

# JONAS BECKER'S *THE PILE*

By Jenni Sorkin

In 1966, Robert Smithson made a drawing titled *Heap of Language*, in which a pyramid of words seems to collapse from the weight of its myriad meanings. The image implies the difficulties inherent in verbalization and the tensions between reading and looking. The gap between speech and expression, in this case, the expression of desire, is the subject of Jonas Becker's multimedia installation, *The Pile* (2012 - ongoing). Both a video and a sculptural installation, *The Pile* is a red mountain of over 2,000 hand-stitched objects, all symbolic of individual wishes, needs, and personal expressions of coveted happiness. Utilizing data based on targeted questions addressing life improvement, the artwork is a mediation orchestrated between the artist, an internet-borne community, and hand-based craft. Through crowdsourcing and polling, Becker's collection process employed strategies commonly used in community organizing. Culling answers from more than 2,000 volunteers found through his own queer networks and communities both online and in person, Becker carefully coded and tracked responses, ultimately producing symbols that are fabricated by hand and added to an ever-growing pile. Some, such as the desire for marriage, were interpreted quite literally, in the form of two interwoven wedding rings. Others were translated more abstractly, or required another cultural referent to understand; such is the wish for courage, appearing in the form of a lion, an allusion to the fearful character from *The Wizard of Oz*. In Becker's work, he asks questions about how desire is produced for an individual, and what constitutes collective desire. Further, he examines whether or not there is the potential for the idea of a collective unconscious—that is, the repetition of the same wish or desire in entirely different people and circumstances—and how this might manifest itself in the form of a symbol.

Cut from bolts of red industrial felt and handsewed by volunteers who include the artist's own mother, the objects themselves are modest: plump and springy, stuffed animal-like, yet without faces or distinguishing features. In fact, upon closer inspection, viewers can single out strange configurations, such as dollar signs with wings (financial freedom), the universal icon for healthcare (health insurance), and two female symbols holding the hands of a small child (baby with a same-sex partner). Such wishes are usually harbored secretly: too

personal to reveal. The pioneering digital humanist Joanna Drucker has written about the primacy of the written word and how it conveys "secrecy, intimacy, privacy."<sup>1</sup> Such desires become tangible, as Becker's project tracks the written desire and enshrines it in the form of an obscure talisman. Each is joined together at its seams with large yellow overcast stitches, one of the most basic hand-sewing techniques, used to both protect the raw edges of fabric from unraveling and as humble decoration, offering a contrasting color, or perhaps extending a potential metaphor of an individual life lived at the edges, or falling apart at the seams.

As a further extension, the twelve-minute video embellishes the sculpture, adding a layer of mythology to the ritual of hand labor. Set in a bucolic Midwestern cornfield, its elderly female protagonist takes each written desire, crumples it, adds chicken feathers, and stuffs everything inside of the symbolic red objects. The camera pans through the seasons; we see her sewing in damp spring rain, by moonlight in summer, and as leaves swirl in fall. The pile continues to grow, and the camera's aerial view offers several clear art historical references: The pile, set next to a field of corn, looks like a crimson Monet haystack, while the bolt of cloth itself becomes an allusion to Christo and Jean-Claude's iconic land artwork, *Running Fence* (1976).

As a mythological narrative, however, the video is an allegory of female patience, humility, and the connectivity between manual labor and the natural world. But the farm is ornamental, an artifice in which the handcrafted object is assumed to link neatly to naturalism, femininity, and solitude. In reality, one person could never have constructed the entirety of the pile. Becker's video is meant to contrast the decidedly communal and urban composition of *The Pile*, offering a strangely commanding backstory of singularity and persistence to complement its cacophony of voices, viewpoints, and muted red pleasures.

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<sup>1</sup>Johanna Drucker, "Corona Palimpsest: Present Tensions of the Book," *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*. New York: Granary Books, 1998, 171.

Photos (reverse side left to right): *The Pile* (video still), 2014; *The Pile* (video still), 2014; *The Pile* (installation detail of hand-stitched red felt objects), 2014; *Red Fabric 1*, from *The Pile*, 2014