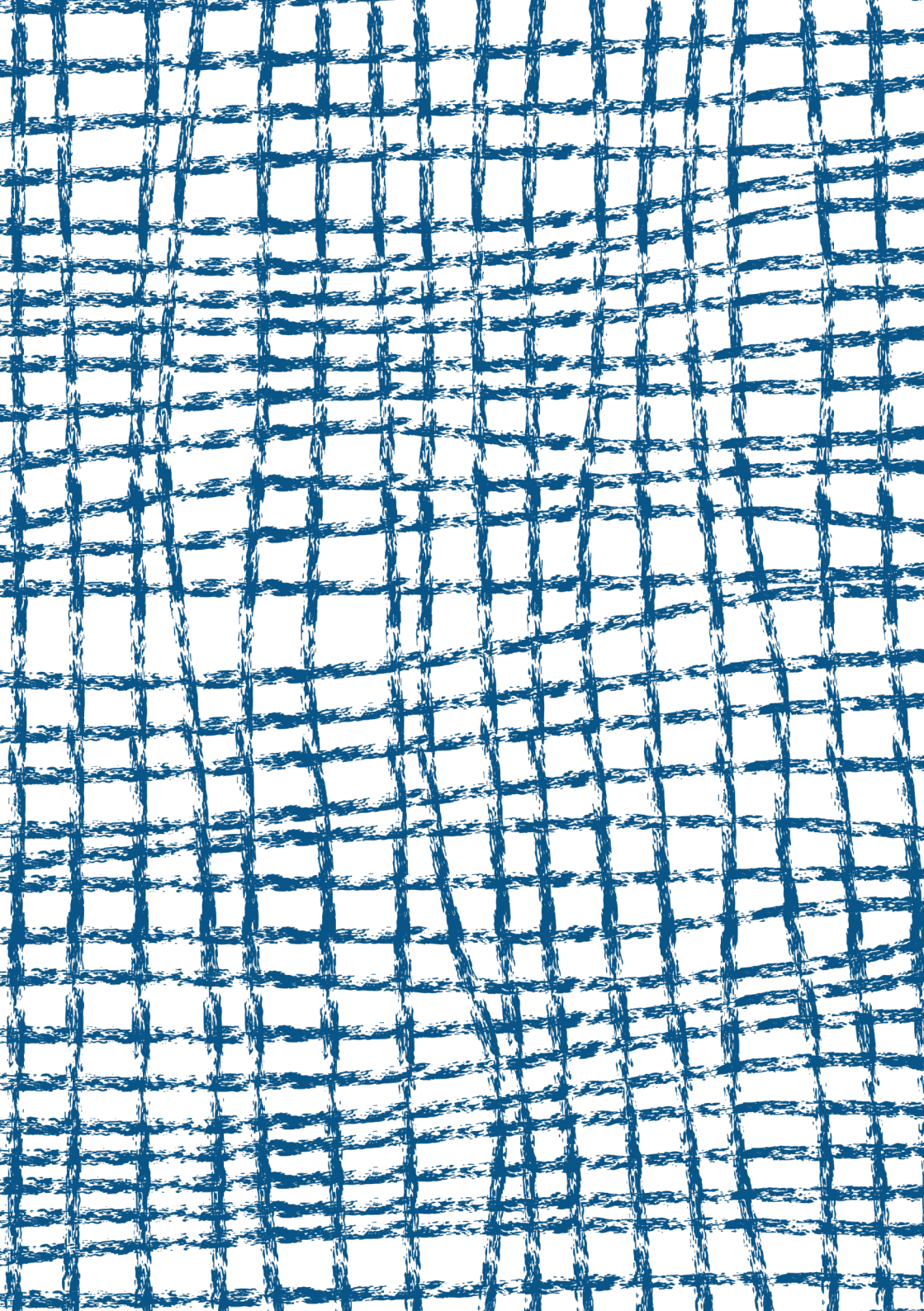


YOU STRETCHED
DIAGONALLY
ACROSS IT

CONTEMPORARY TAPESTRY

ESSAYS



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A BRIEF SNARL BETWEEN INFINITIES

BY SU WU

In his 1938 book, *The Principles of Art*, the philosopher and archaeologist R.G. Collingwood famously attempted to categorize expressive visual work, that foolhardy effort of trying to make sense of the world by carving it into smaller worlds, and then codifying the pieces. He eschewed propaganda as not-art, with its desperate need to persuade, and perhaps overstated the directness in craft from plan to assembly, not anticipating what encroachments non-human intelligence might make on creativity and efficiency in the intervening century.

Instead, Collingwood located ambiguity most of all between art and magic, which both take the same stuff there ever was, and show us something else. What was once a “long and hideous experiment of suppressing magic by force,” that is, by burning witches, was subsequently controlled by ridicule, transformed from fear into the unspoken, pervasive sense that belief is not a crime but a folly. “Our civilization prides itself in being sensible, rational, businesslike,” he wrote in notes published after his death.¹ The doctrines of efficiency and rationality “discountenance emotion and the expression of emotion,” Collingwood wrote. “In particular, it distrusts art and religion as things not altogether respectable.”

Tapestry is the artform perhaps most associated

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James, & Phillip Smallwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 206.

in the Western canon with its ecclesiastical examples, such as Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* that once lined the Sistine Chapel, hanging off the wall in front of trompe l'oeil paintings of draped fabric.² In contemporary works, too, illusion is built into the very structure of a tapestry, which is neither purely image nor purely object, but a categorical collapse. Like the body of Christ, its substance does not change states in the process of becoming, does not harden nor dilute nor get carved into dust. Rather, a tapestry relies on sleight-of-hand, shaping poignancy only from the small miracle of mutual inscription—"that we are not self-enclosed individuals...but are enmeshed and porous, effected and effecting," as artist Candice Lin has said.³ The perceptual shift is not a result of attempted verisimilitude but of double vision, of effect and cause happening at once.

To exist in two states is a condition of exile, of course—to appear intact and yet be sawed in half—but also of attunement to simultaneous realities, of extra-sensory belief, of others "in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effecting the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting *fabric*," as the magician and theorist David Abrams wrote of consciousness (emphasis mine).⁴ In a tapestry, at least as I have attempted to understand it in this exhibition, the surface and the substrate are co-arising; the image is also the matter. For all its depiction of myth and legend, a tapestry returns incantation to the interstices of material, to the pliable grid that is altered by the tension of us actually

² See the brochure for Exhibition of the tapestries of the Acts of the Apostles in the Sistine Chapel curated by Alessandra Rodolfo, Museo Vaticani, Vatican City: https://www.museivaticani.va/content/dam/museivaticani/pdf/eventi_novita/iniziativa/eventi/2020/122_brochure_arazzi.pdf.

³ Ross Simonini, "Interview with Candice Lin," *A Lie Before Its Time*, April 15, 2022, accessed online February 4, 2025, <https://rosssimonini.substack.com/p/candice-lin-jared-madere-and-say>.

⁴ David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 39.

being in it.

In a telling of *Sleeping Beauty*, after the witches have given their blessings to the newborn, a forgotten, uninvited witch appears and casts a death spell (death is the ultimate marginalization after all, and also the ever after): while spinning flax, making fiber, the princess will one day prick her finger and die. Only the smallest witch, hiding behind a tapestry, has a gift left to give to the princess. She absorbs the curse into the tapestry and dampens the full force of death into slumber, wielding the tapestry as a tool of practical magic. And I wonder when else an artwork might do so much, or offer so much protection? First, as a place to hide at an overlong baby shower, before transforming into an object that can induce sleep, waking only to the face of someone who loves you.⁵

We have experience enough with textile to translate by sight not only how a tapestry will feel, but also to recognize its latent utility, to soak up spells and spills, too. As an image of substance, a tapestry has temperature and thickness, whether in spun fiber or otherwise. The works in this exhibition take as material such familiar, everyday objects as cardboard boxes, used bedsheets, aluminum, cashmere, mop heads, pine needles, agave, tires, copper, barbed wire, cotton, magazines, zip ties, and colors that were once rationed or currencies, resurrecting in our screen-mediated lives the haptic qualities of coarseness and plushness and warmth. In these tapestries, like the people who utilize them and the narratives they depict, are reflections of systems of trade and exchange, the circulation and dispersal of ideas and plants and minerals, both native and not—and a critical break with the often

⁵ Sabrina Orah Mark, "I'm So Tired," *The Paris Review*, July 6, 2020, accessed online February 22, 2025, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/07/06/im-so-tired/>.

rigid ethnographic categorizations that have historically more often guided presentations of textile in institutional settings.

Instead of fixed delineations, and even of authenticity, the works in this exhibition engage tradition as improvisational and adaptative—the “paradox” of history’s creation, as artist Yto Barrada has pointed out, because “apparently tradition is something that is transmitted, not something you make up.”⁶ Identity, across the works in this exhibition and their inquiries, is not something fixed nor possessed. Like any process which makes of gesture a devotion, a tapestry works by being open both to the question and to an uncertain, indeterminate idea of identity barely held together in “a promiscuity of culture,” as artist Kira Dominguez Hultgren says, reflecting on her own lived experience—and also identities as temporary and contentious, or even unverifiable, whether in mythology or by loss.

Like the fate of at least a few of those Raphael wall-hangings in the Sistine Chapel, which were likely taken apart for their gold and silver, a tapestry can come fully undone and disappear, arriving in winding subsequence and returning the way it came (the shared effort belying *text* and *textile*). What we know of Penelope’s tapestry in the *Odyssey*, woven in the daytime and unwoven at night, is mostly that for so long none of the suitors in her house noticed that effort can have no result, that they could come daily and demand that she choose a king from among them, and watch her weave as they made these demands, but nothing would come of her work or their words.⁷

In spite of its long history of technological mediation,

⁶ “Artist Yto Barrada on Her Geological Time Scale,” Cultured Magazine, July 16, 2018, accessed online February 4, 2025, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2018/07/16/yto-barrada-aspen-art-museum/>.

⁷ Described in more detail in Camille Okhio’s essay.

from the Industrial Revolution to the often anonymous workers making weavings as core memory, a tapestry remains a stubbornly unoptimized way of rendering an idea—reflecting not the conventional distinction in craft between the handmade and the machine-made, but rather a distinction between ambitions: of efficiency or excess, by which I mean an excess of care and attention that exceeds simple usefulness.⁸ In tapestry, a recursive medium, I have come to think that the effort of expression is not immediacy, but will—a durational faith, and perhaps why it is a medium well-suited to artists who themselves grapple with vastness and depictions of the unknown. Belief, per Collingwood, is not rational, and a trait the algorithm approaching artificial intelligence has so far shown no interest in approximating. The machine is not built to waste time, not least of all wondering about what it does not know. To see the shortness of the day, and the scale of our lives, is perhaps the last purview of the human. And like a tapestry—in which the action of making is the same as the action of unmaking—ours is an existence revocable, just a brief snarl between infinities. Time, someone once said as consolation, is not a thing you can spend because time is not a thing that is apart from you; we are made of time. And so too it is with tapestry, made of everyday materials but also time experienced as finitude, and then, also, of life.

8 Described in more detail in Travis Diehl's essay.

LOOPS

BY TRAVIS DIEHL

I remember a school trip to Blandwood, a modest Italianate mansion in my hometown in North Carolina preserved as a museum. Not much sticks with me of the artworks, artifacts, furnishings, and embellishments collected there by successive wealthy families, except for one wall-mounted textile: a narrative or cosmological scene in purple and teal, richly woven and beaded and sequined by several generations of craftspeople from somewhere far away. So much devotion in this object—by people who would not see their work finished—and who probably couldn't imagine their art decorating a stairwell in this southern manse.

Utter devotion, then alienation—many intricate spiritual objects, from tombs to mandalas, have followed the same arc. But there's something particularly intensive about textiles, since, unlike most of the media stocking the world's encyclopedic museums, weaving has been automated. And as soon as hand-making became optional, it became a statement. Medieval tapestries billowed with overwhelming presence and power, but to weave a tapestry today speaks to attention, spirituality, and endurance—a meditative practice instead of a productive one. The same is also true of any physical textile or work of art that rejects the argument that, since all artworks are destined to be digital images, you may as well skip straight to the virtual.

Artificial intelligence, which is neither artificial

nor intelligent, is today's mechanized loom.¹ Whether machines can make pictures that resemble art is a foregone conclusion. In an echo of the industrial revolution, tech oligarchs of all stripes are pushing AI products that promise to free human workers from supposedly rote tasks like programming, driving, writing—and image making. Like the weavers of yore coerced into factories, artists who lament the thoughtless rollout of image-generating tools (which have absorbed countless .jpegs of painstaking artwork without permission) aren't generally anti-tech. Instead, the debate around AI art is a struggle to keep our technologies earthbound, and to leave something spiritual to process.

Plenty of tech boosters claim to want true, self-sufficient machine consciousness—or the singularity, or an artificial god. The sincerity of these beliefs matters less than the way a messianic tone drives investment, monetary and spiritual. In claims for AI tools' transcendent powers of processing and generation lie a false picture of dematerialization. This is the same gradual abstraction of spirituality that has accompanied western thought since the Renaissance. In Dante's day, hell was underground, heaven was above the stars. Later thinkers realized that the physical universe is infinite—leaving no room for the divine.² But Enlightenment philosophers still believed in God. They absorbed the metaphysical realm, conceptualizing heaven as a sort of spiritual substance permeating the material world. Similar claims were made for electricity, then for the internet and cyberspace,

¹ Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale U P, 2021), 8. "In this book I argue that AI is neither artificial nor intelligent. Rather, artificial intelligence is both embodied and material, made from natural resources, fuel, human labor, infrastructures, logistics, histories, and classifications."

² Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York: Norton, 1999), 33–36.

although these are as bound by physics as you or I.

Now, tech companies depend on concealing the physical footprint of their magical products. But computers are still machines. The Jacquard loom, debuted in the early 19th century, used long chains of punch cards to automate the weaving of complex patterns and arabesques. In the 1830s, a manufacturer in Lyon produced silk memorial portraits of the system's inventor so detailed that people still mistake them for engravings.³ Years later, stacks of punch cards were adapted for mechanical computing, used to program warrens of circuits and latches to perform math. Computers have since grown exponentially in power, and shrunk likewise in size. Today's tech companies are invested in the opposite of physicality—ephemerality, invisibility, lightness—through descriptions of clouds and wireless data. It's easy to forget, as they generate a metaverse, that computers are still made of ever-smaller latches and logic gates, integrated circuits that resemble layers of woven copper.

A physical image in the digital age isn't nostalgic, necessarily. It insists on a tactile relationship to the world, towards a future in which humans still make art. If an exhibition of large tapestries feels in some way stubborn, it's worth asking why its impulses are distinctive—why the fact that artists close to their process, not alienated by the tech they use, however advanced, feels so rare, so fragile.

AI is frivolous, frothy, and visual—but it's also a ruthlessly physical, resource-intensive way of mining value from metaphysics. You could say its sales pitch is the commodification of spirit—the assertion that art can be harvested, processed, and repackaged, the good

³ See the entry for Joseph Marie Jacquard (1839), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/222531>.

ground up with the bad. Part of what it means to keep artists in the loop of contemporary image production is to protect conscientiousness toward something other than extraction and profit. But the counter to extraction isn't immateriality, which is impossible anyway. It's spirituality without transcendence. The physical tapestry commits to the world. The handmade one further commits to time and inefficiency, refusing the arrow of progress. A material spirituality is like the double valence of a tapestry, which is both an image and its substrate. In a woven textile, the surface and the matter are congruent: we view both the image and its raw components at the same time. The image is made of how it's made. It's a loop.

ON TAPESTRY

BY GRANT JOHNSON

As someone curious about textiles—from the familial and functional to the artistic, fashionable, and virtual—for essentially my entire life, I have long been haunted by ‘tapestry,’ as both a term and kind of thing. Like any good haunting, possible causes are numerous, challenging to determine and single out with empirical confidence.

‘Tapestry’ as a term always feels both concrete and ambiguous. Perhaps I am spooked by both conditions independently and equally. More likely, I am put off by their unreconciled (and unlikely-to-be-reconciled) co-existence. Like any word, it is easy enough to look up “tapestry” in a general dictionary. Beyond such publications, it is also tracked, like many other more esoteric classifications, by the taxonomic and terminology obsessed field that textile study, collecting, and preservation have been and continue to be.

Unlike other diagnoses drawn from the various available DSMs—such as “twill,” “couching,” “smocking,” or (everybody’s favorites) “warp” and “weft”—that would be surprising to hear and undefinable by most at your average dinner party, “tapestry” is a word many might use with some blithe confidence, including those who rarely think about textiles beyond choosing what to wear, where to wipe their hands, or when to do their laundry. These invocations usually have little to do, in fact have likely never concerned themselves, with the ‘the primary structures of fabrics.’¹ Why would they? Textiles generally arrive in

1 Irene Emery’s *The Primary Structures of Fabrics*, 1966, a kind of dictionary of textile structures and

our lives fully formed, constructed by someone else far from our homes and daily lives. Tapestries, and the rules that might define their construction, are even rarer and mysterious.

So, when someone says “tapestry,” they often embrace and elongate an ongoing web of vague associations and connotations, of historic Europe, fusty museums, weed flecked college dorm rooms, maybe Heart castle (if you’re lucky). One feels these associations via tone and clues of context, a certain glint in the speaker’s eye, or a quasi-condescending or lightly bored inflection, that implies something fuddy-duddy and forgotten, something perhaps magisterial in its way but also awkward and old world, something that we recognize but also can’t quite reconcile with our modern life.

We heard it loud and clear late last year, when critic Dean Kissick singled out the Barbican’s *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* as “the most depressing exhibition I had ever seen at the gallery.”²

“While *Unravel* pretended to be politically radical—even revolutionary,” wrote Kissick, “it didn’t seem to stand for much beyond liberal orthodoxy and feel good ambient diversity.” Filled with “fantasies of resistance,” it had, “little to offer in terms of genuine, substantive social change or artistic experimentation.” In the wake of the electoral devastation of 2024, textiles become a metaphor for the extremely depressing experience of grappling with immense political failure and the prospect of a major social rearrangement that follows. Populated by artworks “almost entirely produced with traditional methods and materials, in

the shared terminology used to describe them, remains a primary point of reference for textile conservation, collecting, and preservation.

² Dean Kissick, “The Painted Protest: how politics destroyed contemporary art,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 2024, <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/12/the-painted-protest-dean-kissick-contemporary-art/>.

recognizable aesthetics," *Unravel* becomes the introductory and first symptomatic example for an essay beside itself with the state of contemporary art at large.

All too easily equating textiles (among other, often craft-inflected formats) with a dead-end past, Kissick bemoans a ubiquitous contemporary landscape, "progressive in content but conservative in form." Like so many before him, Kissick takes aim at an easy strawman, perpetuating an attitude toward textiles that finds them inherently retrograde. Falling back on Arthur Danto and Tom Wolfe, he inherits this all-too-familiar side-eye like a kind of mental readymade, as prêt-à-porter as a white t-shirt. This is familiar, almost expectable. Perhaps ultimately what's worse, is the creeping sense that even if Kissick or others like him could begin to believe in the "politics and power of textiles," they would still stick out their tongues at their status as art, or simply roll their eyes, ultimately just chronically preprogrammed to be bored at the thought. This latter score feels more deeply rooted and felt. To be lame, in fact, or feeling, is a hard, and more chronically damning, fate to shake.

One feels a certain exasperation even in the account of "tapestry" provided by Anni Albers, (likely the most famous weaver in this and the preceding century), in her 1965 book *On Weaving*. Positioned as the ninth of ten chapters, it is as if Albers felt a not unrelatable responsibility to address the topic eventually, weaving's elephant in the room, and yet put it off and put it off...until it was almost too late. Albers starts with the possible technical definitions ("the term refers to a technique of weaving, or variation of it, where a weft thread, covering the warp completely, passes only over the surface of those sections of the weaving that are to be built of it") but ultimately mobilizes the term and her

chapter dedicated to it into something more.³

“It is an artwork,” she declares, in that “hardly any of the time-saving inventions of the past hundreds of thousands of years of textile history can be utilized in this work.”⁴ As such, Albers casts “tapestry” as a format interestingly resistant to mass manufacture and, by extension, mediation (and how they might intertwine).

Textile mass manufacture all but left the United States decades ago, but, in 2025, when so many things deemed irreversible, previously regarded as settled “history” have been revised or returned with a fearsome vengeance, one hesitates to say “never.” Disrupted supply chains, the environmental catastrophe of “fast fashion,” presidential fantasies of domestic factories revived, and home crafters captivated by their machine-aided quilts all make a return to local textile manufacture writ large more believable than ever. Meanwhile, looking back from more than fifty years on, in a world far more “mediated” than the postwar United States that surrounded Albers, and amid our own “tapestry” and craft revival, Albers’s meditation on mediation also feels prescient and worth teasing out.

In the realm of textiles, Albers writes, tapestry “demands the most direct—that is, the least impeded—response of material and technique to the hand of the maker, the one who here transforms matter into meaning.”⁵ In other words, technology cannot solve tapestry’s problems. Turning to tapestry, then, we begin to admit, and confront, all the ways in which technology cannot solve many of our problems either.

Tapestry, Albers contends, in its dependence upon

3 Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (1965) (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 48.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

handwork, preserves the “magic” of textiles for a world where they have otherwise lost their alchemy, where they have become devalued and banal. Magic is robbed by the utilitarian: “fabric’s usefulness, when linked with the increased ease of its fabrication, tended to dilute its magic potentiality as an art medium.”⁶

This is some part of what haunts me about historic tapestries that I’ve met in the present; I move past their picture and zoom in on their threads, ruining any potential they might have for pictorial illusion. I see them for their materiality, not the pictures they carry. They do feel drained of a magic it seems I am supposed to see, or at least, be able to imaginatively recover.

Seemingly feeling this too, or something similar, in her own era, Albers decenters the usual examples of achievement in tapestry: “what we have been made to think of as the high points of the art of weaving: the famous great tapestries of the Gothic, the Renaissance, the Baroque.”⁷ Drawing upon classic modernist slurs, she calls them “decorative,” “monumental illustrations” with only “supporting parts to play.” Most damningly, she states that these tapestries, usually upheld then and now as the hallmarks of the genre, “are responsible...for textiles being relegated to the place of a minor art.”⁸

Instead of these largely European examples, she returns (as she does elsewhere in this text and others) to the work of precolonial Peru, arguing that it succeeds because of what she calls its “directness of communication.”

“Much of the potency of textile art has been lost during centuries of efforts to produce woven versions

6 Ibid., 49.

7 Ibid., 50.

8 Ibid.

of paintings," she writes, "but trespassing into another art form, however great that form may be, does not necessarily bring forth great art works. On the contrary," she concludes, "the original concept as well as the transposition suffers by the very fact of indirectness."⁹

Here again, Albers is thinking about mediation, about translation from one medium to another. This was already a theme in her midcentury modern life, clearly. It is also an age-old aesthetic question. Thinking of her in 1965, I think of Anni Albers, telephone in hand, experiencing static on the line, perhaps as she calls Trude Guermonprez, her former Black Mountain colleague, in northern California, or Luis Barragán in Mexico City, to discuss their upcoming collaboration for the Hotel Camino Real. Those Renaissance tapestries, for me, as they were for Albers, are all about mediation, about getting more static than signal, about the conditions of the conduit becoming so pronounced as to foreclose my ability to experience anything but.

Our digital century has often promised to solve all this, to create virtual utopias where we connect with friends and loved ones without difficulty or delay. Instead, they have become corporate from the first and charged with inherent bias. Meanwhile, most contemporary, allegedly offline experiences (getting or keeping a job, making a reservation at a restaurant, entering a museum) require us to submit to some banal tyranny of the digital: a smartphone, an email address, an internet connection, or some Bermudian triangulation of all three. Whereas twenty years ago these new digital forms of mediation felt like veils of possibility, postmodern hyperspaces and metatexts, potential homes for newly liberated communities, cyborg feminisms, and

9 Ibid.

other unprecedented democratic shapes for connection, now, they feel like so many blind windows, assembled into a miserable penitentiary with no escape hatch, ruining our societies and ourselves.

No matter how sophisticated it gets, a digital screen or projection—not unlike a Renaissance tapestry—always ultimately breaks down into (and as such testifies to) its illusionistic components, whether they be individual threads or falsely colored boxes arranged into a grid. As such, tapestry in this century, unconcerned with such illusions, seems to me to proffer “resolution” instead. In Anni Albers’s sense, of problems and solutions that cannot be solved by the supposed progress of technology, tapestry is a format that insists on direct experience with a material reality that we cannot escape or plan to supersede with our devilish phones or other intermediary devices. “Resolution” is also an emotional metaphor, materialized and configured by tapestries as they are reimagined by contemporary practitioners. There is something undeniably soothing about this new work in “tapestry.” Because tapestries resolve the lack of resolution to be found in contemporary, digitized life, they lay bare its inherent fictive promises and faulty constructions, it’s inevitable irresolution.

Recalling Albers’s preference for the Peruvian offers an alternative intellectual and formal precedent for the “tapestry” of today. Beyond this medium specificity, it is also a way of grounding, and explaining the wider re-embrace of “craft” practices and object making generally that clearly troubles cool guys like Kissick. From abstract paintings made of oil-suspended minerals applied to woven canvases to blown glass and ceramic vessels, artists have returned to specific kinds of things embedded

in specific technical know-how, practical histories, and institutional contexts. The very bulky looms are shuttling, and the kilns are firing. ChatGPT is unlikely to disrupt them much at all.

All this “thing making” to be found across contemporary art has become a massive wrench in the predicted trajectory of culture and art more specifically that we were raised to expect. It resists our dissolution into the empire of the digital as well as the more art-world-specific dematerialization allegedly inherent in conceptual art or post-studio plurality. Ideas can take any form, sure, but when they do take shape, those decisive forms depend upon a highly specific chain of intersecting necessities, from material flows to inherited traditions to collective labor and investment.

We also remain dimensional beings, meeting artworks or simply any aspect of the world much as the ancient peoples of the Andes Albers so valorized likewise did. It matters what format ideas and emotions take, and in what shape they meet us in the present. Albers idealizes her preferred mode of tapestry as a space of “direct communication.” One trusts this conviction came from her own experience of extant examples, informed by decades of looking at and working with textiles across three continents. As she makes clear in her writing, it was also amplified by the reigning conclusion (from all available evidence then and still now) that precolonial Andean cultures, despite their immense diversity and roughly four thousand years of independent existence, never developed any written languages.

Trapped within linguistic ways of thinking as we are, this is a hard claim to wrap one’s head around, hard to believe but also seemingly impossible to project oneself

into. Somewhere in all of that, its several seductions are palpable. For one, it created an ideal modernist scenario for someone like Anni Albers, where visual art existed autonomously from linguistic description or literary source, not because it liberated itself from history or past precedent, but because it never had to. Free from the shadow of the linguistic, these “tapestries” arose without the attendant binary typical of Western thought and art, between idea and execution, concept and form.

This ideal was also surely alluring, and urgent for Albers—still in the postwar, Cold War years—as someone who had witnessed the rise of fascism and fled the Nazi party’s seizure of previously largely independent institutions of education and culture. Linguistic descriptions amass into official truths, received wisdom, history with a capital H. As recent events have reinscribed, new or progressive interpretations of both the present and the past are all too easily deleted or revised. Meanwhile, artworks are harder, if not impossible to “read,” and thus harder to revise and instrumentalize quite so efficiently and dependably into evidence of anything other than their own existence. As long as they survive (a big “if”), artworks are mute, recalcitrant, and mysterious, evading this play of words and contest of conflicting meanings with their persistent obduracy, emerging from the past, aspiring for all kinds of as-yet-unrealized futures.

TIME WEAVING

BY CAMILLE OKHIO

Penelope's weaving appears first in book two of the *Odyssey*. She and Telemachus, her son with Odysseus, fend off suitors of marriage, as the patriarch of their house has already been gone many years. Penelope installs a large loom in their great hall, making a performance of her weaving and putting off betrothal with her tireless labor. No husband can be named when there is still work to do.

Tapestries and weavings have long been a particular outlet for female ingenuity, encasing our skill, our capacity to form cogent, long-form narratives, our patience, and our adaptability. Tapestries, though technically static, carry within them movement and time. They are narratives with shifting ends. Like writing a book, a weaver can stop in the middle, revisit the beginning, and start again, keeping the bare bones and rehashing the meat. In the decidedly female strategy of getting to the truth through performance, Penelope uses her domesticity as a trick—an echo of the legendary guile of Odysseus, the noble trickster of ancient Greece. His actions have been recalled as heroic, and hers as devotional:

*"You must be patient;
I have worked hard to weave this winding-sheet
... Please let me
Finish it"" And her words made sense to us.
So every day she wove the mighty cloth,
And then at night by torchlight, she unwove it.*

*For three long years her trick beguiled the Greeks.*¹

Penelope uses her weaving to enforce patience on men who would prefer a quick result. This display of female agency expresses a timeless, feminine aptitude for survival—the ability to control while being controlled. The most advanced of us today bring about our preferred version of the world through similar means. The loom is a symbol of transport, whether to a more comfortable earthly situation or, in some cases, a wholly divine realm.

In the Renaissance, embroideries and weavings were the purview of continental nuns.² From the 1500s onward, convents grew as refuges for women uninterested in the corporal, political, or social aspects of marriage, often dovetailing as workshops of learning and highly-skilled craft. A whole team of seasoned women would pour hours or years into a single capelet or mantel. A pope might carry a decade of labor on his back. A nobleman, several years. A base layer of the most exceptional weaving, one bolt of perfection, would then be finished with the finest trimmings.³ This was a time when a textile was as valuable as a jewel.

Weaving can also address other, darker impulses or fraught responses to traditional gender codes. Between 1944 and 1955, the schizophrenic artist Marguerite Sirvins wove a wedding dress for her much desired, imagined

¹ In Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, Homer describes a "mighty loom inside the palace hall" of Penelope and Odysseus. Penelope weaves her "fine long cloth" during the day as she receives and puts off suitors, and unweaves it at night. She tells them she will decide on her second husband when her tapestry is finished, but of course, it never will be. See Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

² Religious vestments made by nuns for priests were included in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2018 Costume Institute exhibit *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, exhibiting years' worth of several women's work in a single garment.

³ In a Catholic context, the wealth to fund these textiles was accumulated through tithes collected from the lay community and large gifts from Catholic monarchs. By the church's reasoning, sustained displays of wealth in the male religious community underlined the divine authority of the church and the hierarchy within it, from the pope down to the lowliest of priests and novitiates.

betrothal. Like Penelope, she first unwove old bed sheets, using the thread to crochet a dress in which she would never walk down the aisle.⁴

Similarly, the Danish artist Ane Henriksen's *Trembling*, though made by a sound mind, is also woven from worn out bedclothes, with silk and red jersey dots that mimic a medieval bloodletting, fifty years after Sirvin's dress. Henriksen's emotional work encourages introspection into every recess of the mind: dark, light, or somewhere in between. It is through her extremely refined hand that her abstract configurations are able to communicate such psychological depth.

In Diedrick Brackens's tapestries you can see the psyche at its most fecund, imagining its way to reality. The Texas-born artist weaves his desires and dreams into silhouetted figures on richly-hued backgrounds. Black bodies in dance, in unity, in confrontation, and in communion wind with and around blocks of colors, vaguely-suggested natural environments, stripes, spheres and other shapes. His works are room dividers between the present and a hoped-for future.

There is the meta in this material to consider as well. In Tudor England the folds and divots of a stylishly arranged shawl were woven into wall-sized tapestries: textiles depicted in another textile. In one tapestry from Pieter Coecke van Aelst's series depicting the life of St. Paul, sumptuously outfitted citizens surround burning books. Van Aelst designed the scene, which was woven in Brussels before 1539, for a schismatic Henry VIII.⁵ Silk, gilt gold, and silver metal thread travel through the scene, elevating the wool warp to a celestial position. The violence

⁴ Now that dress hangs on a form at the Art Brut collection in Lausanne, Switzerland.

⁵ Following his break from the Catholic Church, Henry VIII painted himself as a religious scholar and holy man through commissioning works of art and literature such as Van Aelst's tapestries.

of a despot's book burnings are here propagandized as holy. As just. The shedding, picking, beating, letting-off, and taking-up of now-unnamed women's hands lent credence to a fallacy.

In the 2024 work *Planetary Expedition, Undocumented*, Consuelo Jiménez Underwood similarly weaves metal into the fibers of a scroll-shaped tapestry, reflecting a politicized narrative, albeit with more honorable roots than Henry VIII's. In copper, steel, and barbed wire, she explores the metaphoric potential of celestial bodies to address colonialism and immigration. There is no agenda of domination here, but instead a bid for resistance and self-actualization. As exhibited in Underwood's work, textiles have long been an apparatus through which to understand and communicate identity and place.

In act one, scene two of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Portia disparages a suitor, Falconbridge, as incongruous:

*How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany and his behaviour everywhere.*⁶

By this she suggests this man either does not know who he is or is trying to be someone (or several people) he is not. In the late 16th century, each region of Europe had its own distinct textile tradition and style of wearing garments. A man with a doublet from Italy, hose from France, and a bonnet from Germany is essentially a man in an African kufi, with an Indian kurta, and a Western skinny jean: a confused, tragic, fashion victim with culturally

⁶ In this statement Portia communicates her mistrust for Falconbridge and roots that feeling in the inconsistency of his self- presentation. WHICH EDITION OF MERCHANT OF VENICE

vampiric tendencies.

The force of Portia's disavowal of Falconbridge brings us back to the gravity of textile as a physical object and a symbol of time and agency. The loom is a tool through which to transmit value. At the time Shakespeare lived, textiles were so precious that they were passed down and repurposed in a cycle that has few Western contemporary equivalences. Textiles at all levels were so costly that they needed to live many lives to prove worth their price. A hierarchical network of hand-me-downs existed within many European courts, with chambermaids inheriting their mistress's old garments as partial payment for their own domestic labor. A similar cyclical economy of thread can be seen in Diedrick Brackens's practice. The artist makes coats out of the scraps that do not make it into his finalized works. He refers to the repurposing as a "quilter's mentality." Similarly, Christy Matson incorporates byproducts and surplus from contemporary, mainstream fashion production into her tapestries. To her the refuse is "treasure."

As we saw weaving as politics during Henry VIII's reign, we see it again in his daughter's. In 1600, Elizabeth I owned hundreds of gowns, kirtles, and mantels in velvet, silk, and satin, with slashed sleeves to display additional layers of rich textiles, one beneath another. The embroidery done by her ladies-in-waiting and skilled craftswomen outside of the court incorporated silver and gold thread like her father's tapestries, but here depicted elements of the natural world that she encountered on her daily walks, rather than allegory. Yet in her biography of the queen, Anne Somerset emphasizes how Elizabeth's commitment to rich adornment, even exceeding her fellow monarchs, was a conscious and ultimately successful

tool to communicate her tiny island kingdom's growing might: a strategy in cloth.⁷ Ambassadors to her court thought her dress so impressive and politically relevant that descriptions of her outfits found their way into official ambassadorial dispatches.

Dancing, one of Elizabeth I's favorite pastimes into old age, showed the glittering velvets and jewels in which she was adorned to their strength. She knew this. With each step and spring of the volta, a popular dance of the court, skirts trembled and satins caught the light. The repetitive movements of the dance call back to mind the weaver at her loom. At its genesis, weaving was for warmth and protection. Over millennia it has evolved both in its process and final forms, to encompass a narrative capacity for memory, emotion, and invention alongside its political, religious, and domestic history. Wood, metal, glass: many materials morph into new forms with each age, but the thread has managed to constrict and expand without restriction. A tapestry can be as long as a human life or longer. At its core, the textile's strength is in its movement, both through its creation and in its activation. Fabric of this kind is fluid gold: muscle memory bound in thread.

⁷ Might and wealth achieved through a policy of informally approved piracy and colonial expansion.

You Stretched Diagonally Across It: Contemporary Tapestry is organized by Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, Texas, and curated by Su Wu. The Fabric Workshop and Museum presentation is organized by Kelly Shindler, Executive and Artistic Director, with Hilde Nelson, FWM Curatorial Fellow.

Exhibition Dates

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Editorial

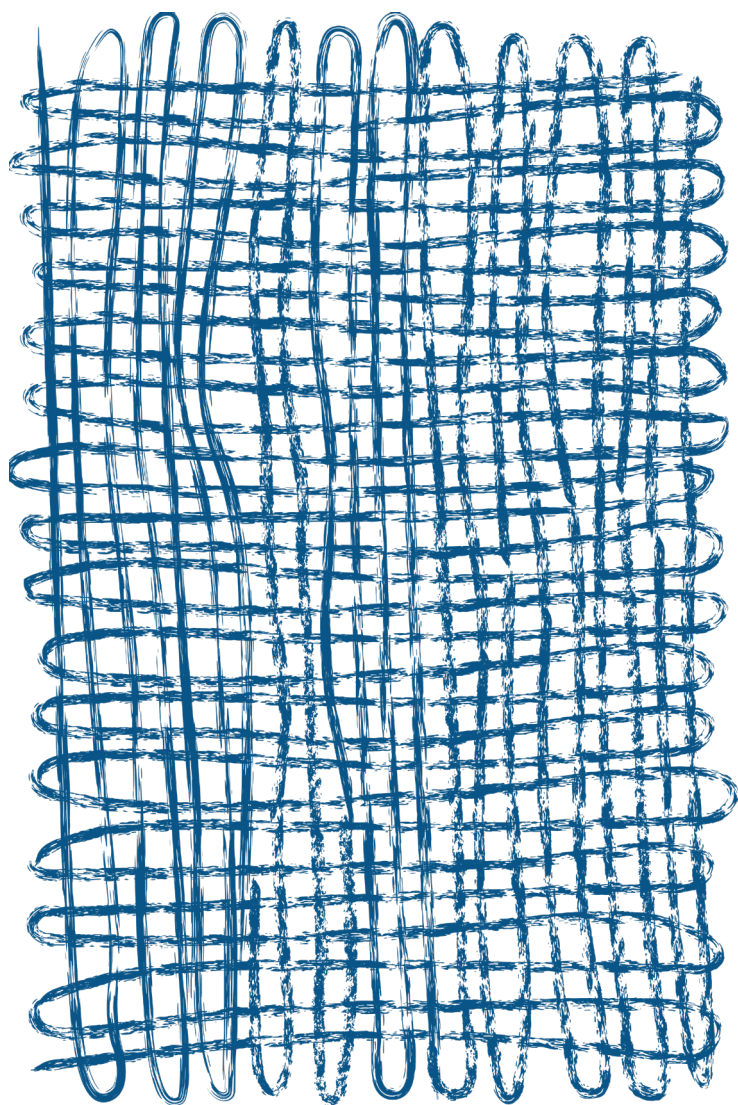
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