everyone in my family got something embroidered for Christmas that year. Art school had taught me that everything I made had to "mean" something. Needed to have an intention, a background, a context. Wanting to make something beautiful almost felt taboo. My embroideries were free from needs. They did not have to be discussed, explained, understood. They were allowed to just be beautiful, because they were not made to be in an art context. Embroidery was my

technique too much not to try and understand a little bit about its history. I still find that whether I'm embroidering a shirt for my mother, or embroidering as part of my art practice, it's still my sanctuary, it hasn't lost its magic for me.

Embroidery has been described as a technique made for women to express not their thoughts and emotions, but rather their "innate femininity" (Parker, 1996, 5). A pastime designed to keep them in their homes, keeping them busy stitching beautiful flower patterns instead of voicing their opinions. But the opposite has also been argued, that embroidery has at the same time been used as a tool for communicating, both inside and out of the home, as well as a tool for emotional well being. In *"Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory"* (2000), Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass state; "Whatever repressive and isolating effects stitchery as a disciplinary apparatus might have been intended to produce, women used it to connect to one another within domestic settings and to connect with the outer world, as well". (Jones and Stallybrass, 2000, 148).

The statement connects to one Rozsika Parker makes in *The Subversive Stitch* (1996): "For every writer who condemned embroidery there was one who considered it a consoler for a nameless sorrow. Dinah M. Craik claimed the needle was 'a wonderful brightener and consoler; our weapon of defense against slothfulness, weariness and sad thoughts'" (Parker, 1996, 150), a statement I can personally relate to in my work. A needle and thread are my best weapons whenever I feel anxious or sad.

There are many different aspects to understanding the meanings of embroidery as a technique. In this paper I will not focus on the feministic aspects of the history of embroidery, though it is always relevant, but I will try to explore the ways embroidery can help us heal from mental illness, as well as how it can be used to express love and care for others. As I stated earlier the starting point is my embroidery project *Flower heart*, in which the two main themes are craft as self-therapy and crafting as a manifestation of love for others. In this paper I explore these themes through research on craft as an occupational therapy, research on (textile) craft used to express love and care, historically and contemporary, as well as interviews with contemporary embroidery artists Michelle Kingdom, Alexandra Drenth and Willemien de Villiers.

Background of the project Flower heart*

Since I was a teenager and started to become aware of my body, my appearance and how it could be valued and judged by others, I have been struggling with an eating disorder. It would get better for some time, but it always came back, I felt unable to fight it. I felt ashamed in many different ways. Ashamed of my body.

* The title comes from the book *The Swedish Language of Flowers*, from a passage of a poem that reads: "Ej angår mig en yttre fröjd och smärta. Hvad i mitt frö naturens kärlek tänkte, utvecklas troget av mitt blomsterhjerta" (The Swedish language of flowers, 22). Translation: "External joys and pain do not concern me. What in my seed the love of nature thought, is faithfully developed by my flower heart".

Ashamed of *being* ashamed of my body- I felt I should be smarter than this. I should be able to stop feeling like this. And at the same time, always ashamed of not feeling like I was “sick enough”, which I think is the reason why it took me so long to ask for help. I never starved myself to the brink of death, my body has always worked, no matter how deep into the eating disorder I sank. I was afraid that if I asked for help I would be met with a response like “Why are you here? You’re not sick enough”. And I still feel ashamed even writing about this, do I really have the right to? Did I get off “too easy” to be allowed to talk about it?

The feeling that you are never sick enough is common when dealing with eating disorders, which is why it can go on for a very long time before someone seeks help. There is a misconception about how a person suffering from an eating disorder “should” look. Many people feel that if they are not severely underweight, then they can’t be suffering from an eating disorder (Rollin, 2018). This norm of what a person suffering from an eating disorder “should look like” is harmful and far from the truth, and that is why I decided to share my experience, despite feeling like a fraud for doing it.

Around the same time that I started my Masters program I also started going through a therapy program at Stockholm’s Center for Eating Disorders (<https://www.stockholmatstorningar.se/>). It’s an intense CBT-program that takes about seven months, and it was probably the best gift I could have given myself. When the program was coming to an end I felt a little scared, would I be able to keep going with what I had learned without the support of the Center? I started to think of a way to keep my brain occupied, something to focus on to avoid falling back to my old unhealthy thought patterns. Letting go of an eating disorder is difficult, there is always a part of you that doesn’t really want to. It becomes so familiar, it feels like a safe place to return to, and even though you hate it, it is hard to give it up, much like an addiction. During the program I learned that people who develop eating disorders often have a personality type that causes them to become obsessed with a subject or an activity. Researchers have made links between eating disorders and behavioral addictions such as gambling, compulsive buying, sexual addiction and excessive videogaming (Montourcy et al. 2018, 1-2). I thought about my other obsession, one that felt healthier, and therapeutic: Embroidery. There was my thread to hold on to after the therapy program had ended. Textile craft is not uncommon to use as a tool for therapeutic purposes. In a study from 2000, the activity of needlecraft in self-management of depression proved helpful for many of the participants. “When analyzing the therapeutic effects of creative activity, most women described the experience of intense concentration in the task as providing distraction from worry and relief from depressive thoughts. Creative activity was often described as enhancing self-esteem” (Reynolds, 2000, 1).

An idea started to take form. I wanted to make a portrait of myself, my whole naked body, straight on, full scale, and decorate it with embroideries. This would force me to spend a lot of time looking at my body, but not in the mirror emphasizing the flaws, but with an image that could not be changed. Trying to just accept. I chose to make floral embroideries because that was the first kind of embroidery I made when I tried embroidery for the first time, and I knew I loved

doing it. Wanting the embroideries to carry symbolic meaning, I started researching for books on the language of flowers, and stumbled upon a Swedish book from 1849; *“The Swedish Language of Flowers”*. When I was reading it I found not only flowers with symbolic meanings to express my feelings towards myself, but also towards people close to me. I decided to make the project a series of portraits, one self-portrait and four portraits of people I love. Later I also decided to make an embroidered book for each portrait, where the meanings of the flowers of the portrait can be found, as well as a pair of embroidered gloves to go with each book.

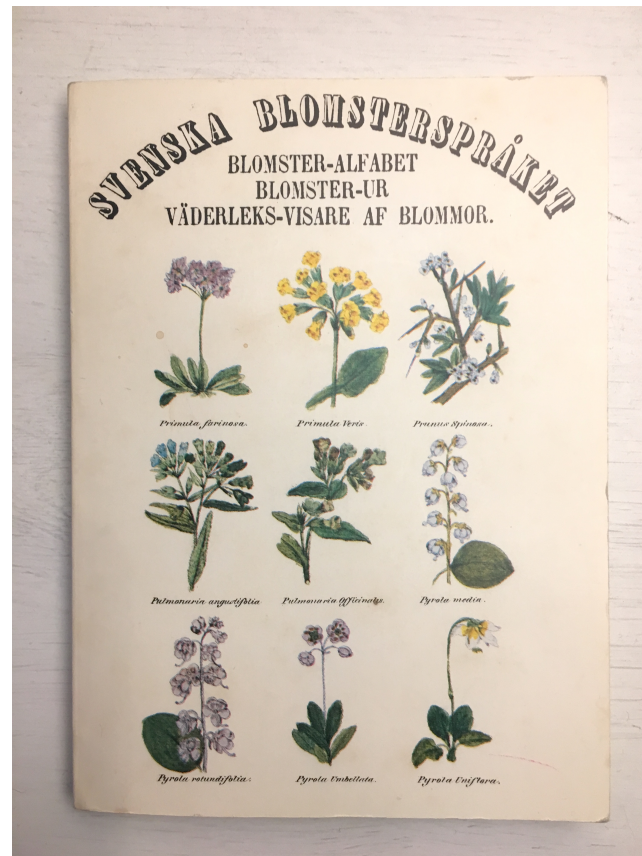


Figure 3. The Swedish Language of Flowers

Confronting body norms and negative body image through the project Flower heart

The first step was to photograph the portraits, which was done in two sessions. I had told the other participants that I wanted to photograph them nude, from the back, and that it could be either full body, half body or just a part of the body, whatever they felt comfortable with. During the first session I photographed my partner, the intention was to do a half body photograph but afterwards he said he would be okay with me using the full body image. He told me he wanted to show his support for my idea, and also to challenge himself, since he hasn't had a completely uncomplicated relationship with his own body and appearance in the past. He then photographed me and I didn't feel as uncomfortable as I thought I would, probably because I feel secure around him and he knows how I look better than I do myself anyway. After that I photographed one of my friends, he

chose the half body image, I think he was a little uncomfortable, but not so much because of the nudity but more of being in front of the camera at all, and the seriousness of the studio setting. When I asked him later about how he felt about being part of the project, and being photographed, he said that he considered it an honor to be part of an art piece, and that he had no problem being photographed by me since he trusted that I knew what I was aiming for. When I showed him the embroidered image later he said that he liked the work, but immediately made a negative comment about how his body looked.

During the second session I photographed my two other friends, both of them were quite uncomfortable with doing it but apart from wanting to help me, they also felt that they could benefit from the experience themselves. One of them said that when I had asked her about being part of the work, her own strong aversion towards doing it made her feel that she had to, to prove to herself that she could. My other friend told me she has since puberty felt a lot of anxiety about seeing herself in photographs, and when I asked her about being part of the project she was hesitant. But in the end, she also felt that it was important, to challenge herself and to be part of a work that shows “normal” bodies. They chose the angle and frame of their photographs based on what felt doable and most helpful to them. I wanted to share their feelings around their participation in the project, to make a point of how common it is to have negative emotions about your own body and appearance, which only became clearer to me during the making of this project.



Figure 4: "For Emilia", 2020, part of the project Flower heart

From an early age we learn that it is normal to not be happy with your body and wanting to change it, and companies make a big profit from it. In 2018, the global weight management market was worth US\$ 189.8 billion, and was only projected to keep growing (Business Wire, 2019). For some this feeling of never being content with your appearance develops into an eating disorder, but even if it doesn't, it still takes up a part of your mind and your life that could be filled with much more interesting and useful things.

For me, this work is a step in that direction. A way to consciously steer my thoughts away from the tracks they are used to taking, tracks that only lead to a circle of self-harm, and onto a track of acceptance and healing. I know it has already been of great help for me, and I think and hope it has been for the other participants as well. A full conclusion can not be made before the work has been shown, but I know we have all already gained something. We have challenged that voice in our heads that tells us we are not beautiful enough, not thin enough, not muscular enough, not good enough, we have stood up to it and gone against it, and I think that is a big win in itself.



Figure 5: "For Pauline", detail. 2020, part of the project Flower heart

In the making of the project, I many times reflected on the fact that all the people portrayed, including myself, have bodies that would be considered “accepted by the social norm” (Rand, Resnick and Seldman, 1997, 425). We are all white, young and have fully functioning bodies. I am aware that this is problematic and I have thought a lot about my position in this. Do we really need to see more images of young, able-bodied white people? Not really, no. I would love to do a work that includes all kinds of marginalized bodies, bodies not accepted by society. But this work is about my relationship to my own body, and to the people I love, and I can’t change how we look. I also hope my work can help highlight the fact that eating disorders are not always apparent from the outside. As mentioned earlier, the stereotype that you need to be underweight to have an eating disorder is not accurate. In fact, most people suffering from eating disorders have a normal weight (www.nationaleatingdisorders.org). My work questions the norms of body image issues in society today, and common misconceptions around eating disorders.

While embroidering the images, I had to keep them rolled on the desk so I only saw a small section of the image at a time. This sort of disconnected me from the notion of embroidering onto a body- except when it came to embroidering my own body. The feelings of shame came back and I almost wanted to hide it while working on it. When writing this I have not yet shown the whole portrait to anyone, so I don’t know how that will feel. Part of me regrets choosing to do this, but for me that is how I know when an idea is worth following through. When I feel partly excited and partly horrified.



Figure 6: "For me", detail, 2020, part of the project Flower heart

The embroidered books were all made side by side with the portrait they are connected to. The idea for making them came when I was finishing embroidering the first portrait. It has been important to me in this project to try and be as open and transparent as possible, this applies to the books as well. I wanted to find a way of sharing the symbolic meaning of each flower with the viewer, and making them into art pieces of their own was perhaps my way of honoring the book where they came from. If the portraits are my homage to people who are important to me, the embroidered books are my homage to "The Swedish language of flowers". The gloves are there as protection, to make it possible to let viewers flip through the books during an exhibition. Each pair of gloves is embroidered with a detail of a flower that appears in the book they are hanging next to.



Figure 7: "For Eric", 2020, part of the project Flower heart

Embroidery as an act of love

The four portraits apart from the self-portrait are of people outside my family, who are close to my heart. People who I wish to have in my life forever. I don't make new friends very often, and when I do it is a lifelong commitment from my side. I recently lost one of those friends, not in a dramatic way, not because of a fight or a betrayal, it just faded away over time and my attempts to rekindle the relationship were met with indifference. I mourn that friendship much like you would a long time lover leaving without saying why.

In making these embroidered portraits and books, at least I will know I have expressed my love and care in a proper way. No matter what happens in the future, these stitches are proof of a love that once existed, and that gives me some sense of relief.

In my research for this paper I contacted three contemporary embroidery artists whose work I feel relate to mine, through e-mail, to hear their reflections on embroidering as an act of love and care, and the therapeutic aspects of the technique. American artist Michelle Kingdom, whose embroidered images often include portraits of people as part of her storytelling, defines herself as a fine artist. Unlike me, she states that she does not use embroidery as a therapeutic medium and that she does not find it relaxing- it is her work. But there is a connection between her work and mine in that she says she has also used her work to honor others, particularly family members, by creating vignettes or slivers of memories and idealized personal mythologies (Kingdom 2019).



Figure 8: "Only then shall I forget you", Michelle Kingdom, 2018

In "Only then shall I forget you", we see a young woman holding a bouquet of flowers, they are starting to wither and fall down on the floor. Behind her are

silhouettes of two other people, one of them is placing their hand on her shoulder. I don't know the story behind the image but I see it as some form of memorial, and as the title suggests, as a portrait of a person whom the artist will care for as long as she lives. I feel it has connections to my work in that sense, that it is a work that honors someone, a physical manifestation of a love that can not be expressed with words alone, and a way of letting that love live on through the work.

Crafting as an act of love and care is something that people have been doing for centuries. Johanna Ilmakunnas, professor of Nordic history at Åbo University, writes about the emotions connected to handmade objects in 18th century Europe. Ties between friends were embodied in handmade gifts like hair jewelry or notebooks, and family bonds manifested by clothes made by mothers for their children or by children for their mothers. The handmade object becomes a way to carry your loved ones with you.

Ilmakunnas continues with another example of the emotionally significant embroidery; bridal linen. They could take years to finish, and served as a way of showing off skills and family connections. But more than that, they were stitched full of dreams and worries about married life, leaving home, starting a family, growing old. (Ilmakunnas, 2016, 313).

(Picture removed for copyright reasons)

Figure 9. Embroidered shirt for groom, late 18th/early 19th century, Brösarp, Sweden

When you are making an object for someone else, the production demands not only an investment of time but also an investment of your thoughts, your care and consideration for the person you are making it for. The object becomes charged with emotion. As textile historian Jo Turney argues, "the crafted object bears the imprint of the maker, not merely as craftspeople would suggest 'the maker's hand', but of the maker's being" (Turney, 2015, 305).

The time-consuming, repetitive nature of embroidery makes it an excellent vessel for emotions. The time you put into crafting something for someone, and making it with your own hands, physically leaving a mark of yourself on an object, becomes a manifestation of your emotions. Words can often feel inadequate to express how you feel towards a loved one, and that is when craft can become a necessary means of communicating.

Turney states that a handmade gift suggests the bond between the maker and the receiver, of intimacy and closeness. She writes:

"In relation to notions of love, knitting or the handmade in general operates on a variety of levels: first, as a sign of familial devotion, encompassing a series of beliefs arising as a response to the cult of domesticity emerging in the eighteenth century; second, as a part of the culture of romantic love and devotion to an intended partner/spouse; and, third, as a sign of platonic and/or narcissistic love or friendship. Each

factor considers the binding of one to another; an intimacy that goes beyond a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers". (Turney, 2015, 307).

Crafting an object out of love is also a way of immortalizing that love. In the same way a photograph can capture a moment and a feeling, an object crafted by hand can capture time, love and care, and live on long after it's maker is gone. This has always been important to me in my work, and has become more apparent through the making of the project Flower heart.

In 2016, textile artist and curator Clare Hunter organized a project called Material Matters. Ten women from different parts of Scotland were asked to contribute by sharing a story of a textile that mattered to them, in the form a wall hanging. The works were exhibited in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the public was encouraged to bring their own treasured textiles and share their stories. Hunter writes about the memories embedded in the needlework, how every piece of fabric brought to the exhibition, worked like a channel between its owner and the person who had made it. Many of the textiles had been folded away in storage for many years, and rediscovered after the death of its maker. They became a freeze frame of the time and place when it was made, and a memorial of the person who had made it. "The stories people told were surprisingly emotive; a young girl held up dress pattern pieces, still pinned to fabric, cut out by a mother who never survived to sew them together, kept by her as proof of her mother's care" (Hunter, 2019, 86).

In *"The subversive stitch- Embroidery and the making of the feminine"* Rozsika Parker presents a powerful example of how embroidery can be used to express emotions and to pay homage, in a Swedish tablecloth from 1945. Embroidery has long been used as tool to show resistance against oppression and to commemorate people who died. In 1945, women who had survived Nazi concentration camps and found refuge in Sweden, embroidered a table cloth for the diplomat who had helped them, Count Folke Bernadotte. The cloth is decorated with cornflowers, poppies and daisies, surrounded by the names of all the women who worked on it. (Parker, 1996, 192)

Embroidery and emotions seem to be closely linked together throughout history and today. The stitches are a powerful language of love and care that speaks to us through the centuries.

The therapeutic powers of textile craft

Knowing that something you made will live on in the world after you leave it I think is a soothing thought, conscious or unconscious, for many artists and craftspeople, but there are many other emotional benefits to craft making. As the title of this paper suggests, I believe embroidery has therapeutic qualities, and in this chapter I will dig deeper into that idea.

Willemien de Villiers is a South African artist and writer who often uses embroidery in her works, stitching on used, stained domestic linen (Figure 6). I asked de Villiers about her thoughts on the therapeutic aspects of embroidery

"Stitching by hand, to me, is as therapeutic as deep meditation. While stitching, my mind enters a neutral, calm space that is very helpful when dealing with trauma, whether past, or present. I think all handwork have this ability to soothe... it has to do with the repetitive action of pushing the needle in and out through the cloth, I think, and the inbuilt slow pace that invites reflection. The fact that one cannot rush the process forces one to slow down. Apart from the hand stitching I do as part of my work, it is also my go-to activity when I feel particularly stressed for whatever reason – I have a few 'meditation squares' I turn to where I simply do rows and rows of mending stitch, allowing my mind to relax and find creative solutions to problems". (De Villiers, 2019)



Figure 10: "Female Notions", Willemien de Villiers, 2019

Alexandra Drenth is an artist based in Amsterdam whose textile collages are rich with embroideries. When entering her webpage you are met with the quote "Embroidery becomes meditation, and then you can create anything you want" (Drenth, 2019). In response to my question mentioned earlier she wrote: "Working with embroidery gives me a liberating feeling. In my embroidery subjects it's all about my inner world, my life and nature. I can tuck all my feelings in my embroidery subjects like grief, pain, joy" (Drenth, 2019).

These words from de Villiers and Drenth link back to my statement earlier, that embroidery is an excellent vessel for emotions. There seems to be something built into the technique that initiates both reflection and distraction, whatever is needed at the time.



Figure 11: "Soft Wild Promises", Alexandra Drenth, 2017

Handicrafts and especially embroidery played a big part in rehabilitation and therapy for soldiers after the First World War. Workshops, exhibitions and commissions were organized by the government in collaboration with medical authorities, artists and craft people to engage the ex-servicemen in different kinds of craft work. Embroidery, at this time still looked upon largely as a "female craft" became the occupation of thousands of disabled soldiers. Craft as a therapeutic activity is not gendered.

One of the biggest commissions came from St Paul's Cathedral in London, an altar cloth for the 1919 Thanksgiving Service, which was made by over 130 men, in memory of their lost comrades.

(Picture removed for copyright reasons)

Figure 12: St Paul's Cathedral WW1 Altar Frontal

Though we can only speculate on how it impacted them individually, embroidery turned out to be a successful form of occupational therapy for the mentally and physically wounded men returning from war (Hunter, 2019, 43-45).

A more recent example of how textile craft can be used to enhance mental well-being comes from a study made in Finland in 2013. The study is based on 92 letters from textile craft makers between ages 16 to 84. Based on the analysis of these personal statements, the researchers could conclude that the crafting had a number of positive effects on their lives and their well-being. The effects included "personal growth, development of physical and cognitive skills, control

of one's body, thoughts, and feelings, as well as cultural and social awareness". (Pöllänen, 2013, 226).

Many previous studies on the benefits of craft making are focused on crafting as a group activity (for example "The experience of creative activity as a treatment medium", 2008, "Art and Recovery in Mental Health: A Qualitative Investigation", 2007, "Textile handcraft guild participation: A conduit to successful aging", 2001), this one was made to look deeper into subjective experiences, and the meaning of crafting as an activity done on one's own. When analyzing the gathered information, three main themes of the effects of craft making were revealed, "Meaning and value of crafts", "Feelings experienced during craft activity" and "Holisticity and intentionality of craft making" (Pöllänen, 2013, 221).

The study shows that for many crafting is seen as a useful way to spend free time, for the elderly or unemployed a way to structure the day, which also stimulated other daily occupations. The participants reported that their craft work was an obligation that they willingly set for themselves. It helped changing difficult moods, it created a sense of control and a way of analyzing life. Crafting, and successfully finishing something they had set out to do, created such positive emotional responses that they had to keep doing it. Knowing that their work would live on in the world after they were gone, maybe being handed down by generations to come, was also a strong motivator. The oldest participants of the study described their textile craft as a friendly companion, helping them to remember their lives.

Many described how their craft had helped them through difficult times of loss, illnesses, divorce etcetera. The crafting could serve as an escape or a protection. One participant writes about how she used her craft to avoid self-destructive behavior. On sick leave from work due to depression and panic disorder, crocheting became her way of escaping from the present, calming herself down, getting out of bed, and protecting her from self-harm. (Pöllänen, 2013, 217-223) Textile crafts have the power to both anchor us in the present, and help us remember the past.

Though textile craft does not contain the power to heal physical illness, it can provide an outlet while dealing with one. The embroidered artworks of Lee Malerich served as a form of therapy for her during cancer treatment. In "Scar portrait 1" she portrays herself both inside her body and outside of it, observing, along with friends who also suffered from cancer. She asked her friends to share drawings of their surgery scars, and used them in her embroidered figures, though in her abstract interpretations they seem to become a natural part of the bodies (Bendheim, 2000, 1563).

(Picture removed for copyright reasons)

Figure 13: "Scar portrait 1", Lee Malerich, 1997

As these examples show, embroidery (and other textile crafts), can have a big impact on our emotional well-being. It can help soldiers rehabilitate from

traumas of war. It can be a friendly companion helping us remember, at the last chapters of our lives. It can help us cope with both physical and mental illnesses. For me it has been a good and reliable friend for the last four years, and I hope it will be for many years to come. It has helped me in my recovery from a mental disorder I thought I might never be free of. It has provided me a tool for communicating thoughts and feelings that I can not put into words. It has helped me manifest the love I have for people close to me, and reassured me that that love will live on long after I am gone.

Conclusion

In this paper I set out to investigate the emotional benefits of textile craft, and how we can use craft as a manifestation of love and care. Through the making of the project Flower heart I found out my own personal answers, and through the making of this paper I found answers from people of diverse backgrounds and ages, historical and contemporary. Our crafts can comfort us from sorrow, help us deal with pain, both physical and mental, be used to connect to one another, provide meaning to our lives, anchor us in the present and live on long after we are gone as a manifestation of our lives and our love.

The final conclusions on the project can not be made until the work has been shown to an audience, which I believe will be the biggest challenge (emotionally). I still feel apprehensive about showing the self-portrait, in a context that involves a lot of people who know me. I don't know fully what impact the work has had on the other participants either since they have not seen it in its entirety, or how they will feel about the images being exposed to an audience, but I do know they are proud to be part of the work, and proud of themselves for overcoming their fears.

What I also know at this point is that the work has been of great importance in my own recovery. Especially the format, an elaborate embroidery work that goes on for a long time, has been helpful. The work has demanded my full attention - which was the intention- and in doing that, helped quiet down the voice of the eating disorder during the critical time after finishing therapy.

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Image references

Figure 1: Embroidered sweater detail, Maja Bäckström, 2016.

Figure 2: "Förankring", Maja Bäckström, 2018.

Figure 3: The Swedish Language of Flowers, image Maja Bäckström, 2020.

Figure 4: "For Emilia", Maja Bäckström, 2020.

Figure 5: "For Pauline", detail, Maja Bäckström, 2020.

Figure 6: "For me", detail, Maja Bäckström, 2020.

Figure 7: "For Eric, Maja Bäckström, 2020.

Figure 8: "Only then shall I forget you", embroidery, Michelle Kingdom, 2018.

<https://michellekingdom.com/artwork.php>

Figure 9: Embroidered shirt for groom, late 18th/early 19th century, Brösarp, Sweden. <https://digitaltmuseum.se/011023579081/skjorta>

Figure 10: "Female Notions", embroidery on used domestic linen, Willemien de Villiers, 2019. <https://www.willemiendevilliers.co.za/stitched-work>

Figure 11: "Soft Wild Promises", embroidery, Alexandra Drenth, 2017.

<http://www.alexandradrenth.nl/simply%20thread.html>

Figure 12: St Paul's cathedral WW1 Altar frontal

<http://www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/st-pauls-cathedral-ww1-altar-frontal/index.html>

Figure 13: "Scar portrait 1", Lee Malerich, embroidery, 1997.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/piedmontcraftsmen/25903260220/in/photostream/>

Appendix

Interview with Michelle Kingdom, fine artist based in Los Angeles, specializing in embroidery

November 14th 2019

Maja: Hello Michelle! I have been admiring your work for some time now, I am an embroidery artist myself currently finishing my MA in textile craft in Stockholm. In my exam paper, I am researching the therapeutic qualities of embroidery, as well as how embroidery can be used to express love and care for others. I would love to include experiences of other embroidery artists, and was wondering if you would consider answering some short questions about your relationship to embroidery? All the best! /Maja

Michelle: Sure, I'd be happy to answer your questions. Send them off and I'll get back to you when I can. Fondly, Michelle

Maja: Thank you so much! My questions are:

- Does embroidery have any therapeutic qualities for you? In other words, has embroidery ever helped you cope with difficult emotions or get through a hard time in life? If so, how?

- Do you ever use embroidery to express love and care for others? If so, how?

I also wanted to ask your permission to use an image of your work in the text, of course with your name attached and with a link to your web page. Best, Maja

Michelle: Your first question is a bit complex for me. I am a fine artist by training and by my intentions, merely utilizing embroidery in place of traditional art materials. In as much as all art is expression and therapeutic, yes I absolutely use embroidery to cope and deal with the many facets of reality.

However, I am not using embroidery simply as a therapeutic medium or as a relaxation tool. Although the work is methodical, it is not relaxing for me and my mind and hands are in a continual state of flux. In other words, embroidery is as therapeutic as any form of art- a way to process and try to come to terms with our world.

In cases of using it to help me deal with hard issues, I am trying to tackle the topic and evoke sides or possibilities. Usually I end up asking more questions and never try to find definitive answers to the problem. And sometimes it can just be processing the world on a visceral, gut level. I have used my work to honor others, particularly in my family by creating vignettes or slivers memories and idealized personal mythologies.

You can use my website and images and I hope that answered your questions. All the best, Michelle.

Maja: Thank you so much! Interesting response. So kind of you to share your thoughts! Wish you a lovely weekend!

Interview with Alexandra Drenth, textile artist based in Amsterdam

November 14th 2019

Maja: Hello again Alexandra!

I was so thankful to receive your answers to my earlier questions about textile portraits, and was wondering if I could trouble you to answer two more (short...) questions about your work?

I am currently writing my exam paper on embroidery, and would love to include experiences of other embroidery artists.

Should you find the time, my questions are:

- Does embroidery have any therapeutic qualities for you? In other words, has embroidery ever helped you when dealing with unpleasant emotions, going through a difficult time in life?

- Do you ever use embroidery to express love and care for others? If so, how?

I also wanted to ask for your permission to use images of your work in the text (it will later be uploaded to a digital portal where other students and researchers could read it)? Of course with your name attached to the image, and with a link to your website.

All the best, Maja

Alexandra: Good morning Maja,

Here some answers to your questions:

Working with embroidery gives me a liberating feeling, which is always good. In my embroidery subjects it's all about my inner world, my life and nature. I can tuck all my feelings in my embroidery subjects like grief, pain, joy, that's the personal side of the work.

My work is about feeling, my concerns about the earth and nature, our environment. In my work I transform people into animals because I hope that people will realize that we are part of the big picture, there is only one earth.

Using pictures: you can use my photos online for your work.

With love from Amsterdam

November 15th 2019

Interview with Willemien de Villiers, artist and writer based in Muizenberg, Cape Town

Maja: Hi Willemien! I have been admiring your work for some time now, I am an embroidery artist myself currently finishing my MA in textile craft in Stockholm. In my exam paper, I am researching the therapeutic qualities of embroidery, as well as how embroidery can be used to express love and care for others. I would love to include experiences of other embroidery artists, and was wondering if you would consider answering some short questions about your relationship to embroidery? Should you find the time, my questions are:

- Does embroidery have any therapeutic qualities for you? In other words, has embroidery ever helped you when dealing with unpleasant emotions, going through a difficult time in life?

- Do you ever use embroidery to express love and care for others? If so, how?

I also wanted to ask for your permission to use images of your work in the text (it will later be uploaded to a digital portal where other students and researchers could read it)? Of course with your name attached to the image, and with a link to your website.

All the best, Maja

Willemien: Hi Maja

I hope this is in order ... please let me know if you need more information.

Good luck with your thesis!

Warm wishes
Willemien

Does embroidery have any therapeutic qualities for you? In other words, has embroidery ever helped you when dealing with unpleasant emotions, going through a difficult time in life?

Stitching by hand, to me, is as therapeutic as deep meditation. While stitching, my mind enters a neutral, calm space that is very helpful when dealing with trauma, whether past, or present. I think all handwork have this ability to soothe ... it has to do with the repetitive action of pushing the needle in and out through the cloth, I think, and the inbuilt slow pace that invites reflection. The fact that one cannot rush the process forces one to slow down. Apart from the hand stitching I do as part of my work, it is also my go-to activity when I feel particularly stressed for whatever reason – I have a few ‘meditation squares’ I turn to where I simply do rows and rows of mending stitch, allowing my mind to relax and find creative solutions to problems.

Do you ever use embroidery to express love and care for others? If so, how?

Not as much as I'd like to, but I love mending items of clothing of people I care about.

Maja: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, I really appreciate it. Sorry for the late response- your mail ended up in the junkbin, good thing I found it!
Best wishes, Maja