

Diaspora

written by Nadia Odlum, 2016

What traces does the body leave on the world? The recording of history, the creation of portraits, the archiving of precious accounts or objects speaks to our desire to maintain some presence in the world after our bodies have disappeared. But is it possible to gain a sense of the bodily presence of someone passed through these artefacts? And what about the stories that, for whatever reason, the history books do not record? Do they simply fade away? Is it possible to touch hands with someone you will never meet, or to tell a story you have never heard?

Diaspora addresses these themes through a body of work that transcends its own essential materiality, and creates connections that thread through many lives. Gathered through a process that sought to give honour to anonymity, and executed through a practice of deliberate mutuality, these pieces weave intricate links between the bodies and lives of individuals separated by culture, continents and time.

Orchestrated by artist Yang-En Hume, this project began over the course of a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, in the National Art School's Storrier Onslow Studio. Whilst researching new work in Paris, Hume was drawn to the city's marché aux puces – the flea markets, and in particular the stalls holding the many and myriad items gathered from deceased estates. In a city like Paris, the weight of history can be felt in every stone. However, it was not the grand narratives of 'great masters' in the many hallowed museums that piqued the interest of the artist. Rather, it was the piles of photographs, letters, envelopes, old clothes, diaries, passports and birth certificates of individuals long passed. The weight of the lives behind these objects, the intensely personal nature of each individual piece was starkly contrasted with the way they were now laid out in piles and boxes, cluttered on tables like historical detritus.

Sorting through these piles of images and objects, Hume found that the effort to select items that were aesthetically interesting slowly turned towards a more concerted interest in seeking out images of women in their daily lives: women at home, women working, women with each other, their families or their children. In addition, she was attracted to samples of lace and textiles that themselves contained allusions to women's labour, and the way such work has throughout history been frequently relegated to a lower status in the divisions between 'craft' and 'art'.

This interest led to further research, conducted at the *Library of Decorative Arts* in Paris and the *Calais Lace Museum*. Housed in a former lace factory, the *Calais Lace Museum* boasts a large collection of over 15,000 sample books and 10,000 lace pieces. But while the designers of the lace patterns (who were predominately male) are usually credited, the makers of the pieces of lace are only broadly identified: "The ladies of France made this lace". The identities behind the hands that cramped over the laborious intricacy of each piece are lost to history.

The artist's proposal to travel to France had started with a desire to explore the catacombs of Paris, to investigate concepts surrounding the dismembered body. However, it eventually became clear that these lace patterns, and the piles of personal ephemera found in the markets gave a greater sense of past lives than those cold rows of skulls. In these objects the body is absent, but its traces remain: physically and socially, in subtle but powerful echoes. Interwoven with this is a sense of anonymity, of time, and of stories untold.

The combination of these materials and sources of inspiration into the pieces presented in *Diaspora* could be considered interest enough when examining these works. However, there is yet another layer to this project, and another set lives that have become entwined. The work started with the artist engaging with these relics using her own hands: sifting through the artefacts, laboriously tracing the lace patterns, transferring the photos to the fabrics and embroidering over them. However, she soon realised the mammoth task that embroidering each of the pieces represented. Bemoaning the pain in her wrists and giving regular shout-outs to all the needle-working women across history, Hume realized that if this project was to be completed it would require many hands, and the donation of

hours from others. In a process the artist herself described as ‘terrifying and exhilarating’, she turned to her community for help: she put a call out through social media.

The role that social media and collaboration has played in this project is fascinating for a number of reasons. As a time consuming and meditative practice, embroidery has historically been something that brought groups, particularly groups of women, together. Confined together in one space, with a repetitive task, conversations and connections between individuals would inevitably grow. In a social knitting circle a certain style of communication emerges: it is an extended exchange that ebbs and flows from the mundane to the intimate and back again. In recent decades, this has been fondly termed the ‘Stitch ‘n Bitch’. This term can also be more broadly linked with a feminist reclaiming of handicrafts, and an active resistance to taboos surrounding ‘traditional’ notions or expressions of femininity.

The intimacy of the setting for Stitch ‘n Bitch style exchanges can be contrasted to the way conversations now happen over social media: we no longer have to be physically in the same space to communicate, and people can drop in and out of the conversation, or observe the entire exchange without it even being registered. The idiosyncrasies of this communication medium had a large effect on how the collaborative process for this exhibition grew. Asking for help in this way, and sharing the achievements of her volunteers online as the project progressed, allowed the artist to reach a greater number and variety of participants than other methods of outreach. In addition, the public nature of social media meant that some volunteers (perhaps feeling unskilled or intimidated) waited until others responded to the call out, following the back and forth between the artist and her volunteers on Facebook before gathering the courage to jump on board themselves.

This generosity of spirit, and the humility felt by the artist at being helped by so many willing participants, serves to offset what might be perceived as a certain audacity at taking on a medium with as long a history of tradition and technique as embroidery. Hume herself admits that she possesses little training as an embroiderer, and some of her volunteers (instructed only in a basic running stitch) have even less. However, this amateurism adds an intriguing rawness and individuality to the way the embroidery patterns have been interpreted. In a number of cases, the artist has even chosen to invert the pieces, and display the backs of the embroidery rather than the more precisely realised fronts. These tangled messes have their own bodily allusions, like tresses of hair trailing from the back of the found fabric pieces. It is a sight that would give conniptions to any professional embroiderer, but in the context of this exhibition these amateur qualities signal the willingness of the participants to step outside their comfort zone, and to give of their time and labour in order to see this project realised.

It is these layers, this cooperation, this back and forth and crossing over, these hands, these threads, and these many linking lives that make the works in this exhibition so rich. The lace patterns are combined with the found fabrics, which are printed with the anonymous images from the Paris markets. These materials are selected and composed by Hume, yet completed through the work of her many volunteers. Each piece is laced with personal history, and takes on a life that is beyond the artist’s control. There is a credence given to collaborative efforts throughout history, and a recognition paid to undervalued labor. It is a more powerful tribute to the untold stories and anonymous lives of the women behind the pieces or images than simply inserting their names into the history books. Through these works, strains and aches are shared across time, and the echoes of many people, of many bodies, are drawn together, stitch-by-stitch.

Embroidery Volunteers:

Kate Andrews, Janet Bales, Veronica Barak, Fiona Brennan, Jane Britton, Amy Bui, Sonia Byrnes, Ro Cook, Georgia Dimitriades, Laura Fayers-Pooley, Somya Gandhi, Isobel Green, Cassie Griffiths, Veronica Habib, Amanda Holt, Rachel Honnery, Bee Hoon Hume, Sumitdirae Javakhar, Greta Koeck, Julia Krivoshev, Holly Ladmore, Gillian Lavery, Joy Lincoln, Kimjeng Luy, Adam Maunder, Gabriella McGrath, Katerina Mesterovic, Annelise Morrow, Jenny Pang, Bernadette Roberts, Jennifer Ruan, Jeffrey Schutter, Lisa Sharp, Vicki Sheehan, Nancy Skinner, Alexandra Streeton, Lisa Tolcher, Angela Wu, Stephanie Young, Bronwyn Zucker.