HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.2396-9008.062

"Made-Unmade-Remade": Art, History and Identity in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* (1994)

Chloe Julius

I.

On a small piece of raw linen framed and fastened to one of the walls of her installation *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* (1993) (fig. 1), Elaine Reichek implicated Jewish identity in the development of American art. Quoting her friend, the writer David Frankel, Reichek embroidered the following remark in carefully stitched white letters: 'The son of rabbis, my father had gone beyond religion and ethnicity — he was a Modernist. But every Passover he'd make himself *matzobrei* for breakfast'. Paced like a joke, where the punch of the punchline lives or dies by the strength of the set-up, this set-up does not pull any punches: modernism would permit those who abided by its laws to overcome identity. In highlighting Frankel's *preservation* of identity – albeit only in his cultural proclivities – the joke seemingly dethrones not one but two twentieth-century forces: modernism and assimilation.

That modernism entailed assimilatory possibilities, and that this would have been particularly appealing for American Jews, was an idea that started appearing with increasing regularity in the burgeoning field of Jewish Studies in 1990s scholarship. The modernism to which such scholarly explorations most frequently referred was its expression in New York of the 1940s and 1950s, *an artistic scene to which many Jewish artists and critics contributed*. Given this focus, it makes sense that Clement Greenberg was often caught in the middle of this reassessment of modernism, whose art criticism was foundational to this period and whose own Jewish identity permitted Jewishness to be read back into his writing, even – or, perhaps more precisely, *especially* – when it was not mentioned.

From the standpoint of the 1990s, Greenberg's dogged advocacy of abstraction appeared to have an ulterior motive: assimilation. The autonomy

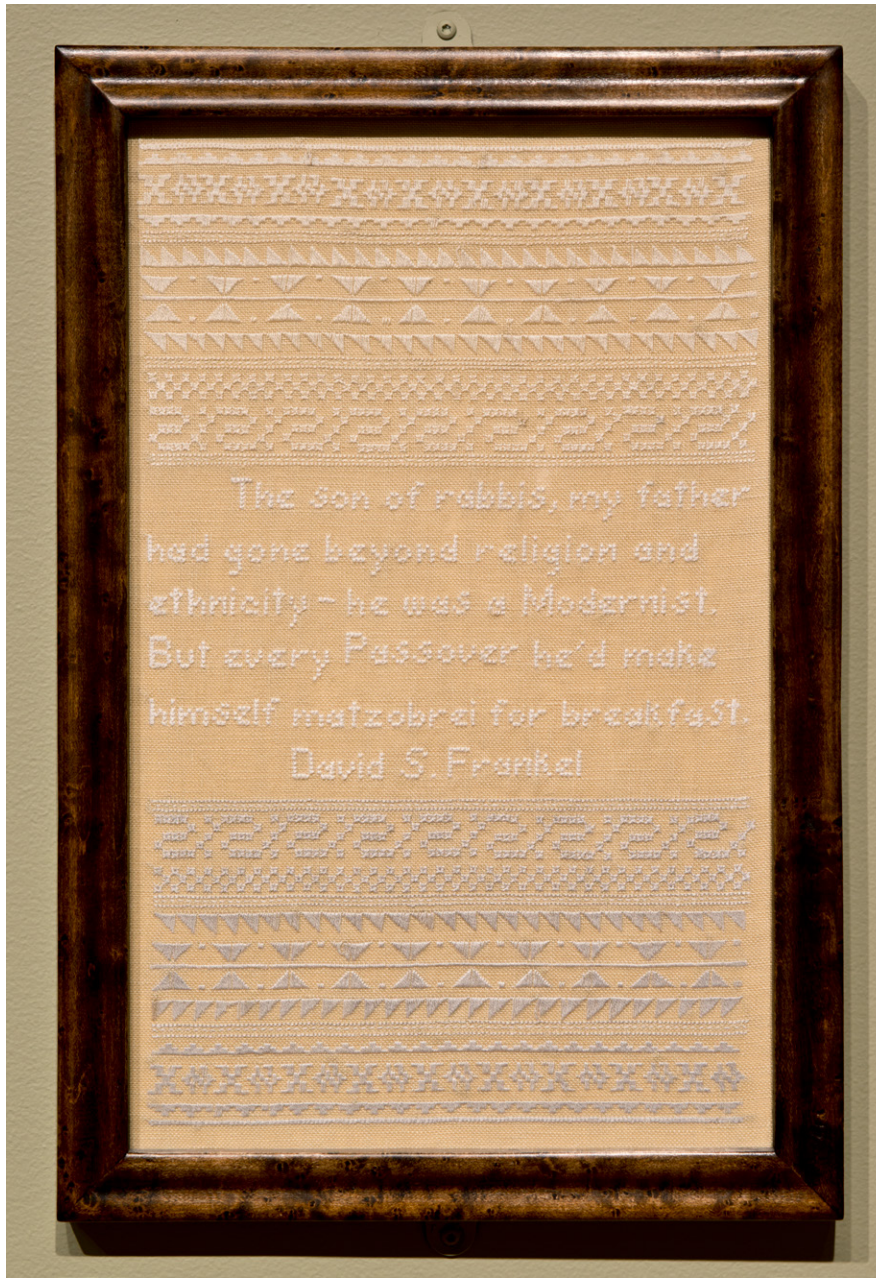

Figure 1 Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (David S. Frankel)*. 1993. Hand embroidery on linen. 37.8 × 24.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

of the abstract artwork, it was supposed, provided a convenient mechanism by which the identity of its author could be concealed. This line of thinking was colourfully captured by the artist Ronda Lieberman in 2002, when she summarised the contours of Greenberg's 1990s makeover as follows:

> Clement Greenberg is the closest thing we have to a rabbi of 'High Art': in his synagogue of abstraction the artist transcends ethnicity – and class – and everything – to find universal *gesundheit* through his 'signature style': Frank Stella with the stripes; Newman with *his* stripes; Olitsky with the drops . . . Abstraction is kosher; pop and kitsch: *treyf*![1]

Although delivered in jest, the binary Lieberman set up between American universality and Jewish particularity betrayed a hangover from the 1990s shakeup of American Jewish identity. At a notably belated moment in the unfolding of identity politics in America, in the 1990s American Jews began to question the porousness of American culture exemplified by its melting pot ideal.[2] Rather than an unstable site in which multiple cultures would mingle, America came to be understood as a monolith into which its Jews could only insert themselves by renouncing their culture. Recasting assimilation as acculturation, this view was retroactively applied to the generations of Jews who had immigrated to America from the seventeenth century onward. In finding 'universal *gesundheit*' in abstraction, ordaining it 'kosher', Lieberman implied that acculturation was not only the path favoured by American Jews, but that Clement Greenberg facilitated the ease of travel.[3]

Lieberman's joke traced scholarly terrain forged by Margaret Olin, who was the first art historian to use Greenberg to connect the history of American modernism with that of American Jewry. In 1996, Olin contributed an article to the catalogue for the exhibition *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* that explicitly tied the criticism practiced by Greenberg to his Jewish identity.[4] This exhibition, held at New York's Jewish Museum, was a crucial node in the 1990s reappraisal of Jewish identity in American art, a reappraisal in which 'American' and 'Jewish' were invoked as separate, static categories. Olin's argument about Greenberg – that the abstraction he espoused was motivated by an assimilatory urge *towards* America and *away* from Jewishness – gained traction within this context.[5]

Olin's intervention in Greenberg's historiography was developed by other scholars in the early 2000s. As the argument proceeded, the art in Greenberg's art criticism dropped further out of the picture. Whereas Olin located Greenberg at the crossroads of American modernism and American Jewry, in 2005 Matthew Baigell claimed that Greenberg's aesthetic ideas were primarily formed by his desire to 'escape from his particular Jewish background'.[6] This was taken further by Lisa Bloom in her 2006 enquiry into the spectral presence of Jewish identity in feminist art, where Greenberg's name served as a 'place holder for naming a set of problems around the whitening of Jewish immigrants and immigrant culture in the United States'.[7] Of course, Greenberg's name had long been afforded the status of shorthand, but that Bloom's place holder referred not to his view of modernism but his perceived role within the acculturation of American Jews was a direct consequence of Olin's scholarship. Conjoining abstraction with assimilation, this 1990s scholarship brought Jewishness *into* American art, albeit negatively, by virtue of its perceived absence.

Reichek, whose work appeared in the exhibition *Too Jewish?* and whose textile directly referenced the 1990s reappraisal of modernism, was keenly aware of these developments. The humoristic edge of the Frankel sampler offers the first hint that Reichek sought to situate herself at a remove from its dogma. That Frankel's father continued to eat *matzobrei* does not attest to a failure of modernism or assimilation to facilitate the transcendence of religion or ethnicity. Rather, this culinary choice presents a discrete – and rather charming – example of the contradictions that necessarily emerge from the crisscrossing of cultures. By poking fun at the view of modernism held by her peers, Reichek brought modernism back into the picture, whose memory, I will argue, she attempted to resurface in the broader installation of *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. That such a rescue mission inevitably also engaged American Jewish identity, reveals the extent to which both histories had become entangled in the 1990s.

II.

A Postcolonial Kinderhood (1994) (figs. 2–3) sits evenly between the decade of its production – the 1990s – and its subject – the 1950s. While the installation entails a faithful recreation of Reichek's childhood home in Brooklyn, it resists the allure of pure historical escapism. Rather, it offers a vision of the

Figure 2 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. 1994. Installation view at the Jewish Museum, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

past consciously mediated through the present: the 1950s *through* the 1990s. This is exemplified by the installation's eleven textile pieces: relaying quotes Reichek collected from family and friends in 1993 (including the Frankel sampler); these works provide entry points into the past while simultaneously affirming the installation's present. The same logic guides the selection and arrangement of furniture in the installation. Ordered from the same company her parents used to decorate their home, Reichek altered each piece to make it smaller, and then dispersed the furniture in a dimly lit room much larger than her childhood bedroom. These games of scale are deftly deployed to point to a past at once temptingly close and at a remove.

In making the homely strange, Reichek sets *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* in the terrain of the uncanny, which, as Freud had it, could be provoked 'when one wanders about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or the electric switch, and collides for the hundredth time with the same piece of

Figure 3 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, 1994. Installation view at the Jewish Museum, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

furniture'.[8] But it is not just Reichek's home that is made strange; the 1950s is rendered uncanny through her 1990s interventions. The decade's familiarity – both as the genesis of a certain normative American domesticity and the apex of American modernism – is unsettled in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. In making the 1950s present, Reichek reinscribes the decade with possibility, probing her viewers to consider that the future projected from mid-century might not be the present they were living at century's end.

The 1990s holds a peculiar position in the history of twentieth-century American art. Working as Reichek did, as an artist in this period, meant making art *after* postmodernism, which is not to say that postmodernism had ended, or indeed been replaced, but rather that its critical possibilities had waned, loosening its hold on both the academy and artistic practice. Yet the failure to overcome that which it had declared itself to be *post* – to fully break with modernism – perversely brought modernism back into focus,

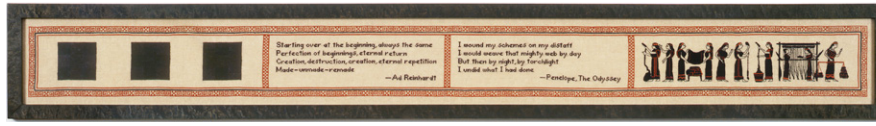

Figure 4 Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (Starting Over)*. 1996. Hand embroidery on linen. 22.2 × 171.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

its legacy, only partially buried, demanding attention once more. Artists who responded to this demand in the 1990s were charged with what Hal Foster called 'an archival impulse': through their work, these artists sought to 'probe a misplaced past [. . . .] to ascertain what might remain for the present'.[9]

Reichek is one such artist. The legacy of modernism both weighs on and is reconstituted by her work. It exists not merely as an object of critique, rather, in the 1990s, Reichek returned to episodes from modernism's history to understand its enduring hold over the present, episodes that had often been obscured by postmodernism. *Starting Over* (1996) (fig. 4), a textile work by Reichek in which three of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings are reproduced in one of its four sections, is exemplary of this engagement. Otherwise known as his ultimate paintings, Reinhardt worked exclusively in monochrome from 1953 until his death in 1967, building up his gridded canvasses with squares of colour mixed with black oil paint to produce varying shades of near black. In resurrecting Reinhardt's last paintings in embroidery, Reichek was not refuting Reinhardt's aim – painting lives, albeit in embroidery – nor was she neutering it, by reproducing the last painting three times over. Indeed, in her reproduction, Reichek remained faithful to the governing principle of Reinhardt's paintings, making alterations in thread and stitch to produce slight but perceptible shifts in the colour black across the three squares. And, although Reinhardt had been Reichek's teacher at Brooklyn College in the early 1960s, *Starting Over* activated something greater than the disciple overcoming the master; through this work, Reichek attempted to retrieve one of Reinhardt's lessons.

Next to the three black squares appear four lines of stitched text. Beginning with the two words that give the work its title – starting over – the text belongs to a note by Reinhardt titled 'Creation as Content'. Fittingly, the note is undated, for it is a celebration of the purity of beginnings in painting,

which, according to this note, were always the same for Reinhardt, as long as the work neither represented nor alluded to anything outside of itself. 'Creation, destruction, creation': seemingly, in pursuit of starting over, Reinhardt cast history aside, with creation triggering a sequence that always leads back to itself – a cycle of eternal repetition.[10]

The cycle that follows on the next line, however, suggests a different kind of beginning: 'made, unmade, remade'. Unlike 'creation, destruction, creation', in this triplet creation does not circle back to itself, although it does return to a beginning. But this beginning is imperfect. It is tied to the act of its unmaking, and also bears the memory of the original making. In other words, history creeps in. In the first formulation, creation is rendered futile, in the second, it contains the possibility for transformation – *this* was Reinhardt's lesson, yet it would come to be obscured by the art that followed in its wake.

In 1982, T.J. Clark bristled at what he called the 'negligible art' Reinhardt's paintings seemingly anticipated: the dematerialised, conceptual work of the 1960s and 1970s.[11] For Clark, linking Reinhardt's paintings to these later practices betrayed their modernist ambition: although negation might have been Reinhardt's means, it was not his end. Clark points instead to the following lines from T.S. Eliot's 1925 poem *The Hollow Men* – 'Shape without form, shade without colour' – assimilating the logic of Reinhardt's paintings into Eliot's modernist expression of formlessness as form. Or, as Reinhardt himself put it in 1966: 'The end of art is art as art / The end of art is not the end'.[12]

'Made-Unmade-Remade': Reichek, like Clark, resists reading Reinhardt's negation as merely an empty gesture. Reichek finds substance in Reinhardt's negation by allying him with Homer's Penelope, the other protagonist in *Starting Over*, who, in order to delay marriage to another suitor while waiting for Odysseus to return, wove and unwove his funeral shroud. Reichek incorporates this ruse into the work through text, quoting Penelope in the first person – 'But then by night by torchlight / I undid what I had done'. Like Reinhardt, Penelope's undoing was not futile, it was in service of a desired end: eventually being reunited with Odysseus. While the end Reinhardt's paintings reached towards is less concrete, and crucially, was never realised, in pairing his process of making and unmaking with that of Penelope, Reichek reminds us that negation does not necessarily always point back to itself. This

is the site of the remade, the possible redemption for 1990s art, itself residing in the aftermath of the unmaking of postmodernism.

Remaking expresses the possibilities of Foster's 'archival impulse', which seeks not only to 'probe a misplaced past', but to reconnect its disparate strands. Foster's 'will to connect' perfectly captures the mode of *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*: with the past as her subject and embroidery her form, Reichek wove history back together. And for Reichek, the possibilities presented by textiles in service of the archival extended beyond mere metaphor. Rather, they permitted her to work through another modernist theme obscured by postmodernism: medium specificity.

III.

In an article written in 1938, Anni Albers – another crucial influence for Reichek – exemplified cloth's modernist potential, indexing medium-specificity to craft by suggesting that the 'inherent laws' of a given material – cloth or otherwise – 'introduce boundaries for a task of free imagination'.[13] Albers's innovations in weaving, where she generated a new language of art by *abiding* rather than *departing* from the inherent laws of cloth, are a testament to this approach. Letting a material's inherent laws inform how a work of art is made is central to Reichek's practice, who reveals a modernist attachment to medium in her own treatment of cloth. Building on Albers, it is not just cloth's inherent laws – its warp and its weft – but also its history, that govern and give shape to her work. Specifically, Reichek is interested in the history of one particular textile form: the sampler. Under Reichek's precise treatment, the sampler became a mechanism by which her work could address history, art, and identity.

The sampler form came into prominence in sixteenth-century England, where it was primarily used as an instructional device for young women. In its most basic manifestation, a sampler is an embroidered piece of linen upon which the maker's capacity to produce a variety of stitches, letters, and patterns is demonstrated by sewing a combination of either the alphabet and numerals; a maxim, quote or psalm; or a geometric pattern or border. The sampler's pedagogic function was threefold: teaching embroidery; teaching reading and writing skills; providing students with a moral code. Pertinent for Reichek, the form had a strong (although perhaps unintended) historical consciousness, revealed in the tendency for samplemakers to sign, date, and

locate their work, as well as include information about their age and teacher. As such, the history revealed by the sampler drops off in the mid-nineteenth century when samplemaking fell out of favour in schools due to changed priorities for girls' education, and the form itself was outmoded by new industrial methods.

These aspects of the sampler – its awareness of its own history, design and function, and the identity of its maker – are its key structural elements. As such, the sampler organically offered Reichek the means by which she could address the interrelation of history, art, and identity because these are its *inherent laws*. Thus, by carefully adhering to the logic and form of the sampler, following Albers, the form enabled the boundaries for Reichek's own task of free imagination.

Reichek's use of the sampler was not restricted to *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, as the form dominated her practice throughout the 1990s. Reichek's varied appropriation of the sampler during this period demonstrates the form's immense elasticity. As a motif that repeats throughout her practice, the form also allowed connections to be made between and across the registers of individual works. The upper third section of the Frankel sampler, for example, is in dialogue with Reichek's later work *White on White* (1999) (fig. 5), in which the same white pattern copied from two seventeenth-century English band samplers is used in a rare non-textual sampler. Disciplining the ease of travel between these two samplers is *Sampler (Jasper Johns)* (1997), which addresses modernism in white. In this sampler, Reichek meticulously stitched in white cotton eleven rows of numbers onto raw linen, faithfully replicating the order but significantly reducing the scale of Johns' encaustic painting *White Numbers* (1957). Through her use of a secondary grey thread and haphazard stitches, Reichek evoked strokes formed by the bristles of a paintbrush, capturing the painterly qualities of the Johns precedent while drawing attention to her own medium – embroidery – and the form, the sampler, in which text and letters constitute an essential element.

In appropriating the sampler, Reichek preserved not only its inherent laws, but often reproduced traditional models entirely, retaining their design, scale, and, where possible, materials and colour palette. For example, as Ronit Steinberg has pointed out, the scene of pastoral abundance used for the Jesse Reichek sampler in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* – which frames Reichek's uncle's hot take that 'If you think you can be a little bit Jewish, you think you

Figure 5 Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (White on White)*. 1999. Hand embroidery on linen. 46.4 × 41.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

can be a little bit pregnant' – was directly copied from an American sampler made by Abigail Gould in 1796.[14]

In resurrecting this ossified form – robbed of its pedagogic purpose, rendered obsolete by industrial methods – Reichek activated a past through participation, reproducing the self-authorship invited by the form to incorporate her own maxims. Elsewhere in the installation, the friends

and family to whom the maxims were attributed are outlined in the Family Register sampler, where each person is given an octagon embroidered with their full name and date of birth. Below the register Reichek signs 'This was recorded by Elaine Reichek in 1994'. Mimicking the authorial gesture that distinguishes the sampler from other forms of embroidery, Reichek writes herself into the long history of samplemaking.

IV.

That embroidery and text are compatible concerns for Reichek was pithily expressed in the work *And Sew Well Written* (2006) in which the titular phrase was repeated four times across fifteen lines. In an earlier work, Reichek brought together Arachne and Philomela – two protagonists from book six of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – into a large rectangular sampler. As indicated by the sampler's title, *Ovid's Weavers* (1996), the substance of this particular union is their respective aptitude in weaving: in the case of Arachne, it allowed her to overcome her humble beginnings, for Philomela, it was her means of gaining justice against Tereus, enabling her to produce a tapestry that narrated his assault. In both instances, weaving is used to convey narrative – in the first to 'trace some old tale' and in the second to 'denounce the savage crime'. These are the two sides of text within Reichek's work, that at once rehearses old narratives while simultaneously revealing new ones. Put in Reinhardt's terms, Reichek constructs and deconstructs – makes and unmakes – and only in holding both positions at once does she arrive at the synthesis of remaking.

Both Philomela and Arachne must be kept in mind when engaging with *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. The installation uses text to fix and unfix identity, pointing to a subject formation that is provisional. By tracing *and* denouncing old narratives, the many subjects of Reichek's installation are remade in text by residing within the two poles of making and unmaking. In one instance, this is performed through the deployment of a single word, 'Jew', which is inscribed on four neatly folded towels hanging on a wooden drying rack in the installation's furthest wall (fig. 6). At first, the word appears to reveal (and thus fix) the identity of the room's occupants. But the word's position as revelatory is not stable. White on white, the lettering dissolves into the fabric, its legibility retained by the occasional glimmer of tightly sewn stitches. Text reveals identity, embroidery embeds it within the fabric of the scene; the two work together to trace subject formation and denounce its

Figure 6 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. 1994. (detail of linen towels). Courtesy of the artist.

authority. The tone of the word is unclear, is it accusatory or affirmatory? Does it come *from* the subject or is it externally imposed? Reichek stages this ambiguity in embroidery, allowing the subject emerging from the text to ricochet between internal and external authorial modes.

Reichek's provisional treatment of identity is further enabled by the sampler form, which tracks a history of identities in flux, specifically, the national identities of England and America, which were modestly articulated with and through the samplers brought by English colonial settlers to America from the seventeenth century onward. While the earliest samplers produced by American schoolgirls strongly resemble those made in England, in the years immediately following the American Revolution, their samplers began to differ entirely from their English counterparts. Incorporating embellished borders and new materials such as silk, American samplers from 1776 were not only more complex, they also introduced a new regular motif: family trees or registers. [15] Synthesising the symbolic tendency towards the pastoral

and the principle of self-inscription, these visual expressions of ancestry allowed samplemakers to emphasise their new American lineage, as seen in an 1818 sampler worked by Betsey Adams, upon which Reichek's version was based.

Not only was the sampler's American history consciously evoked through the installation's title of Reichek's installation, with *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* Reichek was also able to point to the colonial period's contemporary resonances. When, for example, Reichek relays her brother-in-law's comment that he 'doesn't think about being Jewish until [he] leaves New York' on one sampler (fig. 7), the version of America represented *beyond* New York in the

Figure 7 Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (Paul Tannenbaum)*. 1993. Hand embroidery on linen. 42.5 × 44.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

corresponding stitched image tallies with the same one projected by American schoolgirls centuries earlier: pastoral, romantic, untouched. Testifying to the enduring grip such an image held, even in the 1990s imaginary, Reichek bridged the gap between her own contemporary text and the historic form on which it was inscribed. And, while the embroidered statement situates Reichek's uncle at a distance from his projection – there is Jewish New York, and the 'America' beyond – the artist undercuts the neatness of this binary by implicating his words with their corresponding image. This is posed in more explicit terms elsewhere in the installation, where Reichek mounted a family photograph from 1905 in which her mother-in-law and her brother pose next to a Native American man (fig. 8). In this portrait of difference rendered in black and white, the distinction in dress and ethnicity between the children and the adult posits its American Jewish subjects in very different terrain to that which Reichek's uncle was claiming in 1993.

The distance travelled between the various statements Reichek collected from her friends and family for *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* in the 1990s and her 1950s setting testifies to the dramatic shift in American Jews' self-understanding in relation to America and its histories. This is posed most starkly by the participation of American Jews *within* the American sampler tradition. As the Christian content in samplers had always veered towards the folkloric rather than the religious, the capacious form also enabled Jewish versions to emerge as equivalents, which similarly shunned liturgical content in favour of symbolic gestures. The most frequently occurring of such gestures was the Hebrew alphabet, which could be incorporated to exemplify a samplemaker's embroidery skills rather than spell out a prayer or psalm, as in in the earliest known Jewish sampler from 1843 by B. Lazarus.

Until the 1984 exhibition *Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art*, the existence of Jewish samplers had been largely overlooked. As correctly intimated by the title, the Jewish spin on the sampler was motivated not by a desire to differentiate from its Christian tradition, but rather, to participate and embrace an American one. Both Norman Kleeblatt, who curated the exhibition, and Steinberg, whose writing on Reichek presents a major contribution to the scholarship on Jewish samplers, address the Jewish content in the samplers in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* as interventions in an otherwise 'American' domestic scene.[16] As such, both Kleeblatt and Steinberg make the error of upholding both 'Jewish' and 'American' as static categories.

Figure 8 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. 1994. Installation view at the Jewish Museum, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

A more generative framework for understanding *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* thus comes indirectly from Stephen Whitfield in his book *In Search of American Jewish Culture* when he talks about the 'acute receptivity' of both Jews *and* America in the production of twentieth-century American culture, where 'values, symbols, and ideals have circulated in *both* directions: not merely from majority to minority, but in an interactive and reciprocal fashion'.[17] Through *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, Reichek employs the domestic to express how American culture had been absorbed into the identity of its Jewish population. Reichek is keen to present this as a process within which American Jews were active rather than passive, a claim enabled by the sampler. If only Whitfield had had *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* to point towards, when he described the relationship between American and Jewish culture as 'too firmly braided' to separate.[18]

V.

Unlike the English sampler, which remained largely within a pedagogic context, American samplers were also used by colonial settlers to decorate their new homes. And, when samplers were no longer used in schools, they experienced an illustrious afterlife in home décor during what became known as the Colonial Revival in architecture, when a renewed interest in the American Revolution around its centennial in 1876 led to a resurgence in colonial era design. That American identity was forged and re-forged in the home is one of the histories resurfaced by *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. When Reichek chose to recreate her childhood bedroom, she necessarily engaged the history of her family home – built in the Dutch Colonial style at the peak of the Colonial Revival in 1903 – and the design choices of her parents, who decorated their home in the 1950s, during the Colonial Revival's second wind, in which samplers were but one of many furnishings that evoked the Colonial era.

At the centre of this re-revival was the company Ethan Allen, whose colonial era-inspired furniture filled the homes of many Americans, including Reichek's own. Founded in 1932 by two Jewish brothers-in-law, the company rebranded as Ethan Allen in 1939 after the success of its 'Ethan Allen 1776' collection. Named after a prominent politician who had fought in the American Revolution, the 1776 collection relaunched in the 1950s to great commercial success. 'To study the colonial revival', architectural historian Alan Axelrod has stated, 'is to examine aspects of our past, present

and future selves'.[19] This is the precise examination Reichek facilitated through her furniture choices for *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, of which the bed, night table, and washstand were all ordered from Ethan Allen. Together, they pull the installation back from the 1990s and into to the 1770s, making pitstops in the 1900s and 1950s.

While Reichek's multiple nods to the Colonial Revival in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* proved generative for her exploration of how certain pasts were preserved and made present in the home, this was further enabled by the installation's setting at the Jewish Museum, which was itself once a home that had been built for the philanthropist Felix Warburg and his wife Freida Schiff-Warburg in 1908. The room in which the work was installed had originally been the Warburgs' dining room, remnants of which were uncovered by Reichek when she stripped the room during the installation.[20] Beneath the sheetrock of the museum walls, Reichek found the original woodwork, candelabras and fireplace. These ornamental flourishes in gold and wood entrenched the installation deeper into the domestic, which, under her deft treatment, Reichek fixed at the intersection between art, identity, and history.

When Daniel Bell reflected on American Jewish identity in an article for *Commentary*, he issued a warning that finds an uncomfortable echo in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. Building on an argument Bell had made about American political consciousness a year earlier, in which he charged the 1950s with signalling 'the end of ideology', in this article he argued that Jewish consciousness had declined dramatically during the same decade. What was left, Bell argued, was shared memory, which occasioned its own warning:

> The sense of the past is often merely the present read into the past. Memory is selective, it screens out the hurts, it throws roseate hues. Remembering what happened in one's lifetime is difficult enough; uncovering the past of history is even more so.[21]

For Bell, the articulation of a Jewish identity through memory submits to the threat of nostalgia, which he feared would lead to a watering down of tradition: 'at its worst, it may be the continuity of appetite—the lox, cream cheese, and bagel combinations; or through comedians' jokes'.[22] Reichek, who found herself at a generation's remove from Bell, both fulfilled and denied his injunction by making nostalgia her subject in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*. On

the one hand, Reichek conceded to Bell by situating her 1990s enquiry into Jewish identity within the home (and away from tradition); on the other, by revealing that space as *already* nostalgic, Reichek implied that that which Bell had been warning against had already been realised in the 1950s.

As well as establishing nostalgia as a legitimate object of historical enquiry, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* also benefits from its logic. Illuminating the installation is a lamp with a mottled glass base holding a shade in which photographs of Reichek's grandfather are inserted. Resting on a wrought metal stand, 'Grandpa Reichek,' (he is named in the exhibition's checklist) gazes out from the corner of the installation, as if surveying his progeny with paternalistic pride. The intimacy afforded by the 'roseate hue' (to repeat Bell) of this gaze, and also its domestic setting, permits the inhabitants of *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* – Reichek's friends and family – to enter with ease. Yet once they are situated within the space their position is by no means cosy, even if they speak from textiles. The sentimentality of this particular family reunion is undercut with humour: nostalgia made conscious.

In one sampler, Reichek herself speaks, making fun of the installation's proposition that histories are buried in the home by recalling her bedtime attachment to a history that happened many miles away from her own: 'I used to fall asleep every night thinking of places to hide when the SS came. I never thought this was the least bit strange'. In another, Reichek's friend pokes fun at her parent's assimilatory aspirations: 'As a child I fell off the merry-go-round at Coney Island. My parents were very disappointed. They knew I'd never be part of the horsy set'. The Jewish codes written into these jokes recall the Catskills – another 1950s moment – and under this veil of nostalgia Reichek is able to sneak in some contemporary observations, like the redeeming (and wholly unpolitical) role Israel played in the imaginary of young American Jews, quoting her sister: 'After an unhappy romance with a gentile, my son Dan travelled to Israel to recuperate. He picked fruit all day. Exhausted, he took a vacation in Egypt'.

Reichek's critical engagement with sentimentality in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* forms her most significant departure from the traditional sampler, in which the home is unproblematically romanticised. In traditional samplers, the embroidered representation of a house often appeared below its principled message, figuratively *carrying* the psalm or maxim. While a similar relationship is drawn between image and text in the samplers in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood,*

the embroidered homes carry very different messages. When, for example, Reichek's mother's command, 'Don't be loud / don't be pushy / don't talk with your hands', is stitched above a six windowed house, the iconography of familial accord is premised on a series of injunctions that project a hostile world beyond its walls. Testifying to how such a projection was forged in her home *through its rules,* Reichek turned her mother's command inward to show how the home could become a site in which external prejudices could not only calcify but be reproduced. That Reichek is able to avoid sentimentality by situating her exploration of the Jewish identity within the domestic sphere is counterintuitive, but it makes sense within the broader context of her wider practice, which, as Susan Morgan has it, 'does not sentimentally yearn for the past'.[23]

VI.

Without the history of the sampler form, the sampler with which this article began appears to address only two histories: the differing contexts of David Frankel and his father, which is to say, the 1950s and the 1990s. Taking into account the history of the form on which these histories are inscribed, however, permits another to emerge, one that crucially adds another dimension to the modernism to which Frankel's father was supposedly aligned. The sampler is a product of modernity, and the modern subject's revelation of her place within history is written into its formal codes. That this particular expression of modern subjectivity moved from schools to homes makes sense within the history of recipe books outlined by Elaine de Leong where she posits the household as a critical site for knowledge production in early modern societies.[24] Samplers, like recipe books, permitted their authors to learn about themselves while learning about making. More than this, they pointed towards the fundamentally modern ideal of self-transformation. As Louis Menand put it in 2003: 'In modern societies, the ends of life are not given at the beginning of life; they are thought to be created or discovered'.[25]

That Reichek returned to this fundamentally modern form for her own project of self-understanding in the 1990s is deeply significant. In his 1980 lecture 'Modernity an Incomplete Project', Jürgen Habermas polemicised against a nascent postmodernism by claiming that that which it posited itself to be 'post' was in fact, incomplete. Habermas's lecture argued that a new kind of modern consciousness emerged in the nineteenth century 'that freed

itself from all specific modern ties'.[26] Habermas calls this new consciousness 'aesthetic modernity', presumably to preserve a dialectical relationship to modernity, yet given that it 'assumes clear contours in the work of Baudelaire' it could also be named modernism.[27] Expressing itself primarily through the metaphor of the avant-garde – the conquering of the new at the cost of the old – Habermas' 'aesthetic modernity' had buried the positive elements of modernity, namely the transformative possibilities of modern subjectivity.

When, in 1951 Greenberg stated that 'I want to feel free to be whatever I need to be and delight in being as a personality without being typed or prescribed to as a Jew or, for that matter, as an American', he was not pledging his allegiance to modernism, but rather his commitment to modern subjectivity.[28] Demonstrably, such a commitment was also staged in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, yet Reichek, unlike Greenberg, picked up the loose ends of modern subjectivity consciously and with the full knowledge that such a subject position had been rendered largely untenable, compromised, in part, by the modernism to which Greenberg himself helped perpetuate. What resulted was by no means a complete project, but in taking up the task of remaking *after* unmaking – both of modernism and postmodernism – Reichek attempted to go beyond mere negation. In this sense, the real butt of the joke in the Frankel sampler is not Frankel's father for believing modernism would allow him to transcend religion and ethnicity, but Frankel himself for only being able to poke holes in his father's logic.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Seth Anziska, Tamar Garb, Michael Green, Pamela Nogales and my external reviewer for their constructive comments, as well as the convenors at the Institute of Historical Research's 'Jewish History Seminar' for inviting me to present an early version of this article. I would also like to thank Elaine Reichek for our continued dialogue about *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* and for granting me image permissions.

Notes

1 Rhonda Lieberman, 'Is Anything Alright?: 3 Generations of Jewish-American Women Artists', in *The Rhonda Lieberman Reader,* ed. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer (Los Angeles: Pep Talk Press, 2018), 72.

2 The term 'melting pot' was popularised from the other side of the Atlantic by Israel Zangwill's 1909 play *The Melting Pot*.

3 Lieberman, 'Is Anything Alright?', 72.
4 Margaret Olin, 'C[lement] Hardesh [Greenberg] and Company: Formal Criticism and Identity', in *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman Kleeblatt, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1996), 47. Also see Margaret Olin, 'Nationalism, the Jews and Art History', *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 45 (1996): 461–680.
5 Mark Godfrey has disputed the terms of Margaret Olin's intervention, ironically within a catalogue for an exhibition held at the Jewish Museum. See Mark Godfrey, 'That Oldtime Jewish Sect Called American Art Criticism', in *Action / Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976*, ed. Norman Kleeblatt, exh. cat (New York: Jewish Museum: 2008), 255–256.
6 Matthew Baigell, 'Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Their Jewish Issues', *Prospects* 30 (2005): 659.
7 Lisa Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.
8 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* XVII (1917–1919) ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 2001), 237.
9 Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110 (2004): 21.
10 Ad Reinhardt, 'Creation as Content' in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt,* ed. Barbara Rose (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 191.
11 T. J. Clark, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art', in *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 155.
12 Reinhardt, 'Art as Art', 63
13 Anni Albers, 'Work with Material' in *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 1, 5 (1938): 3. Reichek's work *Sampler (The Ultimate)* (1996) cited various Bauhaus figures and was framed using a border based on one of Albers' patterns.
14 Ronit Steinberg, 'Sampler Embroidery Past and Present as an Expression of Merging Jewish Identity', *Ars Judaica* 10 (2014): 64.
15 Mary Jaene Edmonds, *Samplers & Samplemakers: An American Schoolgirl Art 1700–1850*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1991), 16
16 Steinberg, 'Sampler Embroidery Past and Present', 62. For Kleeblatt on Reichek, see Norman Kleeblatt, 'Passing into Multiculturalism' in Kleeblatt, *Too Jewish?*, 22.
17 Stephen Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH, and London: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 30.
18 Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture,* 30
19 Alan Axelrod, Preface to *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Norton, 1985), ix.
20 Interview with author April 2019.
21 Daniel Bell, 'Reflections on Jewish Identity', *Commentary* (1961). Accessed online, 25 April 2021: https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/daniel-bell-2/reflections-on-jewish-identity/.
22 Bell, 'Reflections on Jewish Identity'.
23 Susan Morgan, 'Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions', *Aperture* 119 (1990): 32.
24 Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7.

25 Louis Menand, 'Forward' in Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Making of History* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), xiii.
26 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – an Incomplete Project' published as 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 4.
27 Habermas, 'Modernity', 4.
28 Clement Greenberg, 'Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism: Some Reflections on "Positive Jewishness"' in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. III, Affirmations and Refusals, 1950–1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 56.