Review: QR Code Quilt

Liz Polcha¹

¹Drexel University

Published on: Mar 27, 2023

URL: https://reviewsindh.pubpub.org/pub/qr-code-quilt

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
Project
QR Code Quilt

Project Director
Kelsey Dufresne, North Carolina State University
Mary Downs, Quilter and Educator

Project URL
https://arcg.is/XL8X00

Project Reviewer
Liz Polcha, Drexel University

Project Overview
Kelsey Dufresne

For me and for many, quilting is a distinctively feminist practice — a practice and art of labor centralized on constructing an artifact of comfort, rooted in the home, in the family, and in collaboration. Like the quilts in Alice Walker’s short story "Everyday Use," quilts are active participants in my family and our life together: messy and falling apart at the seams, but warm and comforting. Our fabric materials and artifacts have lasted and will continue, but today’s cultures put a higher premium on “the electronic” and “the digital” than on the haptic and tactile. In this ArcGIS StoryMap, I bring the digital and tactile together through a QR code quilt.

QR codes are nifty communicative tools that take a user, via their phone, to a web-based site. QR codes are not designed for cuteness or approachability but provide an efficient and fast transfer of information. They are rigid in design, rather inflexible (one can change some components, but the overall design composition and conventions are rather concrete). They are, pointedly, visual codes. Coding itself, including QR codes, is gatekept to the computational elite, a demographic that is traditionally gendered by the male-dominated STEM field as well as systemic and societal gender notions.

Therefore, quilting and QR codes are developed by two very differently gendered populations and communities, with very different priorities and goals. In response, the QR code quilt my mom and I created challenges the broad understandings of “digital.” Benjamin Peters (2016) frames this term as rooted in our digits, our index fingers specifically: "Digital media do what fingers do” (p. 94) and "Digital media thus have meaning insofar as they index the world” (p. 99). A quilt is firmly digital, indexing the world, memory making, and labor of those who craft them. But how is this made complicated when we sew QR codes into our pattern? Moreover, how do QR codes and quilts serve as memory devices? If quilts relay my familial history in a material way, how can, if at all, QR codes do the same?
Through co-design and collaboration, both strong pillars of inclusive design and design justice, Mom and I engage in discursive and critical design to explore a gendered practice and act of labor through a particular focus on the “digital.” This project aligns with digital humanities, critical making and discursive design, as well as cultural media studies. The audience is broad, including scholarly audiences and, quite intentionally, families, quilters, and anyone with beloved artifacts of everyday use.

Note: I/me = Kelsey; Mom = Mary; We = Kelsey and Mary

References


Project Review

Liz Polcha

QR Code Quilt explores the digital feminist possibilities of quilt making. The project is an ArcGIS StoryMap that details a mother-daughter team’s crafting of quilts designed to display QR codes.

Kelsey Dufresne initially completed the project for a graduate class with the help of her mother and fellow quilter and educator, Mary Downs. The StoryMap narrative guides site users through Dufresne and Downs’ creation process, citing a range of different sources: autoethnographic personal conversations, feminist and digital humanities scholarship, and Alice Walker’s short story, “Everyday Use.” The StoryMaps narrative is highly effective in its multi-media presentation. It features photos of the two quilters at home, a video on their process, an AIDS Memorial Quilt video, screenshots of text messages, and gifs of their sewing machine. Though the resulting quilts are visually striking, the StoryMaps site is the more engaging and persuasive object of digital feminist exploration.

The central claim of QR Code Quilt is that quilting is a feminist practice, and that as “artifact[s] of comfort” quilts reveal the interwoven threads of kinship, labor, and memory. Dufresne connects QR codes as machine-readable optical labels to this claim as examples of communication tools that, like quilts, aid in memory and information retrieval. Dufresne generated QR codes for websites that had familial meaning for the two quilters (such as Dolly Parton’s website) and Downs printed the codes on 3”x 3” squares of fabric sewn onto the quilts. The way QR codes fit into a specifically feminist quilting practice could be more fully theorized to connect QR codes more clearly to a digital feminist agenda.

This digital narrative raises the question: what makes an act of digital and material artistry “feminist”? Does crafting within a context of kinship between women always support feminist knowledge production? In asking
these questions, I would encourage Dufresne to think more about the material and technological history of their sources. It would be helpful to know more about the history of QR codes as machine-readable labels that became particularly popular in the U.S. during the pandemic. Further, I would encourage Dufresne to tackle the ethical contradiction of sourcing materials for a “feminist” project from Hobby Lobby, a company that infamously blocked their employees’ access to birth control in a 2014 Supreme Court case (though I understand it may be the only local store available for a short-term project).

I would encourage Dufresne to also think about how race and whiteness shape their project. Which audiences and communities are invited into the digital narrative in QR Code Quilt? Quilting has historically been a Black feminist practice with a centuries-long multifaceted history beyond the brief window we see in Walker’s story. The project gestures toward that history without much further investigation. Lauren Klein’s scholarship on Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s data visualizations and relational knowledge may be a helpful source for further theorizations. In sum, this creative and promising project would benefit from deeper engagement with feminist history and material culture studies.