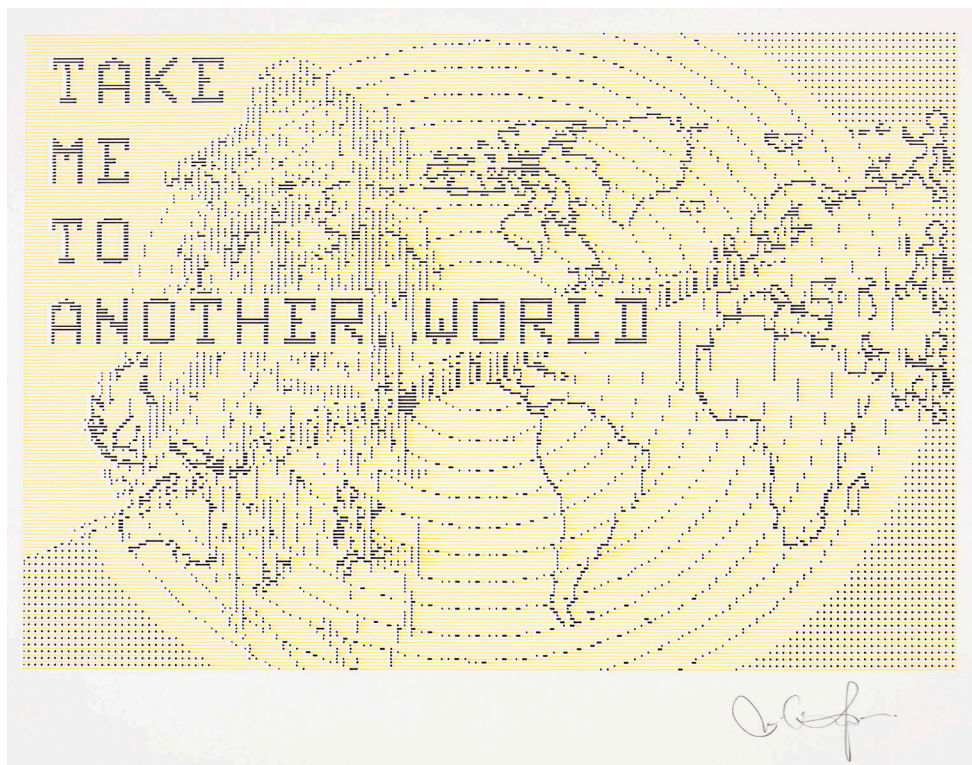


Exhibition April 7 – August 16, 2021

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Charlotte Johannesson

Take Me to Another World



Take Me to Another World, 1981–86. Computer graphic on paper. Courtesy the artist

Take Me to Another World is the first retrospective of Charlotte Johannesson's work to date. Her artistic practice from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s is precocious for being a force field of image production between craft and technology – or, perhaps better put, between textile technology and digital technology. Johannesson's is also a practice remarkable for its historical situation on the edge of the art institution, in self-organised spaces and in dialogue with subcultures and countercultures.

Neither of her chosen artistic media – the loom and the computer – were part of fine-art discourses at the time she worked with them. Both belonged to the realm of applied arts: the loom as the tool of woman, the computer as the power instrument of the techno-patriarchy. Johannesson's artistic attitude was complicated, then, because she defied the 'natural' in a double sense: she went against the norm as a woman artist, and as a woman artist who worked with machines. It is only now, well into the twenty-first century, that her work is gaining a reception – a delay that also reflects a gender bias of art history.

Johannesson is self-taught as an artist. She trained at a textile crafts school in Malmö in southern Sweden in the early 1960s, a traditional crafts education where 'you weren't allowed to have your

own ideas', as she puts it. Inspired by the Swedish-Norwegian weaver Hannah Ryggen, Johannesson started at the end of the decade to create art weavings that with non-Western patterns and motifs dealt with the fabric through an anthropological imagination, and through the loom as a transcultural tool. Soon slogans and sentences began to find their way into her work, based on concrete poetry's sense of the materiality of language.

Departing from a conventional view of textile as a decorative and domesticated craft, Johannesson instead fielded it as a protest medium in which propagandistic messages were paradoxically delivered with the softness and slowness of the woven image. For instance her *Chile eko i skallen* [Chile Echo in My Skull] expresses the artist's dismay at the 1973

military coup in Chile; and the stagnant consensus of parliamentary politics is robustly summarised as *No Choice Amongst Stinking Fish*, in a work made on the occasion of a general election in Sweden that same year. Johannesson's woven images aren't left-orthodox political art, but rather deconstructions and re-imaginings of symbols and media – political and otherwise. In this way she repurposed the loom's mythological and folk-humanistic connotations to instead use it as an artistic medium with which to comprehensively negotiate the crises of representation of her own time.

In 1978 Johannesson acquired an Apple II Plus – the first mass-produced 'micro-computer', and a forerunner of the home computer as we know it. Until then, computers had only existed as hulking mainframes in the service of the state, the military or multinational companies. Soon afterwards, Johannesson and her partner Sture started the Digital Theatre in their apartment. A self-organised platform at the edge of the art system, the Digital Theatre was Scandinavia's first studio for digital art.

By exchanging her loom for a computer, Johannesson activated intrinsic material connections between them, and she connected the two technologies' shared modern history that overlaps in the mechanised Jacquard loom of the industrial era. Hereby the incompatible binaries represented by the two machines – analogue and digital, coding and weaving, material and virtual, female and male, craft and industry, etc. – became malleable constituents of a new aesthetic, a new sensibility.



Chile eko i skallen [Chile Echo in My Skull], 1973 / 2016.
Textile. Courtesy Hollybush Gardens

Johannesson taught herself how to programme her Apple II Plus in order to make graphics for the screen, or drawings that could be 'plotted' (this was before the printer). She laboriously coded images in the same number of image fields or pixels that she had had in her loom – 280 times 192 – and generally approached the computer with the same lack of reverence that had inspired her to take apart her loom, conceptually speaking. With her digital graphics from the late 1970s and early 1980s she channelled contemporary mass media and personally inflected images, as if the future cybernetic reality of the Internet had already taken root in her nervous system and allowed her to forge an



Dancing, 1981–86. Computer graphic art
Courtesy the artist



Bowie, 1981–86. Computer graphic art
Courtesy the artist

escape vehicle or time machine that could take her to another world. In 1984 Apple presented a new generation of computers, now with a closed graphical user interface that made Johannesson feel restrained and less creative to explore. The Digital Theatre faded and closed down, and she largely ceased her artistic activities.

For the present exhibition Johannesson has, in collaboration with the graphic designer Louise Sidenius, created a series of new works called ‘woven digital graphics’. In these weavings that loop back to the transition performed by Johannesson when she swapped the loom for a computer, she has recycled imagery created at the Digital Theatre, and that has

been neither seen nor shown since floppy disks fell out of use: world maps, feminist heroines, self-portraits, hemp leaves, abstract patterns.

In its particular mix of escape and confrontation, Johannesson’s production was in dialogue with the social and cultural dissent of its time: 1960s counterculture, feminism, punk, and an intellectual sympathy with 1970s militancy. Thus in 1976 the Johannesson couple curated a memorial exhibition in Stockholm in honour of the West German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof. The Swedish authorities promptly closed down the exhibition, and even supporters of Meinhof’s urban guerrilla, the Red Army Faction, were appalled by

the weavings that Johannesson had created for the occasion, as one of them included the comic book character Snoopy from *Peanuts*, doing battle for the revolution. This wasn't their idea of engaged art.

By working through the technological and social conditions for creating art at the end of the twentieth century, Charlotte Johannesson's oeuvre surpassed its ideological and material limits in a becoming of its own. In this way her production stands as a predecessor of today's post-feminist and digital art. As the artist Hito Steyerl sums up, Johannesson's work 'created a timeless connection between ancient civilisational technologies like textile-making and the emerging aesthetics of early Apple computer graphics. By being completely focused on its own time, it managed to effortlessly span millennia of female-connotted technological development.'



Vote, 2019. Wool, digitally woven
Courtesy the artist

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