







# Haptic Codes

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Haptic Codes addresses personal histories, languages and borders, set against the backdrop of the digital divide, economic precarity, political instability, conflict and ecological collapse. The haptic tactile characteristics of the artworks grapple with the environmental, the technological and the handmade, with the domestic and the global. Stockwell and Keidan Shavrova appropriate the materiality and techniques traditionally associated with women’s work in their idiosyncratic and diverging languages. Both artists’ work has been influenced by their experience of large totalitarian regimes, as opposed to western democracies, with a view to the humanitarian impact and cost of geopolitics, trade, expansionism and political corruption.

Textiles, stitching, sewing, embroidery and threading are juxtaposed with imagery of surveillance, technology, environmentalism and activism. The conversations of both artists have remained topical and poignant over time, evolving and

shifting since 2020 parallel with the global pandemic to result in an exhibition that demands a slower, intimate viewing, and a response to the need for a physical connection and awareness amid urgently global political and ecological concerns.

The refocusing on the tactile value within the visual language of contemporary art that is socially engaged and addresses current issues is critical for Stockwell and Keidan Shavrova, especially at a time when the world has been starved of the physical and the emotional impact that the direct experience of art in the public realm offers.

Stockwell and Keidan Shavrova have collaborated previously in the exhibition *The Sea is the Limit*, which also featured work made from fibre-based materials and was concerned with migration and conflict – ever-present haunting issues that originate from the global imbalance of power, over consumption of resources and the inevitable consequences of climate emergency.

## A Visual Treatise

by Susan Stockwell

Susan Stockwell’s practice examines questions of social justice, trade, power, cultural mapping and feminism. Her art employs the material culture of everyday products, such as recycled computer components, maps and paper currency, which she transforms into compelling artworks, through sewing, quilting and constructing. In seeking to reconnect an object’s past, its related history and materiality with contemporary issues, her work underscores these materials urgent interconnection to collective memories and ecological shortfalls; aspects that evoke, expose and challenge inequality and injustice.

The serious concepts behind the practice are balanced out by the playful, the seductive and the beautiful.

Stockwell’s interest in the politics of feminism and the body has led her to make a series of dress sculptures, the most recent of which, *Territory Dress*, 2018 was commissioned for the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Accompanying the work is a film, *Territory Dress* that explores the sculpture and juxtaposes it with archival film of past seafaring imagery. It is as if the figure is remembering her history and making imaginary connections. This work is featured in two recent books *50 Women Sculptors* and *Provenance*. Stockwell’s subversive yet beautiful quilt, *A Chinese Dream* (ii) 2021 uses paper products to form a visual treatise on the Chinese economy. The quilt has been created from one of the most transferable and anonymous paper objects within contemporary society: money. Through the careful selection of almost 1000 new and worn Chinese bank notes Stockwell forms a visually arresting piece that is at once a fluid, scale-like surface, and a political statement of the emergence and future implications of China as a global superpower. Inspired by visits to China, 2005-2009 Stockwell was fascinated by the pace of development and change and

recognised the future implications of this on the world stage.

*A Chinese Dream* is one of a series of stitched quilts and maps made by Stockwell from money, maps and everyday paper products that stem from a tradition of women recycling old clothes, passing on keepsakes and sharing in a familial process that transcends generations. For her, the continuing relevance of both quilts and currency lies in their connection to the haptic and coded shared languages, where recycling and ecology are an inherent part of the process. Stockwell chooses these industrial and domestic ‘commodity’ materials because, in her words, they contain ‘stains of existence’ and ‘act as ready-made signifiers’ which she can sculpt and interweave in ways that delicately reveal their obscured politics and hidden beauty.

In contemporary western society paper currency is losing its place as electronic money transactions dominate. This work could become a memento to the past as well as an acknowledgement of the future.

“Money by its very nature is recycled...”  
Susan Stockwell

Stockwell says, “Money by its very nature is recycled; it’s covered with the residue of many hands, pockets and purses – what I call the “Stains of Existence’....” Yet we seldom think about what this everyday material actually is and consider our complex relationship with it.”

*Truth and Consequences* 2020 is a shopping trolley containing map globes; some are illuminated, others are old and bashed, they bulge out of the trolley, their cables resembling entrails spilling down onto the floor. They highlight our

insistence on burning through many more planets than the one we inhabit. The choice of a shopping trolley as a ready-made container to hold the globes references the connections between consumerism and global warming, mass migration, pandemics and an uncertain future.

*Covid World* 2021 combines a map globe with old wooden bobbins sourced from a silk making factory in New York State. The piece ironically references the familiar form of the Corona virus while at the same time being a sculpture which can stand on its own feet! The bobbins suggest spinning and reference production and the ecological cost of the textile industry. *Covid World* evolved out of *Armada*, a series of 5 shopping trolleys, each filled with different objects selected to speak to social history. There are books of atlases and a collection of globes,

which glow enticingly (*Truth & Consequences*). These are tools with which people have traced the routes along which the contents of other the carts, including sugar and cotton, historically travelled.

These selected works chosen from past and present ongoing practice demonstrate Stockwell’s fascination with material culture and making.

(1) *Truth and Consequences* and *Armada* were part of the exhibition *Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery 2020, commission by Arts&Heritage for their Meeting Point programme.

(1) *A Chinese Dream* (iii) 2021 developed out of *A Chinese Dream 2010* commissioned by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London for the exhibition *Quilts 1700-2010*

## Threads of Surveillance

by Varvara Keidan Shavrova

Varvara Keidan Shavrova’s practice is focused on excavating the layers of history through the process of remembering, recalling, retracing and re-enacting stories. In engaging memory, nostalgia and reflection, Keidan Shavrova creates installations that make connections between historic and current narratives, between the archival and the present. In her current work, Keidan Shavrova examines the symbols of power and authority whilst investigating their relationship to the individual. The process of empathy is the means of materializing the past into the present. The materiality of her installations is a comment on women’s labour, and include objects and installations made of wool, thread, yarn and fabric, with methodologies of hand sewing, weaving, embroidery and knitting that are often combined with digital technologies and the moving image. Thematically, Keidan Shavrova’s work often investigates ‘borders’ in physical, geo-political and gendered terms.

In her new and ongoing *Threads of Surveillance*. *Soft Drones Series* (2020-2021), Keidan Shavrova examines the tools of surveillance, questions the notion of privacy and addresses the meaning of civil liberties in the context of the current situation in the world at large. By the end of March 2020, nearly 3 billion people, or every 5th person on this planet, found themselves under total or partial lockdown due to the onset of the global pandemic. Quarantine enforcement, contact tracing, flow modelling and social graph-making are some of the data tools that are being used to tackle the covid-19 pandemic. In the various states of emergency that different countries around the world are experiencing today, mass surveillance is becoming normalised. As citizens, we are asked to sacrifice our right to privacy and to give up civil liberties in order to defeat the pandemic. What happens once the state of emergency is over?

Hovering on the intersection of historic appropriation and contemporary reflection, Keidan Shavrova develops ideas around tangible and intangible flying objects that conjure up various elements of surveillance mechanisms. The hand embroidered drawings of drones are sewn directly onto soft fabric used as interlining for drapery and curtains, thus evoking the sense of domesticity and comfort. That comforting sense of security and domesticity is in stark contrast with the objects that Keidan Shavrova is depicting, thus reflecting on the notion of surveillance that interferes

with the very basics of our daily existence. The theme is further developed in a series of recent hand-loomed and machine-embroidered works that employ Venetian velvet and that the artist started to develop during the first global lockdown in early 2020, in collaboration with the 18c manufacturers La Bevilacqua in Venice.

In the two large-scale knitted and embroidered works *The Palace of the Soviets* and *King Kong*, Keidan Shavrova is questioning the symbols of global power and authority by juxtaposing iconic images from movie stills and archival documents associated with Communist and Capitalist empirical architecture, namely the *Palace of the Soviets* project that was never realised due to its entirely absurd scale and utopian ambitions, and the *Empire State Building* pictured in a film still from the cult movie *King Kong*. Creating a visual and physical tension between the two images is made possible by literally stitching the two parts of the knitted surface with bright orange thread to emphasises the dependency of one system on the other, and to point at the fragility that ensues once they are separated. This notion feels especially relevant today, in the times of global uncertainties and constantly unfolding global crises, conflicts and wars.

Keidan Shavrova is also interested in the question of scale, where she is pointing at the discrepancy between the giant statue of Lenin that adorns the top of the *Palace of the Soviets*, whilst dwarfing even further the multiplicities of tiny, ant-like figures of the demonstrators at its foot. On the opposite side of the knitted panel this image is juxtaposed with the figure of the giant ape towering over the New York skyline, adorned by a swarm of biplanes that also resemble the zeppelin flying around the *Palace of the Soviets*. This mirroring effect and a similar notion of grandiosity contrasting with the smallness of an individual continues in the other large knitted piece, *Monument to Cosmos*, where an office worker is hunched up and scurrying along under the shadow of the famous monument glorifying the Soviet Union programme of conquering of the cosmos. In these works, Keidan Shavrova employs methodologies of machine knitting, hand stitching and manual embroidery, that allow the artist to physically interlink historically opponent political narratives that appear uncannily similar- those of Communism and Capitalism.

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