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Teddy Bears, F-Bombs, and Captain Kirk: Subversive Stitching and Other Evolutions in Contemporary Cross- Stitch

Amy D. Wells

- 1 In 1924, the Dollfus-Mieg & Compagnie (DMC) published their fifth booklet in the series “Cross Stitch  New Designs.” This title indicates that even during the second decade of the twentieth century, there was an effort to present embroiderers with “new” designs. The collection of patterns:

[...] contains a valuable collection of borders, backgrounds and detached motifs, which take due cognizance of the modern trend of decorative art. Furthermore, it comprises a certain number of plates representing sportive or musical scenes, landscapes and animals, as well as subjects suggested by Red Riding Hood and the [...] fables of La Fontaine. [...] The patterns in this album, very decorative in style and rich in colouring, are intermediate between plain cross-stitch embroidery upon a linen foundation and tapestry work upon canvas with an embroidered background. (Introduction)
- 2 The introduction to the collection immediately equates cross-stitch with decorative art, and it promotes the company’s commitment to following “modern trends.” The themes evoked are the types of popular motifs still seen in some styles of contemporary cross-stitch patterns—animals, sports, landscapes, and popular characters. Emphasis is given to the decorative style and colors. As **[Image 1]** demonstrates, these “modern” motifs are contemporary equivalents to the Art Deco flowers and flourishes seen in other artistic media. Furthermore, the DMC Library extract is an example of how, over the next century, publishers will attempt to satisfy cross-stitchers with “new” designs that reinforce the decorative, artistic nature of stitched canvases, following “modern trends”.



Image 1

Contemporary Patterns from the 1924 Dollfus-Mieg & Compagnie (DMC) fifth booklet in the series "Cross Stitch 新 New Designs"

- 3 Most commentators of embroidery history have pointed to a shift in cross-stitch practices with the acquisition of more leisure time. No longer a family obligation or a subject taught in school (Holland-Daly 7), most people cross-stitch for fun, to relax, as therapy, or to create gifts for family and friends. In addition to changing trends and styles in popular culture, cross-stitch has also evolved in conjunction with technological changes. Computer generated designs, the sale of patterns and kits on-line, the exchange and sharing of patterns through social media, and the desire to decorate the cases of new technological devices, have all contributed to shaping cross-stitch designs of the twenty-first century. However, it is not only technology that has had an influence on the modern-day cross-stitch: feminist designs and hipster culture have led to a new trend, known as "subversive cross-stitch." To better understand this new movement present within the American crafts revival, we will first quickly summarize the cross-stitch context in general before turning to detailed examples of subversive cross-stitch, Geekcraft, Twisted Stich, and Kustom craft—new modes of emerging visual art in American culture.

I. The Cross-Stitch Context

- 4 In the early 1980s, Catherine Sestay authored *Needlework: A Selected Bibliography with Special Reference to Embroidery and Needlepoint*, explaining that "[d]uring the last decade, arts and crafts in general and different types of needlework in particular gained wide popularity. As a result of the demand, books were published in increasing number" (Sestay v). The decade of the eighties is connoted for its kitsch designs, notably teddy bears and geese. This eighties style is evident in [Image 2], the November/December 1987 cover of *Cross Stitch & Country Crafts* magazine. For \$ 2.95, stitchers had access to 25 projects to complete. The country elements of the cover, such as the teddy bear, the toy

train, and the oil lamp set the scene for the cross-stitched Santa Clause collector plate. From a 2015 perspective, it would be easy to understand why stitchers today might not be attracted by such “country” designs, especially younger urbanites. While teddy bear or other country motifs are still on sale today, the market has expanded to attract new customers and revitalize cross-stitching art.

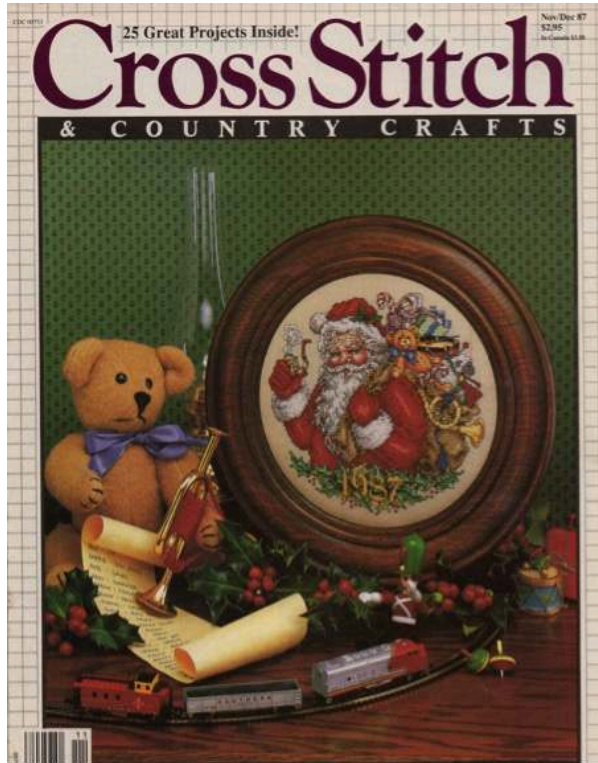


Image 2

The November/December 1987 cover of *Cross Stitch & Country Crafts* magazine

- 5 There are numerous possible needle arts to practice, but here we will focus exclusively on cross-stitch. Sestay defines this particular stitch, suggesting: “In the very simplicity of the stitch lies much of its charm. One stitch crosses over another again and again in neat geometric rows to form delicate patterns, figures, and pictorial scenes” (Sestay vi). The pictorial scenes, as those mentioned above in the DMC Library, are often popular storybook and children’s characters, holiday themes, samplers, wedding and birth commemorative gifts, animals, geographic representations, actors, and food. Cross-stitch projects are available in a variety of formats. For easier projects and beginners, there are stamped cross-stitch products available for purchase. Usually guest or tea towels, pillowcases, or wall hangings, these materials come with the “x”s stamped directly on the fabric, and the stitcher just has to follow the lines. More advanced stitchers do counted cross-stitch, in which the number of stitches must be counted as they are stitched on to Aida cloth, canvas, or linen. Special dissolvable grids called Waste Canvas exist for those who want to execute a pattern on a different type of support (such as a regular t-shirt or tote bag). Cross-stitch supplies may be purchased in a kit, often including the canvas, threads, needle, and pattern, or in individual lots of thread and fabric to be used with workbooks that offer a collection of patterns. In addition to the internationally known DMC Company, another popular brand of cross-

stitch kits is Dimensions.¹ Cross-stitch is considered to be an affordable craft to practice. John Lohman goes so far as to say that “cross-stitch is a great beginners craft because it is easy to learn and the materials are quite cheap. You should be able to complete any of the projects in the book for under twenty dollars, and once you’ve bought the main materials, you’ll be able to complete more projects even more cheaply” (Lohman 9). Because it only requires some thread, fabric, and needles, cross-stitch is a craft that is relatively easy to do.

- 6 There is a distinctive American approach to cross-stitch, but at the same time, cross-stitch as a visual art benefits from a certain interculturality. As the examples below will show, an English text is often translated into European or Asian languages. Due to the visual nature of the craft, sometimes, accompanying text is not even necessary—it suffices to see the pattern. The DMC Library was aware of this facility in reproducing patterns, and even speaks in the introduction to its 1924 Publication List:

Each album is edited in several languages and is composed of a series of unpublished and much varied designs accompanied by explanatory texts. Ladies who do not find in our assortment the languages with which they are acquainted, will nevertheless be able to use successfully the albums of the D M C Library. Owing to the clearness as well as the perfection of the designs, the text becomes a secondary question and it will always be easy to execute most of the patterns shown in these albums without having need of the text.

- 7 It is in this way that social media sites such as Pinterest and Etsy make it possible for crafters to see and reproduce patterns from designers, artists, and other fellow stitches from across the world. Designers flocking back and forth across the Atlantic produce charts that capture a contemporary style that is neither American nor British. Non-anglophones may choose to stitch up some of the quirky sayings charted in English because they seem exotic or are familiar from television series or music.

II. The Subversive Cross-Stitch Movement

- 8 As we can see in [Image 3], a search on Pinterest for “Subversive Cross-Stitch” returns numerous results, some of which are quite humorous or surprising, or which even require explanations from the Urban Dictionary to be understood. Some popular phrases include:

- Babies suck
- Bite Me
- Bitches Please
- Damn it feels good to be a gangster
- Bullshit
- Shit happens
- Time for cake and sodomy
- Shut your Whore Mouth
- Shut the fuck up
- Fuck off I’m reading
- I am a fucking heirloom
- We had sex in this room



Image 4

"SUBVERSIVE" CROSS-STITCH COMBINES TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY SUBJECTS WITH OBSCENE, CATCHY OR QUIRKY SAYINGS, AS DEMONSTRATED BY THIS PATTERN, "DO NOT FUCK WITH ME"



Image 5

THESE PENDANT PATTERNS ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE TYPES OF SAYINGS POPULAR IN SUBVERSIVE CROSS-STITCH

- 10 Jackson's testimony highlights the main traits of subversive cross-stich: an ornate sampler or intricate border is stitched on the outer edges of the canvas with an obscenity executed in the center. She returned to cross-stitch, which she had not done since her youth, as a type of art therapy. Subverting the traditional craft "felt so great"—the craft brought her satisfaction. Jackson stitched a few more pieces, and decided to post them to a website. Her work went viral, and she "decided to offer this crafty form of therapy to others through kits."
- 11 A basic kit from the subversivecrossstitch.com shop costs \$ 14, and for an extra six dollars, there is the Deluxe kit including 2 needles and a hoop. [Image 6] The two workbooks have similar titles: *Subversive Cross Stitch: 33 Designs for Your Surly Side* (2006) and *Subversive Cross Stitch: 50 F*cking Clever Designs for Your Sassy Side* (2015). The 2006 publication date is noteworthy for the first title, as it seems to be the catalyst for a publishing trend in "modern" cross-stitch design workbooks. [Image 7] The back cover descriptions for both texts use descriptions such as "snarky, in-your-face cross stitch" and "invites stitchers [...] to fully express their bad-ass crafty selves, whether they need to release their inner curmudgeon or let fly with a witty insult." Just as the finished canvases contrast classic styles with obscene sayings, here the workbook cover blurbs combine unexpected words, such as "snarky" and "in-your-face" with the craft of "cross-stitch." If we think back to the "crafty" nature of the 1980s Cross-Stitch magazine, "bad-ass" does not necessarily come to mind. Visually and textually, subversive cross-stitch takes this traditional needle art to another level of "sassiness."



Image 6

FALL PATTERN AND KIT OFFER FROM SUBVERSIVECROSSSTITCH.COM, "IT'S DECORATIVE GOURD SEASON, MOTHERFUCKERS"



Image 7

CONTEMPORARY CROSS-STITCH WORKBOOKS FILL SHELVES IN BOOKSTORES

- 12 Other designers and publishers would quickly pick up on this effort to rejuvenate cross-stitch workbooks. The following year, *Not Your Mama's Stitching: The Cool and Creative Way to Stitch It*, appeared. Kate Shoup's workbook puts forward the image of a "liberated" cross-stitcher: "Forget the fair young maiden painstakingly embroidering pillowcases for her hope chest. Picture a liberated lass (that would be you) creating chic fashions and accessories while sipping a glass of whatever and saving the planet." Here the text specifically speaks out against the traditional use of cross-stitch (preparing items for the hope chest), suggesting that the crafter's production be for her own personal use, such as accessories. Furthermore, this book promotes going against the grain of the stereotypical image of the young woman who does crafts by giving permission to stitch and drink alcohol at the same time. This association brings to mind the socializing-crafting get-togethers known as "Stitch and Bitch."² These groups promote a physical or virtual solidarity amongst knitters or other crafters in a social setting.
- 13 In the same vein, yet another publication appeared just a short year later, *Stitch Graffiti* by Heather Holland-Daly (2008). Again, the workbook's main sale is a "new" type of cross-stitch:

Old-fashioned ABC samplers are nowhere to be found in this collection of 26 stylish and witty designs that give cross-stitch a forceful new look. Unconventional wall hangings fill the first section of the book and dazzle with their bold colors, unusual lettering, and offbeat quotes from songs, books, movie dialogue, and even truck stop bathrooms.

- 14 It may be hard to imagine that crafters would want to recreate anything from a truck stop bathroom, but this introductory text is aimed at a hipster/counter-culture market. The patterns are trendy, as they promise "stylish and witty designs." The "forceful" new look is far from the "old-fashioned" sampler or the teddy bear. While Holland-Daly's text obviously comments on the changing styles of the proposed projects, she maintains that it is still the same basic cross-stitch technique being used:

Although some people might look at these designs and say, "This is not your Granny's cross-stitch," I wholeheartedly disagree. It is. It's the same basic stitch—a

simple “x” made by crossing two stitches and grouping these crossed stitches on countable evenweave fabric to create words or images. [...] What has changed are the supplies. Today, we stitch largely for leisure, not necessity. We stitch for relaxation, to make personal gifts for friends and relatives, to decorate our clothing and homes, or to simply keep our hands and mind out of trouble! Whatever the reason, the sense of creation and accomplishment is as rewarding now as it was then. (7)

15 The designer explains that the supplies and the motives for stitching have changed. No longer is it a necessity for home management, but more a hobby for relaxation. She evokes the decorative aspect of cross-stitch projects, which are destined for visual display.

16 Despite the numerous fans and apparent success of subversive cross-stitch, the genre has been criticized for the ways in which it reduces the nature of artistic expression to swear words and hipster trends. The popularity of the genre caught the attention of Julia Bryan Wilson in her essay “Knit Dissent” in the collection. According to Wilson, these workbooks may be missing out on the opportunity to claim the political nature of the craft:

Trade books with titles like *Subversive Cross Stitch* and *Subversive Seamster* proliferate. These books could be echoing the influential feminist literature about the gendered hierarchy in the crafts, namely Rozsika Parker’s 1984 *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Parker’s gender- and class-based analysis, together with a deep history of embroidery technique and the labor formations it engendered, provide a model for thinking through how craft methods have been deployed, re-appropriated, and politicized over time. But Parker’s precedent goes unacknowledged within these books, which are more hipster how-to guides complete with irreverent patterns and practical tips for sewing yore own gauchos. (Wilson 251)

17 Efforts to “sass-” or “surly-” up cross-stitch projects, while falling under the influence of feminist thoughts and theories or being claimed by feminists,³ may be failing to assert specific political objectives. Furthermore, one acute Pinterest user, “M Que,” summarizes the phenomenon best by saying, “I like that it’s trying to subvert expectations of cross stitch, but excessive use of the f-word and other overused pop slogans becomes a new kind of conventional.”⁴ Nearly ten years into the movement, we may wonder how long the idea of cross-stitching a text like “Bite Me” may entertain crafters.

18 From an economic perspective, it is important to note that subversive cross-stitch kits are not available in hobby and craft store chains like Michael’s, Jo-Ann’s, or Hobby Lobby. So subversive they are, they have had to subvert the traditional retail circuit. The explanations for this new form of distribution could be numerous—either that one-woman companies like Julie Jackson’s cannot keep up with such a demand, or that the buyers for the chains do not feel comfortable selling the kits due to their offensive natures. It is difficult to image the Christian-based Hobby Lobby selling “We had sex in this room” kits, given the company’s resistance to providing birth control for female employees.

19 While the subversive cross-stitch style has made its mark on the craft, there are two other approaches that are changing the way hobbyists, male and female, stitch: Geekcraft, Twisted/Trash Stitch, and Kustom Work modes have resulted in several workbooks opening up the sector to new practitioners. The term “Geekcraft” can be traced to Susan Beal and Jay B. Sauceda’s 2011 instruction manual, *World of Geekcraft*:

Step-by-Step Instructions for 25 Super-Cool Craft Projects. This book is not exclusively dedicated to cross stitch, but promises that: “Geek meets craft in this fun collection of 25 kooky projects for geeks of any affiliation [...] With lots of photos and plenty of geekery throughout, this one-of-a-kind book shows that geek and craft go together like...pixels and cross-stitch!” The fun tone of the workbook encourages science fiction fans and other self-identifying geeks to combine the two passions. From a technical perspective, pixels and cross-stitch do go together as pixels are like the squares on a cross-stitch chart. Even a few years prior to this publication, Helen McCarthy made the same point in her collection that combines Manga digital art and cross-stitch. According to its introduction, *Manga Cross-Stitch: Make Your Own Graphic Art Needlework* (2009) “attempts to bridge the gap, to encourage artists to use the ancient skills of embroidery to make anime and manga images, and to urge stitchers to tap into a whole new visual grammar” (McCarthy 6). This particular book is a good example of Geekcraft, combining an interest and familiarity with manga and the artistic approach of ancient art. We will return to this specific manual below to discuss the importance of its inclusion of a CD that enables stitchers to create their own, unique patterns.

- 20 Geekiness and cross-stitch further meet in the ultimate example of John Lohman’s *Star Trek Cross-Stitch: Explore Strange New Worlds of Crafting* (2013). Stitchers are encouraged to “Live Long and Cross-Stitch! [...] you can show your Star Trek pride by decorating your home, your clothes, and your children with cross-stitched Star Trek quotes and iconic images” (cover blurb). Like elsewhere, this text proposes decorative solutions to customize one’s home or clothes. Lohman goes on to suggest to stitchers that they reflect their true selves through personalized cross-stitched *Star Trek* canvases. In introducing *The Next Generation* characters hand towel, he teases crafters: “You could fill your bathroom with flowery towels or boring monogrammed towels, but these don’t tell people about who you are as a person. Imagine how impressed your houseguests will be when they go to dry their hands and see the cast of *TNG* staring back at them!” (Lohman 79). In this extract, the choice of design is used to indicate something about the stitchers’ personalities, and they are encouraged to show-off their geeky passion. Finally, in the last project of the book, Lohman explains how the sampler tradition can be adapted to the *Star Trek* graphic style rules. “Cross-stitch samplers have been used for hundreds of years as a way to show off and test skills in needlework, and they commonly feature alphabets, quotes, animals, and decorative borders. We’ve adapted this traditional craft to the imagery of the future, including starships, planets, stars, and communicators” (Lohman 135). The traditional practice is adapted to the specific themes that *Star Trek* fans love, enabling them to work from within the tradition to design their own *Star Trek* montage.
- 21 When English designer and artist Phil Davison discovered cross-stitch in the United States, he adapted the medium to his own ends, resulting in *Twisted Stitches: 30 Corrupt Cross Stitch and Embroidery Designs* (2011). Davison’s brand is also known as Urban Cross-Stitch, and the French translation adopted the term “Trash Stitch,” which is used by other designers and bloggers. Davison’s designs focus on popular culture and technological approaches:

Twisted Stitches brings a contemporary twist to cross stitch designs with wicked results. Stitch cards or pictures featuring sinister skulls or zombies. Decorate your home with towels bordered in barbed wire, jar covers crawling with bugs or a set of pillows that feature a fly meeting a comic book “splat!” demise. Create cool

accessories like a “game over” laptop cover or a “tweet this” phone case, or stitch a scarily realistic stab wound onto a tee shirt.” (Davison, back cover)

- 22 The adjectives used changed slightly from the previous examples: they are “contemporary” and “wicked.” Some items mentioned remain within the embroidery tradition, such as cards, pictures, and towels, but then there are also laptop covers and phone cases. With bugs, blood, and barbed wire as proposed themes, this collection is far from employing traditional motifs for surprising combinations, but rather takes previously unseen motifs and transposes them into cross-stitch charts (as the one pictured in [Image 8]). Davison’s approach as designer first, then a stitcher, is thus obvious.

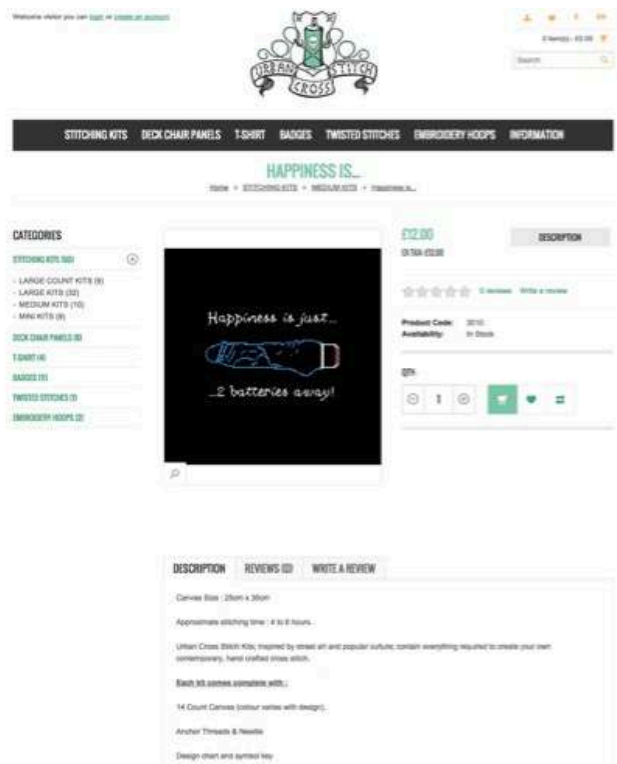


Image 8

DESIGNER PHIL DAVISON DEVELOPED THE BRAND URBAN CROSS-STITCH, PROPOSING KITS AND DESIGNS INSPIRED BY STREET ART

- 23 In a very similar way, French designer Yann Lerouville has created cross-stitch charts for DMC, in an effort to revitalize the craft. On the back cover of *Point de Croix Custom/Kustom Cross-Stitch*, Fabienne Bassang explains:
- With his baseball cap screwed on his head and his pants always slightly too large, I imagine him on a skateboard rather than drawing models of embroidery for cross-stitch. Here is the influential designer i [sic] have been waiting for! The one who is going to change the vision of our children and grandchildren on embroidery. No more rabbits, hens and flowers. Here come skulls, aliens, sparkling trucks...[...] embroider and amaze the “Young Generation”! (back cover)
- 24 The character evoked is one of a skateboarder rather than a cross-stitcher, suggesting that this effort to update embroidery by replacing the typical motifs (rabbits, hens, and flowers) with skulls, aliens, and sparkling trucks is the key to amazing the “young generation” and creating gifts for them. The motifs mentioned can be considered to

lean more towards the “masculine” side. But the book’s introduction explains that “Yann Lerouvillois unites the feminine and masculine worlds while bridging the generation gap. [...] Just like rock ‘n roll, the ‘stitch ‘n bitch’ spirit will never die!” (Lerouvillois 6). Questions of gender and generation are no longer barriers for cross-stitching where this manual is concerned. Furthermore, Lerouvillois explains his “Kustom Kulture” methodology:

“Kustom Kulture” is a movement consisting of many different subcultures: from fans of the 1950s, Pin-Up Girls, old school tattoos, Roller Derby, Bikers and Skaters to Mexican Wrestlers...In fact, it is difficult to define because so many diverse groups combine to create this subculture. I took slices of culture from here and there to create characters that I hope reflect some of those groups. I also added symbols from a variety of subcultures, including tattoos, skulls, motorcycles...etc.” (52).

- 25 By borrowing iconic images from a variety of American popular culture sources, Lerouvillois pieces together a new, individual style, and he encourages his readers to mix and match images themselves. This particular title is an example of the interculturality of cross-stitch mentioned earlier, as it is a bi-lingual edition, suggesting that the ensemble of images has a trans-Atlantic appeal.
- 26 While each of the workbooks cited here is distinct in its approach, the corpus shares the promotion of cross-stitch as a visual art. This nature of the craft is apparent through the use of completed canvases as gifts to be displayed. Many stitchers have referred to cross-stitch as “painting with thread.” One blogger happily exclaims: “It’s fun to watch your design come alive on the clean fabric as you stitch. It’s like painting with a needle.”⁵ Some designers, artists, and authors wish to make the distinction between “craft” and “art” by differentiating the originality of their canvases and how they are sold (through an Etsy site or via a gallery, for example). One cross-stitch designer, Alicia Watkins, has both her own Etsy site and her productions are distributed through the Collier West website. For example, in the Home Accessories tab, a small canvas framed by its hoop with the saying “bitch, please” is on sale for \$ 25.⁶
- 27 Whether or not a stitcher can commercially sell his or her work, it is important to note that the majority of the aforementioned workbooks and manuals emphasize the importance of customizing patterns and adding personal touches to projects to make them unique. Returning to Sestay’s bibliography, she also records that the indexed books and manuals promote individual creativity. For example, *Designing in Stitching and Appliqué* (1972), “stresses original designs as a means of artistic self-expression” (Sestay 26). Helen McCarthy also stresses the artistic nature of cross-stitch:

As a stitcher, you are part of a long tradition of artists and crafters who have used their skills to beautify everyday life. Inspired by your own interests and ideas, you can create images based on manga, using a contemporary art form in harmony with one of the most ancient crafts. [...] The software on this CD [...] will also enable you to personalize your projects by changing the colors of the stitches. The full program [...] will enable you to design new charts of your own, which you can do using elements in the charts provided with this package, as well as your own motifs. (McCarthy 10)
- 28 The objective of artists and crafters alike is to “beautify everyday life.” In addition to the repetition of “art,” several workbooks pair the concepts of “contemporary” and “ancient” in their blurbs and introductions. In her particular book, McCarthy offers a CD that gives the ability to individual stitchers to change the colors in the designs of the pre-packaged charts or to plot their own motifs on a grid.

- 29 If crafters follow the advice in these workbooks, they are to customize their pieces. *Not Your Mama's Stitching* advises crafters to “make everyday items one-of-a-kind, or whip up your own creations from scratch” (cover blurb), while *Stitch Graffiti* includes specific instructions for “personalizing the final product by adding beads, dyed fabric backgrounds, or frames made from hardware and found objects” (Holland-Daly X). Yann Lerouvillois states it in his own way by saying: “Rebel!! Do not hesitate to change colours according to the colour of your material. Mix the cross-stitch design, when a pirate meets one Derby girl!!!” (11). All of these authors encourage the individualization of the projects presented in their books, which equips stitchers with the necessary information to create unique, one-of-a-kind productions.
- 30 The cross-stitch form of embroidery has survived across centuries. Twentieth-century cross-stitch suppliers and designers have consistently sought out “new” designs and patterns to offer to their clients. Changing lifestyles that afford more leisure time combined with increased anxiety amongst workers have contributed to cross-stitch’s role as a type of art therapy. Some stitchers feel great relief when they practice “subversive cross-stitch,” but combining swear words with traditional stitches is not the only new approach to the craft: *Geekcraft*, *Twisted Stitches*, and *Kustom* work put cross-stitching methodology and designs into new hands. Regardless of which type of cross-stitch a crafter practices, he or she has the opportunity to participate in the revival of American crafts and a visual art trend that is no longer limited to a Teddy Bear on the wall. From a few threads, we stitch reflections of ourselves.

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NOTES

1. <http://www.dimensions-cross-stitch.com/>
2. The phrase has been used since WWII to describe socializing knitting sessions. In 2003, like for subversive cross-stitch, the term began being used for workbooks as evidenced with the publication of Debbie Stoller's *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitters Handbook*, published by Workman Publishing Company. See <http://stitchnbitch.org/> for more information.
3. <http://www.gurl.com/2014/04/29/feminist-subversive-cross-stitch-embroidery/#1>
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