Steve Reinke
Butter

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Steve Reinke's Needlepoint of Cruelty

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Facing a small field in which pinks, browns, green, and lavender predominate, my first question is, which way is up? The needlepoint is about 12.5 by 15 centimeters, so I decide on the landscape format. There are some lines that look like they should angle up from the lower left, and a couple of masses that could suggest mountains or angular clouds, so that gives me an orientation. There, chaos dispelled for the moment. I could be looking at a garish sunset, or a blocky mountain view. But what to make of these forms on the upper left, boxy outlines one stitch wide in orange on a brown field and a ladder-like shape in the same color, vaguely reminiscent of scientific diagrams? Just below it, that burgundy line angling up, on which I grounded my initial determination of the needlepoint's orientation, is interrupted by the termini of other colored stitched lines then thickens into two stitches wide before it abruptly ends. The burgundy reasserts itself in the "sky" in a group of intricately interrelated lines in four different colors, which I think will make me go crazy if I look at it for too long. Small clots of brown and green stitches pock the pink "mountain" side. Emerald lines noodle up the lower left of the needlepoint, looking both deliberate and random, interrupted by a single point of moss green separated from its antenniform cohort. In the upper right, irregular fields of brown and rose are interrupted by a golden-brown ziggurat or angular intestine. Elsewhere, why does a flanging copper shape cling to a golden-brown oblong? Why the central rhomboids of gray? The lurid colors and incipient forms recall Kandinsky's paintings from the nineteen-tens that turned out to be eschatological allegories, but I am ninety-five per cent certain that this artwork is non-objective, not abstract—it refers to no physical form, not even to abstract it.

Needlepoint is painstaking work. Even on a relatively wide gauge like the one Steve Reinke has chosen, about six stitches per centimeter, the needlepoint artist has plenty of time to determine what the shapes and lines will do. Think of it as a drawing, but with the freedom of gesture subtracted. Looking at this needlepoint makes me feel stupid. Reinke seems to have set out to create a small field that initially pleases with its colors but will not resolve in any satisfying way and makes fun of me for trying. Even as I try to make sense of it, I despise my brain for seeking symbolic resonances, or a general gestalt. And yet I fear what I would become if, in modernist fashion, I took these deliberate yet random forms seriously.

Throughout his oeuvre, a practiced rejection of ideological comforts allows Reinke to reflect on profound issues like mortality, sorrow, love, and friendship. Rejecting all ideology but maintaining a quasi-Lacanian concept of subjectivity, Reinke often asserts that desire is the only reason to live. He often frames this desire around the decaying body of the beloved. Youths who are disfigured in some way, with speech impediments or skin rashes, first appear as this object of desire in his *Hundred Videos*, begun in 1989, and constitute a lugubrious through line in Reinke's work. *What Weakens the Flesh Is the Flesh Itself* (2017), with James Richards, explores mortality and desire with

what I would call a Reinkean Neoclassicism. *A Boy Needs a Friend* (2015) is a moving meditation on solitude and friendship: a tattoo he designed for his friend's anus, the loneliness of Pinocchio and Caspar the Friendly Ghost, the tenderness at the heart of his own marriage.

Yet in the video *An Arrow Pointing to a Hole*, Reinke—sitting naked in a basement at night, sporting some new tattoos of comets aimed at the base of his neck—explains he's worried that his relationship to images has become "too libidinal and sadistic." (Interestingly, Reinke equates empathy with sadism.) Showing some scratched, worn black-and-white film footage, perhaps from some hospital in the nineteen-forties, of boys walking with a limp in a field, he continues, "It's only in the specificities, the little details—the scars, the wounds—that desire is caught." He then states that he wants to efface the singularities that make these images desirable. "I want a smooth plastic surface on which desire can't be caught." So he renders the limping youth as a bland, twitchy animation that is disturbingly funny, as it still indexes the limping youth but also indexes the artist's annihilation of him. With this video Reinke seems to have entered a sort of mendicant stage, apparently working to relinquish the desire that has thus far made life bearable. Elsewhere Reinke refers to his video essays as Montaigne-like, and one of Montaigne's titles, "That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die," could summarize Reinke's oeuvre.

Later in *An Arrow Pointing to a Hole*, Reinke relates (in that smiling, disarming voice that always sounds like he might be pulling your leg) that one day when he was a child, the sun's rays melted the link to his subconscious, and that his microbiome took over—his guts. And ever since, "I mostly do whatever they say."

Is the needlework I've been describing the product of someone whose subconscious has dissipated? A work with no subconscious meaning, nothing to interpret in the old sense? Is the author of the needlepoint not Steve Reinke but Reinke's microbiome? Aha. There is something *digestive* about the whole thing.

Speaking of digestive, *An Arrow Pointing to a Hole* concludes with a "Video to Placate Artaud." It involves the still-living guts of dead cattle, letting out gas, and the simple joy these farts bring to the child videographer documenting his father butchering the carcasses.

Artaud's theater of cruelty sought to unmake the spectator's world at the level of the body itself. In *The Theater and Its Double*, as Kuniichi Uno writes, Artaud discovered "the image of another body that lives with its organs and its nerves, another mode of exchange and circulation with the outside. According to this image, cruelty is not only terrible, catastrophic; it is also creative and almost euphoric as a well-developed form of opening."[1] These needlepoints actually do this for me. I feel their hostility toward my dull, smug perceptual categories, I experience their onslaught, and—as with most of Reinke's work, even the work I cannot bear to watch—I come out feeling free and light. Giggling foolishly.

A Boy Needs A Friend, 2015
Video, color, sound (video still)
21:37 min

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin
Photo: © Steve Reinke

Needlepoint was a medium waiting for Reinke, an artist who always preferred low-res media. Starting out in the soft, approximative medium of analog video, Reinke was one of the few video artists skeptical of digital video's capacity for high resolution and lush installation. He continued to embrace consumer media technologies, simple animation techniques, slightly obsolete digital effects, and other media that announce their means disarmingly to the viewer. Like his recent foray into ink drawing using the ink dropper, needlepoint gives Reinke a medium to continue to explore creativity rigorously but without mastery.

Unlike embroidery, needlepoint is tough, used to decorate things like furniture and slippers, and this toughness gives rise to the particular aesthetics of needlepoint. Needlepoints are executed on stiff mesh grids of canvas or plastic. Usually the holes are square. Reinke tells me that he initially used fabric canvases, which are more beautiful (and they are, the stitches pearly) but require an embroidery hoop, so he switched to plastic canvases for ease. One of needlepoint's affordances is that the image is pixelly, since each stitch occupies one square. Thus if the needlepointer chooses to render anything

with curves, like hearts, flowers, fruit, animal faces, and other popular motifs, the finished needlepoint inevitably looks boxy unless the image is very large. That's why needlepoints look like early video games. However, because the yarn wraps from one square to the next, the stitches themselves are rounded and sit aslant: they are not actually square. The effect, like the asymmetrical knot of Persian carpets, as opposed to the square knot of Turkish carpets, is that on one angle the needlepointer can achieve pretty smooth curves and beautiful sharp diagonals in one direction while on the other curves and diagonals are jagged.

Normally the needlepointer traces a pattern on the canvas, but Reinke says he improvises the design as he goes along. One of my favorite videos of his, *Afternoon, March 22, 1999* (1999), is a sort of manifesto for the state of art on the eve of the new millennium, a time to "cower and wait," he says, for some new aesthetic raison d'être to emerge, or not. Reinke shoots *Afternoon* in one afternoon with his new video camera and edits it in camera. *Afternoon* appears amateurish at first, but it actually has a sophisticated improvised structure that Reinke compares to jazz in the video: what seems to be a spontaneous act arises from long practice and meditation.

As well as jazz, the queer unpredictability of these needlepoints calls to mind the "free marks" that Francis Bacon painted first on a canvas. Gilles Deleuze considered these marks one of the means for a painter to dispel the threat of figuration, in order to address not the mind but the brain of the viewer.

But jazz and free marks are hilariously inapt comparisons for the medium of needlepoint. Needlepoint demands plodding focus. Reinke would have to maintain the intention of continuing that irregular series of brown stitches, for example, or to interrupt the field of salmon pink with a brown lozenge. Needlepoint is not a gestural art like music or painting.

In recent years, art theorists have again been celebrating gesture as a means of free creation, from Giorgio Agamben's gesture as pure praxis to Marie-José Mondzain's "invisible gesture that constitutes the space of seeing," Fred Moten on the gesture's internal differentiation, and Erin Manning's "minor gesture" at the periphery of thought. In the free act of gesture, it is as though some creative agency springs from the world itself and passes through the body of the artist or the viewer. Sometimes I believe such a vital force exists, but as usual in the presence of Reinke's work, I feel my beliefs shaken out of me, especially serious and high-minded beliefs, to be replaced by a genial wooziness.

In any case, Reinke has told us that his subconscious has been replaced by his microbiome. So the source of these pictures is not the world itself; it is a teeming community of microbes. I can picture him patiently stitching, deliberately carrying out an aesthetic decision to maintain maximum meaninglessness, yet—as he says—with beauty.

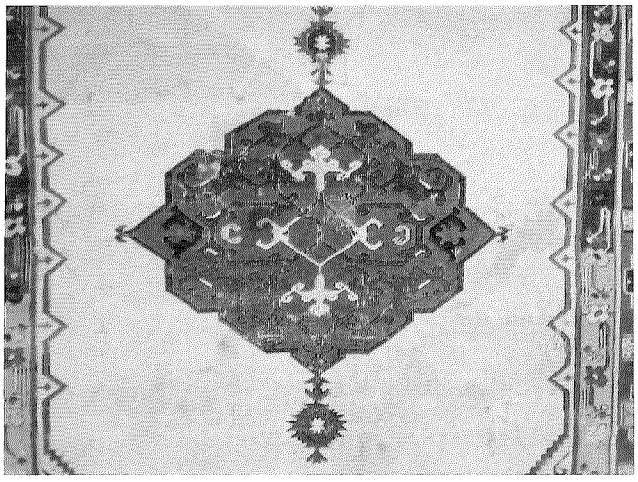
Let's look at another one. This needlepoint, about 28 centimeters square, is relatively figurative: it presents an irregular form whose dominant color is

orange on a field that is mostly turquoise and mauve. In one orientation, it looks a bit like dwellings on top of a cloud. Turned ninety degrees, it looks like a head with a protuberant silhouette. Another turn and I could be seeing a mountain rising behind blocky buildings. On the last turn, I do not recognize anything. As I relinquish the search for meaning, the materials assert themselves. The regular stitches have a soft sheen. The neatly tied-off stitches on the reverse reveal Reinke's conscientious labor and his submission to the regularity of the grid. (Others leave the threads loose.)

Thoughts about process arise to soothe my searching mind. These thoughts place Reinke among the legions of artists who reclaim modest, labor-intensive textile arts. Repetitive, time-based art has recent sources in both Conceptual and Feminist Art from the nineteen-seventies on. With the revival of crafts in the fine arts and the breakdown of the distinction between fine art and craft, countless artists are now working in textiles. In the cases of quilting, weaving, knitting, and crocheting, these artists' practice draws attention to unrecognized, usually female labor that goes into making useful items like clothing and blankets. It emphasizes the mystery at the heart of these anonymous labors. It's common to say that knitting is meditative, but we can't know what was going on in the knitting woman's mind. In any case, yarn-bombing—stealthily encasing trees, hydrants, benches in garish knit or crochet, guerrilla-style—explodes the inner secrets of the quiet, brooding woman and sprays them all over public space.

Needlepoint, unlike those media, falls into the category of useless decorative textile arts. Textile arts like embroidery were traditionally practiced by bourgeois women and girls, to keep them occupied and advertise their class by showing that they had time on their hands. They have been more disparaged than the useful textile arts, being that combination toxic to modernism of decorative and useless. These artists are Reinke's company. They include Mounira Al Solh, who renders her portraits of refugees in embroidery; Charlene Vickers, who stitches Anishnabe beaded designs onto moccasins fashioned from beer boxes; and Inge Jacobson, who renders fashion magazine covers in cross-stitch, flattening the models' contoured faces into blocky fields.

Reinke the needlepoint artist also finds company among contemporary artists who subvert the traditions of the Persian carpet. Many artists from the Muslim-majority world add subversive figures or text to traditional textiles: the spiraling arabesques in Nazgol Ansarinia's vast carpet *Rhyme or Reason* (2009) are composed of ordinary people standing in queues or piled on a motorbike; the Slavs and Tatars collective embroiders puzzling political slogans ("Help the Militia—Beat Yourself Up!") on traditional Shi'i banners. A few deploy abstraction in a similarly queasy way to Reinke. Azerbaijani artist Faig Ahmed digitally alters traditional Islamic carpet patterns, for example making them appear to bulge or drip, and then has carpets woven based on these patterns.



Carpet, 18th century (detail)
Attributed to Turkey
Wool (warp, weft, and pile), 179 × 121 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
bequest of Joseph V. McMullan, 1973

Meanwhile, the subversive stitch (the title of Roszika Parker's 1984 feminist history of embroidery) has become thoroughly mainstream. Now you can order "subversive needlepoint kits" for a snowflake bedizened "Festive as Fuck," slippers that spell "Booty" and "Licious," and an "Impeach the Motherfucker" throw pillow. These objects cast a frisson of disobedience, but as is usually the case with irony, they do not generate enough energy to dismantle the power system to which they appeal. The needlework artist must be wily to evade the sinkhole of irony. I find that Reinke's needlepoints have more company in the uncanniness of traditional Turkish and Caucasian carpets than among these contemporary, conceptual carpet artists. Remember, this work of Reinke's is not conceptual: it's his microbiome doing the thinking.

It's common to refer to classic carpets from Persia, Turkey, and elsewhere in the Muslim world as intricate, lush, vivid, and other such descriptors, but when you look closely at almost any of them, you are hit in the face with mysterious weirdness. Some of this weirdness is due to the constraints of materials: the fact that, as discussed above, curves and forms of any complexity cannot be rendered on a grid. When a weaver transposes a cartoon to a carpet pattern, lines must be converted to pixels with the inevitable loss of resolution. The pixelly form becomes the new norm, and over the years future carpets are modeled on it in lower resolutions, multiplying the boxy approximation of the form. In addition, weavers of classic carpets avoided uniformity of color. For example the Turkish "Lotto" carpets (so called because they appear in paintings by Lorenzo Lotto and can thus be dated to the first half of the fifteenth century) are composed of boxy intertwined yellow vine-like forms, a piece of which will often be interrupted by a chunk of green or blue. I do not know the logic of this random-seeming replacement.

One of my favorite textile works is a carpet in the collection that Joseph McMullen amassed in the early decades of the twentieth century and donated to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is a small square Turkish carpet, whose low resolution suggests it was made for local use, not export. It looks a bit like the "Ghirlandaio" carpet, so called because it appears in paintings by Ghirlandaio. It is composed of a diamond-shaped central medallion of undyed beige wool on a red field, bordered by quirky floral forms, with irregular red cruciforms biting into the beige. The color placement is exceedingly capricious: fields of deep blue and green bleed irregularly into the tips and heart of the central medallion, as though the weaver considered making the tips blue but got distracted. Yet intention was involved, for the weaver would

have decided to replace the undyed yarn with blue yarn for a short length of the weave. As McMullen describes it:

> This is a very close but hilarious descendant of no. 97 [another carpet in the collection]. ... The design is basically faithful. ... But there is no comparison between the sloppy drawing in this rug and the sophistication of its model, while the use, or misuse, of colour, particularly blue in the central medallion, is strange indeed, without system or sense. Again green is used in the corner pieces at one end only. It is all a refreshing reminder that the human spirit can, and does, produce wonderful effects impossible to the trained and sophisticated mind.[2]

This carpet has an effect on me very similar to that of Reinke's needlepoints. Every landmark of sense and meaning my eyes might cling to—symmetry, materiality, tradition, intention—disappears into the fog. I appreciate that McMullan called it hilarious, for laughter is the buoyant response to the sensation that the meaning has dropped out of your world and you are floating, helpless and unmoored.

The forms in Reinke's needlepoints resonate even more closely with those of carpets made in the Caucasus from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Boxy, multiple-generation abstractions of plant and animal forms, these carpets retain a look of being alive without reproducing pictures of live things. Oscillating between figurative and abstract, they are possessed with nonorganic life. The machinic-biomorphic forms of Reinke's needlepoints similarly imply a kind of nonorganic life, not mimicking existing biological forms but inventing new forms. Like Caucasian carpets and McMullan's Turkish monstrosity, they liberate differentiation as a force in itself. In inverse proportion to their resemblance to any actual life forms, their mutating forms release energy that constitutes "a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if beasts, things, and persons ... endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation."[3]

I wrote above that I think Reinke's needlepoint art is non-objective, not abstract, but I am starting to reconsider that. As Reinke has written, "Time to make more drawings. / More hostile genitals."[4] One of his earlier canvas needlepoints shows two connected figures on a white ground: from what might be a factory trails a channel that develops into a multihued spiral. It recalls Reinke's spoof of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in the video *Rib Gets in the Way* (2014). It also looks intestinal. Another canvas needlepoint features a burgundy-colored block with swirling clumps of multicolored stitches that recall the animated commercials for anti-HIV drugs Reinke analyzes in that video. I suspect we are in the gut. I think the painter who prefigures Reinke's needlepoints is not Kandinsky but Duchamp of *The Large Glass*. We are seeing bachelor machines in these needlepoints, and the fluids they are exchanging are probably less seminal than excretory.

Or, to shift the point of view from the human to the microbiome, we are seeing populations, and the environments among which they circulate, which include us larger creatures in both living and dying states. Reinke's earlier videos *Rib* and *What Weakens the Flesh* posit that the body is a microcosm of the cosmos. *An Arrow Pointing to a Hole* is cosmic too, but it is trying to privilege the creatures that traverse us humans over the humans themselves. Earlier I mentioned in passing that Reinke equates empathy to sadism. Sorrow is instrumental, he tells us in the ill-lit basement. In empathy, "this identification with an other, this love," he explains, "one uses the other as a kind of torque, to torque things from the personal to something just slightly larger than the personal: endless sadness. Which seems universal, and therefore, beautiful." The ethical act in this video of limping animations, trampled flowers, and farting cattle corpses consists of preventing us from feeling sorrow. We can let other beings be themselves and float free from our needy empathy.

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1. Kuniichi Uno, "Variations on Cruelty," in *The Genesis of an Unknown Body*, trans. Melissa McMahon (Helsinki and São Paulo: n-1 Publications, 2012), p. 40.
2. Joseph McMullan, *Islamic Carpets from the Joseph V. McMullan Collection*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1972), p. 52, plate XXXVIII.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 173–74.
4. Steve Reinke, "Boy/Analysis (After Melanie Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis*)," in *The Shimmering Beast* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2011), p. 49.