

*An investigation into changing models of value labour and emancipation
in stitching in Craft and Fine Art contexts.*

BY OUR OWN HAND

Richard Grayson/Phil Baines. Text heading design for Publication 2017

By Our Own Hand is a project that operates between and across the areas of Craft and Fine Art practice

Focussing on the act of stitching embroidered text panels it seeks to research and develop a project that :

- Reveals and articulates different loadings and values culturally invested in the arenas of craft and manual labour, artisanal labour and the high value Fine Art Practice labour.
- Articulates the shifting positions of gendered labour.
- Reveals ways that the act of stitching has been invested with Ethical and Political ideas of emancipation and improvement.
- Explores models of transformation and emancipation in religious and political stitched texts.
- Develops workshop strategies to expand competencies in non art-trained practitioners.
- Innovate ways of articulating the 'exhibition publication' as an equal site for the generation of meaning in a visual arts project, rather than as a secondary commentary.

There are three areas of research

1 The histories of the sampler and stitched letters in the pre-industrial and industrial West

2 The stitched letter in the visual arts practices of the 60's 70's: those of Arte Povera and the works developed by Alighiero e Boetti working with Pashtun embroiders.

3 The forms and languages of religious and secular expressions of emancipation and improvement

Using these these nodes as points of departure, the project investigates and interrogates different understandings values and loadings invested in the act of stitching at different times and different technological contexts: from when it was a primary means of production, then after the introduction of the machine, and now the introduction of the intelligent and networked machine.

In each context the stitch has taken on a different symbolic and cultural loading, from economic activity, to moral imperative to exemplar of ideal relation and non alienated human to a source of recreation.

**BY
OUR
OWN
HAND**

***300 Word
Statement***

Background on Researcher

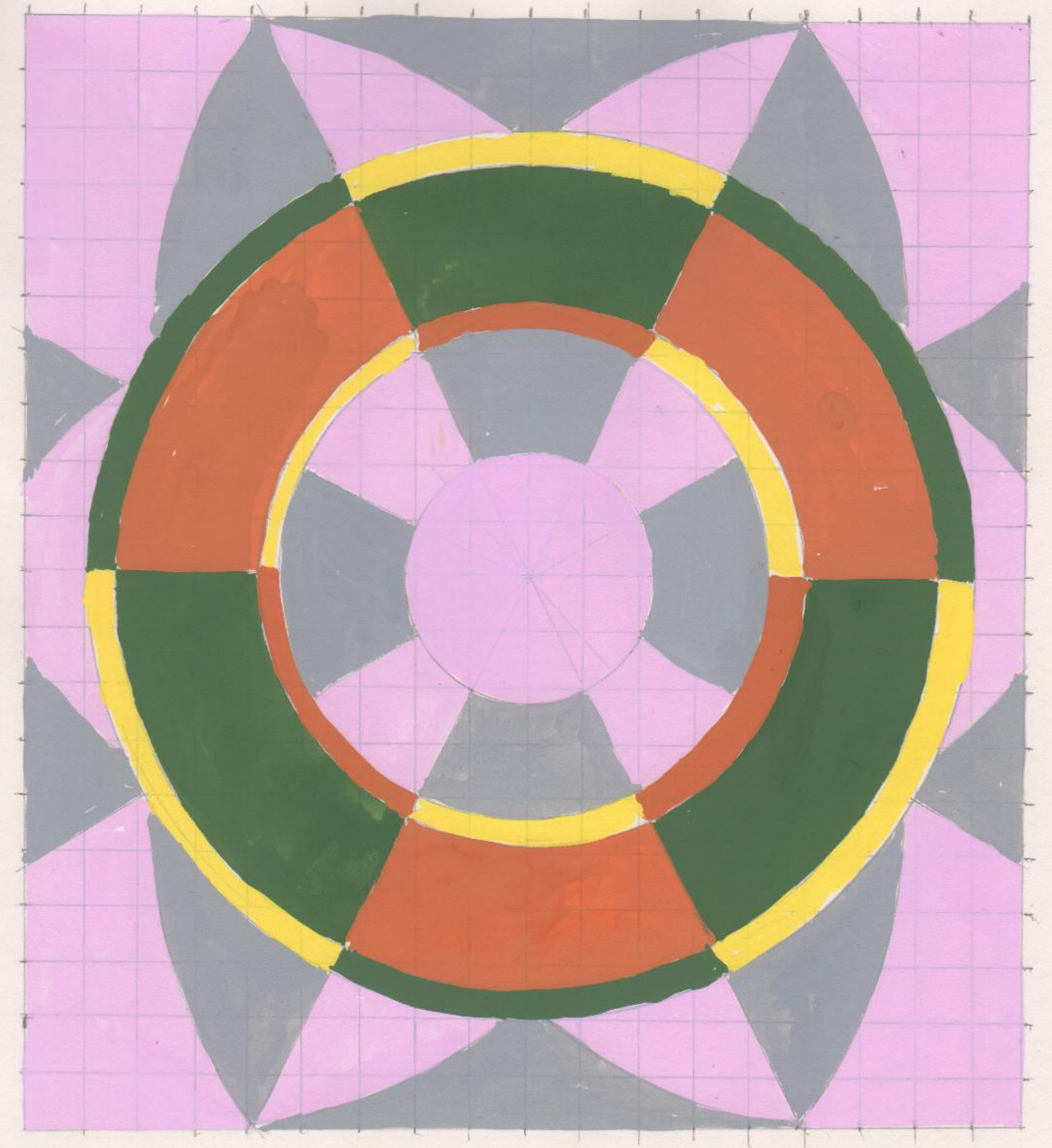
Richard Grayson is an artist, curator and writer. He was a 2007-2018 (Ongoing) Bartlett Research Fellow, Newcastle University, UK. He is a visiting tutor at Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University.

Recent exhibitions and projects include *The Magic Mountain* (2013-17), *Nothing Can Stop Us Now* (2014), *Boredom is Always Counter Revolutionary* (2013-16), *Cosmic Joke* (2015), *By Our Own Hand* (2017-18) and *Possessions* (2016-19). Recent curatorial projects include: *Worlds in Collision*, *Adelaide International* (2014,) *Vordemberge-Gildewart Award Exhibition* (2016) and the *David and Yuko Juda Art Foundation Award London* (2018).

He curated the 2002 Sydney Biennale, *The World May Be Fantastic*, the Hayward Gallery Touring exhibition *A Secret Service: Art Concealment Compulsion* (2006) and *Polytechnic*, Raven Row, London (2010) which looked at time-based and experimental practices in the UK from the mid-seventies and early eighties. He was a founder member of the Basement Group, 1979-1984 Newcastle upon Tyne, an artist collective that made and represented time-based and performance practice.

Previous published writing by Grayson includes: *Blast Theory, You Start It*, (2018) Nam June Paik Art Center, Korea, *Susan Hiller- Lost and Found* (2018) Documenta 14 catalogue essay Germany, *If It Was A Going Concern* (2014) Adelaide International *Shaun Gladwell: On Motorbikes* (2013) De La Warr Pavilion, England, *Susan Hiller* (2011) Kunsthalle Nuremberg: Nuremberg; *Mark Wallinger* (2008) Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Rignier: Switzerland; and *Mike Nelson* (2006) Koenig Books: Berlin, reprinted in Brian Dillon (ed) *Ruins*, MIT Press: Boston and Whitechapel Gallery. He is a regular contributor to Art Monthly Magazine.

His work as artist and curator investigates ways that language and narrative are used to make sense of the world around us, and how narratives in turn generate worlds of their own. The ways that Subjective readings and constructions of the world might achieve social political and cultural expression, and how they are used both to understand the world and model potentialities, is a central focus of his work. - both as an artist and curator.. There is a focus is on the subjective and the belief system as sites of opposition to hegemonic capital and commodity, and as a response to the discourses of modernity and enlightenment rationality.



By Our Own Hand. Studies. Richard Grayson Gouache on paper. 42 x 29 cm 2016

INTRODUCTION

The overarching research focus of the project **By Our Own Hand** is on the transformative histories and agendas of contemporary art practices that emerged in relationship to specific revolutionary, social, cultural and political movements in the early 20th century, and how they are re-articulated and shaped by the cultural economic and technological conditions of the early 21st century.

By Our Own Hand constructs a collaborative volunteer stitching experiment in project that engages with:

- the histories of the sampler and stitched letters in the pre-industrial and industrial west
- the stitched letter in the visual arts practices of the 60's 70's: those of Arte Povera and the works developed by Alighiero e Boetti working with Pashtun embroiders.

Using these these nodes as points of departure, the project investigates and interrogates different understandings values and loadings invested in the act of stitching at different times and different technological and cultural contexts: from when it was a primary means of production, then after the introduction of the machine, and now the introduction of the intelligent and networked machine.

In each context the stitch has taken on a different symbolic and cultural loading, from economic activity, to moral imperative to exemplar of ideal relation and non alienated human to a source of recreation to artistic expression.

RESEARCH AIMS

Focussing on the act of stitching embroidered text panels, By Our Own Hand seeks

- To reveal and articulate different loadings and values culturally invested in the arenas of craft and manual labour, artisanal labour and the high value 'Fine Art Practice' labour.
- To develop strategies to manifest ways stitching has been historically and culturally invested with Ethical and Political ideas of emancipation and improvement

To Develop workshop strategies to expand competencies in non art-trained practitioners.

- To innovate ways that the 'exhibition publication' may operate as an active site for the generation of meaning in a visual arts project

CONTEXT

By Our Own Hand extends my earlier research into the functions and roles of letters and text when materialised in visual art practice. Alternative History Paintings 1997-8 looked at the spaces of counter-factuality, fiction and the traditions of historical representation and construction, Negative Space (Things I don't Understand) 2000 investigated and critiqued western and contemporary ideas of Art practice as a form of Knowledge production through a consideration of known conceptual sets that were, so to speak empty (not understood). The project also builds on my research into the nature of tensions/differences between individual and collective cultural production:

specifically Messiah: Two channel video projection 2004 The Golden Space City of God: Hi-Def video installation 2009 and Nothing Can Stop Us Now five channel video installation 2014.

By Our Own Hand is shaped by changes in our ideas of work, labour and craft. The act of making something by hand - and the object produced - takes on new resonances in a world increasingly shaped by the computer and digital means of production, reproduction and consumption in which relationships between the actual and the virtual, the original and reproduction, become blurred and slippery. Inevitably this conjures up other narratives and shifts in how we understand the act of making something by hand, that have taken place in the face of previous technological and cultural changes.

A central point of reference of By Our Own Hand is the history of the embroidery sampler. Widely produced in pre-industrial and industrial Europe from the 14th century onwards, they started as a resource and means of reference for experienced embroiderers, with examples of stitches, patterns and effects and evolved into training tools and exercises to inculcate necessary skills into young hands. Over time the texts on the samplers took on a strong moral loading, that inculcated both ideas of value and utility where labour had moral weight, and to counter-acted the tendency for 'Idle hands do the Devil's work'. This was reinforced through the use of religious or improving texts as the subject of the work.

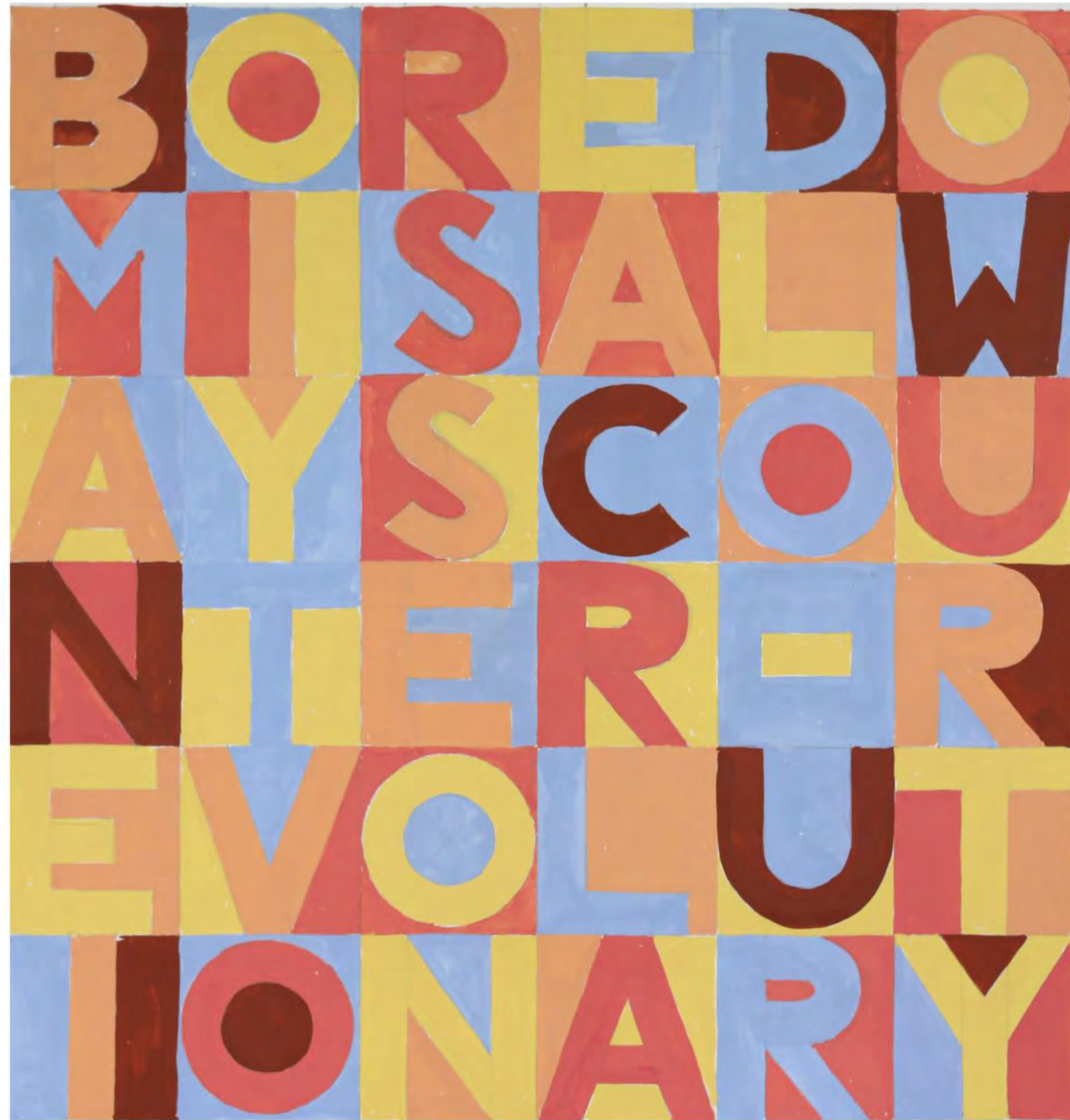
As industrialisation and technology developed, stitching and craft skills became invested with qualities that machine and factory production did not allow: care, personal pleasure, what Marx would consider non-alienated labour. Working with machines tended towards the boring and individual skill and agency often became increasingly marginalised.. "Machinery will be continuously developed with labour-saving purpose, and many people will have enough spare time to taste the pleasure of life." wrote William Morris in 'The Lesser Arts of Life' 1882 "Men whose hands were skilled in fashioning things could not help thinking that in their very labour that they lived by, lay the material in which their thought could be embodied"

The approaches of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, its foregrounding of skilled manual work as a noble and empowering activity still shapes the ways we see things made by hand and informs the activities of crafts-people and hobbyists today. Where the primary drive for making something is pleasure and actualisation not the production of commodities of economic value. Where the act of creation is also a means of recreation for the person who is doing the work

By Our Own Hand also focuses on the embroideries produced by Alighiero e Boetti between 1971 and 1994. Boetti and his agents contracted work out to approximately 500 Afghan embroiders drawn from the Pashtun, Hazara and other ethnic refugee groups in Kabul Pakistan who had a strong cultural tradition of embroidery. The embroiderers were given a set of instructions/conditions by Boetti and were able to make their individual contributions through choosing colours and sometimes incorporating embroidered phrases in Farsi, but in the finished works the maker is unnamed, their individual contribution submerged in the strong visual identity of the artist's design, and in the artefacts function as hyper-commodified objects of value in the Contemporary Art Market. His approaches have also been critiqued as orientalist or colonialist.



Alighiero e Boetti. Untitled 1982. Embroidery On Canvas



By Our Own Hand. Study. Gouache on Paper. 2016



The phrase 'Boredom is Always Counter-Revolutionary' is drawn from a text written by Guy Debord published in the Situationist International Journal in 1962, which later became a popular graffiti in the May 1968 uprisings in Paris.

The central question for the Situationists was how might people find meaning and significance in the modern world, one that not only alienated people from their work but from our experience of life. Debord spoke of the 'spectacle', the torrent of advertisements, media events, entertainment, and communication technologies that takes up all of our "free" time and separates us from the fruits of our labours, from one another, and from ourselves. They considered play and spontaneity as the cornerstones necessary for a fulfilling life. Boredom to them was a modern phenomenon, a modern form of control.

Situationists contributed to the thinking about creative collaborative projects have been a focus in progressive art practices for over a century, where approaches drawn from communist societies, filtered through radical practices of the 1960's and 70's and in the last 30 years finding a home in Relational Aesthetics and the approaches of Nicholas Bourriard that have sought to dismantling and re-imagine of social bonds through communitarian art events. **By Our Own Hand** however seeks to widen the focus to that which is produced as much as the act of production, building on Claire Bishop's insight that it is all well and good to regard the exhibition space as a laboratory, construction site or art factory; but '*what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an "experience" of creativity, which is essentially institutionalized studio activity, is often unclear*'.

Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', October 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51-79: 52.

Relationships between acts of craft are becoming increasingly complex and central in contemporary art. On one hand artists increasingly echo late capitalist modes of production through outsourcing: Ai Weiwei's millions of ceramic sunflower seeds were made in unnamed skilled crafters in Jingdezhen China, whilst the market simultaneously values the artisanal values of hand-crafting in the practices of many artists such as Grayson Perry, Yinke Sonibare and Suzanne Husky, and materiality and manual dexterity becomes a fascination in a world mediated by the digital. This is true both in the art market and in the massive growth of maker and hobbyist networks on the web. These engagements and re-engagements can be seen in the recent large survey exhibitions re-positioning the practices of Sonia Delaunay, focussing on textiles and clothes Tate Modern 2018 and Anna Albers - with an emphasis on weaving - Tate Modern 2019 and in recent projects by Anya Gallaccio working with wool and dye. The significant exhibition *Unto This Last*, curated by Alice Motard and Alex Sainsbury, Raven Row 2010 explored practice by artists who "*simultaneously abide by the codes of conceptual practice – autonomy, dematerialisation, abstraction and lack of skills, among others – and to various degrees draw on the critical potential of craft.*"





By Our Own Hand expands on a proposition by Theorist and Historian John Roberts, "*In The Intangibilities of Form*. Roberts shows that the inception of apparently anti-materialist tactics, such as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades or the completely outsourced artwork (like the abstract paintings, enamel on steel, that Lázsló Moholy-Nagy reputedly ordered up over the telephone), involve not only the stripping away of traditional artisanship – 'deskilling' – but also the invention of new artistic processes, which Roberts terms 'reskilling'. The artist still functions as a 'producer', but perhaps in the same sense that the word is used in the film industry. The context for creativity may no longer be the work, but rather the way of working. For example, multiple productive modes can exist within a single artwork: recourse to artisanal making (skill), purely critical or negative actions (deskilling), and strategic reinventions of the artistic profession itself (reskilling) (From *The Ties That Bind*. Glen Adamson 2010

<http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/32/> and seeks to develop formats that acknowledge and celebrate these modes rather than occluding them.

Methods, Processes

Panels and Workshops

By Our Own Hand centered on the production of 42 30cm x 40cm panels that featured either a letter or a blank.

The panels were made by 30 volunteer non-professional stitchers. The stitchers were recruited through different groups and Networks to ensure that participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds.

These ranged from call outs on the Matts Gallery Website, and ranged through the networks of the Embroidery Guild, the Stitch in Time, network to STORM:empowerment Group a community outreach project in Peckham, the ROSE Community Hall Battersea, Prison Workshop services and the Culture outreach programmes of Wandsworth and Nine Elms in London.

Each participant was allotted, by chance, the template of a Gill Sans Serif letter, or in some cases, just a blank panel.

The participant was asked to generate a pattern or design for their work. The only conditions were that the work was to use stitching stitched and that the shape of the letter (or the blank) should be, to a greater or lesser extent, visible in the design they generated

A series of talks and workshops were developed by Richard Grayson and James Hunting, Course Leader Textiles from John Cass School . Grayson's presentations were to introduce participants to examples of text and letters being treated as art in Contemporary Art. James Hunting's workshops and resources were developed to allow access to expanded skills and vocabularies on the part of participants as and when determined needful by the individual.

A set of resources was developed and produced: images of other artists works and texts of possible approaches

There were 16 meetings of participants over the period of the project. These were augmented by informal break-away session initiated by participants themselves.

Each panel required twenty four thousand of stitches to complete at the most basic level. Many were multiples of this. Well over a million stitches constitute the final project.

The completed panels were professionally documented with professional RAW photographs.

Each panel was individually framed in museum standard frames and glass and assembled into a gridded unit that echoes Boetti's grids of individual letters.

Each participant was provided with four copies of the parallel **By Our Own Hand** publication documenting their contribution.

Publication and Presentation.

The publication element of the project was designed in association with Phil Baines Studio.

Each work was reproduced in full colour and full page, with the name of the maker (other than when they chose to remain anonymous) on the page opposite.

Curator and writer Jez Fernie was approached to write an essay contextualising and analysing the project and the works

A text by Richard Grayson provided further context

Participants were invited to make statements about how they had felt about the overall project and the act of investing so much time and focus into the act of stitching.

The Publication was published by Matts Gallery 2018

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and distributed by Matts Gallery, Cornerhouse distribution Manchester and Amazon UK.

The finished work and project: **By Our Own Hand** was launched and displayed at Matts Gallery Nine Elms in June 2018.



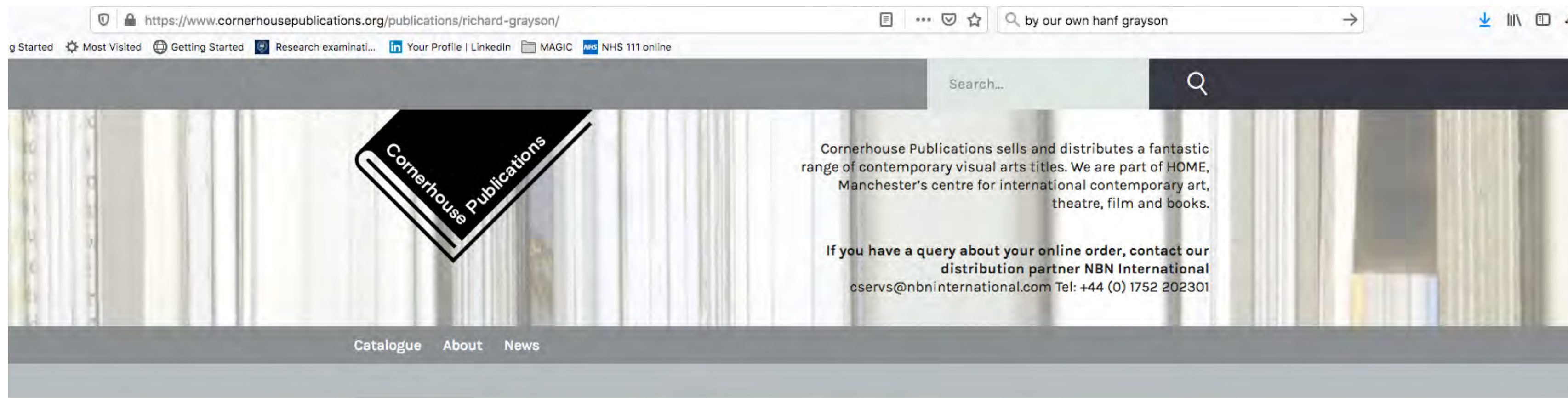
By Our Own Hand

42 embroidered Panels

Wool, cotton and mixed media on canvas backing

Each 44x32cm

Installation Matts Gallery Londin 2018



Richard Grayson
By Our Own Hand

This book is published as part of, *By Our Own Hand* which is a project by Richard Grayson, featuring an introduction by the artist, full-page colour reproductions of 42 embroidered panels, documentation of the creative process, and a specially commissioned essay by writer Jes Fernie. The book has been designed by Phil Baines.

By Our Own Hand is an artwork made with the participation of individuals and organisations in Wandsworth. The starting point of the work is a cross-stitch tapestry made by Richard Grayson between Christmas 2012 and Easter 2015.

Working with stitching, appliqué, or other techniques involving textiles and cloth, participants have developed, designed and made individual panels. Brought together these form the component letters of the phrase, 'Boredom Is Always Counter-Revolutionary' (originating from a text by writer and filmmaker Guy Debord).

The work references the practice of Italian conceptual artist Alighiero e Boetti's series of iconic embroideries, produced in the latter part of his career and made by Afghan embroiderers.

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|----------------------|---|
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