

Ele Carpenter, *Shaggy Modernism* (2011) In: *James Hutchinson: works 2007–2011*. Art Editions North: Sunderland.

## **Shaggy Modernism**

‘Shaggy Modernism’ situates the emergence of modernity in the history of hand-made computing, challenging the distinctions between professional and amateur making, and rehabilitating folk traditions of craft and the commons. This is all theoretically possible because the roots of digital culture lie in the fabric and politics of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century textile industry and its influence on the development of computing and the politics of making.

The Jacquard Loom was the first programmable machine, which used punch cards to store complex weaving patterns in a binary format. Inventor and engineer Charles Babbage was inspired by the punch card system, which he used in the design of the Analytical Engine. His friend and colleague Ada Lovelace was also familiar with the loom, and in her notes describing the Analytical Engine in 1842 she wrote:

“We may say most aptly that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves.”<sup>i</sup>

Lovelace envisaged the potential of the Analytical Engine to algorithmically manipulate symbols and images, way beyond its original mathematical intentions. Here the language of textiles and code is not just metaphorical, it is actual<sup>ii</sup>. At the same time, it’s possible to trace the influence of the textile industry on the language Babbage used to describe different parts of the machine, such as the ‘store’ and ‘mill’<sup>iii</sup>. A visit to the Macclesfield silk mill today demonstrates the eight-digit machine used to punch the holes in the cards for the Jacquard Loom. Like typing without thumbs, each press of the key punches a hole through the paper, or presses ink onto the page, or code into a script, as the centuries roll by. These poetic technical threads are unraveled across time and cultures in ‘A Concise Lexicon of / for the Digital Commons’ by the Raqs Media Collective,<sup>iv</sup> currently being stitched as the ‘Embroidered Digital Commons’.<sup>v</sup>

In Hutchinson’s works, the digital is handmade: hand-stitched and hand-coded. Each pixel pinpointed on the screen of a mobile phone, each tuft of felt pulled through the hessian backing. The pattern for the proggy mat is the image itself. This image is composed on a mobile phone by running a script to plot black pixels on a grid, and printed out as a flat image. There is no degradation of the edges, no pixelated fudging because the image is the pixel. Then the pattern is transferred onto fabric, returning to its influences, true to its material both metaphorical and actual.

Closely related to ‘Shaggy Modernism’ is the ‘C’ book, available online, not just as an artist-designed book, but with the flexibility for the collector to select their own sequence of pages. In ‘C’ the preciousness of the hard-won image is abandoned for hundreds of mobile phone sketches, not only are these images easy to store, download and print, they are transferable between platforms and formats, modular and ubiquitous. These are the utopian characteristics of a creative networked technology that modernism dreamed of:

where flowers and leaves are the algebraic patterns Lovelace describes, transferring between loom and engine, fabric and mathematics.

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<sup>i</sup> Toole, Betty Alexandra (1992). *Ada the Enchantress of Numbers*. California: Strawberry Press. p248.

<sup>ii</sup> Plant, Sadie (1997). *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*. London: Fourth Estate.

<sup>iii</sup> Essinger, James (2004). *Jacquard's Web: How a Hand Loom Led to the Birth of the Information Age*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Raqs Media Collective (2003). 'A Concise Lexicon Of/For the Digital Commons', *Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies*. Sarai-CSDS Delhi / WAAG Amsterdam.

<sup>v</sup> The 'Embroidered Digital Commons' [www.open-source-embroidery.org.uk/edc](http://www.open-source-embroidery.org.uk/edc)