THE UNCOMMON THREAD
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JODY ALEXANDER AND LISA KOKIN

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The Uncommon Thread
Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin
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The San Francisco Center for the Book, founded in 1996, fosters the joy of books and
bookmaking, the history, artistry, and
continuing presence of books in our culture and enduring importance as a medium of self-expression.
The SFCB was co-founded by Mary Austin and Kathleen Burch, who recognized a growing
need in San Francisco and the Bay Area for a
facility specifically designed and equipped for book arts. The first Center of its kind on the West Coast, the SFCB now operates over 300 workshops and many free events a year, including the annual street fair called Roadworks: Steamroller Printing Festival. In addition to workshops and events, there is a thriving artist-in-residence program, producing numerous artists’ books every year, and collaborations with many local non-profits, museums, and libraries. The SFCB also hosts special visits and hands-on demonstrations for students of all ages, teachers, librarians, corporate team building, collectors, visiting printers, artists, writers and designers.

Jody Alexander
Felix’s Notebooks
Exposed Spines, No. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
Often It Is Necessary to Make a Person Insensible
Late in Life, Healing Is Complete
She Pours Out Tears in Her Efforts of Defense
Asparagus (In the New World)
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 137 (House Dream)
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 117 (Divisions of the Heart)
Wardwell’s Kidney Was Bean
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 117 (In the New World)
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 117 (Wrapped Words)
Who Will Get Your Money?
Das Kapital, Page 236
Irritable Vowel Syndrome
Room for Improvement
How To Stop Worrying and Start Living
Recapitulation
Me See How You Do It
Abridged
Four Balls Short
Fauxlage
Obligation to Endure
Treatment

Lisa Kokin
Panacea Papireta
Das Kapital, Page 50
Das Kapital, Page 226
Das Kapital, Page 368
Who Will Get Your Money?
How To Stop Worrying and Start Living
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As a gallerist, it has always been my intention to present book-related arts in a contemporary gallery atmosphere. It is my belief that the book as a medium for art offers an aesthetic experience unlike any other. This extends itself to fine press editions, handmade unique offerings, sculptural and altered versions. Great art inspires multiple associations. The associations book lovers have with books extend to not only the text and content, but also to the hand held object, its papers, illustrations and cover. In the hands of an artist, form and content can come together as a resonant harmonic chord.

I had two goals guiding the development of this exhibition. The first was to curate a show that would draw the attention of young artists and collectors of contemporary art. My hope is to build a bridge between the fine art world and the world of printing and book making. My second goal, related to the design of the exhibition, was to expand ideas of how the book influences contemporary art. I purposefully selected two Bay Area artists, Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin, who had already made names for themselves in the contemporary art world and whose original experimentations using the book as a medium for art developed past any conventional uses and explored new territory.

In Jody Alexander’s case, entire installations based on quirky, isolated characters incorporate stitching, photography and book pages. She embeds exposed spines of books in tea-stained layers of cloth, creating a visual abstraction that is both entirely unexpected and somehow familiar. Lisa Kokin works in thread and recycled materials, in this case, book elements. Her work offers themes of political and social subversion while conveying a remarkable respect and delicate tenderness in the treatment of her materials. Kokin transcribed directly and entirely in thread pages of *Das Kapital* from a copy in Yiddish found in her Romanian grandfather’s belongings. In other works, she utilizes the foil-stamped titles from self-help book spines sewn together with thread in mesmerizing wall sculptures, a commentary on a national obsession with self-improvement.

The Uncommon Thread as the title for the exhibition refers to the artists’ use of sewing and stitching in their practice of making art.

– DONNA SEAGER

Exhibition curator Donna Seager owns a respected contemporary gallery in Mill Valley – the Seager Gray Gallery – that also specializes in artists’ books. She mounts an annual exhibition at her gallery entitled The Art of the Book, bringing together fine press, artists’ books and contemporary sculptors using books as subject and material in their work. Her mission is to expose the arts community to the rich array of talented printers, binders, printmakers and book artists associated with the San Francisco Center for the Book and encourage notable fine art collectors and museum curators to consider book-related works as an important genre in its own right.
Like a warm woolen jacket or a patchwork quilt, the structure of a book that is made to last is created with thread, its parts sewn together into something beautiful, strong, and perfectly suited to its task – whether that might be presentation, communication, exhortation, or all three. The attractiveness of such an object for artist-bricoleurs (those makers who handily adapt objects and materials to their own devices) should be obvious. A book, already a container of meaning (both literally and metaphorically) can be un-made, altered or reconfigured in a dizzying number of ways, all of which “book artists” have seemingly investigated.

The Uncommon Thread: Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin was inspired by the annual “Art of the Book” shows presented at the Seager Gray Gallery in Mill Valley for the last nine years. Works included have ranged from exquisite fine press editions to extraordinary transformations of discarded volumes like the ones presented here, in which Kokin and Alexander explore every part of various volumes they have appropriated for use. The works included were chosen by curator Donna Seager to demonstrate ways in which books are both bona fide substance and inspiration for art, and to create a bridge between the worlds of contemporary art and the fine book. What joins much of the work presented in this show is thread itself. Filaments of white or tan or red travel through many of these pieces, drawing neatly-stitched lines across and around text, accumulating in disorderly bundles, or joining parts together in a new textile language – sometimes, in place of the words that were once on the pages now fashioned into art.

I.

Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog it’s too dark to read.

— GROUCHO MARX

Maria Porges is an artist and writer whose work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions since the late eighties. She received a SECA award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and has twice been in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts. For over two decades, her critical writing has appeared in many publications, including ARTFORUM, ART IN AMERICA, SCULPTURE, AMERICAN CERAMICS, GLASS, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, and a host of other now-defunct art magazines. She has also authored essays for more than sixty exhibition catalogues and dozens of scripts for museum audio tours. Porges is an Assistant Professor at California College of the Arts in the Graduate Program in Fine Arts. She likes to topiarize unsuspecting shrubbery and read out loud.

Jody Alexander and Lisa Kokin: By a Thread

Alexander – artist, librarian, bookbinder and teacher – draws on all of her various identities for the construction (both literal and meta-
For over two decades, Lisa Kokin has explored ways to sew together image and text, using books, photographs, and, most recently, thread alone as a palette for narrative expression. Her series based on self-help books thrifty incorporates the entirety of each volume she uses — snout to tail, so to speak — in different works. The book’s covers, for instance, appear in How to Stop Worrying and Start Living (2010), cut into stylized petals sewn into bulbous, determinedly cheerful flowers (“which I hope will create eternal happiness for the viewer in five days or less,” Kokin avers.) Each of the irregular, rock-like shapes in Room For Improvement (2010) consists of the pulped pages of a single book, mashed and molded into a tiny boulder to be pushed à la Sisyphus, up the steep slope of acutely-felt personal lack towards some unattainable goal. (The size of the rock is determined by the scope of the book; surprisingly — or perhaps, not surprisingly at all — one might be a thrifty little ovoid, while another might be quite large.)

In Treatment (2010), the book’s spines are sewn, row after row, into a free hanging, vertical form, not unlike a Venetian blind. Kokin, often pointedly humorous, creates a vaudevillian double play on words with her title. Not only do all of these volumes purport to assuage the doubts, ills, and problems they describe, but the blinds that the piece’s form mimics is also known as a window treatment.

The recent Das Kapital series (all 2013) continues a different path in Kokin’s work: a more serious one, in which she has addressed her relationship to history through members of her family and, more broadly, the Jewish diaspora. For each of these works, she has used her grandfather’s Yiddish copy of Karl Marx’s famous polemic on capitalism as her model, copying the letters of a single page of text in thread, word for word, onto a rectangle of delicate lace. To most viewers, the meaning of these lines resides in their formal beauty; the number of people that remain on this earth who can still read Yiddish

II.

A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.

– FRANZ KAFKA
in the Hebrew alphabet has become a tiny fraction of what it was when the book was printed, before a century of violence shrunk their numbers. The shroud-like, disintegrating lace, seemingly held together as much by the text as its own structure, invokes the lost traditions of another era.

In all of these works, the dexterous use of thread as metaphor, connective tissue and drawing material comes together in a complicated narrative that can constructively be described as feminist in nature. Women are not the only artists who love books or who understand the ways in which books carry both specific and universal meanings, but Kokin and Alexander both display an infinite patience and attention to detail, stitch by stitch, that is arguably gendered. For both, the book has been a point of departure as well as one of arrival; the content, something that becomes generalized into what is held between the covers of all books – all of the stories and texts, instructions and imprecations – and something that is unique, book by book, to be savored and understood. Books are like this, these pieces seem to say to us. They speak to us, and us alone, but they are also the voices that we use to talk to each other, the language that we share, sometimes across all languages, to communicate what we know, what we feel, and what we yearn for.

– JANE Austen

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story . . . the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.

– MARIA PORGES

III.

THE UNCOMMON THREAD

Jody Alexander
Exposed Spines. No. 7, 8, 9, 10, 17*, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16*, 17, 21, 26, 29, 30, 27

Discarded book, fabric, thread

Felix’ Notebooks
2008
21 x 10 x 7 inches

Discarded, disbound and rebound books, red thread
Late in Life Healing Is Complete
2012
7.5 x 5 x 1.5 inches
Discarded book, found photo, fabric, thread, light bulb
From the collection of Jean Beebe

Often It Is Necessary to Make a Person Insensible
2012
7.5 x 5 x 1.5 inches
Altered book, thread, photo, bullet

Often it is necessary to make a person insensible.
If a body is broken, the first books are lost on
in which the men of most intelligence
of this is that the first books are lost, as
in a book, the first letters are.

- Jean Beebe
She Pours Out Tears in Her Efforts of Defense
2012
7.5 x 5.5 x 1 inches
Discarded book, found photo, fabric, thread, chemistry glass and sea salt

Sedimental #9
2010
32 x 25 x 10 inches
Bookshelf, discarded books, fabric
Asparagus (In the New World)
2010
22 x 30 inches
Discarded book pages, thread, muslin, thread
From the collection of Jeanne Lewis

Sedimental #4
2010
17 x 8 x 10 inches
Wooden sewing machine cover, discarded books, fabric

From the collection of Jeanne Lewis
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 137
(House Dream)
2011
33 x 24 inches
Cotton batting, thread, mull, found photographs, thread, discarded book pages

The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., No. 117
(Divisions of the Heart)
2011
33 x 24 inches
Cotton batting, thread, mull, found photographs, thread, discarded book pages
Wrapped Words
2008
12 x 12 x 12 inches with stand
Re-imagined book: Handmaid’s Tale, thread, cake stand, cheesecloth

Wardwell’s Kidney Wax Bean
(In the New World)
2008–2009
17 x 22 inches
Discarded book pages, thread, muslin, thread

Handmaid’s Tale, thread, cake stand, cheesecloth
The Odd Volumes of Ruby B., Travelling Case containing No. 9, 17, 31, 37, 51, 59, 73, 79, 97
2009–2010
16 x 15 x 12 inches
Travelling dental case, fabric, discarded book pages, fabric, thread, found photographs, chemistry glass

THE UNCOMMON THREAD
Lisa Kokin
Panacea Pizpireta
2013
56.5 x 48.5 inches
Self-help book spines, mull, thread
Das Kapital, Page 368
2013
37.5 x 21
Linen, thread

OPPOSITE
Irritable Vowel Syndrome
2010
8.5 x 20 x 10.5 inches
Altered book
Who Will Get Your Money?
2009
17 x 6 x 3.25 inches
Book fragments, wire, wood
From the collection of Lia Roozendaal

How To Stop Worrying and Start Living
2010
Size variable
Self-help book spines, cotton batting, thread, waxed linen
Room for Improvement
2010
Size variable
Pulped self-help books

Recapitulation
2008
10 x 72 x 10.25 inches
Pulped books, wooden shelf
Me See How You Do It
2009
6 x 22.5 x 2.5 inches
Book fragments, waxed linen, spools, metal hinges

Abridged
2008
7.5 x 9.5 x 7.5 inches
Pulped dictionary, PVA glue, thread, snaps, mull
Four Balls Short
2008
15.25 x 15 x 10 inches
Shredded atlas, PVA glue, wire
Fauxliage: Obligation to Endure
2011
70 x 24 x 8 inches
Thread, book pages, wire
From the collection of Nion McEvoy

Treatment
2008
86 x 30 x .25 inches
Self-help book spines (double-sided), burlap, thread, balsa wood, hemp, PVA glue
From the collection of Allan Baabam and Marcia Fortnoff
THE UNCOMMON THREAD
JODY ALEXANDER AND LISA KOKIN