

Monika Auch gives a preview of her book 'Stitch Your Brain' documenting the 10 year research about the hand-brain connection with creativity and health.

Monika Auch is a visual artist and worked as a doctor until graduating from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (2000). She combines research and weaving in her research into the intelligence of the hand.

We project our identity on the brain. With an alternative assignment of -'stitch your heart'- works with loads of romantic symbolism would have been sent.

The embroidered brains of participants in the 'Stitch Your Brain' study set up in 2013 by Monika depict memories, emotions and stories - more compelling than words. They are unique self-portraits with a fascinating variety in color, materials and design. The book will be published in the autumn of 2023 with 140 works, commenting articles by experts and the results of the research.

'The 'Stitch Your Brain' project invites you to do needlework with the brain as an inspiring subject. On the brain we project our identity, after all it is the center of creativity. But - what role play our hands and intuition in the creative process? What happens, if we make a mistake? Does age affect our creativity? Since the dawn of digitalization, swiping, scrolling and tapping have taken over many manual actions. What is the influence of this impoverishment on the crafts, on sensitivity to materials, on our well-being and even health? Did our experience of creativity and crafting change during the isolation in the Covid years,?

To answer these and other questions, I started this scientific based research in 2013. Embroidery packages containing a pattern with the print of a brain template, an embroidery needle and skeins of yarn have gone around the world. This allowed participants to depict their 'brain' by sewing, embroidering or drawing on it. They also completed a questionnaire and sent additional descriptions. All brains can be seen on the project website.'

Stress management

As expected, mainly women participated in the project. The largest group of participants is between 50 and 70 years old, i.e. the population group that experiences hormonal and other changes in their lives. Many women tell how doing needlework created mental peace in stressful situations and functioned as simple stress management. American participant Mary Risseuw found herself suddenly unemployed. She made a meticulously embroidered brain with twirling, straggling threads and emails: '...how confused and afraid I was for the future. It gave me peace to express the frustration on the fabric.'

Poetic versus MRI scan

Surprisingly few brains resemble an MRI scan. Even though some are inspired by an MRI image, the visual interpretation is always poetic and beautiful. Fueled by the widespread knowledge about the functioning of the brain, a number of works focus on dealing with brain diseases and illustrate powerlessness and resilience in the face of this situation. Joke Lith and Diny van Kempen, as fellow care takers of family members with Alzheimer's, jointly created a double-sided, three-dimensional brain with a healthy and a diseased hemisphere.

Changes in the timeline

Five years after the start of the study, an over-view exhibition took place in Amsterdam. Can the influence of needlework on creativity and health be mapped out? The subject attracted a lot of interest and many artists took part and sent work. Their individual handwriting is recognisable, although they work in textiles, for some quite a different medium. Josephine Ganter, photographer and printmaker, embroidered fading and overlapping areas of subtle color that correspond with her black and white works on paper. Jewelry maker Dinie Bezems always works autonomously and did not want to fill in the given template of a brain. She cut open the grid and created her own fragile nerve connections.

English sophistication

In 2016, the English Gawthorpe Textiles Collection became a partner of the project, which is on a par with the ideas of its founder, Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth (1886-1967). Her leitmotif being, that making things with your hands strengthens health, personal development, creativity and identity. The local community and the foundation's network participated in the study. In April 2016, a beautifully presented exhibition with 40 works opened. Many of the embroiderers had taken

embroidery lessons and drew on inspiring works from the Gawthorpe collection. The pieces show refined techniques, references to historical material and a perfect finish, for example the work of Jenny Waterson.

The harsh reality

In the nine years since the study started, interesting changes in content and imagery can be seen. There are fewer decorative elements employed and the provided yarns are less in use. In comparison there is an increase in motifs from nature and the addition of special materials. The statements also shift from personal concerns to themes with global impact such as pollution and political conflicts. The Norwegian Aud Baekelund processes the plastic waste she finds on her sailing trips in her work: 'This material is horrible and beautiful. My brain is full of it - metaphorically and perhaps physically too.' Zoei So from Hong Kong cut a newspaper page with the names of arrested people into strips and created a volume, a mass out of it. 'Cutting and sewing helped me to give direction to conflicting feelings. I call this work: 'A' for 'Arrest'. ' she says.

Corona and isolation

In Corona time, more young women are participating in the project. Compared to the older age group, they appear less skilled in technical areas. Some of them - in addition to some moments of frustration - also become inspired: 'A first time embroidering suddenly turns out to be much more than just making crosses.' They see the discovery of concentrated needlework as the start of more creative projects. The isolation led to a growing interest in craft as a form of mind fullness with positive effects on health.

Brainless graveyard

Since 2021, the Kunstnerfløjen group in Nykøbing, Denmark has been active as a partner. They are housed in a former psychiatric institution with the 'Brainless graveyard' on location. Until the middle of the last century, the brains of deceased clients were removed without the consent of the family and sent to the pathological institute for examination. In memory of this and to bring back the brains an exhibition of almost a hundred embroidered Danish brains took place from June to September 2022.

The book with 140 of the brains and the results of the study will be published in the autumn of 2023. The website documents the further development of the project and new brains and stories.

www.monikaauch.com

www.cargocollective.com/stitchyourbrain

www.japsambooks.nl