I Want a Man Who
Desires, Wishes, Ideals, and Expectations in Women’s Online Personal Ads

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2010
Abstract

I begin this paper by describing how a string of failed relationships led me to investigate the ever-growing contemporary realm of online dating, from Match.com online profiles to the community posting boards of Craigslist.org. I discuss how a little curiosity turned into appreciation, commiseration, and eventually a collection of funny, poignant, and surprisingly specific requests from women in the form of appropriated excerpts from personal ad postings from the “Women Seeking Men” section of the Craigslist.org webpage for the Columbus, Ohio, area. This collection was the basis for my installations I Want a Man Who... and Wish Lists, that were exhibited in the 2010 Masters of Fine Arts Exhibition: Me and You and Everyone We Know at the OSU Urban Arts Space in Columbus, Ohio, from April 21 to May 20, 2010. Chapters two and three describe the installations in detail as well as the processes it took to make them, the underpinning ideas, and the artists who inspired me. In Chapter 2, I also spend time outlining the history and importance of hand embroidery in colonial American women's marriageability and in contemporary art making. I conclude by discussing some of the transitions in my art practice, primarily as they relate to my shifting from photography to a more multi-media practice, with strong ties to traditional decorative arts and appropriation.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to every woman who still wishes for her ideal man and has the boldness to admit it.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the women in Columbus, Ohio, who post descriptions of the ideal men that they are hoping to meet in the "Women Seeking Men" section of Craigslist.org. Without you and your words, my thesis work really would not exist. You give my project voice and encourage me to wish.

I would like to thank my thesis committee for all of their invaluable input and suggestions over the last two years. They have pushed me to believe in (and accept) my creative impulses. I owe my deepest gratitude to my close friends and family for their unconditional support and love. Namely, Barbara and Richard Wilson, Jimmy Tucker, Laura and Richard Carissimi, Matthew Carissimi, and Pam Venz have been invaluable supporters and resources throughout this process. I would like to thank my undergraduate English professors, Dr. John Tatter and Dr. David Ullrich; their poetry workshops played a larger role than I could have ever imagined in my present work. I am also indebted to the John Fergus Family Fund for all of their financial assistance and bigheartedness throughout my time at The Ohio State University.

Finally, I would be amiss not to thank that particular blue-eyed ex-boyfriend who kick started my entire project.
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2010 ...................... *Tracing Lines Project: Project Preview*, presented at
13 East Tulane, Columbus, OH, February 19

2009 ...................... *Roots: These Territories Three*, presented at BLANK Gallery,
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2009 ...................... *Small Works Exhibition*, presented at Roy G Biv Gallery,
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2009 ...................... *Art Squatters: An Exhibition in Presently Vacant Spaces in Downtown Columbus*, presented at the former Chamber of Commerce Building, Columbus, OH, September 5 to October 3
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2009..........................Recent Arrivals, presented at Hopkins Hall Gallery + Corridor,
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2010..........................Lehosit, Sean V. “‘Me and You and Everyone We Know’: Annual MFA Exhibition Unveils Talent in Many Forms,” U Weekly, April 21, 2010


Publications

2008..........................Wilson, Elizabeth Danielle. “Grandpa’s Wrists,” poem published in Nerve Cowboy, Fall #26


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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since 2006, I have been in a string of failed relationships. After three years of bizarre first dates and short-term relationships gone awry with a laundry list of men ranging from construction workers and honky-tonk musicians to medical students and a former televangelist, I started to believe I was intrinsically incapable of meeting the right man on my own. My breaking point came at the beginning of 2009. I thought I had finally met a nice guy; his blue eyes and shy smile made me want to believe we could last, at least for a while. About one month in, he suddenly remembered that he was still madly in love with his former girlfriend.

After that relationship fell flat, I resorted to investigating online dating sites; I felt desperate and incredibly lame. The female friends who I dared to tell about my online explorations laughed at me. “You’re joking, right? You can’t possibly be serious about this!” About three quarters of the way through filling out the essay portion of a Match.com online profile, I came to the section titled “About Me and What I’m Looking For.” That was about the point that I chickened out. It felt bizarre to be promoting myself to potential partners in essay form. What the heck was I supposed to say?
I decided to do some research on the kinds of things women actually post online when they are seriously looking to meet men. My quest led me to the “Women Seeking Men” section of the Craigslist.org webpage for the Columbus, Ohio, area (see Illustrations 1 and 3). It was fascinating to read the things that women just like me living right here in Columbus were brave enough and honest enough to post online about the qualities that they are looking for in their ideal man. I loved how blatant and incredibly specific their requests were. At the same time, an incredible sense of loss could be felt in their statements. I could immediately relate. I read posting after posting, periodically coming across statements so powerful that
I could not resist copying and pasting them into a word document. Reading and collecting the words of this huge group of women made me feel substantially less frustrated and alone. Their postings reassured me that it is perfectly acceptable and healthy to imagine, to wish, to desire, and to actively admit what you want in a man. He might be out there. In an American society that is overworked, overbooked, overcommitted, and increasingly internet-dominated, it seems like online dating may be one of the best options for meeting potential Mr. Rights. All any woman can do is ask.

Although I have yet to meet my own personal Prince Charming on Craigslist, over the last year I have read and amassed hundreds of delightful, hilarious, and profound personal ads that women have posted on the site. My appropriated collection forms the basis for my two installations, I Want a Man Who... and Wish Lists, that were presented in the 2010 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition: Me and You and Everyone We Know. The following chapters describe and discuss these pieces in detail.
Chapter 2: Throw Pillows and Personal Ads

Illustration 2. Frontal View of *I Want a Man Who...*, Elizabeth Danielle Wilson, 2010, Hand embroidered throw pillows, armchairs, and appropriated phrases from the Columbus, Ohio, “Women Seeking Men” personal ads section of Craigslist.org, 35” x 72” x 60”.
Description of I Want a Man Who...

I Want a Man Who... consists of thirteen throw pillows that are sitting in, propped against, and lying in the floor between two armchairs (see Illustration 2). Each throw pillow is handmade and hand embroidered on one side with a unique phrase. I appropriated all of the phrases between May 2009 and March 2010 from personal ad postings in the “Women Seeking Men” section of the Craigslist.org webpage for the Columbus, Ohio, area. Illustrations 1 and 3 are screenshots of personal ads similar to the ones from which I appropriated.

**Throw Pillows**

Of the thirteen throw pillows included in *I Want a Man Who...*, seven are rectangular, four are square, and two are bolsters (see Illustrations 4-10). The throw pillows that I made earlier are each covered with either solid or patterned cotton calico fabric and hand stuffed with polyester fiberfill (see Illustrations 9-10). The more recently fabricated throw pillows are each covered with either solid or patterned cotton upholstery fabric and filled with a prefabricated pillow form (see Illustrations 4-8). Tactually, the upholstery fabric is heavier, thicker, and generally feels more appropriate for a throw pillow. The prefabricated pillow forms are also denser, heavier, and make the throw pillows look full-bodied than the fiberfill could. Although I did upgrade my materials, I purchased all of the supplies I used to construct the throw pillows at Hobby Lobby, Jo-Ann Fabrics, and Ikea. Living and working in Columbus, Ohio, these were the stores most easily available to me, but they are also the types of stores where most American women who practice needlework and other traditional fabric-based handicrafts purchase materials. All of my throw pillows are hand embroidered with cotton embroidery thread; finished with trim, cord, and/or tassels; and sewn together with polyester thread using a borrowed 1970’s Pfaff sewing machine accompanied by hand stitching. I did all of the embroidery and hand stitching myself.
Illustration 4. Personal ad throw pillows from *I Want a Man Who*

*Appear enamored with me, 15.5” x 15.5” x 4”; You must be able to put up with my happiness, 19.5” x 18” x 5”; Have your shit together, 15” x 19” x 4”.*
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*Just looking to get married*, 16” x 16” x 4”
Illustration 7. Personal ad throw pillow from *I Want a Man Who...*
*Life goals: just have some, 13.5” x 17.5” x 4.5”*

Illustration 8. Personal ad throw pillow from *I Want a Man Who...*
*Someone that is tired of being alone, 15.5” x 15.5” x 4”*
Illustration 9. Personal ad throw pillow from *I Want a Man Who...*  
*He must have a beautiful spirit, 15.5" x 15.5" x 4"

Illustration 10. Personal ad throw pillow from *I Want a Man Who...*  
*Rugged like the Marlboro man, 10.5" x 20.5" x 4*
I mentioned earlier that there were a total of thirteen personal ad throw pillows included in *I Want a Man Who...* I never consciously made a decision to include the number thirteen in my work; in fact, it did not even occur to me to count the throw pillows until my thesis committee pointed this out. When it came time to install the piece, I had created seventeen throw pillows; three had to be shipped to a concurrent exhibition and one was an early version of another pillow. The remaining thirteen made it into the thesis exhibition. In retrospect, I am pleased with the involvement of the number thirteen in *I Want a Man Who...*; the number is often perceived to be as unlucky as an unmarried thirty-year-old woman.

**Armchairs**

The two armchairs in *I Want a Man Who...* were purchased from Ikea in March 2010 and are identical. They each measure 30.375 inches tall by 30.75 inches wide by 26.75 inches deep by, are padded with polyurethane foam, are covered with off-white cotton fabric, and are each supported by four solid beech legs (see Illustration 11). The chairs are positioned so that they have approximately a foot of space between them and are slightly turned toward one another at about a forty-five degree angle. The positioning is intended to suggest a comfortable domestic living room space where two people could sit comfortably, engaging in a conversation or exchange. The angling of the chairs suggests that these two people could be a couple, a potential couple, or friends.
Why Armchairs?

Initially, I was unsure of how to display the throw pillows. I considered placing them on shelves, on pedestals, in a pile on the floor, or on couch or love seat. I wanted all of the phrases to be readable, but I also wanted to ensure that they were placed in an appropriately domestic environment. The appropriated phrases embroidered on the pillows are examples the types of very specific man requirements that women like myself actively think about, obsess over, and discuss heatedly. These discussions can be held anywhere, from doctor’s office waiting rooms to noisy bars, but in my experience, my girlfriends and I often discuss men in comfortable domestic spaces like our living rooms and bedrooms. After meeting with the 2010 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition curator, Jennifer Wulffson Bedford, I made the final decision to use two identical armchairs that could be easily translated into a young single woman’s living room.
Once I made this decision, I did a great deal of both online and in-store research on armchairs of various shapes, sizes, and colors. In the end, I chose Ikea’s Tullsta armchair in “natural” (see Illustration 3) because it is nicely shaped, comfortable to sit in, and produced in a neutral shade that does not conflict or clash with any of the assorted throw pillow fabrics. In the gallery, their presence suggests a cozy domestic space. I am happy with the installation, but if I were to reinstall the I Want a Man Who..., I would probably place a large area rug underneath the chairs and the pillows in order to better delineate the installation’s space. A rug would probably also make the installation feel more domestic and inviting without the need of a building a separate environment or room.

By filling the two chairs with throw pillows and strewing the remaining pillows between and around the chairs, I hoped to give viewers the sense that this is a space where two people could sit comfortably, using the throw pillows as conversation pieces for discussing their own opinions and requirements about dating, relationships, and men. Some of the phrases are hopeful, some are sad, and some sound a little desperate. I believe that we have probably all—man and women alike—felt these emotions at some point in our dating careers. The women who posted these particular personal ads on Craigslist.org just happen to be brave enough to admit their wishes and desires to the world. I hoped that viewers would in the very least be delighted to see armchairs and throw pillows in a gallery space. I hoped that the patterns, colors, and trims would convince them to stop for a
moment, read a few of the throw pillows, and perhaps even chuckle a little because they can relate to the words.

**Why Decorative Throw Pillows?**

When deciding on a form for my appropriated “Women Seeking Men” personal ad phrases, I had to look no further than the living rooms, bedrooms, and favorite boutiques of my female friends for inspiration. All of these places seemed to be buried in throw pillows, specifically ones with scrawled, machine embroidered phrases. The phrases read like pages out of a clichéd women’s gift book: “It’s official; I’m becoming my mother,” “High Maintenance,” “Saw it, Wanted it, Threw a fit, Got it!” (see Illustration 12). I was immediately drawn to the popularity and

![Illustration 12. Mass produced throw pillows with cliché phrases. I retrieved this image via a Google image search during my initial research on throw pillows.](image-url)
kitschiness of the pillows. They made me smile. As tacky and hackneyed as they were, something about the proud declarations made me feel comfortable. I wanted to own one. I knew that if I could respond this way to a mass-produced throw pillow, there could be potential in mimicking this interior decorating trend with original phrases from real women. After this initial impulse, I spent a great deal of time looking at and thinking about decorative throw pillows.

Much like a piece of fine china or a porcelain knickknack, a decorative throw pillow is a very particular type of gendered object steeped in Victorian middle class ritual. It is typically women who buy them, decorate with them, and arrange them. It is also women who typically promote the domestic dance associated with them.

When placed on a bed, throw pillows are routinely removed at bedtime and replaced in the same order when the bed is remade. When placed on a couch, they are removed from the sitting area when visitors sit down and are promptly replaced when they leave. A throw pillow is an object created specifically for decoration, to be admired and appreciated, not used or dirtied.

Although decorative throw pillows are treated with the upmost care when they displayed, they are also cheap enough and portable enough to be easily replaceable. Whenever the seasons or the tastes of my single female friends change, they replace their throw pillows, slipcovers, lampshades, and/or curtains to something more fitting. As a twenty-something-year-old single women, what we want (or what we think we want) in potential partners can change as easily as the throw pillows we choose to display. This parallel between women and their home
décor and women and their requirements for future boyfriends and husbands played a huge role in my decision to use throw pillow in this project. I can easily picture women sitting among all of my personal ad pillows, picking and choosing which ones they would display in their homes.

**Process of Hand Embroidery and Pillow Making**

Before I begin embroidering, I spend hours in front of my laptop. I have dug through thousands of online “Women Seeking Men” personal ads, looking for anything that stands out for its honesty and creativity. I save all the best ones in a word document, print it, and cover the pages in pen, permanent marker, and highlighter. During the editing process, I begin to make notes about what a pillow for each particular phrase might look like. I think about which patterns, colors, and trim, could best frame each phrase.

With a list of ten or fifteen phrases in hand, I go to a fabric store. I spend hours pulling and comparing bolts of fabric, rummaging through trims and tassels, choosing pillow form shapes, and critically examining shades embroidery floss. Once the raw materials have been purchased and I know which pattern and trim I plan to pair up with which phrase, return to my computer. Using Adobe Photoshop, I determine which font, spacing, and line breaks most successfully coordinate with each phrase and the material I have chosen for it. From there, I print the phrase out on paper, transfer the phrase onto fabric using wax-free transfer paper, retrace the transferred image in pen, put the fabric in an embroidery hoop, and begin to sew.
Hand embroidering usually takes around twelve hours per pillow, depending on the amount, size, and shape of the text. I primarily use satin stitches (see Illustration 18) and stem stitches (see Illustration 19), either alone or in combination. Depending on the size of the text, I often trace the letters two or three times with stem stitches or sew around satin stitches with stem stitches.


After all the embroidery is finished, I use the sewing machine to attach the trim and sew together three sides of the pillows. Next, I either hand stuff the pillows (for the earlier versions) or fill the fabric envelope with the pillow form (for the later versions). The last side is sewn together by hand. In the end, each throw pillow is a one-of-a-kind object.
Hand Embroidery as Time Investment and Obsession

I am often asked why I spend so much time and energy on hand embroidery. Although machine embroidery may mirror the quick and easy nature of posting personal ads online, it leaves something to be desired. Women do not just spontaneously invent the male attributes that they describe as ideal in their online personal ads. As a single woman, I know all too well the incredible amount of time and effort that women invest in obsessing over the particular qualities that they hope to find in potential partners.

As a physical process, hand embroidery, like dating and searching for the right man, is time intensive and frustrating. Much like dating, learning to embroider takes substantial trial and error and is usually punctuated with its fair share of pricks. Even for someone who has been sewing for years, every project, like every relationship, comes with knots that have to be untangled. Sometimes you think everything is going swimmingly in your relationship or your sewing, only to realize that you have made a huge mistake and need to pull out all of your work and start over somewhere else.

In Elaine Reichek’s piece Sampler (Dispositional Hypnoid States), she captures another important aspect of hand embroidery through an appropriated phrase from a novel by Colette: “I don’t much like my daughter sewing...She is silent, and she—why not write down the word that frightens me—she is thinking” (qtd. in Reichek 8) (see Illustration 17). Because embroidery is so repetitive in nature, once you
have your pattern laid out and you master the basic motor skills, your mind is free to roam while your fingers are busy. The numerous hours I spent sewing allowed me an abundance of time to examine my own situation and desires.

While I sewed, I spent a great deal of time thinking about what is it to be a single woman in my twenties. I thought about what it means to be older than my mother ever was before she was married. And, of course, I thought about my string of failed relationships. In many ways, I believe that the mental process of hand embroidery helped me to heal emotionally and learn to laugh about my recent romantic letdowns. When I felt overwhelmed by past pain, I could lose myself in each individual stitch, obsessing over something other than rejection.

Along with giving me to the time and space to reflect, hand embroidery allowed me to create objects of everyday beauty capable of honoring and elevating the collective cries of female desire. The words are no longer just a portion of a temporary online want ad posted by a lonely woman; they are transformed via “laborious, loving hand labor” (Reichek 11) into a treasured form that can bring comfort to other women, both physically and emotionally.

**Historical Embroidery and Marriageability**

In contemporary America, it is rare for young women to be taught embroidery. However, this was far from true in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Needlework was a vital part of a woman’s life. In Mirra Bank’s *Anonymous Was a Woman*, she remarks that “[i]n society or alone, a woman’s needle never stopped” and that “[t]hrough years of growing skill in every kind of
handiwork, her most constant companion would be her needle” (10). Female children were sent to school specifically to study sewing and to gain “elegant accomplishment” (qtd. in 10) in stitching. In *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework 1650-1850*, Betty Ring notes that “Until about 1840, every girl who had received even the slightest education had made a sampler and was thereby prepared to mark the linens of her future household” (xvii) and that ‘for the American girl, to make a handsome sampler was ‘at times…the main object in attending school’” (qtd. in xix). In the 1879 book *Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian*, Sarah Anna Emory wrote, “One was considered very poorly educated who could not exhibit a sampler; some of these were large and elaborate specimens of handiwork; framed and glazed, they often formed the chief ornament of the sitting room or best chamber ‘” (qtd. in Bank 28). It is clear from all of these accounts that samplers were vitally important to the education of young women.

Although samplers can come in a wide variety of forms, in his essay “...Remember Me” David Frankel describes the basic form of a sampler as follows:

A sampler could be a picture, a pattern, a text, or any combination of these, all drawn in thread. It was a three-in-one tool, teaching a female child, aged as young as six or seven, how to read and count, through the listing of letter and numbers; how to sew, a useful preparation for a life of either leisure (demanding a civilized hobby) or of work (demanding a skill); and, finally, morals, through the
spelling out of religious quotations, or of homier sayings and homilies.

(Reichek 8)

The samplers produced by the needles of these women were “never meant to be disposable; it was designed to be admired, used, and cherished” (Banks 11). Beyond the basic roles of education and decoration, embroidery once played a large role in courtship and marriageability. Bank writes, “at the conclusion of her education, the American girl was expected to marry” (10). Amelia Peck of the Department of Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art furthers this statement, noting that

While less straightforwardly useful than marking samplers, decorative samplers and needlework pictures also served an important function: they revealed the values of the girl and her family to potential suitors. The completed work was usually framed and hung in the parlor, proclaiming the maker’s obedience, patience, and skill. It also communicated that a girl’s parents were wealthy enough to send their daughter to school and that the family valued the arts of refinement. The verses found on many samplers reinforced these messages, emphasizing the importance of female virtue, the value of education, and obedience to one’s parents and to God. (1)

Illustration 15 is an example of a traditional girlhood sampler. The verse sewn into it reads, “Who can find a virtuous woman/ for her price is far above rubies.”
Illustration 15. *Alice Mather her Sampler made in the twelvth year of her age july 8 AD 1774*, Silk on linen with a printed chintz border, 13 ¾” x 11 ½” (Ring 199).

With this knowledge of the extreme importance of embroidered sampler verses in mind, it is fair to say that the “needle wisdom” (Bank 10) of the phrases I hand embroidered onto the throw pillows in *I Want a Man Who...* would probably not be warmly welcomed in any nineteenth century parlor. In the traditional context of including moralizing or religious phrases in embroidery, I suppose that my use of embroidered words could be seen as ironic or slightly shocking. However,
given current American culture, I believe that a woman who chooses to display one of my throw pillows on her living room couch would be engaging in an activity similar to that of her ancestors; she would simply be displaying her values to potential suitors.

**My Personal History with Embroidery**

Growing up, I do not think I ever saw Grandma’s hands stop moving. I watched them constantly. If they were not perming hair in her in-house beauty salon, cooking giant meals in her kitchen, or praying in church, they was making something out of fabric and thread. Although no one ever bothered to call her an artist, Grandma’s living room, dining room, and basement were her fiber studios. Every night I fell asleep wrapped in her work. When I turned eleven, Grandma taught me embroidery. Under her supervision, I embroidered pillow tops, pieces for frames (see Illustration 16), and a baby’s quilt top. She taught me all of the basic stitches: running, couching, French knot, lazy daisy, chain, stem, and satin. In high school, between studying and club meetings, I began more advanced forms of embroidery such as chicken scratching. When I started college in 2004, my needlework trailed off. I only took out my embroidery hoop when I felt extremely lonely, frustrated, or sad. It was not until graduate school that I began to view embroidery as a form that I could legitimately use to make art. With the encouragement of Professor Suzanne Silver and her incredibly expansive approach to art making, I began to realize that I could embrace and build from my background.
in craft and embroidery to better explore topics that fascinate me: women, wishes, desire, and dating.

Illustration 16. My first embroidery piece, 1997, Cotton, 10” x 13”

**Artist Influences**

When I initially conceived of the idea for *I Want a Man Who...*, I was not aware of many contemporary artists using embroidery. Mostly, I just knew that for this project, my photography skills were not going to be the right vehicle for exploring women’s romantic desire and personal ads. As I sat in my studio, hand embroidering kitschy cotton calico, I felt a little crazy and a little self-conscious. In a group MFA exhibition full of high art forms, would my work look like it was coming completely out of left field? When I told people that I was making throw pillows,
they looked at me like I was nuts. I started being called “crafty.” It felt insulting, like I was some horrible stereotype of what a woman should never be: a spinster, a shut-in, a crazy cat lady.

Nevertheless, embroidery felt right. Throw pillows felt right. So I kept stitching, but I also started looking around the library for other people who use traditional needlework in their art. What I found amazed me, but it also made me feel like I had a tradition that is not just based in the work of colonial American women; contemporary artists have actively re-embraced embroidery and sewing.

**Elaine Reichek**

It is virtually impossible to mention embroidery in contemporary art without acknowledging the work of Elaine Reichek. David McFadden, author of *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* describes Reichek as a pioneer in reclaiming an array of fiber-based techniques for service in her art. She has knitted, painted, and embroidered for over twenty years, and has been a prominent and intelligent voice in the blurring of hierarchies among techniques and materials in art. (17)

Experiencing Reichek’s work was an incredibly eye-opening experience for me, especially the samplers she presents in the book *When This You See...* In this collection, Reichek worked within the tradition of the sampler while simultaneously turning it on its head.

In the introduction to the book, David Frankel describes Reichek’s process as “the piratical practice of appropriation, for she makes her samplers by sampling [...]
searching literature of all kinds for quotations that bear on her subject” (Reichek 9).

Sampler (Dispositional Hypnoid States) (see Illustration 17) is from this collection. In this piece, Reichek borrowed the floral sampler design from an eighteenth-century American source, but appropriated the text from Sigmund Freud and Colette. Both texts discuss the evils of sewing and needlework for women. Freud’s

Illustration 17. Sampler (Dispositional Hypnoid States), Elaine Reichek, 1996, Embroidery on linen, 18 ¼” x 20 ¼” (Reichek plate 18).
reads, “Dispositional hypnoid states...grow out of the day-dreams to which needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone...[and] intrude into waking life in the form of hysterical symptoms.” Colette’s reads, “I don’t much like my daughter sewing...She is silent, and she—why not write down the word that frightens me—she is thinking.” Although I am not using traditional sampler designs or quoting famous psychotherapists in my own work, I was especially captivated by this piece. Reichek deftly managed to say so much about women and gender roles through appropriation and a traditionally decorative art. Her work inspires me to keep following my impulses, to keep appropriating, and to keep embracing decorative, domestic forms.

**Pricked: Extreme Embroidery**

I came across *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* while researching Reichek. Published in 2007, the book was produced in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Art and Design. The collection offers a peek into the extraordinarily active world of contemporary needlework. In the introduction, David McFadden writes that for most of the twentieth century, needlework was primarily relegated to second-class as *craft* in comparison to *fine art*. The objects that embodied engagement with material and process were, at best, marginalized and ignored, and, at worst, deemed void of ideas and concepts. As the millennium approached, however, the tables began to turn. Artists were once again working with tangible
materials—clay, glass, wood, metal, fiber—to create objects of aesthetic, cultural, social, political, and intellectual merit. (8)

McFadden goes on to note that, “By the last years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, needleworking in general, and embroidery in particular, had secured its place in the mainstream of contemporary art” (9).

Looking through the pages of Pricked was like stumbling into a wing of an art museum I had only imagined could exist. The only needlework I had ever seen in museums was almost always relegated the colonial or folk art sections. I finally felt like my work and ideas could have a place in the contemporary art world. In this book, I finally found a community of people using decorative needlework to explore modern issues.

Andrea Deszo

While reading Pricked: Extreme Embroidery, Andrea Deszo’s Lessons From My Mother series particularly stood out. In this body of work, Deszo embroiders “cautionary aphorisms passed down from her mother” accompanied by humorous “‘informational diagrams’” onto small pieces of white cotton (McFadden 22). In the introduction to Deszo’s work, McFadden notes,

Deszo has chosen a format that evokes the wall hangings found in Transylvanian Hungarian kitchens during her childhood. According to the artist, the textiles served two important functions: to “protect the walls from splattering grease while teaching us important lessons:
how to catch a good husband, how to recognize a decent housewife, or how to guard one’s husband from the neighbor’s eager wife.” (22)

Although there are a total of forty-eight pieces in the series, ten are illustrated in *Pricked*. The embroidered words and pictures read like samplers gone wild: “My mother claimed that if you let a man fuck you he’ll leave you because every man wants to marry a virgin,” “My mother claimed that men will like me more if I pretend to be less smart,” “My mother claimed that a woman’s legs are so strong that no man can spread them if she doesn’t let him” (see Illustration 18) (McFadden 22). It was wonderful to find another artist who was embroidering appropriated phrases. Better yet, like the words I appropriated in *I Want a Man Who...*, Deszo’s phrases are taken from an everyday person, not from great works of literature and famous people. She mines her childhood experiences in order to explore what it is to be a daughter and to grow up female. After reading all of her pieces, I thought about expectations and men. How much of women’s expectations for dating, marriage, and men are instilled in us by our mothers? How do we pass these things on to our children? I hope that my personal ad throw pillows are functioning similarly to Deszo’s embroideries; I hope they make viewers think about this whole world of women, wishes, and expectations.
Illustration 18. *A Woman’s Legs Are So Strong That*, Andrea Deszo, 2005-6, from *Lessons from My Mother* series, hand-embroidered cotton thread on cotton canvas, 9” x 6” (McFadden 22).

*Tracey Emin*

Although Tracey Emin would by no means qualify for inclusion in *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*, her tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (see Illustration 19) often returned to my mind as I embroidered the words of anonymous women seeking men. Emin's piece featured the names of about a hundred people stitched onto the
interior lining, ranging from her aborted fetuses to family members, school friends, and sexual partners. [...] It was an interesting, voyeuristic exercise to climb inside and read the names and find out who Emin had slept with; it was a kind of late-twentieth-century Sistine Chapel, completely engulfing the viewer with its colour and inventive formal design; and it acted as a metaphor for the sexual act, in that the viewer had to crawl through a narrow opening into this womb-like, sexually charged space. (Elliot 28)

I am fascinated by this act of going into a space where you can stare, gawk, and read about the private sexual life of a woman. There you are, on your hands and knees, engulfed in her most private experiences. This how I feel when I read online “Women Seeking Men” personal ads. As I read their words, I feel like I am learning

too much about them and too much about myself. In public, I wonder if I am surrounded by these women who publically reveal their private emotional and sexual desires.

When I was making decisions about how to arrange the throw pillows in *I Want a Man Who...*, Emin’s tent was still as present as ever in my mind. Although viewers would not be crawling inside anything, I hoped that they would feel free enough to gawk and laugh while still asking themselves the questions Emin and I have asked ourselves: Where have I been? Who have I been with? What does that mean? Where do I want to go from here?
Chapter 3: Wallpaper and Wish Lists

Illustration 20. *Wish Lists*, Elizabeth Danielle Wilson, 2010, Frames, glass, archival inkjet prints, paint, baseboard and crown molding, and appropriated phrases from the Columbus, Ohio, “Women Seeking Men” personal ads section of Craigslist.org, 7’ x 13’ 10.25” x 1.25”.

**Description of *Wish Lists***

*Wish Lists* consists of forty-eight gold frames hung salon style on a single wall (see Illustration 20). Each frame holds an archival inkjet print of white text on a black ground. Much like the throw pillows in *I Want a Man Who...*, the text used on the prints in *Wish Lists* was appropriated between May 2009 and March 2010 from
personal ad postings in the “Women Seeking Men” section of the Craigslist.org webpage for the Columbus, Ohio, area. Light blue wallpaper with white text hangs behind the gold frames. The wallpaper text repeats the phrase “I Wish.” White molding is nailed at the top and bottom of the wallpaper.

**Frames**

The gold frames in *Wish Lists* range in size from 3.75” x 4.25” x 0.75” at smallest to 21” x 25” x 1.25” at largest. The frame shapes, styles, and patinas also vary greatly (see Illustrations 21-29). All of the frames were purchased from craft stores such as Michael’s and Hobby Lobby. The prints housed inside each frame consist of one hundred percent cotton rag Epson Velvet Fine Art Paper printed with Epson inks. The sizes of the prints range in size from 2.3” x 3” at smallest to 16” x 20” at largest. The fonts and type size vary for each print.

I Illustration 21. Details of frames from *Wish Lists.*
Illustration 22. Detail of a frames from *Wish Lists*. 

NOW, AS FAR AS WHAT I WANT. 

I WANT A MAN WHO WILL MAKE A DECISION ON WHERE TO EAT ONCE IN A WHILE, SOMEONE WHO KNOWS HOW TO TUNE UP MY CAR, CHANGE THE OIL... THINGS LIKE THAT. I WANT SOMEONE WHO CAN FIX A HOLE IN THE WALL, AND PUT TOGETHER ALL OF THE CRAP I LIKE TO BUY AND EVEN MAKE ME A DELICIOUS DINNER ONCE IN A WHILE IF HE FEELS SO INCLINED!

I WANT SOMEONE WHO WILL BE HONEST WITH ME, NOT CHEAT ON ME, SOMEONE WHO WILL HOLD ME WHEN I CRY, CAUSE I DO THAT SOMETIMES. I LIKE A MAN TO HOLD ME IN BED, LET ME KNOW HE’S THERE. SOMEONE WHO CAN BE A LITTLE AGGRESSIVE AT TIMES, LET ME KNOW HE WANTS ME!

I WANT SOMEONE WHO IS WILLING TO PUT TIME AND ENERGY INTO A RELATIONSHIP, MAKE IT MORE THAN A ONCE IN A WHILE DEAL.

I WANT SOMEONE WHO DISLIKES ARGUING AS MUCH AS I DO, SOMEONE WHO ENJOYS LIFE AND WANTS TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT.
Illustration 23. Details of frames from *Wish Lists.*
Illustation 24. Detail of a frame from Wish Lists.
Illustration 25. Details of frames from *Wish Lists.*
Illustration 26. Detail of a frame from *Wish Lists.*
Illustration 27. Details of frames from *Wish Lists*. 
I would like to find an above average activity partner to bring me back into the world of drinking cheap beer at dive bars and being really excited about hearing the Kinks on the jukebox at 4 am. This person should also be however, emotionally stable, have a job/purpose in life, and be willing to help me hang curtains and make complicated food decisions. Must enjoy music art and literature and be enthused about something in their life. Has the ability to make others laugh but can laugh at others. Is adventurous not sleepy, and is confrontational not passive.

No creepshows, old people, jocks, or pervs please.
good things:

tattoos,
good conversation,
foreign films,
domestic films,
foreign beer,
domestic beer,
whiskey,
laughing,
catching typos in advertising,
making up stories about ninjas,
road trips,
crossword puzzles,
dancing,
science experiments,
star gazing,
people watching,
music.
Wallpaper

The light blue wallpaper consists of Epson Enhanced Matte Paper printed with Epson inks. In order to create the wallpaper, I scanned a section of a page from *A Wish Book: A Place to Record Wishes, Dreams, and Thoughts* (see Illustration __).

Illustration 30. Detail of *Wish Lists* wallpaper.

I chose this page both for its color and its text. The subtle mantra-like repetition of “I Wish I Wish I Wish” seemed to be a fitting background for the personal ad selections; one of the most prominent framed phrases even starts out “My Wish List” (see Illustration 24). Using Adobe Photoshop CS4, I slightly increased the luminance of the blue in the scanned image. I altered the color in this way so that it would more closely resemble a tint of blue that is popular in contemporary home décor (see Illustration 31). From there, I created a digital 7’ x 22.75” canvas and digitally repeated the image until I had created a wall-size strip of the wallpaper to print. After the strips were printed, I hung them with finishing nails in a bay in the
hallway of the OSU Urban Arts Space. The width of the installation was determined by the width of the bay; the wallpaper covered an area of 7’ x 13’ 10.25”.

Illustration 31. A contemporary domestic interior painted blue with white molding. I retrieved this image from CountryLiving.com in 2010 via a Google image search while researching contemporary home décor trends online.

*Molding*

I did not originally intend to include the crown and baseboard molding in *Wish Lists*. However, a week after installing the wallpaper and frames, I discovered that the humidity in the gallery was causing the wallpaper to wave and bubble off of the wall. After consulting with the gallery employees, it was decided that I should re-install *Wish Lists*. During this process, I smoothed out all of the wallpaper and re-adhered it to the wall with smaller nails and double-sided tape. I decided to add the white painted molding so that the installation would feel more finished. The crown molding measures 4.5” x 13’ 10.25” x 0.5” while the baseboard molding measures
4.25” x 13’ 10.25” x 0.5”. The simple addition of the molding was completely transformative; the space felt less like a gallery wall and more like a domestic space.

**Typesetting and Choosing Frames**

The idea for *Wish Lists* came while I was embroidering the personal ad throw pillows for *I Want a Man Who...* There were so many passages in the “Women Seeking Men” personal ads that I loved reading and wanted to share, but were too long for me to hand embroider on 12” x 12” fabric squares. Instead of embroidering the words, I decided to print and frame them.

Much like the fabrics, colors, and trims of my personal ad throw pillows, I chose the frames based on the tone of each personal ad. After purchasing the assorted frames, I covered my studio floor with them and spent the next few hours tiptoeing around the frames and deciding which personal ad phrase belonged to which frame. After every frame had a passage taped to it, I began the long process of typesetting. Using Adobe Photoshop CS4, I created a digital canvas the size of each frame opening. After typing each phrase into its canvas, I chose the typeface, font size, leading, and weight based on the tone and length of the phrase as well as the design of the frame and the size of the frame opening. I wanted the message of each passage to be visually reflected in the typography. During this process, I relied heavily on my undergraduate background in English—specifically writing poetry—to make decisions about the line breaks and the visual forms created by the text.

During the printing process, I experimented with several different photographic papers—matte and glossy—before deciding on Epson Velvet Fine Art
Paper. I knew that in order for my framed phrases to be beautiful objects worthy of admiration, the paper had to be just right. Glossy and luster paper looked too much like photographs; cotton resume paper and pulp-based matte paper looked flimsy and cheap. Because the Velvet Fine Art Paper is made out of one hundred percent cotton rag, it has a real weight, substance, and richness to it. Even behind glass, this paper looks like cloth. On a more subtle level, I was also pleased with the connection between this cotton paper, the cotton fabric of my throw pillows, and the cotton fabric used in traditional wall-hanging samplers.

Initially, I planned to print the text in black, leaving the paper white. After running a few tests, I was not convinced that this was a good solution. I eventually decided to change the text to white and the background to black. I was pleasantly surprised with how black and velvety the ink looked when it absorbed into the paper's surface. It looked so tactile. When placed into the gold frames, the white phrases looked almost as if they had been engraved into metal. This visual shift in materiality, from paper to engraved metal, transformed the words. They no longer felt disposable or transient; the inked cotton paper and gold frames transformed the words from fleeting virtual postings into carefully accumulated precious objects. The words felt more considered, like more time had been invested in caring for them, similar to the hand embroidered words on my throw pillows.

Salon Style Hanging

With the advent and popularity of consumer-level digital cameras, salon style hanging has become increasingly in vogue in contemporary home décor. It has
never been cheaper to photograph, print, and display images of your loved ones. At the same time, there seems to be a mass nostalgia for printed photographs and artwork; in a world where most of our personal images exist in binary code on cell phones, in cyberspace, and as screensavers, there is something comforting about being in a room crowded with tangible, framed images.

Salon style hanging originated in the salons of Paris, most notably in the Musée du Louvre. Framed paintings covered the walls, floor to ceiling. The modern day reinterpretation of this practice takes a slightly less crowded approach. Today, countless do-it-yourself (DIY) websites list tips for creating your own at-home salon style experience (see Illustration 32). Even the commercial hardware giant

Illustration 32. Screenshot from Wish.ca giving instruction on salon style hanging.
Home Depot has a section on their Canadian website dedicated to explaining approaches for hanging artwork. Under the “Salon Hanging” subsection, the website gives the following guidelines:

Hanging your artwork from floor to ceiling, with visually interesting similarities or contrasts of style, artist, size, and frames, is called "salon hanging." If attempting this on one blank wall, the art should have at least one common element among the grouping; either style, medium, shape or artist. (Your Guide to Design 101: Artwork)

With so many online sources touting the ease and eclectic nature of salon style hanging, it is easy to understand its mass appeal.

For me, salon style hanging was an ideal solution for Wish Lists. Traditionally, you would find text displayed in a book, but, as much as I love books, I knew that this was not a fitting form for my project. A book is a one-on-one experience, an object for your private meditation and digestion in your leisure time. I wanted something a little more akin to a billboard, something that could start conversations. Salon style hanging offered me an established domestic structure for displaying a large collection harmoniously, but without the conceptualist baggage associated with the grid. Combined with the light blue wallpaper and the white molding, the salon style frames appeared unmistakably feminine and domestic. I wanted viewers to be able to gather around the words in a group, reading passages of their choice at their own pace, while verbally comparing, agreeing, disagree, and
discussing. “Oh, I would never want that in a man.” “This is exactly what I want.” “Since when do women want that?” “I’m taking a camera phone picture of that and emailing it to Amanda.”

**Effects of Accumulation**

The variety of frame sizes, text sizes, and passage lengths allow viewers to have a sort of “choose your own adventure” experience with *Wish Lists*. While hanging the installation, I attempted to create a sort of visual texture among the passages, intermixing longer multi-paragraph personal ad excerpts with shorter sentence fragment ones. By covering the entire bay with frames, I gave viewers options. It would be completely unrealistic for me to expect everyone to stop and read every single phrase, so I tried to create an experience that would be fulfilling both for the casual passerby and for the long lingerer. Some of the type is huge and can be read at quite a distance; other type is so tiny that you have to have your nose close to the glass to read it.

I have been told that the phrases are seductive and addictive, like eating potato chips or turning the pages of a good book. Several women and men who work in and near the OSU Urban Arts Space and who regularly use the public hallway and bathroom next to where *Wish Lists* was installed told me that they read a little bit of the installation every day. Visitors to the space have told me that they stood and read through the entire wall. Some people have told me that they think I am making fun of the women, while others have told me how real and true for contemporary women the phrases really are. These responses were rarely solicited.
There is something about this piece that gets people laughing, talking, thinking, comparing, and taking pictures. I think it is because, when they are hung all together, the phrases manage to be personal and collective at the same time. Viewers can read and compare the differences and similarities between the phrases while simultaneously figuring out where their desires fit in the spectrum. It is an open call to discuss the things that you want and the things that you could not stand in your ideal partner. If anything gets people interested and talking, it has to be relationships between men and women.

**Artist Influences**

In “Collecting and Hoarding Things,” Salman Akhtar remarks that collectors

[...]do not acquire everything that belongs to the category of objects they collect. For example, a person who collects wristwatches or pens does not buy every watch or pen he comes across. Instead, he carefully selects one that is made in a particular era or country, or one that has some special, desirable feature. (31-32)

Whether I am utilizing the tools of creative writing, photography, mixed-media, installation, or other approaches, the acts of collecting, appropriating, and editing are essential to my creative process. *Wish Lists* is essentially a collection. Producing the final installation was an act of intensive but delightful editing and selecting. The end result is a tight set of appropriated phrases that cover a wide gamut of women’s desires in regards to men and relationships. In the process of searching for a way to
successfully create and display my collection, I looked to the work of other artists who primarily engage in the acts of collecting, documenting, and/or appropriating.

**Bernd and Hilla Becher**

For me, mentioning collecting without bringing up the German conceptual artists Bernd and Hilla Becher is like discussing contemporary embroidery without Elaine Reichek. The Bechers are best known for their “photographed ‘families of things’”—industrial relics like blast furnaces, gas tanks, and water towers” (see Illustrations 33-34) that they present in grids (Schwendener 1). My first experience with their work was at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama; it was wonderful to see the local blast furnaces that I frequently drove past photographed

Illustration 33. *Harrison, New Jersey, USA 1994*, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gelatin silver print (Becher plate 51).
in such detail. I think this was when I began to understand the successful construction of a two-dimensional visual collection. The Bechers present viewers with a group of images with subject matter that is similar enough to hang together, but different enough to keep viewers looking and delighting in the aberrations. The collection will be an even better experience if the subject matter is relevant to viewers’ lives and surroundings; I know that I would have been less compelled by the Becher’s work if the photographs had not been taken around the state where I grew up. Although I abandoned Bernd and Hilla Becher's idea of a uniform grid in Wish Lists, I believe that I adhered to their basic approach.

**Barbara Kruger**

When I think of appropriation, I think of Barbara Kruger’s work from the 1980’s: images stolen from advertisements and plastered with bold, unapologetic feminist slogans like “We don’t need another hero” (see Illustration 35). She has an
amazing knack for appropriating gems and using just the right amount of text and honestly to leave viewers feeling dumbstruck. From Kruger, I learned that using existing source material could sometimes be vastly more powerful than creating new imagery.

Illustration 35. *Untitled (We don’t need another hero)*, Barbara Kruger, 1987, Photographic silkscreen and vinyl, 9’ 1” x 17’ 6” (Craven 583).

Coming into graduate school, I had never experimented with appropriation, but I was aware of Kruger’s work and I had a strong inclination for writing my English papers from the perspective of feminist literary theory. Although I was not completely cognizant of it at the time, my literary interest began spilling into my photography in early 2007 in images such as *Literature and Gender* (see Illustration 36). In late 2008, I began tentatively hanging up my camera and exploring the possibilities of incorporating appropriated imagery into my work in images such as
Illustration 36. *Literature and Gender*, Elizabeth Danielle Wilson, 2007, archival inkjet print from scanned 35mm film, 13” x 16”.

Illustration 37. *For Horizontal or Vertical Use*, Elizabeth Danielle Wilson, 2008, C-print from appropriated commercial photo frame insert, 20” x 24”.
For Horizontal or Vertical Use (see Illustration 37). The act and results of appropriating were unexpectedly fulfilling and successful, but I spent most of 2009 struggling to become comfortable with appropriating. It felt too easy and almost too fun. On the other hand, appropriating offered me a direct approach to begin exploring the intertwined topics of women, wishes, ideals, and relationships that really intrigued me. Barbara Kruger’s work encouraged me to be bold and to explore the possibilities of using images I collected from Hobby Lobby, Wal-Mart, and Cosmopolitan. If she had used mass media images so successfully, I knew that I had to be on the right track.

Penelope Umbrico

Penelope Umbrico blends the collect-and-present-similar-photographs-in-a-grid approach of the Bechers with Kruger’s no-holds-barred image appropriation. But, because she is working in the twenty-first century, Umbrico’s playground is the Internet. In the words of Marsha Schwendener, a contributor to The Village Voice, Umbrico

[...] helps herself to this [the Internet’s] bounty, downloading images of banal objects such as remote-control devices being sold in lots on eBay, or creating wacky motifs like Instances of Casually Flung Clothing (from home-decor and home-improvement websites and catalogs) (2007). In doing so, she both highlights and sends up photographic typologies, from what you see in the Bechers’ work
("art") to mail-order catalogs that stoke consumer fetishism. (1)

(see Illustrations 38-39)

In a mass-mass-mass produced consumer society where everything from yard sales to pawn shops and department stores have gone virtual, Umbrico’s work seems all too timely.

Illustration 38. *Image Collection #6: Universal Remotes (for sale on the Internet)*, Penelope Umbrico, c. 2007, webpage (Umbrico).

Umbrico was the first contemporary artist I came across who works almost exclusively with images she pulls from commercial websites (CrateandBarrel.com), photo sharing sites (Flickr.com), auction sites (eBay.com), and community posting boards (Craigslist.org). When I saw her work online for the first time in 2009, I was amazed; source material for art making really can come from anywhere in any form. I felt like I had been so busy looking through my viewfinder that I neglected to see that the Internet is way more than just a place for accessing Gmail and iChat. I started looking at Craigslist.org’s personal ads before I had any idea who Umbrico was, but I did not even image using them as source material for my art work until I saw her work. It is safe to say that her work, much more than most, pushed and encouraged me to make *I Want a Man Who*... and *Wish Lists*. 
Chapter 4: Conclusion

When I applied to the photography area of the Department of Art’s Master of Fine Arts program in 2007, I had big plans. The following is an excerpt from my original Statement of Purpose:

[Graduate school] would allow me the time and space to dive into the various artistic reservoirs that I have barely had the ability to snorkel the surface of during my undergraduate education. In addition to [...] expanding my work with gelatin silver and digital photography, I would like to explore alternative photographic processes, new mediums, and color photography. [...] I would like to expand my visual questioning by working with fabric, albumin, and collage. By exploring various materials and methods, I hope to come to a point at which the materials I use for creating and presenting my photographs engage in the exploration [...] as much as the images themselves. [...] I [also] want to find a way to more intricately connect my background in writing to my passion as a photographer. Although, in the end, I have (at least temporarily) strayed from actually taking photographs, I have stuck much closer to my original intent that I could have
imagined. Throughout the last two years, I have explored a huge range of approaches, including C-printing, studio lighting, staged photography, landscapes, digital imaging, collage, sewing, embroidery, bookmaking, collecting, and storytelling. I no longer see myself as a photographer with an academic background in English; I see myself as a multi-media artist and I believe that looking, collecting, and editing are my strongest skills.

Although I will probably pick up my camera again at some point, I plan to keep using appropriation along with home décor and traditional women’s craft approaches. It is difficult for me to believe that I can start a discussion about desire, wishes, relationships, and women without incorporating real-world material and traditional women’s craft processes as the raw material for my artwork. There is something about decorative approaches that I cannot seem to shake. I think that David Frankel gives some insight into this in his essay “...Remember Me”:

[…]

but embroidery, conventionally, is hushed in the doing, needing unsociable self-contained focus. As work, it is a woman’s task of household repair; as pastime, too, it is usually female, excluding the family’s men; as art, it is nowhere, really, for we think of art, whether beautiful or ugly, as a philosophical vehicle that will tell us something big, and of embroidery, even when undeniable beautiful, as a decorative entertainment. (Reichek 8)

I believe that there is an infinite amount of power and insight in “decorative
entertainment” and lowbrow personal ads, hardware store paint samples, commercial photo frame inserts, and tear sheets from *Cosmopolitan*. 
Works Cited


Reichek, Elaine. When This You See... New York: George Braziller, 2000.


