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Yearning for Kinship: An Artistic Exploration of Moss and Embroidery

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ABSTRACT

In this visual essay, the author examines her relationship with moss through the lens of embroidery. Through practice-led research, she proposes to engage with the medium of embroidery as a tactile, reflective method of inquiry: a practice of exploration embedded in time, feeling, sensation, posture, gesture, artistic expression, and a yearning for kinship. She argues that embroidery provides the necessary care, material intimacy and a more thoughtful pace to familiarize oneself with the world and temporality of mosses. She begins by proposing that knowledge about the world of plants can be gained by initiating a subjective approach, one that is grounded in her own wonder for moss. She then goes on to establish a shared material and expressive quality between embroidery and moss, by thinking through her medium and creating a multisensory practice which allows for an embodied awareness of her chosen subject. She demonstrates how embroidery, as a mindful medium grounded in slowness, echoes the vegetal temporality and growth rate of mosses and finally, she examines the potential of embroidery as a practice of care, one that allows her to form kinships with the more-than-human world.

INTRODUCTION

Living moss carpets have a vital impact on biodiversity and have shown an uncanny ability to thrive in most terrestrial habitats, yet their role in the ecosystem has been underestimated for a long time. In Finland, 20% of the bryophyte diversity has been classified as threatened due to degradation of habitats, urbanization, invasive forestry practices and other human disturbance (Hannukainen, 2018).

Considering the perilous state of our planet and the threat of climate change, science philosopher and multispecies feminist theorist Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to “make kin” with the more-than-human world, to engage in a mutual and enduring relatedness that carries

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consequences. In response to Haraway’s call for action, I began questioning myself: how does one form a kinship with moss? How can we build meaningful relationships with the discrete world(s) of bryophytes?

For the past year I have been gradually moving towards moss as an artistic subject matter – engaging with the overlap of art, science, and activism through multidisciplinary practices –, until it eventually became the only matter that *mattered*. In this practice-based visual essay I propose to engage with the medium of embroidery as a multisensory, reflective method of inquiry: a practice of exploration embedded in time, feeling, sensation, posture, gesture, artistic expression, and a yearning for kinship.

My inquiry begins with an exploration of *wonder*, which has led me to delve deeper into my personal interest in moss. By looking at wonder from an active, creative perspective, I aim to demonstrate how a passive manifestation of curiosity and awe can lead to an intentional emotion which seeks to create meaning through the creative process.

After examining my personal interest in embroidery and what drew me to it, I then lean into the practice itself. By leaning into the tactile

nature of this medium, my aim is to promote it as a research method which can generate experiential knowledge and provide us with valuable information about the materiality of moss.

This material exploration of the craft is then followed by an examination of its potential as a reflection of moss’s own temporality. By questioning the assumption that diligence and little else goes into embroidery, I refocus the discussion on the medium’s ability to offer the time and pace necessary to develop a kinship with moss.

Finally, I delve into embroidery’s potential as a practice of care. I question why it is radical, and how it can help us form kinships and build reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world.

A PROPENSITY FOR WONDER

Early on, I began cultivating an unwavering fascination for the things and beings that dwell at ground level. While others may have set their gaze upon cloudless nights, dreaming of distant moons and universes, my gaze was pulled towards smaller – albeit far closer – realms. I firmly believe in the power of wonder,



Figure 1. Mosses collected in Pirkkola forest, Helsinki. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2021

for “[if] facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow” (Carson, 1956/1998, p. 49). My own, ground-related fascination has taught me to tread forest paths with my bare feet, to let my soles collide with soil, sand, rock, and experience the place of meeting between earth and atmosphere. The forest floor has always been of particular interest to me: this microscopic world has an impressive array of tales to tell, and is bursting with wonderful colors, shapes, smells, and sounds. More importantly, it is a world favored by mosses.

When taking a closer look at a living moss carpet, you soon realize that you are not, in fact, facing a uniform weave of vegetation, but an assemblage of species, co-existing and co-evolving side by side (as seen in Figure 1). An approximate of 12,000 species are distributed around the world, with over 900 bryophyte species found in Finland. These typically grow in dense patches, often in dark or shady locations, and can be found in urban and natural environments alike. They are known to aid in soil erosion control, by providing surface cover and absorbing water. They also possess the ability to break down exposed substrata, releasing nutrients used by other vegetation types (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

I have spent the past three summers treading forest paths in Northern and Southern Ostrobothnia, and during that time I began noticing an ongoing dialogue between the trees and the moss: the architecture of the surrounding woodland was mirroring the forest floor, repeating itself in the form of the moss carpet. This dense amalgamation of vegetation was reminiscent of a Prehistoric Forest with its fern-like *Ptilium crista-castrensis*, large-leaved *Plagiomnium affine* or spindly *Sphagnum squarrosum*. I quickly became enamored with their exquisite features: I marveled at their shapeshifting forms, and watched as their delicate leaves curled and unfurled, a skillful ballet dictated by the vagaries of rain and humidity.

The gracefully orchestrated choreography of moss testifies to its strong affinity for water, which is linked to its status as one of the earliest land plants to emerge from the water some 470 million years ago (Lenton et al., 2012). This incredible attraction is expressed in each of its elements, designed to heighten the attachments of water to the moss and inviting it to linger on (Kimmerer, 2003). Instead of roots, moss has

developed thin, hair-like rhizoids. These dainty appendages facilitate water transport and help anchor mosses to their support (Dolan & Jones, 2012). As such, they follow the shape of trees, rocks, and concrete alike, creating a clever and intimate marriage of vegetal and mineral.

Sensing through moss a connection to a primordial landscape and wanting to perpetuate my experience of wonder, I began to draw a variety of mosses using graphite, ink, and bronze pigment, as shown in Figure 2. These drawings, far from being attempts on my part to achieve scientific accuracy, stemmed from a desire to pay homage to the beauty of moss and engage with it from an artistic perspective. This engagement led me to a renewed awareness of their presence and brought a distinct sense of animacy to the more-than-human world, every encounter bringing a startling sense of immediacy and aestheticism.

As I step out into the world, a boulder might greet me, sparsely clad in green and copper tufts of *Isoetecium alopecuroides*, enticing me to stop for a moment and lay my palm on its surface. Further on, I notice the lace-like extremities of *Pseudoleskeella nervosa* unfurling on a young alder; they capture my gaze, beckoning me to lean in and look closer. Without thinking, I start tracing the uneven contours of the moss with the tip of my fingers, a soft caress that I will later repeat using the tip of my brush. As I spend more time in the forest, I develop a sense of belonging grounded in my growing knowledge of the woodland. This knowledge is further elaborated upon in my drawings, as I attempt to grasp the very intrinsic essence of the mosses that I encounter.

Though introducing a wonderful sense of intimacy with my newly found companions, drawing left me longing for a more sensuous understanding of this peculiar plant. It satisfied the desire for a hands-on, thought-to-action practice, but did not fulfil a longing for materiality. I needed to develop a holistic, multisensory practice, one grounded in the exploration of material and matter.

A BROCADED SURFACE OF INTRICATE PATTERNS

In the preliminary stages of my research, author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2003) book *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* proved to be an essential read, as it provided me with much needed insights into the world of mosses. By looking



Figure 2. *Resilience*, bronze pigment on driftwood, 2020. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2020.



Figure 3. Intertwined moss and thread. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2021.

at moss from the perspective of a mother, scientist, professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer weaves a symbiotic narrative of human and non-human relationships and stories. Throughout this series of collected essays, she encourages us to enrich our knowledge of the world, and, in that process, to re-evaluate and even begin to mend our relationship with it.

Early on, Kimmerer formulates a wonderful comparison between moss and tapestry: “that [mossy] wallpaper, which seemed at first glance to be of a uniform weave, is in fact a complex tapestry, a brocaded surface of intricate patterns” (p. 10). Her analogy reminded me of the strong tradition of floral and botanical motifs in embroidery and tapestry work: wispy floral designs were a particularly repetitive topic in the Middle Ages and Renaissance when needleworkers culled their inspiration from nature and familiar objects. Mixed media textile artist and doctor in microbiology Annette Collinge (2020) suggested that “one of the reasons for the popularity of flowers over birds in ancient embroideries is that *flowers tend to stay put*” (p. 11), providing us with some insight into the motif’s long-enduring favor. Kimmerer’s discerning comparison, I realized, had generously paved

the way to my new medium of predilection: embroidery.

Embroidery is traditionally known as a conventional technique for decorating textiles with the help of a needle, thread, and frame/hoop (Mecnika et al., 2015). As a textile medium, it provides a unique opportunity to create three-dimensional light-weight structures and lay threads on the chosen support in all directions. Having never received any formal needlework training, I have become wiser in the ways of embroidery through trial and error, and by seeking guidance from a striving online community which has been promoting a revival of the craft. In the wake of my apprenticeship with embroidery, I began to suspect the importance of material itself, and how it can influence and shape my experience during the creative process.

As textile artist and researcher Nithikul Nimkulrat (2012) tells us: “a tangible material possesses intangible attributes, such as qualities to shape the practitioner’s interpretation of ongoing work, that tacitly influence a creative process and artefacts (i.e., the results of the creative process)” (p. 1369). The intangible attributes of embroidery became known to me through my noticing of the uncanny



Figure 4. Embroidering texture, cotton thread on cotton fabric. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2022.

resemblance between textile (thread) and moss, as seen in Figure 3. In the picture, cotton thread and leafy strands of moss exhibit a shared likeness, both in texture and color. This similarity, which could be accounted to the vegetal nature of the fiber used to make the embroidery thread (cotton), allowed me to render lifelike and vibrant depictions of moss. It also led to my belief that embroidery as a research method can generate experiential knowledge, i.e., knowledge gained through experience and perception (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). As such, it can provide us with valuable insights into a variety of aspects that science might not necessarily take into consideration, for instance: how it feels to the touch, how one stitch may better capture the likeness and texture of a species over another, or how the extensive array of colors available to the embroiderer allows for greater accuracy and realism.

Having become aware of the textile quality of moss, I began contemplating its artistic potential as a practice embedded in observation and born out of patience, which would allow me to gain an intimate understanding of the temporality of mosses.

IMAGES BORN OUT OF PATIENCE

Embroidery has long suffered from a lack of artistic credibility due to the stereotypical notion that diligence takes precedence over artistic creativity within the sewing process. Art historian and author Rozsika Parker (1984) tells us: “That embroiderers do transform materials to produce sense – whole ranges of meaning – is invariably entirely overlooked. Instead, embroidery and a stereotype of femininity have become collapsed into one another, characterized as mindless [and] devoid of significant content” (p. 6). But judging from my own experience, embroidery requires one to make conscious, cognitive decisions, specifically, when it comes to the choice of subject, design, color palette, and even through the selection of stitches. With moss, grasping the very physical presence of the plant proved to be a challenge of its own (as seen in Figure 4).

My practice has always been very intuitive: it involves a little preparatory work – a quick sketch to better grasp the proportions and features of my subject – and requires no prior transfer of pattern onto the canvas. What it does involve is a great deal of observation. Patience, and therefore time, becomes an

essential component of this process, as it is intricately tied to the act of observation and the careful hours spent examining a tuft of moss. Discoveries are made in such moments: your eye gets caught up in an infinitely small detail, registering the leap of an unexpected critter, hidden in the moss’s tightly woven foliage.

Getting to know *someone*, or *something* requires patience, it takes time. Embroidery offers such time in abundance. As a pattern starts unfolding on my embroidery hoop, I notice the parallel trajectory between my working pace and moss’s own timeline. Due to my lack of training and to the nature of the craft itself, progression on my embroidery piece is slow to appear, but it reveals an underlying similarity with moss’s growth rate. A single embroidery project can take months to be completed – depending on the complexity of the chosen motif. Similarly, moss develops slowly, and while some species require only a few weeks to establish themselves, others can take up to two years to flourish (Kimmerer, 2003). The speed at which we do something will inevitably affect our experience of it: by engaging with slow-paced practices such as embroidery, and *slow stitching* (which promotes a slower, mindful approach to stitching cloth), I can disengage from my own, narrow perception of time, and directly experience moss’s own temporality. Embroidery thus becomes an embodied practice, one that focuses on the body as a tool to develop awareness, stay present, and feel connected.

While adapting to a slower, more deliberate working pace allows us to become more familiar with our chosen materials, it also encourages us to pay more attention to details. As textile artist Claire Wellesley-Smith (2015) notes: “by slowing down my own textile practice, I have developed a deeper emotional commitment to it, to the themes that I am exploring, and to the processes I use” (p. 4). A slow approach can therefore be understood as a celebration of process. I have always enjoyed getting lost in intricate patterns, something I felt could easily be achieved through drawing. This became a key concern when I began thinking about representing moss using a textile medium: how could I retain the intricate nature of my drawings using only thread? As Beatrice Grisol, Head Weaver at Paris’ venerable Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins, remarked, weavers must possess a love of drawing and an abundance of imagination to translate an artist’s vision using silken or woolen threads (The J.

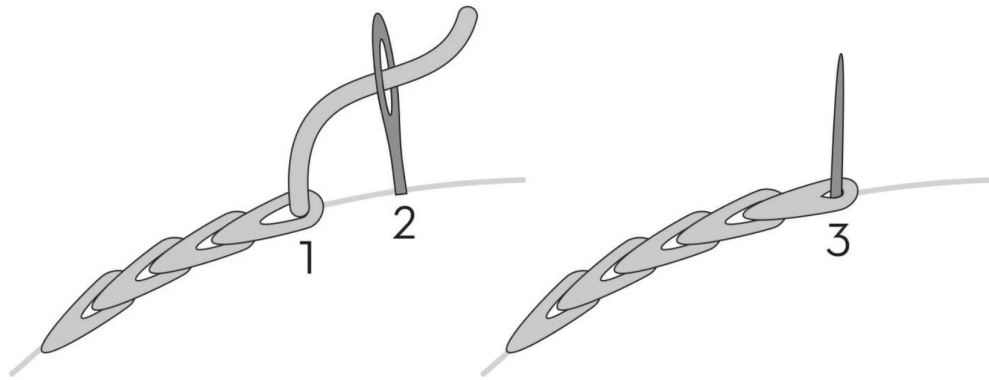


Figure 5. Diagram demonstrating the split stitch. Photo: <https://penguinandfish.com/blogs/embroidery-stitches/how-to-do-a-split-stitch>

Paul Getty Museum, 2017). A statement which, I believe, also applies to embroiderers.

While researching stitches I came upon the *split stitch*, as shown in Figure 5; early documentation of its use dates to Medieval England (West, 2018), and its versatility of use (for outlining and filling in colors for patterns) made it a popular choice for embroiderers over time. When I began using this stitch, I quickly noticed the likeness it shared with drawing, for the split stitch can be worked into tight curves and used to create minute details, similarly, to hand-drawn lines. It allowed me to transpose my love of the line onto fabric, making for a great richness of details and satisfying a need for texture which had been sorely lacking in my drawings.

While the split stitch allowed me to obtain finer details, I also noticed something interesting occurring on the backside of my canvas: a slightly distorted mirror image of the moss was revealing itself underneath my artfully arranged stitches, as shown in Figure 6. This reversed image acted as a testimony of my tentative approach to embroidery, but it also showed me a hidden network of connections: where one stitch ended the next began, and I could easily follow the progression of my needle through the fabric. The emerging pattern echoed the invisible networks of the forest itself: roots and mycelium growing and intertwining beneath the ground, forming a mutually beneficial collaboration. Suddenly, embroidering the likeness of moss had become a metaphor for hidden networks of care.

EMBROIDERY AS CARE

Embroidery comes with a loaded history, and a notable duality at its heart, which deepens the complexity of its meaning as a visual medium. Feminist critical reading of its history emphasized the dual nature of this craft, and the way in which it signifies both self-containment and submission. As Parker (2010) writes:

Historically, through the centuries, it has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence. (p. xix)

I see a striking parallel between embroidery's physical imperative, which bends both neck and eyes towards the work at hand and the downward progression of my gaze, curved by my enduring interest and attraction for the mossy ground. For when embroidering, one must bend the neck towards the canvas, in a concentrated and contained effort, a posture which has often been associated with the embroiderer's submission to socio-cultural norms. However, I am keen to offer a more nuanced and layered perspective of this reading. Far from being a mere illustration of feminine obedience, I believe that bending the neck while embroidering may also be understood as an act of devotion: devotion to one's endeavor, and for one's chosen subject (see completed embroidery in Figure 7).

My own bending gaze – and neck – stems from my sense of wonder for the mossy forest floor, and concern for its future. A future edging



Figure 6. Backside of embroidery. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2022.



Figure 7. Embroidery, cotton thread on cotton fabric. Photo: Eline Gaudé, 2022.

towards hardship and instability, which I experienced firsthand last summer: at the peak of the season, the combined action of heat and drought were tangibly felt and seen. Moss carpets particularly suffered from the absence of rain, and day by day I would witness the slow but inevitable departure of moisture and color from their brittle foliage. Cultivating the capacity to simultaneously feel wonder and concern - to embrace contradiction - seems essential now and brings us closer to the very definition of care: to think and feel that something is interesting, important, worthy of our consideration and concern (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

While exploring different forms of thinking with care through a rereading of Donna Haraway's work, María Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) takes a closer look at the concept of situated knowledge: in her own words, "that knowledge is situated means that knowing and thinking are inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with" (p. 198). She proposes that 'thinking with care' is an essential requirement of collective thinking in interdependent worlds, an assertion which points towards situated knowledge's ability to ignite a sense of care in one's thinking, be it from an affective perspective, an ethical obligation, or through practical labor.

SUMMARY

These days, my feet tread the forest ground more softly than ever, my gaze wanders, seeking out those cherished flashes of green, copper, and gold. Moss, I realize, has developed a perceptible gravitas, a presence that can no longer be ignored; I am nowadays attuned to sensing it wherever I go. As I notice it in both familiar and odd places, I often wonder at its unique qualities: its resilience for one, and how it can bear the weight of our human bodies and persist long after we are gone; its creativity, and surreptitious appearance in places solely intended for us, such as the cracked pavement, the aging house, the silent monument; its tenderness, and how the gentle spreading of its shape encompasses rock, tree, soil, and bone, forming a lush blanket of greenery.

A sense of wonder and excitement still guides my journey into the world of plants, conjuring life and meaning into the vegetal and encouraging kinships across species divides. I have come to believe that embroidery allows for greater intimacy not only with moss, but with a vegetal existence itself. Deliberately engaging

with a slow-paced artistic practice has also forced me to reconsider my relationship with time and productivity: by offering my own time and patience, I have come closer to moss's own vegetal temporality, unbound from my human sense of time. The path to developing a kinship with moss has led me to delve deeper into matters of care, and to examine how artistic practices allow us to bridge the gap between human and more-than-human. I believe that my own creative process, which has found a multisensory outlet through embroidery, has encouraged me to become more attentive and attuned to my surroundings. In a word, it has made me more care-full.

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