



A Stitch in Time:

An Autobiography of Bill Brown in the Form of a Quilt Made Out of T-Shirts that He has Worn (September, 2016)

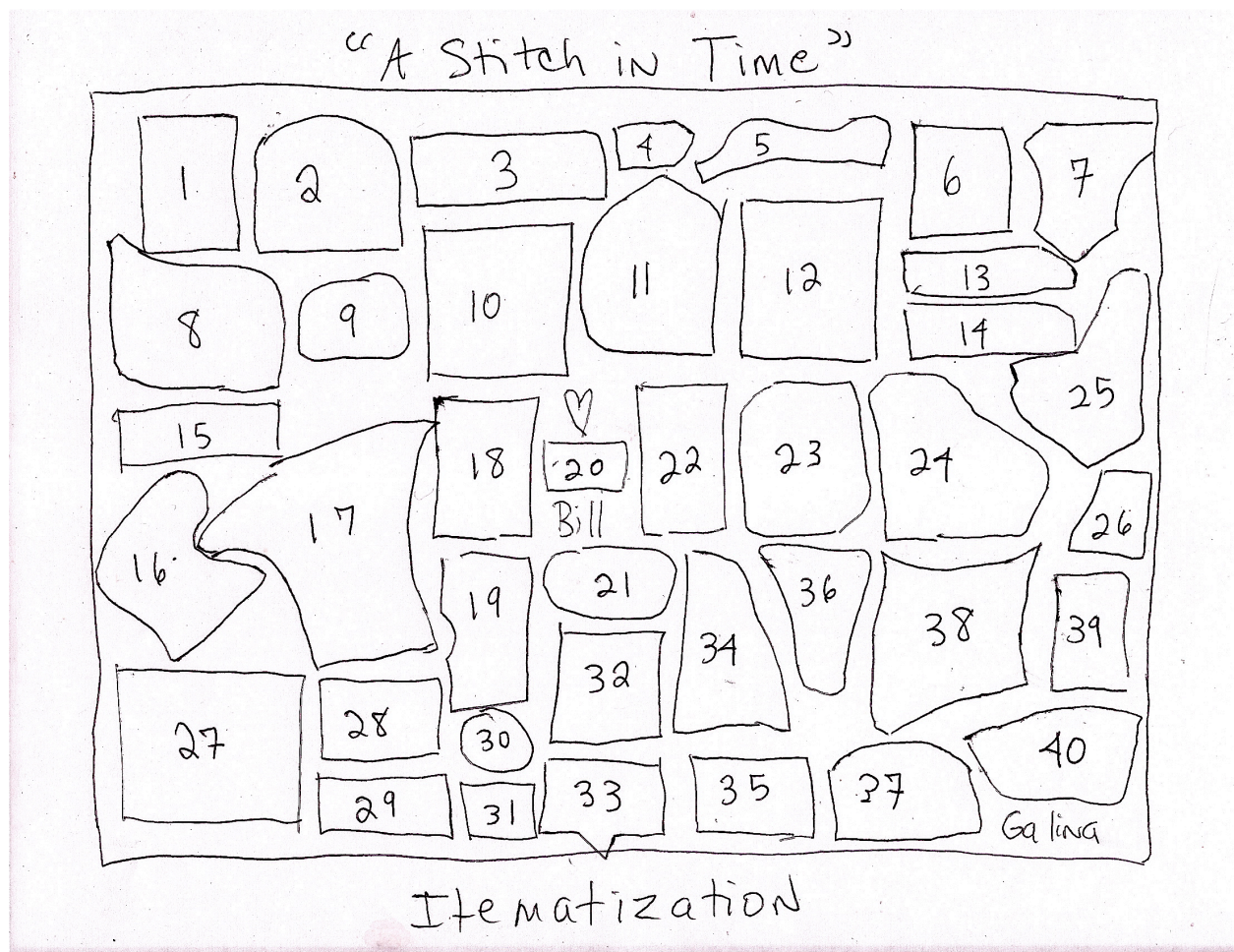
Artist Statement from Bill Brown.

I am not a rich, powerful or famous person, and so the idea of me writing an autobiography (even if I am 57 years old) might seem a bit ridiculous. And I haven't tried to write one here. But one has in fact been produced. It was put together by a very talented seamstress named Galina Zavyalova, to whom I turned over 40 pieces of cloth that I'd cut out of old T-shirts that I'd worn and then saved for as many as 40 years. I didn't give Galina any instructions concerning the arrangement or ordering of the pieces, nor did I tell her their respective dates. I simply said that I wanted them made into a durable, well-made quilt. It was Galina who, based upon the shapes, colors and themes of the pieces – that is to say, based upon her own creative responses to them – decided where each one should go. And thus did she produce the visual narrative of my life that I have titled “A Stitch in Time.”

To enrich the viewer's appreciation of the story being told (it is bigger than me, bigger than the usual story one tells about oneself), I have done my best to provide a context for each of the 40 pieces in the quilt. In addition to the place and date when the T-shirt was originally obtained, the reader of the attached text will find notes that explain the significance of the designs that I chose to cut out and keep. On occasion, I refer to “détournement,” which involves the simultaneous quotation and radical alteration of a well-known phrase so as to produce something new. Here the “détournements” are the phrases that I personally added to the T-shirts using a magic marker. In all cases, these were shirts that I actually wore, day in and day out. I regret that I don't know key facts about a few of the pieces on display here (the ones that come from T-shirts given to me by my parents, who have passed away since then), but those lacunae seem unavoidable when it comes to explaining one's own life. Some things are mysteries even to ourselves.

About Galina Zavyalova.

Born in Russia in 1955, Galina has been a seamstress – at first as a self-taught amateur and then as a professional with a thriving business of her own – ever since she was a teenager. For the last ten years, she's run G&L, a small but very active shop in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn that specializes in custom tailoring for women, but also does alterations and repairs of clothing of all kinds. One of her clients is Bill Brown, who lives a block away and originally went to G&L in search of someone to repair a damaged zipper on a leather jacket.



Itemization.

1. "Sally Timms."

Obtained: Providence, Rhode Island.

Date: 1994.

Note: Sally Timms is a member of the English punk band the Mekons; "The Land of Milk and Honey" is the title of one of her solo albums. The image of the cowboy on a horse reminded me of "the Cowboy Philosopher" (cf. writings by Greil Marcus about the situationists and their use of détournement).

2. "Bart Simpson."

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: late 1980s.

Note: "Don't Have a Cow, Man" was one of Bart's earliest catchphrases. Détourned by the addition of the handwritten word "Vegetarian."

3. “McLenin’s.”

Obtained: St. Petersburg, Russia.

Date: 1993.

Note: here Vladimir Lenin and McDonald’s are not only juxtaposed; the long-dead leader of the Russian Revolution has now become the namesake of an American-style fast-food joint that specializes in all-beef patties.

4. “Yer Boy.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: early 1980s.

Note: This slogan and the melted face that accompanied it were part of an anonymous response to the Ann Arbor Police Department’s crackdown on skateboarders; they were spray-painted over the police’s signs.

5. “WCBN-FM Radio Free Ann Arbor.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: early 1980s.

Note: I didn’t have a show at this still-operating college radio station, but hung around the studio a lot because several friends of mine did.

6. “Don’t Blame Me, I Ride a Bike.”

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: late 1990s.

Note: given to me by a “Bikes Not Bombs” activist who was passing through town and stopped at Blackout Books, an anarchist bookstore in the Lower East Side of Manhattan at which I volunteered from 1996 to 1999.

7. “Santa Dog.”

Obtained: Middletown, Connecticut.

Date: 1979.

Note: “Santa Dog” is also the name of an obscure single released in 1972 by The Residents. I obtained both through the band’s mail order catalogue. One of its slogans was “Ignorance of your culture isn’t cool.” The other was “Buy or die.”

8. “This is your brain on drugs.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: 1984.

Note: one side of a two-sided T-shirt that détourns a famous anti-drug campaign that showed an egg frying in a pan, proclaimed “This is your brain on drugs” and then asked, “Any questions?” As if answering this rhetorical question with, “Yes:

when do we eat?” this T-shirt imagines fried human brains served with bacon and toast.

9. “WCBN-FM Ann Arbor.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: 1989.

Note: I didn’t have a show at this still-operating college radio station, but hung around the studio in the early 1980s because several friends of mine did. In 1989, I returned to both Ann Arbor and WCBN-FM with my band, Loving Offenders, which had been formed in Buffalo, New York. The group performed live both at the radio station and at the Performance Network.

10. “Gibt Nazis Keine Chance.”

Obtained: Cologne, Germany.

Date: 1993:

Note: I taught at the University of Siegen, Germany, as Fulbright Scholar during a year in which neo-Nazis were resurgent. I participated in several large anti-fascist marches and events. When translated, this slogan says “Give Nazis No Opportunity.”

11. “Camel.”

Obtained: from my parents, who’d traveled to Morocco.

Date: late 1980s.

12. “The Statue of Liberty and the Kremlin.”

Obtained: St. Petersburg, Russia.

Date: 1993.

Note: When translated, the slogan says, “Perestroika, Comrade.” The book in the Statue of Liberty’s left hand is a list of cities: Paris, New York, Moscow, Berlin and (partially obscured) Prague.

13. “REAL TV.”

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: 1999.

Note: received as consolation from this now-defunct TV program, to which I’d sent a tape of a “Reclaim the Streets” demonstration held in NYC that same year. Détourned by the addition of the handwritten phrase “Too real for . . .”

14. “The Curse of the Mekons.”

Obtained: Providence, Rhode Island.

Date: early 1990s.

Note: this album by the Mekons, an English punk band, was only available as an import when they toured to support it.

15. “The Situation is Under Control: Unabomber for President.”

Obtained: Boston, Massachusetts.

Date: 1996.

Note: one of more than a dozen T-shirts designed and silkscreened by Lydia Eccles, one of the founders of the Unabomber Political Action Committee (UNAPAC), which lobbied for people to write the name “Unabomber” on their election ballots. I helped open a UNAPAC office in New York City.

16. “Two encircling fish.”

Obtained: China, which my parents visited.

Date: middle or late 1980s.

Note: the Mandarin Chinese says “Silence.”

17. “Bali.”

Obtained: Bali, which my brother visited.

Date: early 1990s.

18. “Recent Sightings.”

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: 1993 or 1994.

Note: I was given this T-shirt depicting Elvis Presley in a number of different guises by a guy named Jim, someone who, like me, taught in Germany in 1992-1993 as a Fulbright scholar.

19. “Wolverines.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: early 1980s.

Note: the design is dated 1979, but I didn’t play with the University of Michigan’s Ultimate Frisbee team until later. I also played “ultimate” at Wesleyan University in the late 1970s and at the Rhode Island School of Design in the early 1990s.

20. “I Am Not Bored.”

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: late 1980s.

Note: to create this design, I simply wrote directly upon an all-white shirt with a magic marker. NOT BORED! is a situationist “fanzine” that I founded in Ann

Arbor, Michigan, in July 1983. It went online in 1996, just five years after the public debut of the World Wide Web.

21. "Black Mountain II."

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: 1985.

Note: the original Black Mountain was an experimental college active in the late 1950s. Thirty years later, a residential college within the University of Buffalo was able to name itself "Black Mountain II" by dint of the fact that the poet Robert Creeley was associated with both projects. I was a resident advisor (RA) at "Black Mountain II" and later studied contemporary American poetry with Creeley himself.

22. "The Stooges."

Obtained: Providence, Rhode Island.

Date: early 1990s.

Note: designed and silkscreened by one of my students at the Rhode Island School of Design, where I taught American literature from 1990 to 1994. Every word of the subtitle was chosen carefully and polemically: the music is called "rock 'n' roll" (not "rock") and many of its best players (Ann Arbor's the Stooges, in this case) are American (not British).

23. "Democracy for China."

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: 1989.

Note: a Statue of Democracy was erected in Tiananmen Square, China, in early June 1989. The design here was détourned by the addition of the handwritten speech bubble, "Down with statutes."

24. "Lenny Bruce."

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: late 1990s.

Note: while volunteering at Blackout Books, where this T-shirt was purchased, I scripted and organized a reading of Lenny Bruce's classic skit "Thank You Mask Man." The shirt's design (created by the famous caricaturist Abe Hirschfield) was détourned by the addition of the handwritten words "the police," thus correcting the implicit claim that Lenny only used "dirty words" for shock value and not for a purpose. I like the fact that the newly created phrase can be read as either "Fuck the police" or "Fuck, the police."

25. "XI AN."

Obtained: China, which my parents visited.

Date: middle or late 1980s.

Note: the Chinese characters and the English translation say the same thing.

26. "Banff."

Obtained: Banff, Canada, which my parents visited.

Date: unknown.

27. "St. Basil's Cathedral."

Obtained: Moscow, Russia.

Date: 1993.

Note: St. Basil's Cathedral is depicted. The Russian on the right says "St. Basil's Cathedral," while the words on the left say "Cathedral of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos on the Moat." *Theotokos* is Greek for "Mother of God."

28. "Regular Guys Café."

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: late 1980s.

Note: drawing upon my experience as a short-order cook in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the early 1980s, I became both the breakfast chef at this place in Buffalo, New York, and a consultant for the creation of its menu and the procurement of the supplies and tools necessary to make the dishes on it.

29. "Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols."

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: early 1980s.

Note: I love the Sex Pistols' music. But upon hearing this punk band's album being played at an incredible volume by the residents of one of the University of Michigan's fraternities, I decided to mimic a famous gesture made by the band's lead singer (wearing a Pink Floyd T-shirt upon which he'd written the words "I hate") by writing "I hate" upon the only Sex Pistols shirt that I owned. One memorable response came from a hippie, who, not knowing the context and only responding to the words "I hate," said to me "I love," as if he were contrasting our views of the world.

30. "Lenin."

Obtained: Moscow, Russia.

Date: 1993.

Note: Communist Party-style design détourned by the addition of a handwritten circled “A” (to signify anarchism) over Lenin’s left eye.

31. “All bombs are clean.”

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: late 1980s.

Note: to create this design, I simply wrote directly upon an all-white shirt with a magic marker. The whole quote – “All bombs are clean. Their only pollution is the system of control and security they radiate [when they are not detonated]” – appears in Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” originally written in French in the 1970s and published in an English translation by Semiotext(e) in the 1980s.

32. “Free Tibet.”

Obtained: unknown.

Date: unknown.

Note: the English and the Tibetan slogan beneath it say the same thing: “Free Tibet.”

33. “12th Maccabia.”

Obtained: Tel Aviv, Israel, which was visited by my uncle.

Date: 1984.

Note: the design commemorates the 12th Jewish Olympics, which were held in Israel in 1985. My uncle was there the prior year to visit the grave of his father, William Z. Spiegelman. In 2011, I edited and published an anthology of the writings of my grandfather, who was an important Jewish newspaperman in the 1920s and the public relations coordinator for the Jewish National Fund in the 1930s and 1940s.

34. “Moscow.”

Obtained: Moscow, Russia.

Date: 1993.

Note: the two figures depicted are statues that stand in front of St. Basil’s Cathedral.

35. “Blackout Books.”

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: 1997 or 1998.

Note: to make this shirt, a volunteer at Blackout Books (an anarchist bookstore located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan) took a page from a book by local

artist Eric Drooker and made a silkscreen of it at the ABC No Rio Print Shop. I volunteered at Blackout from 1996 to 1999.

36. “SCP.”

Obtained: New York, New York.

Date: 2000 or 2001.

Note: “SCP” stands for Surveillance Camera Players, which was an anti-surveillance group that I co-founded in New York City in 1996. To make this shirt, one of the group’s members (a volunteer at the ABC No Rio Print Shop) took the design created by yet another and made a silkscreen out of it. One of the SCP’s slogans – “Completely distrustful of all government” – was printed on the other side of the shirt, about 100 of which were made.

37. “You Can’t Massacre an Idea.”

Obtained: Buffalo, New York.

Date: 1989.

Note: the original design commemorated the uprising in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, in June 1989. The phrase in Chinese says, “Citizens shouldn’t fear death.” Détourned by the addition of the handwritten phrase “Never Work.” To be clear: for me, the idea that couldn’t be massacred was the idea that work should be shunned and abolished; I didn’t mean that the tactic of “citizens” refusing to “fear death” was something that would “never work.”

38. “Painted Face.”

Obtained: China, which my parents visited.

Date: middle or late 1980s.

Note: the face can be viewed either right-side up or upside down. When viewed right-side up, it is fierce and hostile; when viewed upside-down, it is smiling and cute. The small stamp in the lower left refers to Mao’s Long March, includes numbers (34 wen and 105 centimeters) and mentions the No. 1 Knitting Factory in Shaanxi.

39. “Flying Armadillos.”

Obtained: Middletown, Connecticut.

Date: late 1970s.

Note: a gift from my girlfriend in college, who was from Galveston, Texas.

40. “This is your brain on drugs.”

Obtained: Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Date: 1984.

Note: one side of a two-sided T-shirt that détourns a famous anti-drug campaign that showed an egg frying in a pan, proclaimed “This is your brain on drugs” and then asked, “Any questions?” As if answering this rhetorical question with, “Yes: when do we eat?” this T-shirt imagines fried human brains served with bacon and toast.