



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

FACULTY OF FINE, APPLIED AND  
PERFORMING ARTS

# THE INVOCATION OF X

Passing on a textile code

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Essay/Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Applied Art and Design
Level:	Second Cycle
Semester/year:	Spring 2017
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## **Abstract**

“The Invocation of X” takes its beginning in a narrative about domestic textile handicrafts in a historical perspective. This is in turn connected to other stories: handicrafts as a political strategy, secret societies, and the shared matrix of textile and digital structures. The main intention of this work has been to investigate how textile handicrafts can be used in order to negotiate and transgress discursive borders: for example, the ideological division between domestic and public space.

The whole project is filtered through an old sampler book, a collection of images and ornaments in cross stitch. This book is used throughout the process to formulate questions around its imagery, specifically focusing on how this visual grammar has historically been part of a textile language — a way of communication that has been superseded by the written and printed word. The cross stitch sign system is therefore, here, perceived as a hidden code.

The notion of hidden information is also present in the narrative on a larger scale: how the cultural history of textile work has not always been regarded as an important key to understand our shared past. Another intention of doing this project has been to find material based work methods for processing historical facts, in order to shed new light on them in a contemporary craft and art context. This has been done through studying and articulating the similarities between house work and textile work, textile and digital, home and publicity. This knowledge has then been fed into a practical research process based in cross stitch embroidery. The coded cross stitch images have been manipulated digitally, and the small stitches magnified into pixels in large scale patchworks.

The material result is an installation comprised of five large flags, a table, an embroidery hoop, a collection of books and a documentation sampler. On a personal level, this work process has led to a deeper understanding of how to integrate theory with practice, a stronger self-reliance in my way of working with objects and installations, and new ideas of possible continuations of this work that will follow me for a long time.

Keywords: textiles, history, cross stitch, embroidery, samplers

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## **Background**

### I: Introduction

The making of craft and art has throughout history been staged and performed in separate spheres, which has in turn allowed for different measures of freedom and status for those involved in this making. Notions of what craft is have been directed by current ideas on what should be made, by whom, where, and under what conditions (Rosenqvist & Palmsköld, 2015).

The attitudes towards the textile crafts have shifted quite dramatically over time, and somehow consistently in parallel to the prevalent ideology of femininity. There is a profound difference between the busy, collective embroidery workshops of the medieval era, the 19th century bourgeois woman stitching quietly at home, and the ritual-like gatherings of the sewing circles in the 20th century. However, these different modes of textile practice share locality: they all take place in the home. This heritage is likely to have influenced the way in which we understand domestic textile making and textile makers today.

Although history is rich with examples of how the textile crafts have been used as a means of control and even oppression, it is at the same time apparent that ideologies of gender, place and making are not set in stone. In the words of British art historian Roszika Parker (1984) “They have shifted over the centuries, and they can be transformed in the future” (p. 215), and moreover, they carry an intrinsic potential of re-negotiation and even subversion. Textiles are means of communication; they are information and language. I am curious about how this language has been perceived and applied over time, and how it can be understood in a contemporary craft context.

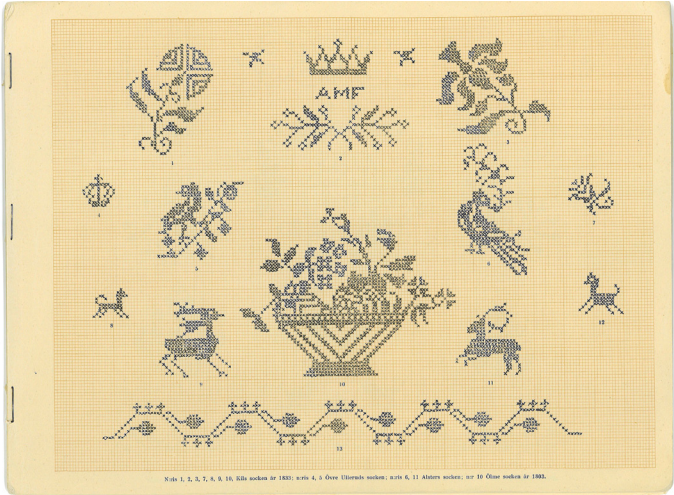
### II: Historical context & previous work

#### *Karin's legacy*

When I was about eight years old, I inherited my grandmother's complete collection of textile handcraft projects, most of which were unfinished. There was also a large number of craft books, clippings from ladies' magazines and endless descriptions and instructions for quilts, coverlets, jumpers, doilies,

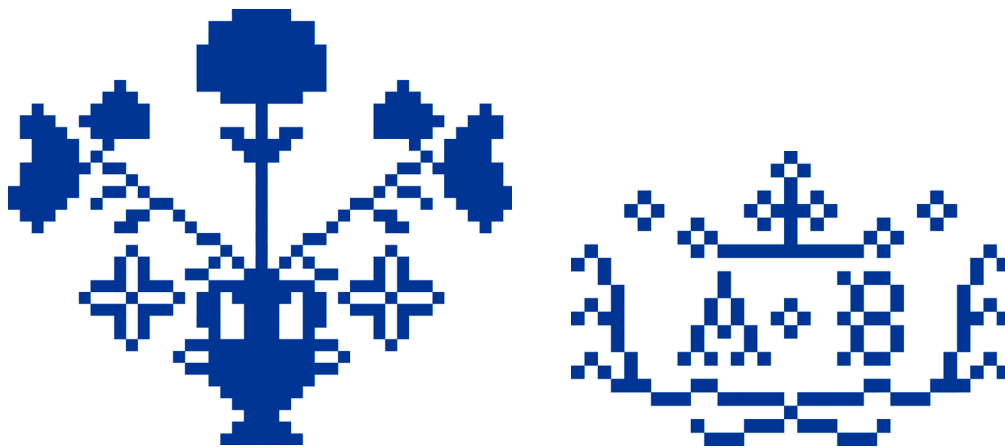
batik and macramé projects, tablecloths, and curtains for all seasons. Among all this, there was also a cross stitch sampler book. It was filled with strange, intriguing symbols, alphabets and rows of numbers, intricate monograms and obscure pictures I could neither read nor understand. The sampler book has been with me ever since, and while all of the projects I inherited remain unfinished still, they are continuously informing my textile art practice in a metaphorical as well as a practical sense.

The book is a compilation of symbols that were sourced in Värmland county in south-west Sweden by the local branch of the Swedish Handicraft Organisation during the late 19th and early 20th century. My grandmother, who was a house-wife with vivid artistic aspirations, was working part-time for the Värmland Handicraft Organisation for many years, which is why I think she had this book. On some pages, she has drawn her own images on the grid, as if she was adding new information to the historical patterns.



## *Samplers*

Sampler-making was a widespread (and ordained) domestic practice among women and young girls in the Western world from the rise of modernity during the Renaissance and well into the 20th century. Originally a piece of cloth intended for one's personal collection of stitch samples, lettering and embroidery patterns, the custom evolved into becoming a profound part of a girl's education (Brown & Wearden, 1999). Regardless of the maker's status, aim or message, samplers were made in the home. Samplers were destined to be placed in the home once finished. Their content, for the most part, concerns the family living in that home. Before the institutionalization of sampler making, women exchanged their stitch samples with one another in order to build up personal material libraries. In their book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) tracks the history of domestic embroidery, and describes how the arrival of pattern books supplanted this custom of networking and individualised the practice (p. 63). The selection of patterns in these books varied with their target groups. Young ladies of the upper classes were presented to lettering and decorative imagery to a larger extent than middle and working class girls. Their pattern books were more likely to deal with simpler marking embroidery for household linen, or different kinds of darning stitches.



From pattern sheets in my grandmother's sampler book, *Korsstyngsmönster från Värmland* (1934).

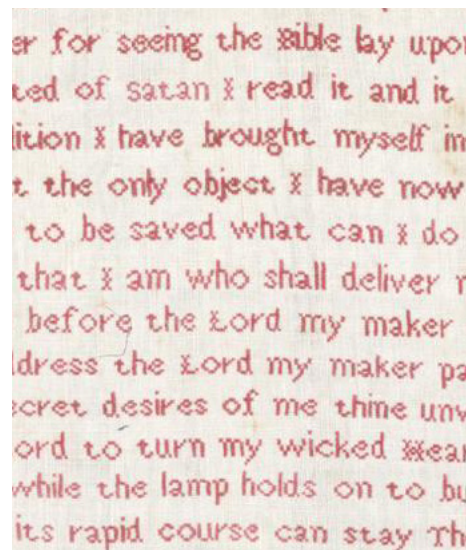
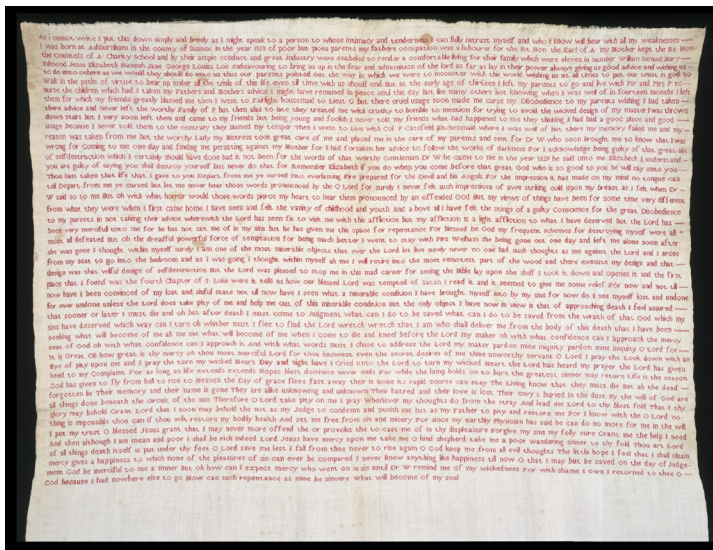
The typical sampler builds on an intricate visual grammar, based on patterns and imagery that have been passed on from generation to generation. In this slow process of transmission, their original meanings may have transformed over time, and the symbolism becomes hard to decode. Monograms are possible to understand; they tell us who married who, that someone was born, or that someone

died. Crosses, apples, trees and birds are symbols of both religious and literary sources. There are urns with symmetrically arranged plants sticking up from their centers. Nature is always disciplined in this visual tradition, composed into geometrical patterns or, at least, potted.

## X

The stitching of a sampler taught lettering to Western women who, throughout history, have often been secluded from formal education and the art of writing. The custom reached a peak in popularity during the Victorian era, a time when women's participation in public life was firmly repressed. The sampler presents a carefully planned and carried out symmetrical composition of letters and numbers, in strict rows on a grid. The key concept here is control, planning and order.

“Patience, submissiveness, service, obedience and modesty were taught by the concentrated technical exercises as well as by the pious, self-denying verses and prayers which the samplers carried” (Parker & Pollock, 1981). However, this tiresome performance is at the same time a veritable invitation to opposition. There are some extraordinary examples of women who bent the pattern and tweaked the alphabetical order of the letters into a story of their own (Wahlström, 2014), as in the case of Elizabeth Parker. Around 1830, she composed a strange piece of embroidery — a confession stitched in small, red cross stitch letters. The text fills up the entire surface of the cloth, and abruptly breaks off in the middle of a sentence. Finding herself in great despair, Parker used the only means of expression she knew in order to put her story into words. She had been taught how to stitch letters, but not how to write them. She was most likely not meant to use her skills the way she did.



Elizabeth Parker's sampler, ca 1830. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

I see how this re-arrangement of the letters could represent a re-organization in a wider sense. There is definitely more than one way of interpreting a person embroidering. The whole setup contains obvious aspects of performativity. Parker (1984) describes: “Eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched — the position signifies repression and subjugation, yet the embroiderer’s silence, her concentration also suggests a self-containment, a kind of autonomy” (p. 10). She has consequently entered a dangerous space: her own mind.

### *The Patchwork Flags*

Last year, I started up a project with the aim of investigating how I could work with textiles in relation to identity and place, a female cultural history and the domestic sphere. The project dealt with:

1. Using textiles as a means of transgressing the ideological border between private and public space.
2. The relation between scale, empowerment and visibility.
3. New ways of reading and using textile symbol languages.

I was searching for ways of pairing domestic textile techniques with expressions of ceremony, elevation and manifestation. Picking cross stitch symbols from my grandmother’s sampler book, I enlarged the stitches into 11x11 cm fabric squares and made patchwork. The result of the project was two large patchwork flags. My reason for making flags was to point to the manner in which textiles have long been used in war as well as in political demonstrations, with a special address to the interwoven histories of the European craft associations, sewing circles, and suffrage movements, a link which I will come back to later.

The questions I had in this project were about carrying information, carrying a message, and who is allowed to be a messenger. The goal was to make a claim for a cultural heritage, and indicate the presence of a silent, lurking force. Textile handicrafts seems to often have played a double role in being both a hindrance and a vehicle for (female) liberation, and I am curious to continue investigating these conditions.





From my show, *Heraldic Remix!* at Nääs Konsthantverk, Floda (2015).

### *The Dinner Party*

There are many examples of artists working with the home and the ideological division of labour, both from historical and contemporary perspectives. An indisputable point of reference is Judy Chicago and her installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979).

It displays a large, triangular dinner table, set with embroidered table cloths, hand-made tableware and 39 place settings, each representing a remarkable woman from history. The craft techniques and imagery of each setting are informed by the specific time and place in which the woman lived.



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979).

The work is inspiring in its conceptual stringency, especially in the way that it deals with symbolism, composition and high levels of detail. It is also using domestic handicrafts in a very straightforward and uncompromising way. Although, Chicago herself pointed out that *The Dinner Party* only presents women of the ruling classes. This becomes yet another important facet of the work, since it is based on the occasional historical records of “great” women that were possible to trace. There simply were no records of the lives of ordinary women and the work they did. For, in Chicago’s own words: “History has been written from the point of view of those who have been in power” (p. 362). But, in spite of its focus on powerful individuals, *The Dinner Party* stays loyal to the work of women in a wider sense (both productive and reproductive), with the aim of uncovering another perspective.

### *Layered histories*

In the history of domestic craft and labour, one can trace a growing division between the public and the private sphere. From the old system of family businesses run in home workshops, the Renaissance and the rise of capitalism brought about a shift in this order. It also generated a growing difference between men and women in terms of type of work, place of work, and working conditions. Parker and Pollock (1981) thoroughly explores this matter, observing that “All the officials were men. Simultaneously, a much sharper division developed between the amateur and the professional work and the number of amateurs increased rapidly. They were all women.” (p. 60). Textile handicrafts fell into the category of amateurism, and stayed in the home, while the home was gradually separated from the workplace. So the domestic sphere became a place where the amateurs met and worked together, talked and exchanged skills, ideas, recipes, *codes*. There have been various forms of ritualized gatherings for making, for example the hobby weaving workshops, the sewing circles (in Swedish, “*syjunta*”) and, in 19th century America, the quilting bees. As Parker and Pollock (1981) describes the latter:

The occasion was not only a gathering of women but a place of meeting, matchmaking and communication for the whole community. At one such occasion, for instance, women in Cleveland, Ohio, heard the first speech in support of women’s suffrage made in the state by the later famous feminist campaigner and writer, Susan B. Anthony (p. 78).



Grandma Moses, *The Quilting Bee* (1940-1950)

The histories of textile making and of the civil rights movements are similarly intertwined in Sweden.

In their project *A Movement Made by Hand* (2014), artists Åsa Norberg and Jennie Sundén

deal on the one hand with the political, social and aesthetic history of the Swedish textile home industry, and on the other with a more contemporary history where a local handicraft organization serves as a starting-point for a discussion about public space and for whom we are building the city.



Åsa Norberg & Jennie Sundén, *The Object, The Subject, The Verb* (2014).



Norberg & Sundén (who subsequently became the external tutors of this project) are creating a net of connections between the Gothenburg-based organisation Bohuslörd, political activists, and aesthetic pioneers, mapping out their shared interests and complex histories. In the work *Homage to the Square*, the weave of layered narratives are intricately joined in a symbolically as well as physically heavy piece. The intersecting textures of two ideologically separated spheres in society are being explored in relation to each other.

Cubic granite cobblestone was cut in the stone quarries on the Swedish west coast, providing a source of income for the local workers. When the stone industry declined, Bohuslörd initiated a textile home manufactory (Bohus Stickning) based on knitting for the quarrymen's wives, turning them into the breadwinners, and handicraft into production. This brought about a temporary shift in the local power dynamics.



Åsa Norberg & Jennie Sundén, *Homage to the Square* (2014).

The red stones in the piece are granite, forming a bow shape. Lilli Zickerman, the key figure of the early Swedish handicraft movement, included this shape in her ambitious inventory of textile symbols, *Rölakan* (1937), an index of prototypical shapes. In *Homage to the Square*, the shape is laid out in stone, referring to “the square as a forum where people can meet and make their voices heard. Here, the tiny square of a textile pattern sheet is given weight by the shape of the stone” (Norberg & Sundén, 2017).

I find a lot of artistic nutrition in these narratives of crossings and connections, and of women gathering under supposedly innocent circumstances (while at the same time carrying a possible hidden

agenda). The construction of the home as a separate sphere is perhaps not that solid: here is definitely room for negotiation. In the book *Zeros and Ones. Digital Women and the New Technoculture* by British philosopher Sadie Plant (1998), which has had a profound impact on me in formulating this project, I found a key sentence that epitomizes the atmosphere I want to create. Plant calls forth the eerie feeling that domestic chores and those performing them, perhaps are not always what they seem to be:

Kept apart by the demands of home work, housework, and heterosexual monogamy, the women couldn't get together to organize themselves after the fashion of the men. But for all the instabilities and crises it induced, the industrial proletariat was never the only carrier of revolutionary change, if it was ever such a thing at all. Perhaps its campaigns even served to distract bourgeois man from the really dangerous guerrillas in his midst, those apparently inconspicuous, well-behaved little creatures who spent their time making lists, detailing procedures, typing, sorting, coding, folding, switching, transmitting, receiving, wrapping, packaging, licking the envelopes, fingers in the till (p. 76).

Textile work in the home is tainted with the notion of wasted time and effort, and has long been a topic of discussion within feminism. I want to revise and improve that discourse by arguing that this thinking belongs to a value system we should very eagerly aim to deconstruct. Instead, this specific type of work performed in this specific sphere could be understood as an ideologically motivated directing of energy, an energy that has historically been forced into the linen closets. My grandmothers closet was brimming with hand woven, crocheted, stitched textiles for every occasion, made during a lifetime of home-making. They were so very neatly organised — mangled and stacked, but still giving the faint impression that the whole space is about to implode at any minute. Textile handicrafts have been performed in the home regardless of its current labelling or cultural appreciation. I want to disrupt the standard pattern, bending the circuits so that this energy can take another route.

The more I explore this subject matter, the more I see the glitch in the system. The home is a production site, a meeting place and a knowledge bank. I would like to invoke the idea of this sphere as a busy workshop, a laboratory and an on-going process — an infinite machine. From the lack of

historical attention and recording, this space could be injected with other narratives and other meanings. From an artistic point of view, and a material based work method, I want to twist and reframe the known story in order to unravel a different perspective. Making and working at home, including cooking, sewing, cleaning, *computing* and everything quoted above, are all acts of constant transformation, in constant motion, and I want to highlight these conditions in my work.

### III: References in contemporary material-based art

#### *Critical participation, radical friendship*

Since its formation in 2013, Den Nya Kvinnogruppen (DNK), a group of feminist-orientated, material based artists, have been constantly visible in exhibitions, workshops and public debate in Sweden. They are critical of the whole idea of contemporary (and competitive) artistry, and instead emphasize the role of collaboration, community, and radical friendship. The group offers an extensive anti-type to the idea of the blessed artist genius, as well as to the hierarchy of fine and applied art. They open up and highlight female-coded spaces, activities, and modes of making, attempting to embody feministic strategies and work ethics, rather than merely addressing feminist topics in singular works of art.



Kakan Hermansson, *Girl's Club* (2012).

Ceramic artist and DNK member Kakan Hermansson's degree project *Girls Club* (2012) portrays the nail salon as an exclusively feminine sphere, and deals with subjects such as class, ethnicity, aesthetic values and sexual violence. The installation incorporates a number of glazed ceramic fingers, represented as characters, and three videos in which the artist paints the nails of different women while having a conversation about their experiences of sexual abuse.

Hermansson chooses to work in an everyday, "de-dramatized" material (ceramics) so that it she can load it with stories that would be hard to embrace if confronted with them without the intermediate material. She aims to bring up difficult, disturbing and provocative topics through objects, and possibly start a conversation. I definitely share this approach to a certain extent, but it also causes me some degree of reluctance as an artist. I am strongly opinionated in social and political issues, and want to bring them into my work — whilst at the same time feeling a strong drive to make for the sake of making. My aim of doing art is not to lend it too generously to a specific issue, but rather to try to bring nuance and complexity to any subject I take on.



Åsa Norman, *1-8, Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose* (2015).

Another member of DNK, Åsa Norman, treats her content quite differently than Hermansson, being much less plainly outspoken. In the work *1-8, Clear Eyes, Full Hearts - Can't Lose* (2015), she is showing banners influenced by the Suffragette movement. In the installation, there is also a sound loop where you can hear the voices of girls "counting loudly from 1 to 8 during a cheerleading rehearsal" (Norman, 2015). In directing our gaze towards the cheerleaders instead of the main stars of the game, that would be the football players, she efficiently puts the spotlight on a part of the game

that is supposed to be complementary, and placing it in the center of the ritual. The girls are still cheerleaders on a male-coded arena, but the power dynamics are temporarily shifted. I also take a particular interest in how the work invokes a feeling of anticipated action, mostly through hearing the group of girls counting. It really builds the sensation that something is about to happen, and I am curious to try achieving that feeling in my work.

DNK started their collaboration from the need for a separate sphere, an art space that would be free from what they call the “male solidarity” of the art world. I strongly sympathise with this experience, and separatism *is* an empowering strategy, where all of a sudden you take the right to make your own definitions and rules. In my view though, this strategy can be justified as a means but not an end. I find this form of organisation very interesting, it is informing the entire theme of my project, and I probably would love being part of one — but even so, I have a hard time coming to terms with the fact that it actually seems to confirm the power structures it wants to resist. I would rather like to develop these strategies and organisations into something more than a reaction, trying to expand on what a radical practice could truly mean. I tend to think that such an alternative needs to be based on actions and skills rather than definitions of gender.

### *Craft and subversivity*

Material-based art can be a potent tool for externalizing complex histories, concepts, and courses of events within society. This view on craft and agency is omnipresent in the work of designer, researcher, and activist Otto von Busch. In his hacking theory, presented in his doctoral thesis from 2008, the aim is not to destroy the machine or overthrow the system, but to learn how it works in order to operate within it and try to change its course. In part, this is what DNK is doing; they are claiming space as artists in a self-evident way, and supporting each other as a defined group. Yet at the same time, they are proposing an option to what a contemporary art practice could be.

In his text *ROT-slöjd och svartkonst* (2015), von Busch talks about the inherent slyness of craft. He discusses the word “craft/crafty” and how it is connected to skillfulness and cunning. Likewise, the Swedish word “slöjd” is directly linked to English “sly”. The word “manipulation” appears throughout the text and also as a recurrent element in his practical work. He argues that there is a radical and dangerous potential hidden in the tacit knowledge of skillful hands. Through some ingen-



ious examples of lock-picking, tax-escaping handymen and alchemy, von Busch efficiently shows how the work of the hand carries the possibilities of transmutation, subversivity, and uprising in its very system. Manual making is not a neutral activity (von Busch, 2015).

#### IV: Artist statement

I want to create knowledge, add perspective, and redesign maps by working with material, form and aesthetics. Craft brings substance and materiality to abstract concepts such as “structure”, “history” and “heritage”, and it is time- and site-specific. Doing research through material based art making responds to one of the purposes of my project, namely to shed new light on the history of women’s textile work in the home. The narrative I am building has a specific connection to my own family history in the shape of my grandmother’s book, as well as it is linked to a more general Swedish textile handicraft context.

Imagination, fiction, dreams and mysteries are vital ingredients that I care for in my practice, even when searching inspiration from historical sources and political realities. A tough and honest goal would be to refine the capacity of staying on the threshold: not searching for solid answers, but rather collecting and producing knowledge about my field of interest, in order to present it as an open-ended piece of work. My knowledge stems from intuition, and is reflected in practical research. In this project, I would like to pursue a method of working that clearly resonates with the ideas presented in this text, basing my research on what I see as the essences of both textile and domestic modes of working: patterns, repetition, gradual transformation, formulae, (re-)production, circularity and cumulative gestures.

Textile crafts are traditions based on a passed down visual grammar and techniques with no apparent originator. They are often the work of many hands and minds, blurring the idea of the originality, individuality and genius of the Artist. These are factors that have frequently disqualified textiles from being recognised as works of art. In order to reflect and undermine this system, I will be exploring non-linear modes of working and making, employing a net-like approach that is plentiful with references and ways of association. I want to suggest the presence of a collective effort, a humming of many voices, an underground society exchanging codified textile messages.

## **Purpose**

### I. Shifting and widening perspectives on a female cultural heritage

The history of textile making in the home is a tangled net rather than a straight line. It contains a rich mythology of creativity, home economics, power exertion and technology. In her text *Att hävda det textila* (“Asserting the Textile” [my translation]) feminist historian Louise Waldén (2005) argues how textiles seem to convey very different meanings and connotations depending on the chosen perspective. Among the emancipated women of the early suffrage movement (as well as the second wave feminists of the 1970’s), textile handicrafts became the ultimate symbol of female confinement and wasted energy: a domestic preservation area that kept women from independence and education. Although, from another point of view, the textile crafts have provided an important arena where industrious bourgeois philanthropist ladies have created opportunities of forming alliances, organisations, enterprises and meeting points. Instead of accepting the restrictions of femininity, some women have consistently found ways of sidestepping the rules, making use of their hands and minds in society in ways not obviously threatening the status quo.

In the essay *Textilens text* (“The Text of Textiles” [my translation]), Waldén (2002) places these activities in a space inbetween the distinctions of the public and the private. She describes the sewing circle as a hidden, but nonetheless significant, form of publicity on its own terms — a shadow regime. In smaller communities, it often played a profound role in local decision making. While being detached from formal power, there still were opportunities of having an informal, and very practical influence. One purpose of this project is to study and try these different approaches through hands-on work.

### II. Investigating the connections between textiles and text

There are several connections between text and textiles, down to the etymological link: the Latin word *texo*, which means “weave”, “plait” or “intertwine” — the main activity of both phenomena. Waldén (2002) argues that the textile *is* text; a predominantly female kind of scripture, to be read in culture,

heritage, and a legacy of knowledge traditions. Reading textiles require a double gaze, and an understanding of women's history, culture and socio-economic conditions. Looking for hidden subtext calls for literacy in material and non-linguistic terms. The textile script is silent, global, physical and social (Rune & Selder, 2016).

My own symbol for this link is the X. X is the perfect merge of stitch and letter, a strong symbol that can be woven into the mythology of this project. X embodies a mix of textile and digital languages and structures. X is the smallest building block in cross stitch embroidery. X is the name signature historically used by the illiterate. X is a transmutable quantity.

### III. Forming a cross-disciplinary platform for my practice

The overall purpose of my artistic pursuits stems from a strong fascination for making connections, for discovering the unknown, and for drawing lines between points to build nets. It is a never-ending process of learning, where my interest in textiles becomes the necessary filter to sift information through. I want to use this project to point out a direction, an area of interest that I can base my practice in for a while. The nature of this work, touching on different subjects, angles and approaches, hopefully will allow me to float between disciplines, fields and conversations. I want to eventually open up for collaborations with others — both within the field of textiles and elsewhere. The idea of sampling lives in my work on both micro and macro levels.

## **Objective**

### I. Asserting the cultural significance of domestic textile making

Textile heritage is a history of recording and transmitting information. It carries a certain air of secrecy, coded languages, and half-forgotten traditions. The old textile languages become well kept secrets if they are not viewed as significant historical records, as public property. Messages rendered in textiles are potent sources of information, that is, if we are able to read them.



One form of textile information is the art of marking. Stitching monograms and symbols onto the dowry, once a serious task for young girls, was also a transmission of identity — sewing one's name in bright red silk on crisp white linen (Waldén, 2005). The act contains elements of ritual and performativity, and manifests a person, a time, and a place. Memorial quilts and mourning samplers serve the same purpose. They are all material records and memory vessels. Sadie Plant (1998) points out how the processing of information has long been a female task, all the way from weavers and embroiderers to private secretaries and switchboard operators, programmers and typists, all employing “a private female code, ‘another language, another alphabet...’” (p. 121).

This project began with an urge for making this language more visible. Starting to delve into the history of textile making, I found a myriad connections to subjects I could not have imagined. I also felt a kind of indignation from the obvious history of injustice, and the reductive interpretations that one inevitably discovers. Although, as the project moves on, I am rather drawn towards making work that focuses on the white spots on the map, the almost known, the half-hidden. Pointing at the undercover aspects of textile traditions seems more intriguing than trying to explain the mysteries and give them away. One intriguing fact about the textile languages is that they already are very visible. It is as though we are surrounded by encrypted information, and I want to investigate what I can do to highlight that in this work.

## II. Presentation in a spatial context

In my bachelor exam project, I worked with a character, her story, her room and belongings, which ended up as an installation — a vehicle of sorts. The purpose was to invite the visitor into a personal sphere, where there were hints and clues to who the person living there was; a kind of puzzle, built from materials, objects and techniques mediating the character. I would like to attempt working in a similar manner again, making use of past experiences, and challenging them. Working with a narrative using objects, actions and a “stage” still feels difficult but alluring, a method I want to develop further.

Installation does of course imply many things, but in this context I am thinking of a kind of abstract scenography, generously interpreted. One source of inspiration is Swedish artist Jonas Live-röd, in the way he works with “total installations”; large bodies of work containing masses of objects,



Bachelor exam work, *The Last Girl in the Woods* (2012).

mixing ready-mades, sculpture, and drawings et cetera — almost like a parallel universe, enfolding the visitor in the space. The feeling of lingering mystery, of endless referencing, and of trying to find links and clues, is strongly present in his work.

Having set out to work with a story about a secret sewing circle, the idea of a scene is quite appealing. Like in my previous work, I want to try creating an atmosphere of on-going activity, something that is in motion; the hidden room in the factory where secret experiments are carried out.



Jonas Liveröd, *Grand Assembly*, detail (2013).

### Question formulation

Is it possible to bring X out of my grandmother's sampler book and the domestic sphere, and into public space?

Is it possible for the viewers to interpret and understand the cross stitch images as being a kind of script?

What does the shift in scale, from small to large, do to the viewers' understanding of the images?

In what ways can I make the exhibition space a considered, included part of the work?

## **Approach**

### I. Domestic and textile modes of making as main principles

Housework is never ending. It implies starting, processing, finishing, and starting all over again. It is predestined to immediate consumption — its results does not last. It becomes invisible, and has to be done again and again and again. It is an infinite loop. In definitions of work, the domestic kind often falls out of the category of real, steady production. Instead, its reproductive nature somehow obscures the effort involved — a condition that is similar to crafts. Textile making contains elements of heavily repetitive motion on all levels.

When looking for commonalities in textile and domestic work, notions of rhythm, iteration, pattern, transformation and formula are recurrent elements. I will try to use them as keywords for this process, and to expand on them. What could “pattern” really mean, taking the concept further? I want to approach textile techniques as programs for making, using their logic to bring about shifts in patterns, images, text, and spatial arrangements. To what extent can I make all elements of the work follow a textile code?

To make restrictions for my gathering of inspiration, and to create possibilities for repetition both visual and material, I have decided to use my grandmother’s sampler book as the central point of departure. The aim is to see how much knowlegde I can extract from it: how disparate references, histories and connections can be traced from a singular source. The idea of the sampler is a key concept in this project. It entails collecting, compiling, arranging, referencing, linking and sharing — similar to patchwork, which is another way of joining diverse sources into a new entity. I will make use of both techniques, metaphorically as well as literally.

### II. Investigating the interplay between the textile and the digital

Digital and textile technology share certain aspects of structure and language, a relationship that I think might help our understanding of them both. I have recently discovered a way of building textile patterns using a digital logic, patterns that I could not invent any other way. This has given me new

possibilities of thinking about textile making. My way of forming knowledge often comes from twisting and turning shapes and words and materials, deconstructing and putting back together again. In this project, I will be working with vector graphics to investigate cross stitch embroidery patterns and samplers, a tool that allows me to work faster and more extensively than I am used to. I aim to create knowledge through letting textile and digital ways of making and thinking inform each other, in visual as well as material and spatial terms.

### III. Building a narrative: the subversive sewing circle

An underground sewing circle meet regularly to exorcise the symbols out of a sampler book. They are using them to code messages. The group is planning something; doing research, making maps, writing lists and procedures, constructing models, collecting information. When you enter their space they are not there. My ambition is to make you feel as though you have entered a sacred zone, aiming for tension, presence and materiality. Unfinished work, loose threads, a state of impermanence.

## **Work process**

### I. Following the material, developing the method

The first thing that I discovered after delving into the practical, material-focused part of the project was that most of the theory I had developed in this text so far was insufficient when it came to hands-on work — no matter how well constructed it was. Most of it simply did not provide me much guidance when confronted with practical issues (something I was not too surprised to find). So, I had to continuously develop and adapt the method to the studio work, adding new questions, and realizing that the most productive thinking was happening while I was making and not in front of my laptop.

The idea of working towards a large-scale installation comprised of a myriad different symbolic objects had to go. Recalling the half-finished, slightly vague feeling of the outcome of my bachelor project a few years back, I was fearing the risk of ending up with plenty of props but no actors. The



fine-tuned narrative I wanted to bring forth might get lost in a cluttered space. The notion of ready-mades could perhaps be reactivated in some respect later on. At this point, the main endeavour was to end up with a solid, elaborate and thoughtfully constructed body of work.

To start this process, I set out to track my original sources of inspiration, as well as asking myself what my actual motivations are. The act of claiming space is important. So is X, which I have come to define as “the cultural and historical fusion of textile and text”. Last but not least, there is the notion of a humming tune, an unknown number of people at work, a mumble.

Having made that clear, I took a step back to look at the flags I made last year. They do embody these main intentions in a true and uncompromising way. They appear as an interface between their historical textile sources and the digital world. X is present in the form of hundreds of squares, being both pixels and stitches at the same time. The flags are the result of an intense and repetitive work process, which links back to the nature of domestic work that I want to cast light on. And, not to forget: they visualise and activate X on a large scale: a domestic textile artifact, blown up into a thing so large it can never be pushed back into the boundaries of the home.

## II. The sampler symbols

### *Definitions of symbolism*

A symbol can be viewed as a concrete representation of something abstract or absent, due to an explicit but arbitrary cultural understanding — but it can also be regarded as an indexical sign, one where the visual expression and the content expressed are the same thing, only in different ways. This idea is strongly present in alchemy for example, where the symbol and the content are equal representations of the same underlying principle. (Johansson & Schüldt, 2015) Or, as in the case of textile fabrications: “The visible pattern is integral to the process which produced it; the program and the pattern are continuous” (Plant, 1998). A change in the program causes a change in the pattern. They are equal aspects of the same entity.

### *Symbolism and samplers*

Within this work, the understanding of symbolism starts with the actual symbols, images and orna-

ments in my grandmother's sampler book. They were collected and documented by the Swedish Handicraft Association during the late nineteenth century in the county of Värmland in mid-west Sweden. Despite the focus on local characteristics in the early days of the Swedish handicraft movement, as in Lilli Zickerman's nation-wide index of textile shapes, these images bear an obvious resemblance to sampler motifs found all over Europe, as well as the Middle East and Central America (Brown & Wearden, 1999). Sampler making was a widespread custom in the Western world, peaking in popularity in the 19th century. Samplers were stitched by girls and women from different social strata, although the materials, verses and images they were ascribed to use varied more or less according to class. The purpose for making them, besides the actual collecting of images and stitches, were the recording of life events such as births, marriages and deaths, whilst at the same time being decorative and personal expressions.

However, this visual vocabulary seems to have lost most of its communicative ability. Its symbol language do not speak very clearly to us today. Occasional books have been written on the subject of sampler motifs and symbolism, but I have deliberately sought to avoid this kind of information. What sparks my interest about the symbols is their obscurity. I rather want to ask why we know so little about them, how is it that they now come across as purely decorative, when it is obvious that they have had the function of a language.

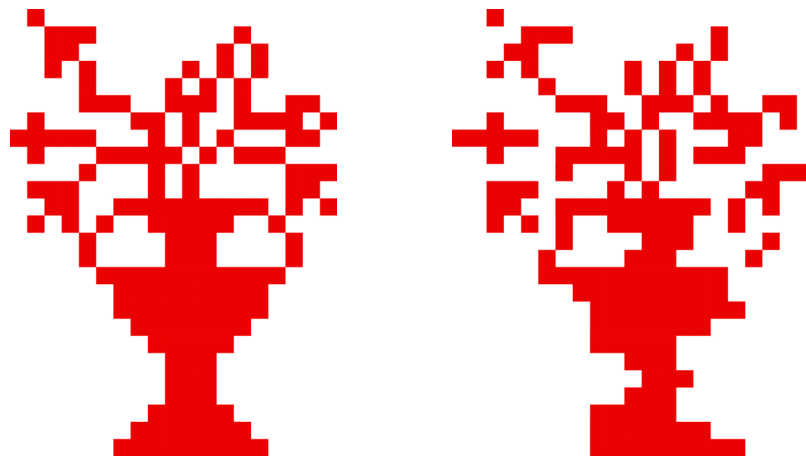
I wanted to explore how the inability to read the symbols could feel and look through a making process, so I tried various ways of manipulating the images within their grid system.



From left to right: Default mode, plain weave, twill and satin.

The squares have been shifted loosely based on different weaving principles like plain weave, twill and satin. Applying these textile rules to the cross stitch patterns renders new versions of the symbols, strange but still recognisable. I have worked with vector graphics in Adobe Illustrator, since that enables fast processing, intricate layering, and complexity in composition. The images are generated due

to a hidden principle, just like the woven cloth appears as the result of the program of the loom.



Right: original image. Left: pattern shifted according to plain weave.

My rearrangements of sampler symbols can also be understood as a way of re-formulation of a forgotten language. Ultimately, it symbolically and practically means rearranging information and bringing forth other orders within the constraints of a rigid system, aiming to uncover other narratives, other perspectives, and other meanings. As mentioned earlier, there are direct connections between different code languages historically employed by women, be it tapestry weavers, morse code knitters, stenographers, war-time code-breakers or embroiderers of samplers. There is an intense passing on of information going on since time immemorial. The effort of bringing new life to the sampler symbols in 2017 is one link in that chain. The tracing and transmission and collaging of old patterns is in itself a symbolic act, as is the chosen technique: patchwork. The interweaving of small elements into a new entity is a basic textile principle. The medium is the message, and the program is the pattern.

### III. The five flags

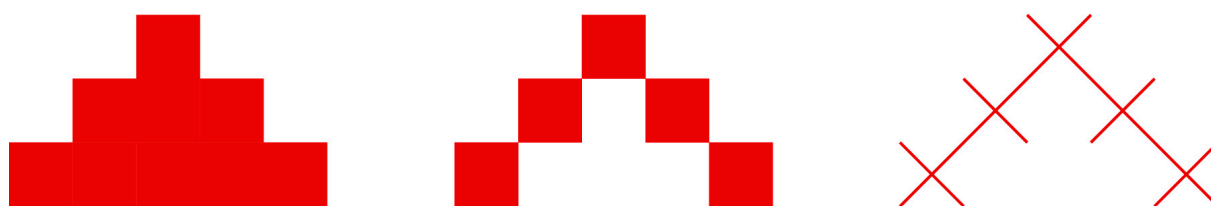
#### *A procession*

A flag is a charged symbol, at the same time as it is an empty container. The act of carrying a message on a flag is something that can be appropriated by any kind of interest. Feminists do it, warlords do it, as well as football fans, monks, sailors, and terrorists. It is an accessible surface. The common denominator of waving a flag is the will for communication.



A whole group of people carrying flags would become a procession: “an organized body of people walking in a formal or ceremonial manner” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911). The word *procession* originates from the Latin *procedere*, to go forth, advance, proceed (p. 414) — just what I imagine the secret sewing circle to be doing, metaphorically as well as literally.

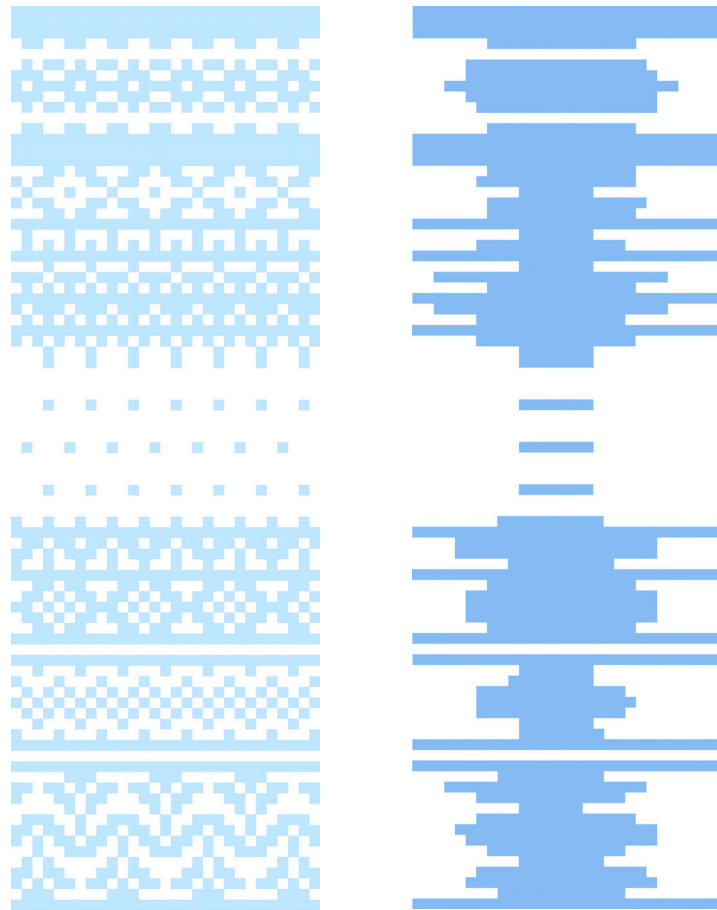
So, I set out to make a series of flags. In addition to the reasons given above, working in series is a well known way of making art pieces: one that I have not tried so much before, but that suited this project really well. I also decided it should be an odd number of flags, ending up with five. The odd number allows for a symmetrical composition of the procession, tracing an elementary textile building block that I wanted to use a basic structure — referring back to Lilli Zickerman’s thoughts on “proto-shapes” (Norberg & Sundén, 2017, p. 30). The number five also entails a link to the pentagram, and to another form of secret female gathering: the magic circle.



### *Manipulated monograms*

The flags also represent five type specimen found in the sampler book: the monogram, the border pattern, the representational image, the text and the merged symbol of two or more of these compositional elements. I have used three ways of processing the images, so that some have been kept intact, others have been disrupted and some have been mixed or “spilled” into each other, creating a new image. Early on in the process I also tried a way of aligning the squares to the center of the image, which generated a version that resembled a soundwave.

Both the weaving principle and this “soundwave” method made the symbols come alive in some odd sense. There was a faint notion of a crunch in the monograms, like white noise or electronic jamming in an old radio. Putting these next to the unbroken symbols strengthened the contrast between stillness and movement. I also thought the whole idea got a bit clearer as the intact version of the symbol provided a kind of code key to the manipulated symbol. I wanted it to be evident that something has been done to the images.



To the left, an original pattern drawn by my grandmother. To the right, all the filled squares have been center-aligned.

### *The colour scheme*

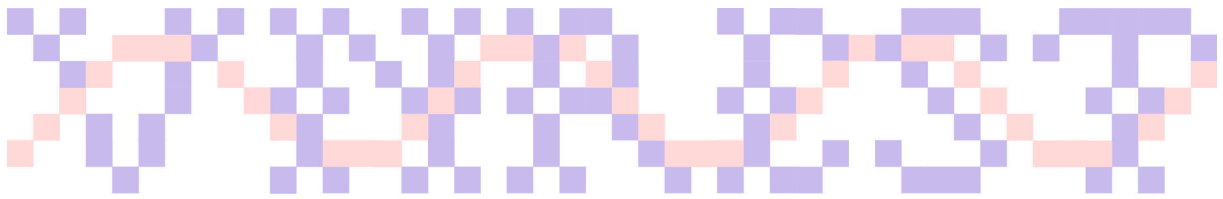
In terms of colour, I tried to limit the options to a minimum, working strongly idea-based within the logic of the project. I wanted to refer to the history of domestic marking embroidery. For example, monograms on kitchen towels are often red or blue on white fabric. I made red and blue my primary colours. The use of the colour red can also be traced a long way back through the history of feminist art, being an emblem of revolutionary love and sacrifice; a colour of energy and strength and action. I also had in mind another piece of work by Judy Chicago — *Red Flag* from 1971, the photo-litograph of a woman pulling a blood-drenched tampon out of her vagina. The next step was to extract all other colours out of red and blue, to create a vertical depth from the primary colours. The light purple is of course a mix of red and blue, and another link to feminist history as it is a symbolic colour associated with the LGBTQ rights movement. The final palette included seven different colours ranging from deep blood red to pale baby blue.

### *A discovery*

The meticulous and algorithmic process of making all dyes by hand — weighing, measuring and mixing pigments and liquids, waiting for water to heat, for fabric to dry — evolved into a symbolic and meaningful act. It also became a method for reflection. I found myself working with colour like a classic painter, and recalled the time I asked my two painter friends why the art they do is “fine”, whereas the art I do is “applied”, as we are all extremely material-based and invested in colour, texture and form. (We concluded that the difference was utterly discursive.) In my long process of making dyes, I discovered how theories and discourses I had studied earlier on started to materialise and become comprehensible through the practical work. I started thinking about a chapter in the book *Old Mistresses* (Parker & Pollock, 1981) again, where the authors are investigating the divisions and integrations of different art forms from the Renaissance and into Modernism. From *Zeros and Ones* (Plant, 1998) I remembered the claim that “textiles underlie the great canvases of Western art, and even the materials of writing” (p. 61) and recognised how the ideas presented in this book had really had a profound impact on this project. Later on I read the book again with entirely new images in my mind. My own making led me to make sense of texts that I had previously enjoyed on a purely intellectual level. I also got a clearer understanding of the way in which textiles and handicrafts can function as a “mnemonic device” (p. 65), as I was able to link rather large quantities of information to the embroidery or colour sampling I had been doing whilst reading or listening to a certain book or podcast. Plant, citing historian Elizabeth Weyland Barber, uses the term to describe the way textiles have been used to “mark or announce information”, to “record events and other data” (p. 65), as well as to indicate how “cloths persist as records of the processes which fed into their production” (p. 66). In my own practice, the meaning of these words is as simple as this: when I work with my hands, it is as though information and memories are recorded in what I make. And the end of this work process, I have managed to establish a link between theoretical and practical work that has been significant for me to find.

### *The Double Tree*

The fifth flag, the last one I made, could be used to describe how I have been working with colour and imagery in terms of composition and symbolic meaning. It is by far the largest of the five. The flag carries two versions of the same symbol: the tree figure that I placed on the very first flag, as seen on

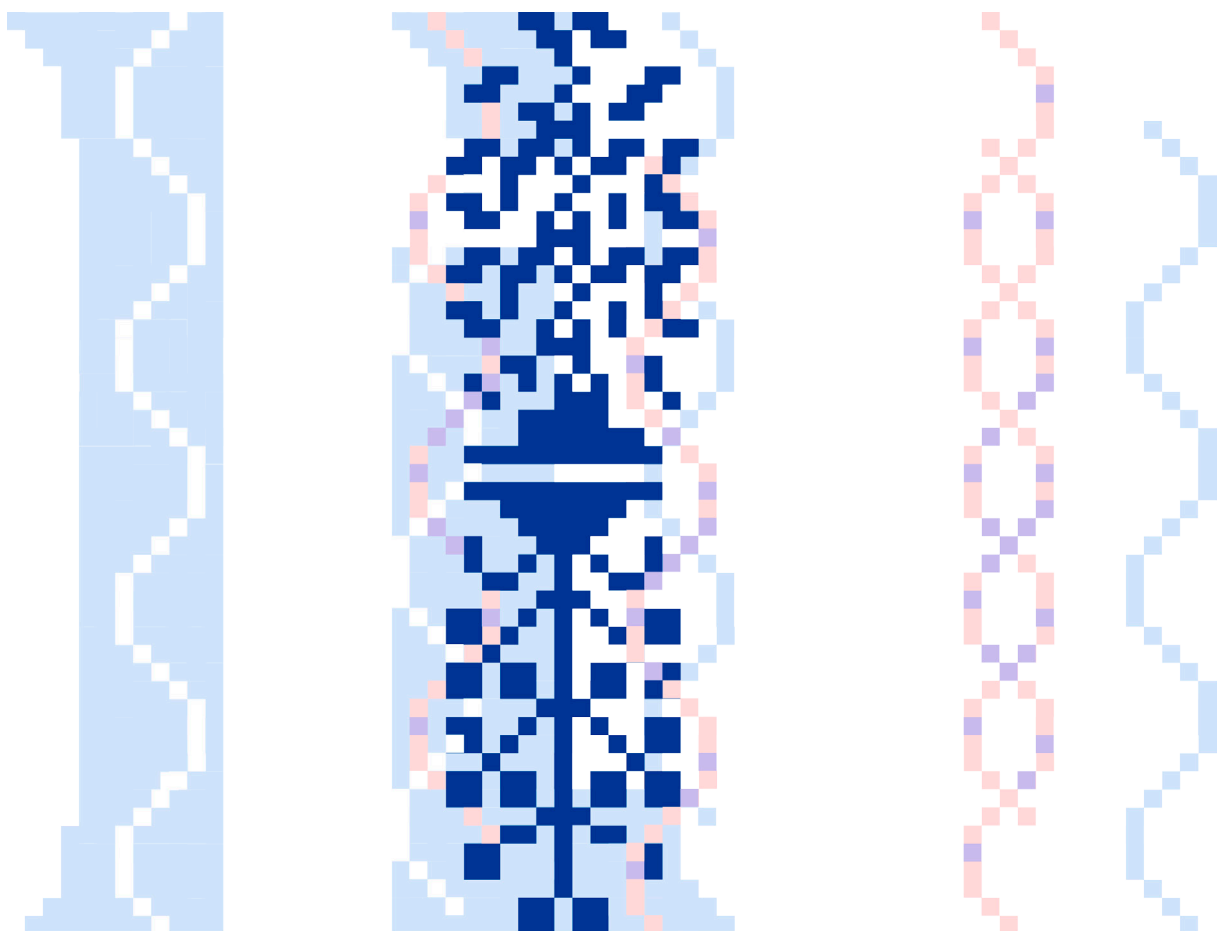


*VNREST*

p. 8. The tree appears twice, on the top half is the rearranged version, sprawling over the surface like it has been charged with electricity. On the lower half, the tree is shown in its unbroken state, but turned upside down. In the background, or simply on another part of the flat surface, are some more solid shapes of light blue and white, that I imagine to be some kind of disintegrating fundamentals, or columns. In addition to this there are several wave shapes.

They have been “spilled” from the flag carrying the text *VNREST*, but here they are entwined, like double helixes. Without thinking about them as I made the picture, it only struck me afterwards. What is a double helix, if not the image and the actual structure of the genome? It is coded genetic material.

The stuff of which the sampler book is full.



The fifth flag: *The Double Tree*

#### IV. Thoughts before the presentation

The thoughts on how to install this work for the examination (and later, the exhibition in Gothenburg) has been in the back of my mind ever since I decided to make flags. The fact that they are flags, or banners rather, suggests that they will be put into use at some point. I do not want them to be dependent on walls. Hanging these textiles on walls may compromise the proud and active presence I wish for them to have. They need to stand freely by themselves somehow.

The potential destination of this work may not be a traditional exhibition space, a white cube gallery or a museum. The context in which I place my flags will heavily influence the way they are interpreted. They are sensitive in that way. To me, the flags symbolize a transgression of borders — both ideological and physical ones. I can think of many possible ways of showing this work, both in terms of spaces and media. The event of activating the flags could be turned into a performance, or a film: a collective process of some sort.

Parallel to making the flags, I have also been working with embroidering a sampler, as a way of documentation — with the purpose of employing this tradition of making in my own, contemporary, context. I have “recorded” many of the visual ideas I have had for the designs of the flags, and I intend to let the sampler develop further over time. The images are stitched in no particular order, eventually aiming for a loosely symmetrical composition spread out over the entire surface. For the examination, I will try to bring back previous thoughts about a *mise en scene* or a setting, and the sampler will appear in this context in some way, perhaps a bit hidden, but with some kind of presence.

What I want to achieve in my installation of the flags is a feeling of unrest, traces of activity, a premonition of an approaching event. The flags must stand ready to be put into action.

## **Result**

### I. Installing the flags

As mentioned above, I have been very firm about not wanting the flags to be dependent on any walls in the exhibition space. However, that opinion was revised when I finally, one week before the ex-

amination, took the flags to a larger space and folded them out together for the first time. They looked larger than I had imagined. I spent a day in this space, assembling the flagpoles and crossbars, hand-stitching some last details, and arranging the work in the room.

I put the flags in a formation inspired by the textile “proto-shape” (see p. 25), but also based on the actual shapes of the flags in relation to each other. Two narrow banners on the sides, then two larger squares, and the longest, largest one in the middle. This composition created a symmetry though the flags all have their individual shape and expression. They all have different solutions in the way they are mounted, as an attempt to give them with a slight impression of personality — like they were made by a number of people, perhaps over a longer period of time. One is sewn and hoisted like a horizontal national flag on a pole, three are done like classical standards, and one is draped and ruffled like a curtain — an ever so subtle nod at its domestic origin.

From the lack of possibilities of suspending the flags from the ceiling, I had to lean them against a wall. This made me change my mind about their relation to walls altogether. Suddenly, they had that easy feeling of accessibility about them: they were ready to use. I decided to let go of the idea of fixating the flags in any way. In the last talk with my tutors before the examination, we discussed how the flags, installed this way, become active in some sense. They appear like figures or characters, perhaps representing their absent carriers. The act of placing them against the wall may really invoke this feeling of waiting, of a stage prior to something happening. Hanging them from the ceiling or fastening them to the floor simply would not make sense to the narrative, it obstructs the feeling of potential transformation and does not encourage action in the same way. The latent movement suggested in the leaning flags corresponds with my ideas about a work in motion. It is offering the possibility of walking away with the flags. I think this way of installation implicates both temporal and corporeal aspects. There may be a before and an after. There is the absence, or potential presence of people. We might, or might not, be waiting for something.

## II. Additional elements: the table, the sampler, the books

When bringing the work into the gallery space where we were going to do the presentations, it became clear that my installation needed some additions in order to better communicate my work process — which was one important part of the examination. As mentioned earlier, I also wanted to include the sampler in some way in the final presentation. After all, it is the sourcebook of the project and the code key to the flags. I wanted to use the sampler as an entry point to their imagery.



The installation at the examination.

However, it had to be a subtle hint. Recalling the kind of mildly cryptic installation art that I myself feel captivated by (as in the work of Jonas Liveröd), the allure is in the mystery. It has to be an invitation, an encouragement of curiosity. The will to decode, to interpret, and to make sense of the work, is something I will dare trusting my audience to be doing — if provided with some entry points.

In order to not present the sampler in a way that immediately gives it away as the code key, I decided to use it as a table cloth, without commenting on it. I brought a small side table into the space, a piece of furniture that can be found in an ordinary living room. On top of the table, I placed the sampler, and then a selection of books that I have been using throughout the project (see Bibliography). These books represent a rather important part of the work that probably will not be very prominent in subsequent versions of the piece. But, these texts underlie many of my creative decisions. Being present in this installation, they also help in diffusing the border between process and result, artwork



and workspace — and the reason for the homely table, the cloth, and the private library altogether is of course an attempt of making visible the correlation between the domestic and the public, the question that is underpinning the entire project.

As the installation work came to its close, flags against the wall and table all set up, I got an impulse and lifted the table to place my empty embroidery hoop under one of its legs. It was a spontaneous, last minute decision, but it felt right. It was linking back to my bachelor work: the urge to create and possess a kind of material vocabulary, a method of arranging everyday objects in an attempt of releasing meaning from them. Perhaps I have been processing it, studying it and tried it long enough to claim it is a quite well rehearsed method. The gesture came naturally somehow, from within the work itself.



The table in the installation at Fixfabriken. Photo: Hilda Grahnat



## **Discussion**

### I. Addressing, acknowledging and navigating several contradictions

#### *Oppression and empowerment*

Since my project is conceptually based in binary structures, cultural dualisms and polarised models of thinking, the discussion too became very much focused around these categorisations and their potential bridging in my work; the intersections of liberation and confinement, theory and practice, the digital and the material.

The conversation took off with opponent Jessica Hemmings stating that the textile practices have an inherent contradiction in them, one which is difficult for both thinkers and makers to come to terms with. Textiles have been used as a tool of oppression and control throughout history, but also as an arena for empowerment and communication. How do we use these facts in a contemporary craft practice without that being a confusion? My opponent thought I seem to have a great deal of acceptance to these conditions in my work, allowing both aspects to be present, and avoiding being didactic. It really is something I need to find a stronger positioning to. How can I work with widening perceptions of historical narratives without bypassing uncomfortable facts? I am very curious to go deeper into this matter, in order to be able to speak louder and clearer about it.

#### *Theory and practice*

Another topic that was brought up in the discussion was how to approach theory as a maker. I have been reflecting on it throughout this entire process, since I have never before built a project on such a large amount of theory and writing. It has been a struggle keeping that balance right, and not regarding the text as a manual for the practical work. The writing has to be informed by what I make; creating a dialectic interplay and keep feeding the theory back into my making. It feels even more important since a part of my investigation deals with the relation between text and textiles as sources of information, and the value hierarchy between them. As an artist with a inclination towards writing, it is crucial to establish a functioning approach to theory.

Or, in the view of my opponent: as a practitioner, I need to take all the conditions of craft practice into consideration in the formation of theory. She concluded that a thorough theoretical framework does not have to stand in the way of the artwork — if the theory is based in the making. Something which I discovered during this process and now have a more personal understanding of.

### *Digital and material*

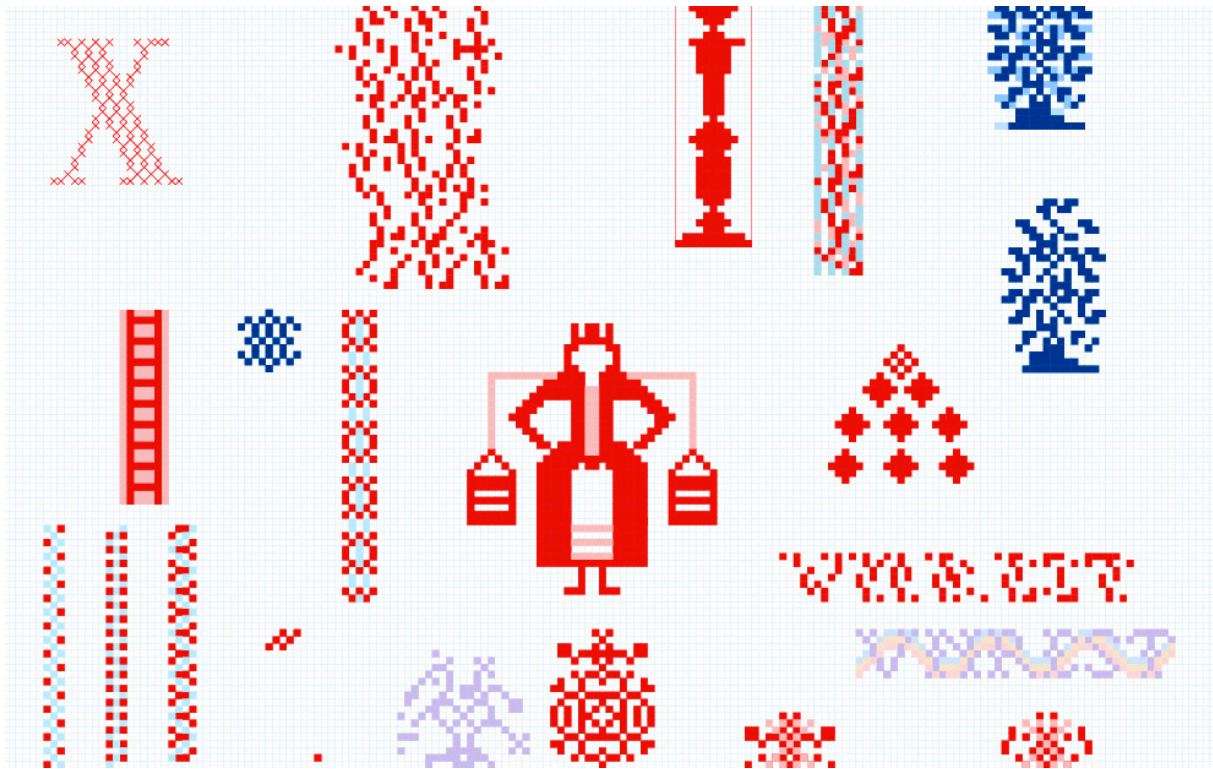
The digital in relation to the textile is yet another example of a presumed contradiction that I wanted to examine in this project. During the presentation, we talked about how the digital, here, is used as a tool to obtain certain outcomes in the material work. It is a means but not an end, in the way that I have used my digital tools to inform my craft practice without flattening out the material aspect of the work. I have been trying to show how the digital and the textile share history and language, with the aim of finding a method of working with them both in a way that strengthens this connection. I have come up with a method that I can develop further, a method that at this point is predominantly visual (the digital manipulation of cross stitch images) — but now I also understand that here is an entire theoretical discourse to be taken into consideration in the development of this work.

### II. Inviting the viewer into the work

To present and exhibit a project like this at a school of art, craft and design, is to present it to a very well informed and specific audience. People here are used to see and interpret this kind of work. So, how could I approach other audiences? What I want to do is to stir people's curiosity, and lure them into the narrative of my work without being too explanatory. If my work is hard to enter into, I rather need to sharpen my tools. During the two exhibitions in which I have shown the work so far, I have made some observations and discoveries.

### *Stitch/pixel*

I believe that this work has the potential of addressing quite diverse audiences, and that my connecting of the textile heritage and the digital language might help in doing so. The intersecting element is the stitch/pixel. It is a concept that can be understood from different perspectives, as it speaks to anyone familiar with textile patterns on grids (embroidery, knitting, crochet) as well as to audiences who would understand it as being pure computer graphics. The grid images can also be read on different levels of depiction: to some people, they are seen as decorative but abstract, whereas others will try to understand what the image actually depicts.



The sketch sampler in Illustrator.

### *The loaded flag*

I was prepared to get criticised for choosing to work with flags, especially in the form of standards that come from a military tradition. I have got some comments on this matter earlier on, pointing out the flag as an aggressive symbol — something I have constantly argued to be a necessary contrast to the domestic imagery. At the examination though, the discussion rather focused on the flags being loaded but *not* angry. Jessica Hemmings commented that using the flag as a symbol, particularly at this moment in history, is quite a risk. But, she also found a lot of comfort in the fact that my flags are not that aggressive. They are brave, she said, confident and bold, but definitely not explicit or didactic. They communicate in a far more fluid way, and manages to inhabit a lot of underlying meaning while at the same time being beautiful objects to look at. This bridging has been very important for me to master, finding the state where the flags can be enjoyed as fine objects, but with the potential of shifting into something else. I want them to be on the threshold where both perspectives are possible. These comments encourage me to develop this “fluidity” further. I want my work to oscillate between different interpretations with as much ease as possible.

### *The code key on the table*

Even though I am arguing that the textile languages are everywhere to be found, clearly everyone is not as familiar with them as I am, nor are they trained to discover them in unexpected contexts. Showing the manipulated cross stitch images in a new technique and on such a large scale may obscure the important story of where they come from, and why they are there on the flags at all.

So, the choice of making an installation with the flags in relation to the table was essential in order to open up the work. If people do not get to see the original symbols in the sampler book, or the embroidered images on the table cloth, it becomes much harder to understand where the flags come from. Presenting the sampler on the table, and the book holding its blueprints, builds a layering effect that leads the audience into the narrative from multiple entry points. Seeing the three different representations of the cross stitch images makes the reading more inviting and dynamic; it helps communicating both their historical use in relation to my contemporary approach, as well as the story of their transition from the domestic to the public — which is the core of the project.

### *The second installation*

The exam exhibition in Göteborg was built up in the old factories of Fixfabriken, in two large industrial halls. My work was placed in a spot near the passage between the two spaces, at the back of the room. There were no walls, so instead of leaning the flags against a surface, I had to try suspending them from the ceiling. The fact that there were two entrances to the exhibition hall allowed me to present the work in a way that made it considerably more three dimensional than in the previous installation. I hung the flags in a formation so that two of them faced one entrance, and three faced the other. So, however you entered the room, you met the work up-front. There was no backside to it anymore. I also let the symmetrical composition go, and chose to install the work with greater regard its visual aspects. If the first presentation was strictly symmetrical, this one was way more uneven and fluid. Instead, the images on the flags became the main concern, and I arranged them so that the eye could travel across the surface and follow the patterns, colours and movement within the image. There was also a greater deal of inbetween spaces, angles and a defined area on the floor thanks to the irregular composition. The table was placed at the side of the flags instead of in the center, so that the pattern were carried from the book and up onto the flags — or the other way around. This revealed to me that even if the flags are finished, there are still so many possibilities of letting the work transform and develop in future versions. I am very content with the way this installation turned out.





The installation at Fixfabriken. Photo: Hilda Grahnat

## **Continuations**

One of the main realizations at the end of this work is that it is not finished, that it is rather impossible to finish. I have found a subject and an approach to it that is likely to keep me busy for years to come. At this point, I see at least three possible paths to continue working within this field.

### I. Public artwork

The intention of this project, to claim a domestic textile heritage as a historically significant means of communication, makes it conceptually relevant to place my work in a public art context. I have sought to bring this artifact out of the home and into public space, so I intend to try developing my practice in that direction, and work with the symbols on an even larger scale. This project could be relevant in a public art context both with regard to its narrative, and to its visual expression. It would be interesting to play with scale, colour and perception in an architectural context. I am curious to test different “resolutions” of the pixelated images on different distances between viewer and image, to see what happens to the perception of the symbols.

As discussed before, the work is also unquestionably sensitive to the context in which it is placed. Therefore, I would like to continue installing it in different spaces. Conceptually, it would be interesting to hang the flags out of a public institutional building (government agency, art museum, university) to put the flags in relation or contrast to their domestic origin. I am also thinking of ways of incorporating the symbol images into the buildings themselves, if the grid patterns are transferred to another material, like ceramic tiles. That would be another symbolically loaded way of integrating the domestic into the public.

### II. Enactment

From the very beginning, I have been investigating ways of installation that plays with the feeling of approaching action. To continue on that track might be the development of a performance piece where the flags are actually activated. One aim of this work is to suggest a collective effort. The imagined scenario is the underground sewing circle at work, and I as an individual artist is not the most important part of this narrative. Even the making of the flags could be done in the form of collective work. It somehow does not make sense that I do everything myself.



I would like try performing with different groups of people, observing how that affects the understanding of the action. What if the performers are young girls, old ladies, or a mixed group of people? Again, the work is highly sensitive to its surrounding context. Where is the procession walking? Do they walk in formation? Backward or forward? Bringing the work into a performance would highlight the collectivity and the movement, qualities which do not come forth in very strongly way in the present way of installation.

#### IV. Artistic research

Throughout my entire masters education, I have had comments from tutors and other students that my work has the possibility of developing into an artistic research project. I can see that opportunity myself. Through this work, that has been dense and far reaching, I have managed to accumulate a battery of new questions that I want to delve into. For example, only the issue of the context-sensitivity is immense in terms of possibilities for further investigation.

Nearing the end of this project, I have also defined two potentially separate tracks in my research: the social aspect (the history of female gatherings, social movements and domestic textiles in public space) and the visual language of textile grid imagery. The first would possibly be based in a greater amount of theoretical research than the other, where the investigation of form, colour and material would be central. However, both paths would depart from my own practice and be based in making.

I am not at all sure that a position as a researcher within an academic context is the best way to develop this project, but nevertheless, during the course of these past months, I have started to perceive myself and my role as an artist in terms of a practical textile researcher.

#### **Conclusion**

This long work process has led me to a number of new insights and realizations. More than anything else, it has helped me understand what it might mean to work with a contemporary, material-based art practice, and has deepened my comprehension of the potential impact of the field of art and craft in contexts that extends far beyond the disciplinary bounds.

The intersection of the textile and the digital has released a new and intriguing field of study

for me in terms of both theoretical and practical research. It has also showed me how the intense focusing on a very narrow and specialized area could visualize and illuminate things on a much larger scale (metaphorically as well as literally). The different perspectives are informing each other. In order to grasp and understand complex historical narratives and how they are present in society today, I need to base my investigations in a well defined idea, approach or material. The method of letting my grandmother's sampler book be the nexus of the entire project proved to be a functioning way of staying on top of the vast amount of material I extracted out of it, and also to release in-depth knowledge about my subject and to pass that knowledge on.

One of the most profound sources of inspiration turned out to be Sadie Plant's book *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1998). In this work, the author is using the link between the textile and the digital as a way of weaving together seemingly disparate ideas and events in history into a narrative of women's work and culture, hidden meaning, and shifting perspectives. She effectively invokes the feeling that what you see or what you have been told to see might not be the whole picture — intricately building another narrative, and uncovering connections that feel obvious once they have been bared. This method of forming knowledge has truly nourished my imagination throughout the process, and provided me with tools and ways of thinking that will keep feeding my work for a long time. I have ended up with a rich and abundant project, one that holds many ways of continuation, and I am eager to go on working.

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