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## **Unseen Labor: An ATG Interview with Ann Kardos and Gretchen Neidhardt**

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# Unseen Labor: An ATG Interview with Ann Kardos and Gretchen Neidhardt

By **Ramune K. Kubilius** (Galter Health Sciences Library & Learning Center, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

It seems only yesterday, but it was back in 2018 that Joelen Pastva and Tony Olson contributed an article for a special health sciences issue of *Against the Grain (ATG)* that they entitled “Current Trends and Opportunities in Health Sciences Library Metadata.”<sup>1</sup> Trends in use cases for metadata, not only in the health sciences, continue to expand and grow. Still, there are those for whom the term “metadata” (and about those who do that work) may continue to be surrounded by an air of mystery. Ann Kardos, the creator of the “Unseen Labor” project sought to tackle that informational challenge in a visual way. She invited metadata and cataloging colleagues to visually illustrate the story of metadata labor through stitching. Here, *ATG* occasional contributor, Ramune Kubilius, asked some questions in order to learn more about this interesting, multi-faceted project. Thank you to Ann Kardos and project contributor Gretchen Neidhardt for agreeing to provide a brief introduction, at the same time reminding readers that a picture is worth a thousand words, so please remember to visit the project (catalogue) site.

Ann Kardos is a metadata librarian at University of Massachusetts Amherst and Gretchen Neidhardt is a metadata librarian at Northwestern University Galter Health Sciences Library & Learning Center, though at the time of stitching, she was a cataloging and metadata librarian at the Chicago History Museum.

**Ramune Kubilius:** *Describe the project a bit and how did the idea start?*

**Ann Kardos:** Unseen Labor is an international library community-organizing embroidery project that I created in

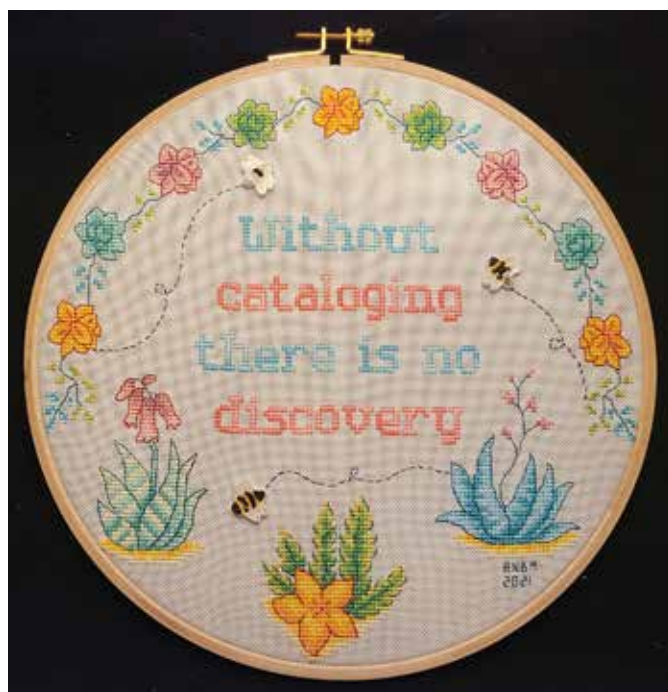
the summer of 2021. It is now an exhibit at the Science and Engineering Library at UMass, currently on display through May 2022. We also have an open access exhibition catalogue available at <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/unseen-labor-exhibit/>. I’ve worked in cataloging and metadata since 2009, and though I cross-stitched as a child, I didn’t really get back into it or enjoy it until 2020, when a friend suggested I pick it up to help calm my panicking mind. After I stitched a few patterns, I realized that both metadata and stitching are built upon unseen labor. With metadata work, many people don’t realize that there are actually humans who create and maintain the library catalog. With stitching, people see the finished piece, but not all of the labor that went into making a piece of fiber art. Cross stitch and embroidery seemed like such a great medium to explore converging the ideas of metadata and unseen labor. Stitching patterns are essentially the metadata that allows someone to create a piece, and particularly with cross stitch, the resulting pixelated images made me immediately reflect upon bits and bytes of data!

So I had a weird idea... I didn’t know of other metadata librarians or catalogers who were stitchers, but I wondered if I could find them through listservs or through my professional organizations. I wanted to ask my peers about the unseen labor in our work, both physical and emotional. And I wanted us to stitch our stories to create something visible and approachable to share our work with others. I created a few prompts and just started talking about the idea with some librarian friends and colleagues to see what they thought. Everyone thought it was pretty novel and interesting, so I began to think of what form this would take and how I could share whatever resulted with others.

**RK:** *What was the aim of the project? (for collaborators and potential visitors to the site?)*

**AK:** Like many people during the pandemic, I had begun to feel pretty disconnected from everyone. I was hoping first that this project would be a good way to connect with people who do the same kind of work that I do, since most of my professional development avenues had dried up. In my personal life, I’m a member of an online crafting community started by Badass Cross Stitch (<https://www.badasscrossstitch.com/>), and I wondered if I could create something similar for metadata librarians and catalogers. But I also hoped I would get enough people interested that I could create an exhibition of our stitching. I’m passionate about doing metadata outreach, and I wanted something to make our work approachable to librarians and others who do not work with metadata. I wanted this to be something that could serve as an educational tool for subject librarians and patrons.

At UMass, our Science and Engineering Library branch has a casual exhibit space and the librarians there were willing to work with me to see what I came up with. But the Covid pandemic also meant that I wanted to find a way to share whatever resulted virtually, in case people weren’t able to see what we did in person. Another colleague at UMass, our Open Access and Institutional Repository Librarian, Erin Jerome, suggested that I could create



**Amanda Mack — Busy Bees**



*Elliot Williams — Code*

an exhibition catalogue using PressBooks (<http://pressbooks.com>). This would create a permanent record of the pieces for the exhibition, and contributors could also add the resulting publication to their library catalogs if they wanted.

**RK: How were potential collaborators identified?**

**AK:** I posted my prompts and the idea for an exhibit on three metadata and cataloging listservs in the summer of 2021. I'm a member of both New England Technical Services Librarians (NETSL) and Online Audiovisual Catalogers (OLAC), so I posted to listservs for members and followers of those organizations. I also posted to a general cataloging listserv called Autocat. Collaborators self-identified — I asked people to email me if they wanted to join. Initially I had about 80 people contact me to express interest. As of today, I have submissions from about 33 library workers, representing 20 states, Newfoundland (Canada) and London (United Kingdom). There are probably another two dozen library workers who follow the project but haven't contributed stitching. It has helped to know that we have others cheering us on!

**RK: How was the format (online book/exhibit) decided?**

**AK:** As I mentioned above, I thought this project could be used as a tool for metadata outreach. Metadata work is something that is often misunderstood. I wanted a way to make it visual and approachable, to help stimulate conversations with those who use library metadata to find what they need. I knew I wanted to have a physical exhibit so that people could really see the details of everyone's incredible stitching. Once contributors started identifying themselves to me, I realized we were from all over the place. I wanted to make sure they could see the results of our work, even if they were far away. An exhibition catalogue made sense, because it also allowed me to include detailed descriptions of the pieces and a written overview of the project. And like I said before, the catalog also gave collaborators something meaningful to read and share with their own libraries.

**RK: How do the elements / formats (book vs exhibit) play out?**

**Gretchen Neidhardt:** I have not personally seen the exhibit, though Ann's pictures have looked amazing. So to that end, I think the catalog has been much more powerful to me in sharing the pieces and their stories with colleagues, friends and family. While I would love to, I doubt I'll make it to Amherst before it closes, but I know there are plans for the exhibit to travel, so I hope to see it when it gets closer to Chicago. It has been awesome to collaborate with folks from all over, though I know we have a very significant number of contributions from the Midwest.

**AK:** For the physical exhibit, I found that a lot of the pieces naturally tackled similar themes or feelings. I was able to create a number of groupings of pieces that went together thematically or visually. It's great, because groupings tell fuller stories together as people stand in front of them. For the eBook exhibition catalogue, I agree with Gretchen. It has been so much more successful than I thought it would be. It has allowed me to share our experiences and stitching with an audience that would never have been able to view it otherwise. I arranged pieces in the catalogue alphabetically by name of the collaborator and included their location. This has also really shown the reach of this project, and how poignant the idea of unseen labor is to our experiences in our libraries, no matter where we live.

**RK: From the chapter collaborators' standpoint, what was the motivation to participate and how much framework/leeway was given?**

**GN:** When I saw Ann's call go out to some of the cataloging lists, I was immediately intrigued: "I'm asking you to create a 12x12 inch cross stitch or embroidery piece that focuses on unseen labor, and how our catalogs and discovery systems don't work well without the unseen cataloging and metadata labor that we do every day."

I've been cross stitching since 2019, but I've almost always had some kind of craft going on (beading, book-binding, knitting, sewing). I also have long been interested in this idea of craft and expression and how they relate to art and creativity, and



*Lindsay Ryer — A Few Inches of Something*

I thought this project sounded like it could showcase the very craft-related meticulousness of creating and maintaining metadata in some very interesting ways. What were a pattern and thread colors if not metadata for a finished cross stitch piece?

My only issue was coming up with an idea. I had a couple of thoughts, but none of them were going to translate well to a square foot of canvas. So instead, I offered to collaborate with someone else who was interested in the project but didn't necessarily want to stitch—they could give me their ideas and I would design and stitch the pattern. I was very lucky that another metadata librarian, Tina Gross, was interested in being the other half of this design process. She had 3-4 very viable ideas. I designed patterns for all of them. She picked her favorite and suggested some edits, and then all that was left was the stitching.

**RK: What responses has the project received so far? What interests or intrigues those who are coming to the site?**

**AK:** The response to this project has blown me away. People love the art we have created. I have been contacted by colleagues who had never really spoken to me much before, who are thrilled to have learned something new about the metadata work I do. Visitors to the exhibit have been struck by how emotional our work could be. Mostly, people have had no idea how much time and energy goes into creating a metadata record, or how much we do that people have thought was done at the push of a button. It's been clear that the story of automation in our library catalogs is pretty misunderstood. There is little realization that there is a human behind a lot of that automation. The educational aspect of the exhibit and the catalog has gone far beyond my expectations! I'm thrilled to have created so much interest and engagement in library metadata work.

**GN:** I've heard such positive feedback so far, and folks seem to really like the pieces that poke a little fun at the frustrations of unseen labor. It's also been a surprising educational tool. I don't have any librarians in my family and I sometimes struggle to explain to them what it is exactly that I do all day, and showing them this project has really helped contextualize that.

**RK: If you had one thing you wanted to convey to people about this project and/or about metadata, what would it be?**

**GN:** I think the one thing I would like to convey is that this is *work*, and there's a deep need for human interaction and intervention in creating metadata. The better work we do, the more seamless and effortless it appears on the user side, which unfortunately erases our labor. Projects like this help publicize and celebrate the skills and effort that it takes to make resources discoverable.

**RK: Where does the project go from here?**

**AK:** I wasn't expecting it, but I have had several people contact me and ask if the exhibit will travel! I'm working with a few collaborators now to see if we can send the exhibit to



**Gretchen Neidhardt & Tina Gross — This is the Library Now**

their institutions. There are a lot of details to figure out at the moment, but please stay tuned! You might be able to see it at a location nearer to you in the future!

At UMass, I'm using the exhibit to create some additional avenues for metadata outreach. I'll be teaching a "learn to stitch" workshop in the UMass Science and Engineering Library in March 2022. The workshop aims to use stitching as a way to engage with science topics one might not be familiar with. I'll be sharing resources on using art to assist with scientific literacy, while I teach attendees to stitch science-related patterns, such as insects, viruses, and botanical patterns. I've also used the exhibit to create some additional educational and outreach resources for the UMass metadata unit. I created an "Intro to Metadata" LibGuide (<https://guides.library.umass.edu>) for patrons and subject librarians with the hope that this will help them better understand the services we provide. If this all helps patrons and other librarians engage with our work in a positive way, then I'll feel like we've all accomplished so much. 🌱

### Endnotes

1. Pastva, Joelen and Olson, Tony (2018) "Current Trends and Opportunities in Health Sciences Library Metadata," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 30: Iss. 4, Article 50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.8279>