Disconnect

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I wish to thank ....

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Contents

Abstract

This exegesis is an exploration and discussion of my photographic practice, and how the incorporation of stitching, or embroidery, into my process works to magnify a message. Through an examination of self portrait, and artists turning the view upon themselves, I unpack how these elements function as a means of therapy and to create a space for the shared discussion of mental health, trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and healing. Art practice has the capacity to give creators space to heal and understand their situation. In this exegesis, I look at how art has operated within the realm of self therapy, seeing how other creatives, and myself, have employed art as a means of interpreting and connecting.

There is an exploration of safety within the work discussed, exploring the idea of allowing someone to share in a way that they may still feel protected, using the photograph as the revealer, and stitching as the protector, creating a safe space for feelings and thoughts to be processed and exorcised.

To find ways to elevate a message or emotion, I ask how a work might be seen and felt. For this, I have used sound as an element alongside the works, exploring how it impacts the viewer, and how it might heighten their sensory experience; reinforcing the emotion behind what they view.

1. On Photography:

The practice of photography as a means of depicting reality, has been exploited since its conception. Photographs proved our identity through ID's, early cartes de-visite, or calling cards, and just as with passports, we are confirmed. Photographs are collected and handed down as evidence of family ties, they connect and verify us and our history. Often when asked "what would you grab in a house fire?", the respondent chooses photos, as while many things from our childhoods may be lost, photos are what often remains. Photographs were seen to hold so much weight that they have been used to document and share the world with itself, but they have also been targeted by governments and armies to hide truths and erase people from history. For example, as discussed in *The Genius of Photography* (Kirby, 2007) after the United States bombed Japan in World War 2, the American troops confiscated the film shot by Japanese photographers, not wanting the world to see the humanitarian cost of their weaponry. When Stalin rose to power, he had Rodchenko black out the faces of so-called heroes of the Soviet Union. The portraits, initially taken by Rodchenko, were now reduced to forms in clothing and black marks of India Ink. Michael Nyman notes that the images became a series of "unpeople", but that even despite the redacted faces, we still recognised human forms, from the way they sat and what they wore. By leaving this information, Nyman suggests we are able to see the "human being under the obliteration" (Kirby, Episode 2, 42:28, 2007). In these examples we see how, being so very convinced of photography's ability to determine that something is real, or keep it alive, that there were equally great lengths taken to defy it; insomuch that photography has been used to both record reality, and to disrupt it.

It is a contradiction of sorts that while photography holds so much power to affirm existence and presence, as it is a medium which started with inherently ghost-like qualities, qualities garnered by gently casting images through the process of capturing light onto plates made of glass or metal, moments in time, fragments of selves, places and, some argued, souls, forever enshrined. It is photography's association with remembrance and memorial that, as once noted by New Zealand filmmaker Merata Mita, with its mix of science and the personal, leads us to the notion of recording the traces of human spirit (Bieringa and Dennis, 1996). And so it was that photography appealed to me, as a way of exclaiming my existence, of making myself real. In my

practice, I interrogate this feeling of not being here, hoping that my existence will be 'proven' through the photograph; it is a notion that has always intrigued me. The proposition of "capturing" that spoke to me is the very same aspect of photography that led to some apprehension of the process in its early years. Did photography steal a part of the person? Was the soul being recorded and diminished in the process? Mita notes, in regard to the early photographs of Māori, "The more fearless were flattered by having their photo taken… but in others there was outright refusal and disgust. For who knew if the soul were being tampered with" (Bieringa and Dennis, 1996, p. 38). I consider this tension to reside in my work, and yet it arises from a place of embracing the idea of capturing my spirit, rather than fearing it. I am hoping that part of me will be taken away; I photograph to capture and impart a piece of me, to find a way to make myself visible and seen; to document my existence.

Many scholars, from Roland Barthes to Susan Sontag, John Berger and beyond, explore how we perceive and process visual images and the notion that "a photograph is literally a trace of something before the lens" (Sontag, 2003, p. 24), suggesting that what is seen in a photograph, must have, at some point, existed. This is what cemented the photograph, at first, as something to be relied upon to convey the truth, despite awareness of photographic manipulation, as with the so-called spirit photos of the nineteenth century, there was a challenge to the viewer, sensibilities conflicting with innate 'realness' of the photographic medium. Sontag reminds us of something the 20th century novelist Virgina Woolfe once stated, "...the eye is connected with the brain, the brain to the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling" (Sontag, 2003, p. 26). The truism that photography proposes takes hold of the viewer, and often the photographer relies on this reaction, in both journalism and artworks alike, the creator seeks to evoke an emotional response. British journalist Jon Snow furthers this idea by posing the question; Do we remember in moving or still images? (Kirby, Episode 3, 2007) This asks us, how does photography play with our sensibilities and ability to recollect? How does it draw so directly on the frozen moments of time we have stored away? Snow states that what "the photographer is doing (is) making direct contact with the human harddrive" (Kirby, 57:37).

Engaging in photography to ground and connect myself to reality is complicated. Often I find the act of taking photos to be both the cause and the antidote to the disconnect I feel. Here, the

camera operates as both connector and shield from the world. In each photograph, I imprint a part of myself; I feel all at once confirmed in my existence as I have control over the frame, the exposure, the angle and how the scene will be observed by others (fig.1). I get to shape and control my own version of my world from what already exists. This is a part of photography that continues to both appeal to, and challenge, me. When we choose to stop and put a frame around a moment, we hold power to select what the viewer sees, but as discussed the medium itself cannot decipher importance, meaning that anything and everything in the frame is able to hold the same weight. (Kirby, Episode 1, 2007)

Figure 1. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Self-portrait.* 2021.

By placing myself into a captured moment and creating a way for others to share it with me, I am opening up the possibility for them to see and make connections to the things as I experience them. It is a response I have when looking at works of Francesca Woodman whose images, mainly self portraits, demonstrate how she was so barely present. In each frame she is a challenge to her own actuality - she is ghost-like - there is an emptiness and a heaviness to her images. It appears, within Woodman's work, that she is asking the viewer to see her, while at the same time, she obscures herself through the use of movement, masks, props or cropping, which don't quite give us permission to see all. By removing colour, Woodman has pushed the abstraction even further; there is a heightening of every tone and line and detail. Without colour to direct our emotion, we look for signs, to composition and subject, to direct how we should feel. Additionally, black and white photographs conjure up notions of the past and of what has been, of something that is potentially no longer with us, so even if it is a contemporary scene, there is a suggestion of recording, or the memorialsing of something that does not belong to the current moment.

In his examination of the use of colour versus black and white imagery in *Time* magazine, Paul Grainge notes that black and white, as used by *Time*, had "the capacity to convey the present as past" (Grainge, 1999, p. 384). When colour photography became easily accessible, it was used frequently in advertising. So, to show the importance of the journalistic piece, *Time* often turned back to black and white photography for specific stories; it became a tool to isolate the image amongst the sheer saturation of colour imagery (Grainge, 1999). Furthermore, he suggests that black and white photography can offer a "nostalgia for the present" (Grainge, 1999, p. 384), meaning that photos taken today, if in black and white, already seem like moments that are gone, lost to time.

My own preference to work with black and white over colour when photographing myself, is directly influenced by these qualities. As a photographer exploring my own existence and disconnect with the world, black and white offers me a way to commit myself to no particular time; I am assigned to a past moment before being fully realised in the present. In any photograph, what we are observing is a moment that is present in a sense, but is also gone. It is

for this reason that I juxtapose the black and white with colour images. The black and white "palette" is in stark contrast to the colour photos I take, and it is through this deliberate use of colour that I am offering a way to connect the self with the present. While the colour images by no means carry a carbon dating certificate with them, there are certain connotations that colour profiles carry, which are gestures within the image that can lead the viewer to assume a sense of the current, or the now, in the very least, something contemporary.

The technology behind photography changes and fluctuates as it develops. From the early black and white film, to the readily available colour process of C41 and transparency film, which became popular amongst many households. As the technical processes change, so does the appearance of photography. Evidence of this transformation can be found in the definitive work of William Eggleston, especially as his images depict a sense of things existing in a more recent time; there is a contemporary momentum to his work. At the time of his series *Colour Photographs*, shown in 1976 at MoMa, critics denounced his photographs, saying they were "perfectly banal" (Zushi, 2016, p. 52). While Yo Zushi notes that Walker Evans saw the use of colour photography as "vulgar" (Zushi, 2016, p. 53). It was, as if through using colour, photos were perceived as too casual, and they were apparently now somehow void of the realm of artistic reverence that black and white photography occupied. However, the use of colour has proven itself to be just as compelling and worthy of its place in art, and that the use of colour does not deride from the impact a photograph can have, but rather offers a different impetus to the image. It is with my own black and white photography that I seek to ground and place myself, but to also reiterate that there is a disconnect with the present time.

2. On Stitching:

While photography has been my core medium, there is certainly no overlooking the sense of security and “home” which is inherent in the accompanying embroidery work I do. In my work *Com/fort* (2021) I set up a blanket fort, reminiscent of the ones I used to make with my sister growing up (fig.2). This work was a direct attempt at invoking a sense of security in the viewer. It was comprised of a warm woolen blanket slung simply over two chairs and held in place by comfy cushions, all mismatched; inside another cozy blanket, along with a torch that shone a bright light onto the wall which and housed a collection of my photos and a few embroidered pieces, fragments of thoughts and memories (fig.3). All present but incomplete. Upon closer inspection of this work we observe that the comfort and security offered is not fully recognised. Is the row of needles keeping us out or protecting something within? Glistening like sterile icicles, they hang from red thread along the entrance way. If you were to attempt to access the make-shift fort, you would end up tangled within them, and the comfort and safety that was there, would vanish. The light from the torch hits the points of the needles, each one becoming more and more foreboding as they sway back and forth. An audio recording of a weather storm, distorted in post-production, the pounding of sharp rain on the window and the howling of wind plays through the dark room. The tent, and the orange blanket lit from inside beckon the viewer, reminiscent of some old horror movie where all our instincts yell “run!” or “don’t go in there!”. It is with these elements that I play with safety and comfort, hoping to introduce that feeling of anxiety and dis-connect within the viewer, not in a cruel or damaging way, but in a way that may allow for a shared experience.

Figure 2. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Com/Fort.* Multimedia installation. Massey University. 2021.

Figure 3 .Ruth Hollinsworth. *Com/Fort*. Multimedia installation. Massey University. 2021.

When discussing embroidery, more commonly known as stitch work, I am reminded of the nostalgic samplers made by mothers or grandmothers. I conjure up images of embroidered pillow covers, wall hangings or handkerchiefs that are often folded away in drawers, the kind of pieces found only when someone passes away, items that hold personal value as keepsakes, but are not awarded much in the way of artistic merit. The meaning they hold, the personal stories, the work put in to make them, the hours of careful stitching, squinting to read square by square patterns, often overlooked. Many stitch artists however, refer to the humble sampler as their source of inspiration. Fluer Woods, from New Zealand, hangs a piece made by her grandmother in her studio, a constant source of inspiration (F. Woods, Personal communication, October 6, 2021). Australian artist Teelah George, who works with stitching, is influenced by the traditional sampler in her series *The Lover is The Boxer with the Flower is the Naked Motif* (2020). George notes that domestic works, such as the sampler were "not meant to be consumed artistically and not necessarily intended to endure". She also notes the struggle textile design and art still has yet to establish itself within art theory "because of its presumption of their domesticity and their historical framing as women's work (Cai, 2020, n.p). While it may be a challenge for some to observe something that was seen as a somewhat frivolous hobby, embroidery and stitchwork is now making a contribution to the intellectual discourse of its practice and history, a development which points to the sharp juxtaposition of contemporary works compared to their domestic predecessors.

In today's artistic landscape, anyone creating with needle and thread is well aware that such domestic and female connotations cannot be escaped. Fleur Woods notes, "I do think that people read stitching as nostalgic craft and innately feminine.(...) I am conscious of elevating the presentation and process from that of domestic to one of art in order to try to communicate its value… and encourage a new reading… while always giving recognition to the resilient and talented women of the past" (F. Woods, Personal communication, October 6, 2021). It is worth noting that Woods is not trying to force a subversion of the medium in an opposite or contradictory direction, but rather she is embracing its history to offer a new breath of life, which allows room for more contemporary themes to meld with traditional techniques. Woods' introduction of small clay pieces to her *Rock Pool* series, and with Teelah George's incorporation of bronze with stitching and fabric, elevate and challenge earlier practices by adapting traditional and domestic processes to modern attitudes, themes and issues.

I grew up with a grandmother and a mother who stitched, darned and sewed. I remember ornate decorative pillow covers, stitched images of native plants, and more specifically the cross stitch that my mother took on holiday camping with us every year until it was done. Taking almost 3 years I recall watching it grow as I did, and being enthralled by the beautiful beads she would add (fig.4). It was something that amongst the chaos of being a single mother of two young girls, became a constant, and something she was determined to complete; this stitch work was for her and no one else. When she had finished it was folded up into a drawer and only recently was it pulled out, upon my insistence, to be framed. This was not just some vapid object, void of meaning; it is a marker of a certain time, not unlike a diary. It has become subconsciously infused with memories of my childhood and, as my mother has noted, a reminder of something she did for herself as a process of empowerment.

Figure 4. Gina Lyon. *Mums cross stitch*. 2001.

There are things I have learned as a stitcher. The act of embroidery is an act of focus, meditation, and distraction, and need not be grand nor an example of refined skills to be significant. While the stitcher focuses on where the next stitch should be placed, where the needle will come out, how to avoid being hurt by its gleaming edge, there is little space left in the mind for other worries; it is a calming exercise where the rhythm is dictated by how fast the hands can go (Cai, 2020). Fleur Woods notes about stitching, “It is deeply therapeutic for me, the slow reflective nature of it really helps me to manage anxiety and step away from other challenges and be present with the work” (F. Woods, Personal communication, October 6, 2021). It has the same effect for me, and is a reason I find it so valuable.

In 2016 after a spinal fusion, I could not hold my camera due to pain, and being someone who cannot sit still, I found it numbing to be trapped in a body that rendered my creative voice mute. I turned to cross stitch. I found patterns online and taught myself. When cross stitching, with its regimented little squares became too constrictive, I started to play with embroidery with its freer lines and I discovered a way to turn down the white noise of pain. It allowed me to drift away, to think, but also to see something coming to life before my eyes, a (not quite immediate) sense of satisfaction and achievement. Art therapists recommend stitching as a therapeutic tool, as it allows thoughts to enter, but does not allow them to fully dominate the mind, it does not allow them to stay, and nor does it give them the weight and impact they have had before (Hunter, 2019). Elli Walsh notes in her introduction to Teelah Georges exhibit, “through the labour-intensive act of embroidery - at odds with our high-speed society - notions of time collide with material and memory, repetition and labour” (Walsh, 2020, n.p). These ideas are key to the benefits of embroidery as a tool for rehabilitation and respite. Making the world quiet and softening the hum of pain, the meditation of stitching is a full body and mind experience, and has been the answer for many people in finding a way through the noise.

Clare Hunter writes, stitching is “physically relaxing and mentally soothing, it offers a sensory respite” (Hunter, 2019, p. 44), which is why it found an unexpected popularity as a restorative tool, amongst returning servicemen of the First World War. What was perceived as a hobby that sat firmly in the female and domestic realm, became a tool used to aid the “steadying of the hands and mind” (Hunter, 2019 p. 43). So popular was stitching as a form of respite, that after actor and experienced stitcher Ernest Thesiger returned from war, he created “sewing kits for

the soldiers to follow in their own home, in their own time- a distraction from pain, his and theirs" (Hunter, 2019, p. 47), This effort led to the creation of The Disabled Soldiers Embroidery Industry, a programme through which soldiers could create and rehabilitate. Creating allows one to sit and be with the self, addressing feelings, emotions, reactions to your situation, it is an outlet and an investigation. Cordula Kagemnann, fibre and paper artist, notes of her own process: “I create my work in solitude and lose myself completely in the process, let the image find its path” (Kagemann, 2021, n.p). While it may not seem a new idea, using art to process, explore and understand the world and our emotions within it, it is certainly something that resonates with me as it is an act of self-soothing and therapy, so much so that when I have lost myself in the breath of each thread, should I accidently prick my finger with the needle, I feel anxiety as I plunge back into the reality of the moment. No longer safe and comforted, I am, instead, in a strange kind of shock. With all the thoughts overwhelming me and fighting to be heard, no longer distracted from what is current and real.

In her doctorate submission, *Exploring the potential of embroidering as a therapeutic intervention in occupational therapy*, Heidi Von Kurthy explored these notions thoroughly. She suggests that the action of embroidery works in two ways that greatly benefit the stitcher. In the practice itself, the “repetitive nature of tasks that slowed the pace of life, contributed to feelings of calmness and relaxation” providing a way for the “thoughts of the day” to “work in peace” (Von Kurthy, 2020, p. 68-69). This is key for those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as overwhelming memories can hold immense emotional weight. Intangible thoughts of trauma that hold no physical space seem to occupy every part of us and it can feel like a heavy burden, resulting in both mental and physical fatigue (Von Kurthy, 2020). Furthermore, stitching offers, Von Kurthy suggests, a way for the maker to occupy a physical space, to re-establish themselves as the person they are, noting that embroidery can “allow a visual narrative that offers voice to the unspeakable” (Von Kurthy, 2020, p. 79), [...] a very novel way of empowering a hidden voice to be heard” (Von Kurthy, 2020, p. 79). The idea of giving a voice to the voiceless is integral to my practice. In states of trauma, illness and PTSD, time tends to become a blur. Stuck in the past the sufferer often feels bound to a moment they wish to escape, through stitching they might find a path to coerce themselves into the present, and pull themselves out of the past.

My own experience of chronic illness can mean the passing of time is filled with tension and angst, as I am stuck in the house, and days pass when I cannot move or think due to the pain so stitching is important to my process. Artist Cordula Kagemann notes, regarding fibre work, “the process is visible to the viewer, which in a way, makes time visible” (Kagemann, 2021, n.p.). It is this visibility of time which is key. While this may not be something that could apply only to stitching (for we see the brush strokes in a painting or the pencil mark in a drawing) in a hand stitched piece the time the artist has sat with the work is at the fore; the viewer can perhaps almost feel the fabric in the maker’s hands.

Those who work with fabric and stitch are not ignorant to the popularity of using this practice as a means of chartering a course through what we feel removed from or challenged by. As Maria Lai noted in regard to stitchwork, “I ask myself what does sewing mean. A needle enters and exits something, leaving a thread behind, a trace of its path, which joins places and intentions” (Ricci, n.d). But despite such hefty motives and the weight of meaning behind each stitch, in one second it can all be undone. The thread I use clearly binds, but is also fragile - with, one cut, one slice, all that has been tied and bound, unravels.The fragility of a thread, the finite life span of fabric and cotton, and the wish for permanence and existence is challenged by the chosen material. This is not to say the threads disappear in a moment. Indeed the works of Queen Mary of Scots from her period of nineteen years imprisonment, started in 1569, still survive today, as does the Bayeaux tapestry, completed in approximately 1077 (Hunter, 2019). However, passage of time takes its toll on such pieces as the fabric becomes weakened, and akin to human skin, becomes thin and fragile, and must be handled with great care and treated as they are; memorials to the makers’ time and life.

This weight of meaning and trace of life can be observed clearly in the work of Agnes Richter. While incarcerated in a mental asylum Richter turned to stitching to process what was happening to her. A trained seamstress, she furiously stitched outrage in overlapping words, jagged letters, repeated assertions of self, Ich (I), seen over and over again, emphatic avowals of existence” (Hunter, 2019, p. 39). The description of the work triggers a sense of her fury and a determination to not disappear into the system in which she had found herself; haunting and sad, it also operates as a symbol of empowerment and defiance. To this day, much of what she stitched appears to be undecipherable; it is the intensity with which it appears, the sheer

abundance of the lettering and the care of the cursive that communicates so strongly. In the same way that Woodman appears in her photographs, there is such a heavy presence with an eerie lightness. Perhaps more importantly, what we are presented with is no less diminished by the fact we cannot translate the words. This is similar to the 'writing' observed in the work of Maria Lai, observed amongst the exhibition entitled *Holding the Sun by the Hand* (2020), the exhibition was presented as an ensemble of her creations made from the 1960s and beyond (Vukadin. 2019). It presented pieces made via looms, weaving and stitching, and of particular note are her books. Vukadin notes that the fabric books are no longer able to be touched by viewers, despite the fact that Lai made them to be held and their pages turned, "as one would in a library" (Vukadin, 2019). Now protected in an attempt to preserve them, we are blocked from their content. But while we may not be able to access the work through the text itself, we still feel something. From the way the "words" or marks fall, and the pace with which they hit the surface of the fabric, to see their depth, angle, how the threads have been left to hang, how both the works of Richter and Lai are heavy with emotion, yet delicate and light. All these facets create a work that is clearly trying to express and voice something, to reveal and to be heard, but somehow cannot fully trust the viewer with the information. There is a revealing and a hiding that coexists. It is because of her work, and all the attributes belonging to the work, that Agnes Richter lives on in each line, word, letter and stitch, and in recognising the labour of the process, the sense of time passing becomes embedded in the work.

3. On Photography and Stitching:

I stitch into photographs in a deliberate attempt to bind myself to the present; to imprint marks that signify my existence. My black and white self portraits already feel foreign to me to the extent that I often don't recognise the body within the frame; a body which is weakened, a body that never feels fully realised. I look at the images, printed onto linen, and I stitch. Knots, marks, lines, ways to make myself seen, to strengthen my voice within the frame. In a similar way, we see this play out in the work of artist Carolle Benitah, who stitches into old family photographs, to insert herself, or connect with the images with which she feels no connection. Benitah notes that, in looking at family photographs, even the ones which include her, she feels no real connection, so in sewing she is deliberately trying to connect with the past, to insert herself into a moment that she clearly took part in but has no memory of. It is a means to connect with the past, in hopes to continue to understand who she is now (Benetah, n.d).

In my work each piece is a moment dedicated to a thought, as I stitch things I cannot vocalise. The viewer observes photos embedded with marks, knots, connecting lines and traces of writing. Seen in my work *Hidden* (2019) (fig.5), the absence of knowing the full narrative alters the viewer's perceptions. These pieces are presented on what would be called the reverse, or "wrong side", so the viewer cannot quite make out what has been stitched. What remains are little scars. As a whole, the creative work acts as an emotional map, a means through which I can navigate my way through the thoughts and the moments I am stitching in. It is almost as if by stitching the words, they lose their power, they are being exorcised, they have been made real and therefore fallible to time and erosion, for the materials I choose are not immortal, they will decay over time. In this sense there is a gentle but obvious contradiction in the fact that this technique is used in my work in an attempt to try to reinforce the physicality of my existence. It would be remiss to not mention the life that the fabric I stitch into has a life in itself. When folded and stored for too long its folds become like wrinkles in the skin that will not disappear. Stains appear from age; it becomes its own entity with its own lifeline.

Figure 5. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Hidden*. Massey University. 2019.

4. On the Self Portrait:

As a photographer, it took many years for me to find a comfortable way to share self portrait work, and I still find that revealing myself to others in my work comes with some unease. It is difficult to present what we do not fully understand. However, through this process my understanding of what qualifies as a self portrait has shifted away from the quintessential ideals of the portrait. Photography records light and shadow; and just like your shadow,you cannot shake the self, it is imparted and imprinted into everything we create and do. My everyday photos, the seemingly innocuous snapshots of the world and my environment, are reflections of self, and depictions of self; they are another chapter in the practice of self portrait. An image of a tree, a burnt-out car, sunlight hitting my bed - these images all felt, and still feel, like moments when I was grounded in and reflected within the moment. The idiosyncratic approach I take with photography does not seek to try to unpack any grand social constructs; it doesn't make strong political statements; it acts as a form through which I try to find access to the world, a connector to the self I long to discover and reveal.

Evident in all my work is a hesitation towards giving too much away. I want to hold onto and conserve some of the information for myself, yet still offer enough to be seen and heard. Sculptor and photographer Hannah Villiger embraces this practice within her deeply personal, yet exceedingly accessible, work (Villiger, 2001). During a long illness Villiger "began to direct the gaze towards the body, which had become alien to her… The place of an "alien" object that she would seize by means (of) looking through a camera was now occupied by her own existence thrown into question by disease" (Spinelli, 2001, p. 43). Villigers work, like my own, employs a type of autoethnography as a means of expression. To use the self as the subject matter, exploring one's own placement and body in the world, and the stories they tell. This autoethnographic approach to creating can be divisive, as some people struggle to find a way to connect with the creator because "the context is his or her own" (Duncan, 2004, p. 30). Margot Duncan suggests that to be so firmly dedicated to the expression of an investigation into the 'self' can be "criticized for being self-indulgent, introspective and individualised" (Duncan, 2004, p. 28).

An example of how autoethnography plays a part in my process can be found in my piece, *Extraction* (2019*)* (fig.6). The viewer walked into a dimly lit, warm room to find a light box placed on a low pedestal, with an image of me, from behind, of my neck and down my torso to the waist. Sewing needles were stuck in the print where my lungs might sit, with red thread draping down into two illuminated boxes that sat on the ground, a piece of white aida cloth on each box. Into one piece of cloth was stitched the words “The Best” and on the other “The Rest”. The red thread fed into each of the boxes, to act like veins, or arteries carrying a message. The recorded sound of my breathing slowly in and out, as if meditating, was played. Despite being a very personal expression of my struggle with back pain, the viewers responded that they were drawn in. They spoke of feeling calm and rested while breathing along with the sound of my breath; it made them aware of their own breath, and yet conflicted, as the needles hanging from the back made them feel anxious which set up an internal battle of wanting to relax and be still, but feeling anxiety and uncertainty. To me, this piece showed that work can come from a personal, autoethnographic place, and can still operate in such a way that not only is it accessible, but can permeate someone’s thoughts and allow them to access the artist’s experience.

Figure 6. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Extraction.* Massey University. 2019.

In regards to this, Corey Keller writes of Francesca Woodman's photographs, "Woodman's preferred subject is herself. (...) Even when other figures appear, they are clearly stand-ins for the artist" (Keller, 2011, p. 169). Woodman's work, as Keller notes, is based on the idea of looking inward; it is an interrogation of her body, of her experience of the world: "she internalized the problem, subjectivized it, and rendered it as personal as possible" (Keller, 2011, p. 173). Her ghostly impression upon each frame always struck me as the expression of someone who felt barely here, someone who struggled with the idea of existence and how they were expected to operate within it. In her images we see her as a blur, moving through a frame, or as a figure obstructed by paper or objects. Even in her nudes where she is in full focus and directly in view of the audience, there is a sense of challenging the viewer, challenging her own presence such that the challenge becomes a costume, a barrier which we will never fully diffuse. There is, in other words, always something that remains hidden and private.

This resonates with my approach to self portrait work. I find that in order to protect myself, I block my images with stitchwork, I look away from the camera, I blur myself - I find multiple ways to allow myself to be seen and protected at the same time. I redact certain parts of myself because I cannot give it all so boldly, for who knows what may be taken or perceived? This is also where my 'environment' self portraits are employed to stand in as representations of self, essentially that all the work I create, both of myself and my environment are all self portraits. With chronic illness, simple things like my home, bed, pillow or daily walks, become the moments I feel a connection with the world; these are extensions of my "self". This got me wondering about how much knowing the past of an artist affects the reading of their work, especially in regard to self - portraiture. Julia Bryan-Wilson notes of Woodman's photographs, and the fact that she committed suicide, "What part of her personal narrative matters to our understanding of her art?" (Bryan-Wilson, 2011, p. 189). How does this impact our reading of what Woodman created? Is her work forever deemed to be an epitaph? When observing a photograph of a person, it is only natural that we analyse and look for clues of their life, of their story. So what happens when some of this is hidden and performed? What do we do then to fill in the gaps?

Recently I exhibited a series of such images, into which I had stitched a black square (fig.7, 8). The squares functioned as blocks, as information removed from the viewer so that they might

feel the same sense of disconnect and never feeling fully immersed in the world that I often feel. It was noted that the work felt reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich and his infamous Black Square (c1915). Malevich stated he wanted to step away from depicting reality, (TATE. n.d). Perhaps there is a similarity in my work, where I am trying to depict my own reality, to step out of the noise of the world, to see through the mess and the disconnect, to find a way to express my own reality by using the square as a means of protection, rather than as a descriptor, but in both senses, as a symbol of defiance against the expected. However, the squares in my work served more to block. The word ‘redacted’ was used a great deal in the discussion of this work, and while it continues to be the most suitable term, due its direct relation to my want to be seen, but willing parts of me to never be observed, parts that I wish I could redact from memory, it is also important to recall the binding and embedding.

Figure 7. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Blocked*. Massey University. 2021.

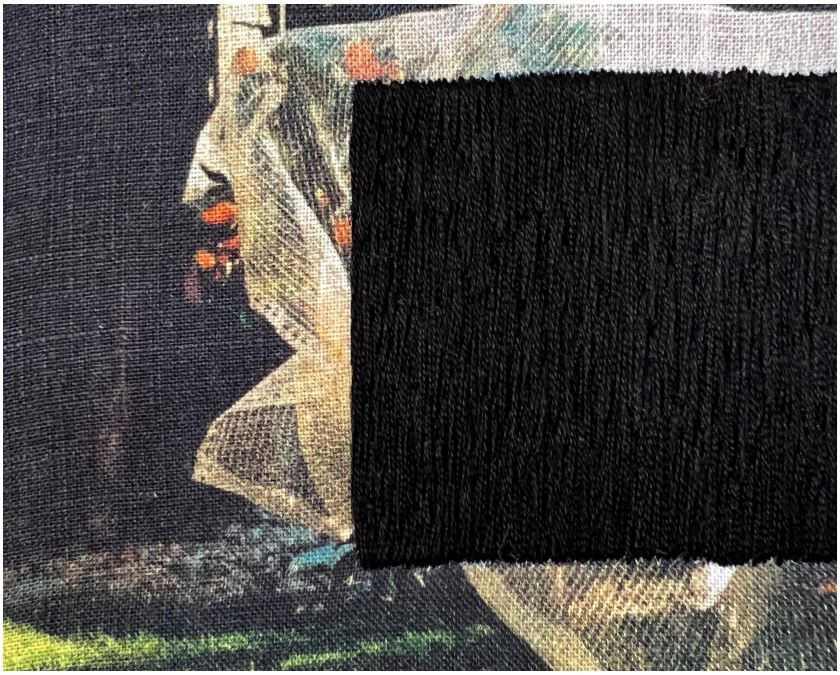

Figure 8. Ruth Hollinsworth. Detail of *Blocked*. Massey University. 2021.

5. On Disconnect:

By stitching messages and thoughts on the reverse of the fabric, there is a message that has been embedded. A viewer can see the wrong side, the side that looks like frantic lines and nonsense, or a strange kind of shorthand, dashes, and back tracks, zigzags of thread, knots and tangles. It is in these seemingly abstract and indifferent marks that we see the hand of the maker (Parrott, 2013, p. 24). Parrott, in her book *Mark-Making in Textile Art*, discusses the importance of a seemingly innocuous mark. Another artist who discovered stitching during a period of ill health, Parrott says “my long standing interest in using repeated stitched marks reflects the important role of small, ordinary, repeated actions in life” (Parrott, 2013, p. 14). In fact, making marks on surfaces can be just as powerful as intricately presented designs, and it is not the marks alone, nor the photograph alone, but both combined in a larger context to complete the final moment. By stitching through photographs there is a direct and obvious augmentation of the recorded reality in which I am hiding, redacting, binding and embedding all at the same time, but more than anything I am forcibly making myself a part of the moment as I stitch over and into the photograph, to have a louder presence in the frame. This allows me to complete my thoughts. When I take a photograph, I often see the thread in my mind. I have metaphysically bound myself to the moment through the lens, so adding the thread is simply a finishing of this invisible binding, making the thought an action.

I have already noted the work of Agnes Richter, whose jacket piece was a protest against her incarceration and being forgotten. The impetus behind my creativity is to hope that it might live a little longer than I do, to break this disconnect and find a way to connect. Within my body I often feel imprisoned, all the things I used to do that participate in making up my identity, have been weakened, in some cases stripped. I can express this through stitching.

While my own experience of disconnect is very different to what is being seen worldwide with the advent of Covid-19, I would be remiss to not acknowledge that the pandemic has seen most of us, not just in New Zealand but around the world, struggle with being isolated in lockdowns and feeling ungrounded and uncertain. At one point or another this overwhelming feeling of

being stuck and shut off from the world has hit all who I know. However, there is a strange disjunction happening. While we are experiencing a worldwide isolation and disconnect it is also true that many currently reside in a state of being able to connect, albeit virtually, more readily than ever before.

6. On Sound:

Locating the body into artwork doesn't just happen visually. As with the addition of sound, coupled with imagery, we also see the inclusion of the body of the viewer. As sound passes through someone's consciousness, thoughts and feelings can be triggered. Artist Susan Philipsz notes this impact with her sound works, where she explains, "I am particularly interested in the emotive and psychological properties of sound and how it can be used as a device to alter the individual consciousness" (TATE, n.d). Philipsz' work ranges from using found instruments, musical arrangements and her own singing voice, but her overarching intrigue is how the use of sound can change a space, how sound alone can draw people in and impact them, even without visual cues. However it is her reference to Guglielmo Marconi, an electrical engineer born in 1874, and his notions on sound that are particularly relevant to my practice (Philipsz, 2018). Philipsz notes "Something that Marconi once said was that when sound is generated it never actually dies away completely. I just find that such an evocative notion, that (...) all sound is still there, resonating around the universe however faintly" (National Gallery, 6:02). In visually exploring the idea of my own existence and presence, by adding the sound of my own breath to my work, I am seeking to reiterate that same sentiment.

Author Jeff Goins suggests that people who create do so to a similar end that birds sing in the morning. Goin states that scientists believe birds do this to proclaim they made it through the night, and that humans who sing and "create art as a way of saying, I made it- I'm still here" (Goins, 2021). Putting my breath into my work acts like some sort of auditory fingerprint. A looping track plays alongside the imagery, and with each play through I am proclaiming again and again that I am here, and that sound will live on, taking a piece of me along with its journey.

When I added sound to my work, I found the meaning became more realised, as if the idea had been reiterated without the visual cues having to be so literal. As Susan Philipsz noted, "sound is materially invisible but very visceral and emotive. It can define a space." (Licht, 2019, p. 127). Indeed this has been the case in my own exploration in adding sound to my photographic and embroidered work. Artist Janet Cardiff notes, just the presence of sound alters the viewer,

suggesting further that sound becomes like a sculpture, layers of the visual and audio envelop the viewer, and it becomes a three-dimensional experience (KQED Arts, 2015). I recall, when observing Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet*, an overwhelming sense of emotion. A room filled with 40 speakers set up in a circle, but grouped as they would be in a choir, in their alto, soprano, tenor and base sections. Two bench seats in the centre of the circle enabled visitors to hear all voices at once, as opposed to when you walked around the circle, and could pick out each voice individually. This meant you could hear their individual breath, and, as Cardiff called it, the collective breath (KQED Art, 2015). The sheer intensity of 40 voices singing became a bodily experience, one could feel the vibration passing through: it was both captivating and consuming.

In my lightbox piece, *Extraction* (fig.6), described earlier, I exploited how the body echoes sound by playing the sound of myself breathing in and out slowly, as if meditating or trying to calm myself. The maker's breath, while stitching, is slowed and moderated; it is easy to lose oneself in the process and find the breath pacing with the in and out and the push and pull of the needle. There is a direct correlation between breath and life, and once again, the will to want to establish myself in the moment, to imprint my existence and to feel a connection with life is iterated in this sound. An unexpected outcome of this installation was that the audience perceived a sound that wasn’t there. Whilst recording, the microphone picked up a gentle knocking from somewhere in the room, or perhaps a room next door. This resulted in a light beating sound that was assumed by the viewers to be a faint heartbeat layered into the track. I was intrigued by how the addition of the sound led the audience to experience the work in a very visceral way; they started to find their own passage through the work and formed their own connections. The viewers also noted they found their own breath calming and slowing, breathing along with the sound, then perceiving the sound as the beating of their own heart. The viewers also commented that, even while they found it calming, they were also slightly on edge, as they realised their feeling of calm and peace was being challenged by the sight of the needles in the image.

7. Personal Therapy:

As I have noted earlier, I stitch, as a form of relaxation, as a therapy, it is a means to calm and regulate my breath, to slow myself, to process trauma, alleviate pain and to repair the sense of disconnect. As I stitch, tighten and knot the threads, I imagine my own bonds and connections to that moment becoming stronger. However, this is a lot to communicate through visual cues alone - not everyone knows how long stitching takes, and how it feels to engage with stitching; this use of sound iterates that scene of the making. If I were to describe my own existence, I would say it feels unweighted; like my feet are never fully on the ground, and yet, conversely, I am somehow so weighted that I am, mentally, unable to move.

I take photos and forcefully stitch “myself” into surfaces, actively binding myself into imagery and on fabric, hoping to find a connection, a way in to understanding and implanting myself here, imposing my identity upon the reality within which I currently reside. But much like sewing into cloth, I myself, like the stitches I make, may try to embed, but will never blend to the point of merging, they are like little scars, raised, they are a foreign body. Like the thread, I sit upon the surface, trying to dig my roots deeper, trying to anchor myself to something bigger than me, trying to give evidence that I exist beyond the limits of my own thoughts. This is where the magic that belongs to photography comes into another level. With its intrinsic connection to record and with fact, in the process of taking a photo of the self, I am making a record, I am declaring my own existence, and in this process I am connecting myself with a time and place. There is a realness and documentative aspect inherent in this particular practice; everything within the frame had to exist at some point and time, in other words, all aspects at some point, were.

Through this process, and embracing the idea of personal therapy, my most current work has become a practice of exorcising thoughts and trauma. To make marks, scores on the surface, has found its way to the fore. There is, as mentioned earlier, an energy and a reading that can be derived from a collective of marks. Long spaced stitches appear slow and plodding, layered groups of marks, chaotically placed appear frantic and fast implying quick thoughts, angst or

fury (fig.9). By stitching on the reverse, words lose their literal definition but take on a symbolic one. I have found, as with the *Hidden* series discussed earlier, that what I had to say seemed to have more impact when just the traces of words were seen. As far as therapy goes, this is an extremely helpful tool. The stitcher can vent and tell secrets, they can bind the words to fabric and photo, making them real, but can also protect themselves by preventing their full disclosure. There is safety in action here, a comfort zone where revealing and hiding coexist, where all the attributes discussed above come together, allowing for voice, therapy, art and growth to work in unison for the benefit of the creator. Personally, throughout this process, I have learned that the stitching aspect of my work does not need to be vivid detail and blatant in its message. I have accessed another level of stitchwork, understanding that it isn't always what is said, but rather what is felt, and that what is withheld can speak louder than what we show.

Figure 9. Ruth Hollinsworth. *Disconnect.* 2021.

Conclusion:

As I look to continue outside the comforts of University, I ask how I might keep my practice developing, and if it might find its place amongst the larger art and social situation. Certainly at the moment there is a shift towards more self care and mental health, within these contexts it seems to find an easy home. Throughout the process of completing this stage of my practice and study, I have immersed myself in the challenge of deeply understanding what I do and what it means to myself and to others. It is through these interrogations that I have come to understand my work in a richer context of those who have preceded me.

My photographic practice attempts to interpret the distance I feel in the relationship between myself and my environment, however, through this most recent interrogation of my practice, I have learned to turn the camera on myself more. I have found ways, through combining photography and stitching, to record myself and protect myself; protection being an aspect which I strive to find, and promote, in equal measures. I have also come to understand that my photographic work has a life beyond the click of the shutter; that by adding the binding and threading, I am reiterating the spirit and purpose of the photograph, making them fuller and more realised.

My work has a tension with the concept of revealing and hiding; how to reconnect the disconnect. Ultimately I have found myself understanding more thoroughly the impact that stitching and photography has on my mental health, and how useful it has been for people globally, throughout time, as a means of discovering and preserving Self. My work has found a rhythm that is feeling more organic; it is finding a pace and clarity. I look more to the treatment of stitches and how they fall upon both fabric and photo, how a collective of seemingly innocuous marks can change a scene, define a mood; alter meaning. Not only this though, I have seen my work take on a multimedia aspect, and this has led to my presence, as the maker, being more fully ingrained and embedded within each piece. The sound is helping to reveal what is hidden, or perhaps, what is woven, into the stitches and into the photography. My practice is not just edging more and more to being realised as a psychological investigation, but is also finding its way into a deeper connection with the viewer. Engaging that extra aspect of sound, I am able to pull the viewer closer, not just by offering another avenue of access, but another sign of the life;

this sees the work carrying an extra dimension and potency of meaning, it further envelopes the viewer, eliciting a deeper meaning, connection and understanding.

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