



## Anna Von Mertens/MATRIX 207

### Suggested North Points

July 13–September 7, 2003

**University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum**

**MATRIX**

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In his poem “The American Sublime” (1935), Wallace Stevens asks, “How does one stand / To behold the sublime?” Later in the work he continues, “But how does one feel? / One grows used to the weather, / The landscape and that; / And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself.” Like many American artists, writers, and musicians who precede her, sculptor Anna Von Mertens looks to landscape as a conduit for both spirituality and identity. Her newest works, *North*, *South*, *East*, and *West*, fuse physical science with the natural environment as a way to wrestle with the presence or existence of God and how increased knowledge in science reflects upon the individual’s role in the universe.<sup>1</sup> Duality is recurrent throughout the artist’s work, which is abstract in form but conceptual in content.

Von Mertens hand-dyes and hand-sews the fabric of her sculptures, all of which take the form of nontraditional quilts. The patterns of colors and the stitching embedded in the surface propose separate strands of meaning. Draped over frames with the familiar proportions of a standard double bed, the quilts suggest themselves as objects with a unique vantage point from which to explore complex human relations. The artist’s theory is that the bed has become the central component of the home, the locus of interpersonal relationships and communication. Examining how we identify a place as home and how we define our sense of place is a recurrent theme in her work. For an installation in the Project Space at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, CA, Von Mertens drew a map of the world on the floor of the gallery. Viewers were invited to indicate the places in which they had lived and to connect the locations. A corresponding logbook, a record of when and why each move occurred, voyeuristically provides a fascinating social anthropological study.

*Suggested North Points*, Von Mertens’s MATRIX installation, is about living in America and the artist’s own westward migration. The exhibition includes a floor drawing as well as five quilt sculptures. Four of the five quilts suggest specific places in the North American landscape to form a personal, geographic portrait of the artist, while the floor work—drawing on nineteenth-century cartography—and fifth quilt allegorically posit the age-old quandary of the relationship between an individual and the collective whole: the attempt to find one’s own direction while working within an existing system.

The horizontal and at times diagonal bands of color in each landscape quilt abstractly delineate iconic natural elements: a brilliant, Hollywood-tinged Western sunset, the truncated horizon at the edge of a snow-covered New England field, or Red Rocks National Park, just outside Las Vegas. Each graphic illustration is of a precise spot, with both a specific meaning for the artist and a universal resonance.

Von Mertens’s reductivist, geometric compositions and alternately magnificent and subdued palettes, as well as her interest in sense of place, individual identity, and spirituality, all posit compelling affinities with the work of American artist Mark Rothko. Some of Rothko’s works are also made up of horizontal bands, which may represent geological strata and metaphorically stand for the unconscious. He intended his large canvas work to be “intimate and human,” not “grandiose” and removed.<sup>2</sup> For both artists color and structure are inseparable. Rothko said, “Art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness.”<sup>3</sup> For Von Mertens, art is also a location of the sublime.

Sublimity is achieved in part through the prolonged, close interaction with her pieces during their creation. Through her stitch work Von Mertens addresses such diverse themes as the complexities of the universe and the intricate history of her own life by articulating them on an intimate level. “I choose to work in a very labor-intensive medium, not out of some kind of martyrdom, but because I believe the aspect of touch,

COVER: *West* and *East*, 2003 (details); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; each 17 x 60 x 80 in.; installation view; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.



a kind of narration with my hands, brings an intimacy to my pieces that could not be obtained any other way.”<sup>4</sup> This physical contact translates into an attempt to situate oneself, to understand one’s presence in the face of that which is awe-inspiring.

In this way, Von Mertens is connected to the only other MATRIX artist to exhibit quilts in the twenty-five year history of the program. In 1997, Lawrence Rinder showed the work of Richmond, California-based African American artist Rosie Lee Tompkins. While the conceptual approaches of Tompkins and Von Mertens are vastly different, they share a link to many twentieth-century abstract painters and the transcendentalist claims of Modernism. Rinder writes, “In front of Tompkins’s work I feel that certain Modernist ambitions may in fact be achievable.... Here are feelings of awe, elation, and sublimity; here is inventiveness and originality so palpable and intense that each work seems like a new and total risk.”<sup>5</sup> The primary risk in Von Mertens’s work is in fact her choice of media. Interested neither in the dialogue between art and craft nor in feminist reclamation of traditional skills, perhaps the greatest challenge for this artist is persuading viewers to look past their initial assumptions of her practice or intention. Von Mertens’s physical and conceptual practice initially references, but ultimately replaces the utility of traditional quilt making.

Historically, quilt making was always associated with women and a female camaraderie in which women came together to share patterns and provide help to one another. It was a form based largely on utility, rather than display. Quilts had both practical and symbolic uses, from controlling dust and draping a coffin to recording history and exchange as symbols of friendship. Whole-cloth quilting, one of the methods employed by Von Mertens, was among the first quilting styles brought to the colonies. Stitching the delicate and elaborate floral and geometric patterns of these quilts required very fine skill.<sup>6</sup>

Von Mertens’s complex stitching patterns have revealed and described such things as the migration of birds in the northern hemisphere and the topography of her own body. In her MATRIX works the theme of the stitch work is energy, how it is exhausted as well as generated. Specifically, *West* and *East* address physics, the Big Bang? (extroversion) and a black hole (introversion), respectively. In the former, time is represented on the vertical axis and space on the horizontal, combining to move toward the ultimate expansion; in the latter, space is denoted as collapsing, with

*South*, 2003 (detail); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.



yellow stitching indicating beams of light sent one degree in every direction. The stitching in *North* and *South* similarly details elements of chemistry. In *South*, we see the metabolic pathways in a cell, a sample of the thousands of reactions that occur every second to determine a body’s metabolism. The stitch work both literally and symbolically demonstrates interconnectedness.

Von Mertens’s juxtaposition of real time (documenting moments of scientific existence) and space (recording geographic places) and the attempt to establish an interrelated matrix corresponds with a new field of science, the study of Complex Systems. Examining how parts of a system interact with its environment, this study is about “understanding indirect effects.”<sup>8</sup> The patterns, systems, and maps found in Von Mertens’s works are chosen by the artist to form questions about how seemingly diverse elements—physical, psychic or philosophical—cross-pollinate and effect change.

The artist’s maps are biological, technological, and political. In one such work, as critic Kenneth Baker noted, “the title holds the key to the odd irregular pattern, with its curious modernist formal echoes: *Allied Bombing of German Town/Scale Model of Germania.*”<sup>9</sup> *Influence*, the fifth sculpture in the MATRIX exhibition, displayed apart from the others, contains a political view. Initially appearing monochromatic, the pattern appears slowly: black thread on black fabric. *Influence* addresses the policies of the current administration and its apparent tendency toward an American “expansionism.” Borders rather than beliefs define nations. The effects of the American government can literally be seen on the map of the world, in places ranging from the former Soviet block to the Middle East. Redrawing occurs as countries appear and disappear. The exterior boundaries of the domestic United States are, however, essentially iconic. The subtle shift of pattern that occurs here in the stitching at the U.S. borders posits a quiet perspective on what happens to the rest of the world when the U.S. gets involved.

Like other MATRIX artists Terésita Fernandez, Yehudit Sasportas, and Wolfgang Laib, Von Mertens’s installation occupies the space of the gallery floor, leaving all of the walls—the traditional location of works of visual art—bare. The floor is a more mundane space, but also a more sacred and ritualistic one, the location of spiritually focused artistic practices from Tibetan mandala practice to Navajo sand painting.

*North*, 2003; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate; 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.



For Von Mertens, the placement of her work on the floor falls somewhere in between these two poles of the sacred and the mundane. In a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to another age-old American quest, self-discovery, Von Mertens's sculptural objects and floor drawings rest on the floor for the most basic and honest reason: the floor is where we stand, what supports us literally as we make our way through life, where we are grounded. As if in response to Wallace Stevens's question, Von Mertens's work answers, we stand to behold the sublime right here, exactly where we are, acknowledging where we were, and looking forward to where we might one day be.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Anna Von Mertens, in an e-mail to the author on May 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Rothko, "Mark Rothko" (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1998), <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/classic4.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/abstraction4.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Von Mertens, "The Well Appointed Garage: 'Emerge' 2001" (San Francisco: GenArtsSF, 2001), <http://www.stephart.com/emerge01.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Rinder, "Rosie Lee Tompkins MATRIX/Berkeley 173," *MATRIX Berkeley Twenty Years* (Berkeley: The Regents of the University of California, 1998), n.p.

<sup>6</sup> "European American Quilting Traditions" (Charlottesville: American Studies at the University of Virginia, 2003), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/#UG97/quit/etrads.html>, and Anne Johnson, "America's Quilting History: Pioneer Quilts, Comfort Through Hardship" (Womenfolk, 2002), <http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/pioneer.html>.

<sup>7</sup> With the creation of the Big Bang theory, the universe can no longer be considered an infinite system, and rather must have a finite beginning and evolution.

<sup>8</sup> Yaneer Bar-Yam, "About Complex Systems" (Cambridge: New England Complex Systems Institute, 2003), <http://necsi.org/guide/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Baker, "New Threads at Lind," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 12, 2003, D10.

*Influence*, 2003 (detail); hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, concrete, 17 x 60 x 80 in.; photo courtesy of Don Tuttle Photography.



Anna Von Mertens was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1973. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1995 from Brown University and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 2000. This is the artist's first one-person museum exhibition. She lives and works in Berkeley, California.

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2001

"VIA," Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA

"Migrations," Project Space, Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2003

"Sewn Together," Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2002

"Introductions 2002," Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA

"Maps and Charts," Penrose Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA

"Conceptual Color: In Albers' Afterimage," The Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA

"High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids: Art in a Digital Age," Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA

"Commission 02," San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA

"Night Skies and Imaginary Coordinates: The Artist as Navigator," Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA

2001

"Emerge," GenArt SF, San Francisco, CA

"Mapping," Works Gallery, San Jose, CA

"Body: Inner and Outer Landscapes," Balazo Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2000

"Bay Area Selections: The Annual Ernie Kim Award," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA

"Chill Factor," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA

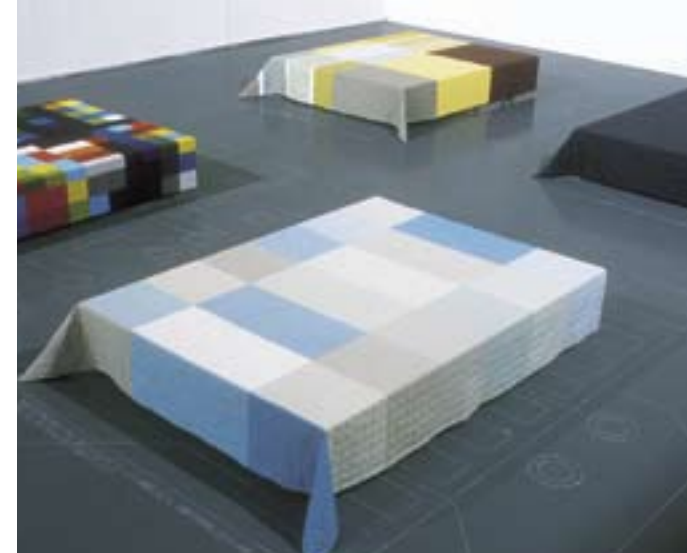
"It Can Change, 2000," 3012 Harrison, Oakland, CA

"Annual Invitational Auction," Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

1999

"Topography/Typography," Paulette Long and Shepard Pollack Gallery, San Francisco, CA

*Migrations*, 2001; installation view, Project Spaces Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA; photo courtesy of Liz Cohen.



#### Selected Bibliography

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Fowle, Kate. "San Francisco." *Contemporary*, June/July/August 2002, 116.

Israel, Robyn. "Charting a New Course." *Palo Alto Weekly*, July 5, 2002, 23–25.

Koppman, Debra. "Sewn Together: Graphic Uses of Thread." *Artweek*, March 2003, 25.

Rapko, John. "Night Skies and Imaginary Coordinates: The Artist as Navigator at the Palo Alto Art Center." *Artweek*, September 2002, 13–14.

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Westbrook, Linsey. "Sewn Together: Graphic Uses of Thread." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, April 2, 2003, 77.

Wetter, Terri D. "Brave New Works: Making Art in the Digital Age." *Diablo Arts Magazine*, April–June 2002, 16–20.

#### Work in MATRIX

*East*, 2003

Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
17 x 60 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
17 x 60 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*Influence*, 2003

Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, concrete  
17 x 60 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*Suggested North Points*, 2003  
Grease marker  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

*North*, 2003

Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
17 x 60 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*West*, 2003  
Hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, mattress frame, plywood, and laminate  
17 x 60 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*South*, 2003

*Via*, 2001; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, steel angle, steel tubing, and plastic sheet; each 15 x 60 x 80 in.; installation view, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.



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*Self-Portrait*, 1999; hand-dyed, hand-stitched cotton, steel angle, and wire screen; 15 x 41 x 75 in.; collection Christopher Vroom and Illya Szilak, New York; photo courtesy of Jean-Michelle Addor.



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