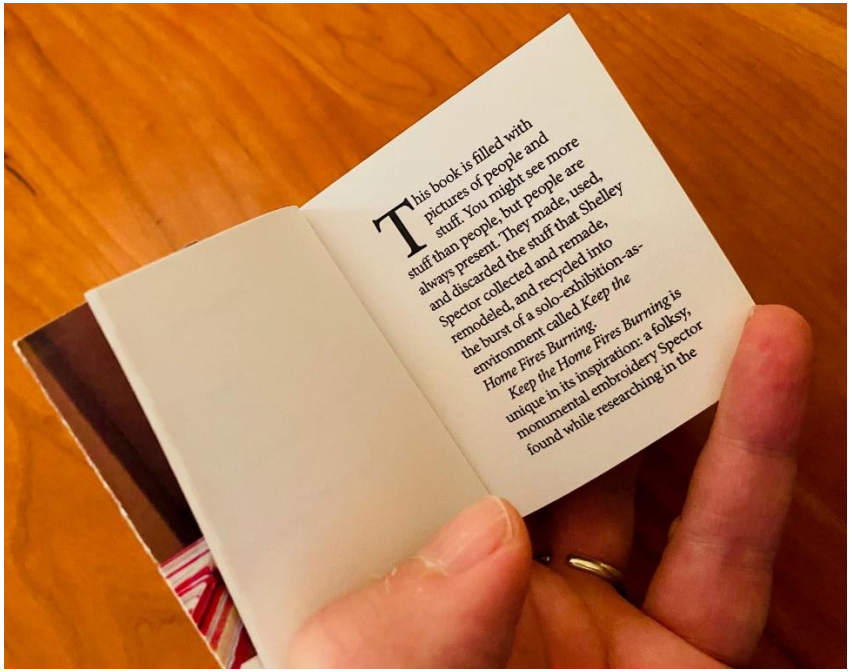

This book is filled with pictures of people and stuff. You might see more stuff than people, but people are always present. They made, used, and discarded the stuff that Shelley Spector collected and remade, remodeled, and recycled into the burst of a solo-exhibition-as-environment called *Keep the Home Fires Burning*.

Keep the Home Fires Burning is unique in its inspiration: a folksy, monumental embroidery Spector found while researching in the

Essay for the limited-edition book accompanying *Shelley Spector: Keep the Home Fires Burning*
Matt Singer, 1-2-15

Fond Objects, Found Affections:

Feeling Shelley Spector's Keep the Home Fires Burning

This book is filled with pictures of people and stuff. You might see more stuff than people, but people are always present. They made, used, and discarded the stuff that Shelley Spector collected and remade, remodeled, and recycled into the burst of a solo-exhibition-as-environment called Keep the Home Fires Burning.

Keep the Home Fires Burning is unique in its inspiration: a folksy, monumental embroidery Spector found while researching in the high-tech, pristine storage area that holds tens of thousands of pieces of clothing and other textiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The embroidery that caught Spector's eye and imagination is a deliberately arranged composition of bright and bold birds, flowers, angels, hearts, and the other designs and symbols of Pennsylvania-German ("Pennsylvania Dutch") folk-art.

Keep the Home Fires Burning is part-and-parcel with Spector's well-honed way of creating. It is Spector writ large—an exceptional yet representative expression of who she is and what she does. A site-specific exhibition, Keep the Home Fires Burning is a discrete project that developed over a particular period of time—from October 2012 when an exhibition was proposed and Spector first ventured through the Museum's storage; to March 2014, when Spector set up a project space in a large storefront near (fittingly) Fabric Row, the historic stretch of family-owned textile-supply stores in South Philadelphia; to March 2015, when the show opened. This clear arc from inspiration to exhibition presented a prime opportunity to record how her art happens. Thus, this book, which documents how a museum show came to be and captures the artist's way of working.

You'll see how very "analog"—how acutely hands-on and labor intensive—Spector's art-making methods are. Hers are the timeless skills of the master craftsperson—little changed over centuries and not to be rushed. Yet the hundreds of photos herein were shot on a smart-phone, the present moment's most ubiquitous product and symbol of advanced-technology.

Spector used her phone to record her work's daily progress. It was Spector's archive and sketchbook. The exhibition and this book return digital doings to the analog realm. The height and width of this book, this volume, correspond to those of the screen on Spector's phone. Its depth relates to that of the phone's very full "Photos" file, which grew in step with her progress.

Spector is a multitalented multitasker whose diverse activities reflect a unifying goal: to create and present unmistakably original art that encapsulates (in her words) "what it is to exist in a particular time and place." Spector is an observer and student of people and cultures over time and distance. In her art are suggestions of anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and history.

Frances Lichten, designer of the embroidery that inspired Spector, worked as a researcher in the decorative-arts department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Lichten enlisted her mother,

Cecelia, to embroider her design. The sampler, completed in 1943, is more than seven-feet-high and three-feet-wide. What moved and galvanized Spector were its colors, textures, and—especially—its imagery. Versions and variations of the same motifs and patterns appear in folk-art throughout the world. They are common to, and link, what seem to be distinct cultures. They are personal for Spector, as well, making appearances in her own work.

Spector collects objects from the past, seeing in them vantage points to visceral and sensory experiences. After gathering, disassembling, and sorting her findings, she reassembles them. Transforming the "found-object" into art is Spector's practice. See the mighty and majestic Lions of Judah rampant in these pages, their mouths agape in guardian growls, their manes like flowing haloes, their tails striped into luxurious, sinuous totems. Within each of those lions—what gives them their imposing posture and proportion—is a simple, use-worn, nearly ramrod-straight children's chair combined with second hand finds such as skirts, ugly sweaters, and a shoeshine kit for a snout.

The message of From Seed to Seeds, a sprawling ceiling installation of flowers, leaves and buds, is that life regenerates. Its medium is recycled clothes and furniture. Dozens of t-shirts were cut into yardage of strips then wound into spools of yarn. Knotted into a thick fabric, requiring "thousands and thousands of stitches," this textile-of-former-tees joined other fabrics stretched and attached onto tree-like armatures constructed from rattan furniture-frames. Beneath large flowers are the seeds they'd sown, knit into colorful kernels stuffed with yet more scraps.

Spector has the crafting skills of an experienced and particularly gifted carpenter—and those of the upholsterer, tailor, and seamstress. She's an artist who can paint like a sign-maker. But her art is more than hands-on, it's mind-full of concept and the details of its inspiration. In this case, her attention was drawn to the credit-line for the embroidery reads "Gift of Katherine Milhous in memory of Frances Lichten, 1961."

Milhous, too, was an artist and illustrator with work in the Museum's collection. She and Lichten met as students at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts) and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, two schools where Spector also studied. They were companions for four decades, until Lichten's death in 1961. Spector read Milhous and Lichten's papers, including personal correspondence between, which is archived at the Free Library of Philadelphia. In signing off a letter to Lichten, Milhous wrote "Keep the home fires burning"—an affectionate, intimate phrase that to Spector was a metaphor of the exhibition's essence. Her response to the revealed relationship between Frances Lichten and Katherine Milhous, both in the material fact and in Spector's imagination, and the embroidery in which their tale lives on in stitches provided fuel for Keep the Home Fires Burning.

Like Lichten before her, Spector enlisted the help of her mother, Anita, of similar age to Cecelia Lichten at the time she embroidered her daughter's design. Spector's mother contributed her own hand skills and also carefully cleaned, deconstructed, and organized the material that the artist transformed into sculpture.

Spector applied her distinctive sense of form, well-developed skills, appreciation of time-worn materials, and very human humor and pathos to create large, three-dimensional, wood- and fabric-based interpretations of the kinds of motifs found in Frances Lichten's embroidery and in traditional

textiles and other forms of folk-art from around the world. Among the local points of interest—a wood bird-bath hosting a pair of mismatched birds (Different Is the Same), a functional pint sized wishing-well for viewers to place coins into (Keep the Home Fires Burning), a burgeoning patch of dozens of patterned sewing-tomatoes sprouting from a fourteen-foot-tall fabric stalk (Village) and a tiny, six-inch-high house for a couple of wooden ladies (Frances Loves Katherine).

The museum gallery that contains Spector's textile-inspired, finely wrought ode to people and the stuff of life is expansive and high-ceilinged. It allowed Spector to pursue her vision on a scale (often life-size and beyond) and to an extent exceeding anything before in her three-decade career as an artist. Keep the Homes Fires Burning gives shape to connections—in faith, love, family, and art—among people across time, place, and culture.