



Whitney
Biennial
2014

Lisa Anne Auerbach

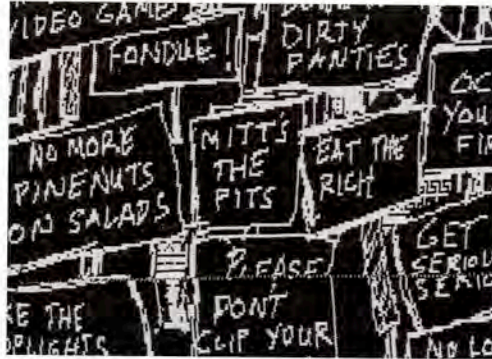


Touch Me, 2012. Wool, 21 × 31 in. (53.3 × 78.7 cm)

Born 1967 in
Ann Arbor, MI

Lives in
Los Angeles, CA

Empress of Modest Propaganda *Mamie Tinkler*



Strike First, 2012 (detail). Wool thread on linen,
63 × 80 in. (160 × 203.2 cm)

Lisa Anne Auerbach's art is situated at the strange juncture where social commentary and domesticity meet. At once deeply earnest and mordantly playful, her work presents a running chronicle of contemporary American life and some of its most intractable challenges: earning a living, feeding oneself, commuting, buying a home, and trying to be a decent person in a politically divided, economically skewed culture.

The aphorism "The personal is political" is the given condition of Auerbach's practice—a starting point for her career-long exploration of the narratives of everyday existence. Like a documentary photographer with a roving camera eye, she is a relentless observer of the exigencies, bureaucracies, and peculiarities of survival in contemporary life. Her work hints at utopian ideas, which is something of a paradox given its earthbound and contemporary nature. What if, she seems to want to know, we were all honest with one another?

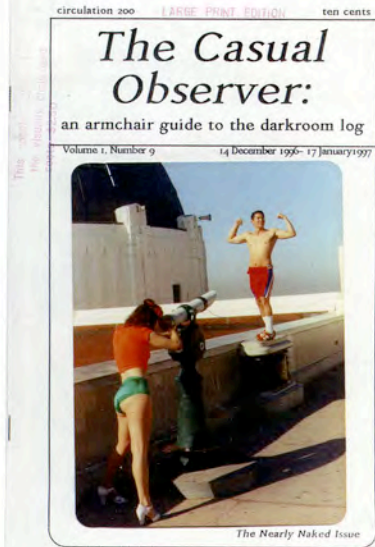
Central to Auerbach's approach is the circulation of language in relation to physical bodies and objects. She has described herself as running "a modest publishing and propaganda empire," and her modes of distribution are various. Auerbach's texts are knitted into the weft of homemade sweaters, printed in zines and newsletters that the artist distributes, and trumpeted in the pages of a massive, 5-foot-tall journal the artist calls *American Magazine*. These alternative distribution systems call attention to Auerbach's role not just in authoring texts but also in (quite literally) making them.

The slogans emblazoned on Auerbach's sweaters are in turn diaristic and overtly radical. ("Everything I touch turns to sold / Steal this sweater off my back" says one; "What's all this talk about dying for revolution? / Live for it," says another.) They might compare to mottos on bumper stickers, except that these sweaters are intended to be worn on the body—effectuating a sensation of intense proximity to the art—and except for the painstaking labor that went into making them. The physicality of the work is paramount and heightens the subjective experience of reading. To look at the outsize issues of *American Magazine* (one features Auerbach's conversations with psychics around Los Angeles; another focuses on megachurches), viewers have to cluster around a pedestal while two performers turn the pages. This distinctly uncomfortable closeness—to the work, to other viewers—elicits conversation, exchange, and debate.

While Auerbach's slogans and signs are politically blunt, her humor infuses the work with subtlety, goofiness, mockery, and self-deprecation—sometimes all at once. One sweater, made in 2007, gives us a 9/11 knock-knock joke (it ends: "9/11 who?? I thought you said you'd never forget"): here, the artist pokes holes in nationalist sanctimony and provokes uncomfortable giggles. But her more poignant jokes are ones that we're not quite sure are being made, and that's where Auerbach's zines come in. *Saddlesore* and *BOOKSHELF*, among many others, document what might be called the minutiae of the artist's everyday life. Is she serious? Life, when examined at



Cover of American Megazine #2, 2014



Cover of The Casual Observer (with Daniel Marlos) 1, no. 9, 1997



American Megazine #1, 2013 (installation view with mega-girls, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery). Ink on paper, 60 x 39 x 1/2 in. (152.4 x 99.1 x 1.3 cm)



Telling it to the Sheep, Shetland, 2013. Photographic documentation of Antisocial Practice Sweater and Journal Pants, 2013 (detail). Wool, dimensions variable

the level of the tiny decisions that we constantly face—which books to throw away when you move? Is it okay not to bring a dish to a vegan potluck if you don't eat anything?—is hilarious, and sad, and sometimes sadly hilarious. Auerbach breaks existence down into its microscopic moments, until—like saying a word over and over until the familiar syllables don't make sense anymore—the whole exercise starts to seem absurd. What are we working so hard for, if these humble problems are the only ones we can ever hope to solve?

In her emphasis on work in all its many forms, Auerbach refutes an overwhelming trend toward aestheticizing domestic labor (from *Martha Stewart Living* to the Food Network). Though she utilizes technology as needed—digital cameras, an electronically controlled knitting machine, a giant Epson printer for the “megazines”—much of Auerbach's production is decidedly low-tech, not out of a Luddite sensibility or nostalgia for traditional ways of making but rather to acknowledge both the temporal and physical limitations of personhood. In an art world in which “poststudio” production is the norm, it is no longer redundant to describe an artist's work as DIY (a neologism that became necessary only when doing it yourself became the exception). Auerbach has always insisted that her art is not about the making, and yet labor-intensive, analogue processes are key to how her work functions. Handmade, small-scale production is not, for this artist, a quaint throwback or a feminist reclamation of craft; rather, it is her investment, her handiwork-made-visible (and in turn, a nod to other workers).

Auerbach has highlighted this distinction when discussing her sweaters. T-shirts, of course, regularly carry personal or political statements—but somehow, we rarely question the labor that went into making or designing the T-shirt, and we'd never assume that the wearer took any special care to fabricate it. T-shirts say “mass-produced.” A sweater, by contrast, bears its origins in every stitch. Auerbach's labor brings us, the viewers, back into a relationship on a human scale. Our experience of viewing the sweater may not have a one-to-one relationship to Auerbach's making of it, but we can understand and project ourselves into the process of its creation.

Auerbach's zines hark back to a long history of amateur publishing by participants in dissident or marginal communities—feminists, punks, and obsessive fans. The rise of the blog has made zines less relevant, a less obvious tool for marginalized voices. But the zine-blog relationship is analogous to that between the sweater and the T-shirt. Auerbach's zines slow down conversation and allow one (quirky, silly, passionate) voice to be heard in full. Her work dodges the annoying contemporary phenomena of constant commentary, mediated debate, and sound bites. In the same way that a hand-knitted sweater will inevitably have irregularities, Auerbach's work, in its absolute physicality, is shot through with idiosyncrasies and particularities. She is not interested in a catchphrase that represents everyone, or even everyone like her. Her singular texts serve, somehow, as slogans for one person, and one person only.