



Elaine Reichek, *Morse Code: First Message (detail)*, 2004, embroidery on fabric, approx. 14' 5" x 13' 10".

ELAINE REICHEK

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Writing in the 1880s, William Morris lamented that what he called the intellectual arts had been separated by “the sharpest lines of demarcation” from the decorative arts, and he exhorted craftsmen to create a “noble, popular art” guided by nature and history. Elaine Reichek has been working for over two decades in one such discipline: embroidery. But where her earlier output was a highly charged feminist appropriation of “women’s work,” she recently seems more closely guided by Morris’s exhortation.

One reason for this may be that Reichek has directed her gaze back to the nineteenth century. The central figure in her recent show was Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, a professor of painting and sculpture at the University of the City of New York (now New York University) and founder of the National Academy of Design. Reichek has created an epic embroidery of Morse’s famous *Gallery at the Louvre*, 1831–33, a painting of an imaginary gallery hung salon style with his favorite works from the museum. Morse also appears in another of Reichek’s new works, *Morse Code: First Message*, 2004, in which his first coded message (which began, “This sentence was written from Washington by me at the Baltimore terminal at 8:45 a.m. min. on Friday May 24, 1844 . . .”) is embroidered on sheer fabric and was here hung along the gallery windows.

In additional works Reichek translates other aspects of language and communication into carefully executed stitching. *Tower of Babel*, 2004, is a recreation of

Brueghel’s painting of 1563, while *Sign Language*, 2004, demonstrates the signed alphabet and *Seti*, 2004, displays the codes used by the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI). Working like many painters, Reichek made several of these pieces by scanning images and turning the colors into gridded templates from which she sewed. This technique begs the questions: Did these elaborately crafted works really need to be sewn, and what does Reichek gain by clinging to a “lesser art”?

The answer, it appears, is everything. Exploring ideas around media and technology Reichek asks: What are the limits of outmoded techniques and how can they be revitalized? Offering more than just the opportunity for virtuoso performance, sewing becomes a means for exploring communication, perception, and craft. The embroidery “screen” here approximates the pixilated reproduction of a painting or, in a duet of small, sly, abstract works titled *Screen Saver (Pink Peanuts)* and *Screen Saver (Green Saver)*, both 2003, the computer screen itself. The antique “code” of sewing—a tradition passed down from generation to generation like an oral epic—is thus linked to more recent innovations: Morse’s telegraphic code and the language of digital electronics. Like Morris, who sought to bridge the gap between art and decoration, Morse vacillated between traditional fields of visual communication (such as painting) and his new language of dots and dashes—a precursor to computer code. And while Reichek doesn’t introduce any new languages, she sets old ones in play, mingling and juxtaposing the conventional with the novel and ably forging connections between the decorative and

the intellectual—categories that Morris saw as regrettably divided, rather than joined, by technology.

—Martha Schwendener