

Contemporary Textile Art

Membranes of Relation

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Inspired by a renewed interest in textile art in contemporary art exhibitions, this article proposes to widen the vocabulary to account for the sensory qualities in textile art as compared to painting. Focused readings of works by artists Anne-Sofie Overgaard, Kari Steihaug, and Ann Cathrin November Høibo will introduce the concepts 'relationscape' and 'minor gesture' (Erin Manning) to discuss the ability of textile art works to engage viewers in spatial relations.

In the last few decades, in museums and galleries, we have witnessed a renewed interest in textile art. The last decennial, international art venues like The Venice Biennale and Documenta in Kassel with their global focus have shown an interest in exhibiting textile art alongside other art forms and media. The retrospective exhibitions of works by Magdalena Abakanowicz at Tate Modern/Henie-Onstad (2023) and Jagoda Buic's solo exhibitions in Rome (2017) and London (2019) are cases in point, as is *Entangled: Threads and Making* at Turner Contemporary (2017). In Denmark and Norway, exhibition spaces have made room for comprehensive shows of textile work and solo exhibitions. This overall reconsideration has inspired this article. In noticing how textile art engages gallery guests in tactile and haptic forms of perception we want to propose a new vocabulary to account for its differences within the discipline of art history. Here, textile art has generally been considered inferior compared to painting and sculpture. Meanwhile, we propose to widen the vocabulary as to how textile art can create 'relationscapes' with a term borrowed from Erin Manning (Manning, 2009). We also use Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as an explanatory model to emphasize a compositional view of artistic creation. As such the following will neither have an emphasis on artworks primarily as objects, nor will its perspective be on optical contemplation. Rather the focus will

be on how haptic encounters can pave the way for wider sensorial fields of attention – and ways of thinking.

We concentrate our reading on textile works by artists Kari Steihaug, Ann Cathrin November Høibo, and Anne-Sofie Overgaard in terms of their ability to create relationscapes. These contemporary works are chosen because they involve gallery guests in creating three-dimensional encounters spanning across different textile techniques, which are knitting, embroidery and weaving. Historically speaking, these techniques follow different traditions, belong to different socioeconomic contexts, and are differently linked to gender and class. In art historical terms, the works we have singled out can be said to refer to developments regarding the conceptual and relational turns in the 1960s and 1970s.

Background

Textile art has lived a rich and diverse yet parallel life to art history in the last century. Lisbeth Tolstrup, who has written extensively on textile art in Denmark, concludes her historical survey *Tekstile udtryk: en introduktion* (Textile Expressions: An Introduction) by maintaining that the literature on textile art is mostly descriptive and has not managed to develop a meta-perspective (Tolstrup 2010, p. 106). Internationally, textile art was given a platform at The International Lausanne Tapestry Biennial (La Biennale Internationale de la tapisserie de Lausanne) spanning over three decades (1962-1995). In Scandinavia, the Nordic Textile Triennial (Nordisk Tekstiltriennale) was operative between 1976 and 1997 with exhibitions travelling between the Nordic countries and managed by shifting artist volunteers. The triennial was initiated by two Danish weavers, Margrethe Agger and Annette Juel, and the purpose was to heighten and strengthen the interest of and the milieu around tapestry (Blæsbjerg Ørum 2010, p. 108). The triennials were a success as to textile communities in the Nordic countries, but they had no impact on art history in academia.

It is noteworthy that craft and art seemed to converge in the 1990s (Astrup Bull, 2007) as The International Lausanne Tapestry Biennial and the Nordic Textile Triennial had ceased to exist. And recently, in 2022, the conflation of art and craft has been realized in the merger of four collec-

tions in The National Museum of Norway (Nasjonalmuseet) in Oslo: The National Gallery, The Museum of Contemporary Art, The Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, and The Norwegian Museum of Architecture. The erosion of long-established boundaries also coincides with the turn towards New Materialism and a general interest in how materials in our environment are produced, reproduced and consumed. In contemporary art the term textile art embraces all techniques and traditions, and often the use of textiles carries with it historical and cultural contexts and produce 'textile politics' in the tradition of the feminist practices of the 1970s (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 7). It is within this framework that the following theoretical and analytical propositions should be seen. It is our aim to show how textile art and craft can be a source of art theory, and that textile has its own properties and capacities to generate specific sensorial interrelations between objects and bodies in space. Before presenting a more detailed analysis of this, we will give a brief and tentative account of the historiographical preconditions for the denigration of textile work as such.

Craft Versus Art in Modern Art Theory

In the modern, 19th and 20th century, Western, academic art history, weavings and textile objects were most often referred to as craft and rarely valued with the same measures and judged by the same standards as painting and sculpture, with the exemption of tapestry in the French Gobelin tradition, which in some cases was considered 'fine art' (Preisler Skovgaard, 2021, p. 18). In the 20th century, it was however not unusual amongst famous modernist painters to have monumental paintings woven as tapestry, often produced by anonymous women. But in general, textile works became disparaged arts, adhering to cultural or social contextualization rather than aesthetic forms of critical valuation. This situation was the result of especially two intertwined developments in the 19th century. One was the new institutional reality with modern museums founded on Enlightenment ideas that divided the arts into craft (works of the hand) and 'fine' art (works of the spirit); the other was a new aesthetic philosophy that elevated art (painting and sculpture) to contemplative and pseudo-religious heights and positioned the artist as a genius (cf. works of the spirit). Both secured the

autonomy of the artwork and side-lined the crafts making them obsolete to modernist theory and criticism.

Meanwhile, as researchers and artists alike have engaged in textile art, it has become evident how there is more to the history of the image than what painting, and the semiotics of signs can explain. Recent research publications such as Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* (Adamson, 2007) and T'ai Smith's *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Smith, 2014) have highlighted crafts as 'thinking practices' on the same level as all other art forms. They have also substantiated the "need to understand the idea of craft historically, as that highly contested concept that was in some sense invented alongside design within and against the beginning of industrialism" (Smith 2014, p. xxii-xxiii). So, even though a revitalization was the aim of John Ruskin and William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement in the 19th century, the label 'craft' continued to refer to pre-industrial methods of working.

Both Adamson and Smith highlight how the 18th century's definition of aesthetics and the subsequent classification of art and new media forms such as photography meant that handicraft became 'a limit of modern art' (Smith, 2014, p. xxi). It is Adamson's (and Derrida's) view that craft with Adorno's notion of the autonomy of modern art becomes 'supplemental'. Smith sums it up: "Craft is pervasive (everywhere in art and design), and yet mostly unrecognized. As the concepts of art come to the fore, the work's craft is that which recedes, or moves to the periphery, like a frame" (Smith, 2014, p. xxii). As a matter of fact, the blank field of art historical recognition might refer to the fact that textile canvas, cloth, and screens can so-to-speak be seen as the 'silent', material background for semiotic signs (images and words), conceived as carriers of meaning in Western culture.

The authors of this article share Smith's view that although textiles should be termed communicative (and touchable) media with the ability to create events that can even "stretch the limits of perception", this quality is often forgot "as we wear or sit on them" (Smith 2014, p. 174). To her, the reason for this oblivion is also the immense and widespread cultural traditions of weaving that extend across time and space. Her view of mediation as a simultaneous creation of events followed by an erasure of the very mediation is substantiated by Josef Vogl: "Media make things readable, au-

dible, visible, perceptible, but in doing so they also tend to erase themselves and their constitutive sensory function, making themselves imperceptible and ‘anaesthetic.’” (Vogl, 2008, p. 16).

Even though we share the view that weaving is an ancient medium of event-creation and simultaneous erasure that reaches beyond narrow ideas of mediation, we would like to focus on Smith’s point; namely how textile can often “stretch the limits of perception” (Smith, 2014). To theoretically expound the question of how textile works might be re-thought in terms of event-creation and relation, we propose to use the concept of *relationscape* coined by Erin Manning (Manning, 2009). With this concept, Manning “attempts to create a vocabulary for how movement becomes thought and vice-versa” (Manning, 2009, p. 8). She highlights that “[t]o come to language is more than to finalize form. To come to language is to feel the form-taking of concepts as they pre-articulate thoughts/feelings” (Manning, 2009, p. 7) In her readings of films, aboriginal painting, video, and dance, Manning brings forces of flow and intensity to the fore rather than representation, symbolization and narration.

With the advent of digital art and the general awareness of how algorithmic coding has influenced all aspects of living since the 1980s, it has become evident that the narratives and theories evolving around the ontology of painting ought not to be the only foundation of art historical thinking. Indeed, the mathematical aspects of weaving were developed even before writing, and as Sadie Plant explains regarding the development of a cybernetic legacy in history, Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace based their invention of the analytical engine in the 1840s on Jacquard’s system of punch card programs patented in 1802 (Plant, 1995). In her book *Thread Ripper* (2022), Danish author and artist Amalie Smith highlights how Ada Lovelace already during the first Industrial Revolution called attention to the relationship between the loom and the computer.¹ To us this history shows how the ancient loom track should be rethought as another path to picture/art theory – a path that naturally involves computation and the digital. We would like to quote Amalie Smith regarding this connection. The layout of the text in Smith’s book as well as the pagination both reflect the technology of weaving and perform a written weave, conditioned by relations of love and biology in the lives of both the author and Ada Lovelace:

The punched card is the physical link connecting the history of the computer to that of the loom. If we trace this connection backwards, we see that the history of the computer extends thousands of years.

With the invention of weaving, humans have already broken down images into points that are assembled into chains, in turn assembled into a pattern or image, not unlike pixels on a screen.

Jacquard could apply punched cards to the loom because weaving is intrinsically a binary technology: the weft is passed over or under the warp. These two possibilities permitted translation into hole or no-hole in the punched card. And later, into zeroes and ones. (Smith, 2022, p. 9)

In bourgeois class society, gender quickly became a marker that helped stratify society into different spheres and ultimately had consequences for how textile work was valued. The textile industry thrived on the serial production, on easy access to materials, and a cheap work force of mainly women and children, which rendered modern textile design possible from around 1850. The serial production was contemporary with modern mass distribution of books and the invention of the camera and the sewing machine. Through these components, modern mass consumption was orchestrated. Women and textiles were thus associated in two ways, through reproductive serial mass production and through reproductive handicraft and needlework in the home. Neither were considered as art.

It is noteworthy that the liberation of the eye (and mind) from the hand (and the body) that quickly made industrial production superior, simultaneously secluded women in private houses (mothers and daughters), in factories (line workers), and in hospitals (nurses). Their manual labor was either low paid or not paid at all since it was considered a voluntary calling of womanhood. Thus, a reduction of the value of manual handicraft goes hand in hand with the domestication of women and male dominance in the public sphere. In line with this, women are not allowed to get an education, but they are allowed to do manual work. The mythology or ideology at work is in other words to consider women as naturally inclined towards *reproduction* rather than *productive* work (cf. Marx), which only men have natural capabilities for.

The mind/body distinction that throughout art history has always meant a male perspective (gaze) on a female object (body) was reinforced

in modernity. Women were excluded from taking part in the democratic rights of bourgeois society and restricted to the sphere of reproduction in private homes. With limited access to education, textile production like weaving, needlework and knitting became occupations associated with femininity. In the European art academies, to which female artists had no access until the late 19th century, this distinction between a meta-perspective (the (male) mind's eye) and physical matter (the (female) body's work) became clearly identifiable in Symbolism and Expressionism. Even though later traditions like non-figurative art, concrete art, and Abstract Expressionism worked with materiality, tactility and hapticity, the ambition was still to create new symbolic ways of seeing.

In the 20th century, however, the serial principle gets reevaluated in art, in the ready-made object, in Bauhaus production, and in Minimalism. The use of units from industrial production is now considered qualified for structuring material. To further explore how textile art can create events and possibly “stretch the limits of perception” (Smith, 2014, p. 174) we will turn to four textile art installations. Our aim is to underline how encountering textile art as objects in space holds the potential to “pre-articulate thoughts/feelings” (Manning, 2009, p.7).

Materiality and the Fabrics (of Relation)

In this year's Venice Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, the focus was on migration, nomadic artists and artist collectives that put the western art tradition into perspective. This automatically placed emphasis on the importance of textile art in other cultures as well as new applications and new material interpretations of older traditions such as weaving techniques and spatial mountings. The following presentation exemplifies this general tendency and introduces our perspective.

The visitor to the Arsenale exhibition venue was met by a huge installation. By covering the ceiling, except for a column that was incorporated into the structure, it formed a kind of textile tent architecture in a woven pattern that resembled those supporting seats in furniture. When taking a closer look, you realized that the structure was made from hundreds of high-visible tie-down straps fastened by steel buckles. Due

to how light rays were captured differently by the various directions of the straps, a shifting geometrical pattern was produced. The artwork was called *Takapau* and made by a Māori collective of women named the Mataaho Collective (founded 2012). From the exhibition label written by Amanda Carneiro we learn that the title denotes a “finely woven mat, traditionally employed in ceremonies, particularly during childbirth”, and that “Takapau marks the moment of birth and signifies the transition between light and dark”.² The tie-down straps are carefully selected by the Mataaho Collective as they represent security and the support of moving cargo. They obviously make a connection between the moving body of the baby from one environment to another and the industrial and serial movement of cargo from one place to another. But they also create a connection between women’s *labor* in childbirth and the manual *labor* of invisible workers around the world.

The *Takapau* installation is an example of what we would like to focus on as a quality of textile; it unfolds when you move around it, observing it from multiple perspectives. By accentuating multiple perspectives, contemporary textile art often creates a more radical spatial awareness than the one proposed by Cubist artists. While Cubism was preoccupied with the multispectral representation of an object, the *Takapau* installation produces space through the multisensorial experience of the moving viewer. Space is created as a function of our *relations* with objects as moving bodies. In the following analyses, we will elaborate on these theoretical aspects.

Norwegian artists Kari Steihaug (b. 1962) and Ann Cathrin November Høibo (b. 1979) and Danish artist Anne-Sofie Overgaard (b. 1990) all work with compound textile techniques. They share a predilection for frays and fraying, and they expand their traditionally two-dimensional media into three-dimensional space in installations and objects. In the installations, two-dimensional and three-dimensional visual perspectives are merged in ways that invite the viewer to move to explore the hybrid compositions. By producing new combinations of visual perspectives, which demand bodily movement to be seen and felt simultaneously, they seem to question the distinction between two-dimensional flatness (as in a painting) and three-dimensional spatiality (as in a sculpture) that is functionally aimed for the art market. The idea that textile weaving is a

three-dimensional technology activating bodies in space is emphasized here along with the two-dimensional imagery.

Steihaug works with embroidery and knitting as her basic techniques, but her embroidery techniques also offer a cross over to hand-tufting. She hangs her picture carpets in space just as much as she hangs them as pictures on the wall, and she references modernist space and 'the white cube' equally as much as she references the Norwegian knitting tradition and its contexts. Another characteristic is that her installation work often shows the processes of the textile industry. November Høibo initially developed her interest in weaving from a fascination with fashion and textile materials and her admiration of the tapestries of Hannah Ryggen (Mortensen, 2019). Tapestry is her main medium, but she brings all kinds of materials and fibers into play such as yarn and thread. In her installations, she often uses the loom itself as a frame for her unfinished tapestry where the warp and weft are left visible transparent and part of the picture. Overgaard makes digital weavings, and like Steihaug and November Høibo she uses all kinds of fibers that promote the hapticity of the weave. She also combines wall hangings with installations extending the different traditions of weaving as well as art institutional traditions and dogmas.

Overgaard, November Høibo and Steihaug make works that we may think of as 'procedural architectures', a term developed by Erin Manning: "An architecture is procedural if it is capable of opening up a field of relation or an emergent ecology such that it can activate the conditions for the continued interplay that keeps life in the process of self-invention." (Manning, 2016, p. 88). Because Overgaard, November Høibo and Steihaug often exhibit their textile works as spatial installations and in seemingly unfinished states – front and backsides are both visible, open areas of warp are left without finishing weft threads, frays are left unstitched, and knitwear is left in unraveled states – they qualify as procedural architectures. They prepare an open stage for the potentiality of the event – that which may eventually appear when the gallery guest encounters the work.

Overgaard's work *Crater of the Unknown* is a weave extended into space (Ill. 1). It was part of the exhibition *Mother of Thousands*, which she did in Kunstpakhuset in Ikast with Olga Benedicte in 2021. It is a 160 × 360 cm weave mounted on three steel poles which makes it unfold in a



ILL. 1.

Anne-Sofie Overgaard: *Crater of the Unknown*, 2021. Tapestry, 160 × 360 cm. Duo exhibition with Olga Benedicte, Kunstpakhuset, Ikast. Photo: Olga Benedicte. Overview. Special thanks to the artist for kindly allowing us to use her work.

triangular shape so that you must walk around it to fully grasp the whole artwork. There is something tent-like about the structure and the fact that it depicts a landscape makes you think that the surroundings are mirrored in the tent canvas. The steel poles are 'planted' in small piles of soil, and the structure is placed in the middle of the room surrounded by three organically shaped steel sculptures with mouth-blown glass endings like flower buds. Two of these are laid out on the floor and one is 'planted' in a pile of soil up against the wall. Seen from a distance the tapestry depicts a mountainous landscape, perhaps in the making, at least the piles of soil seem to suggest that something grows out of Mother Earth. This organic creation principle is supported by the full-room installation in the adjacent room by Olga Benedicte. In the installation *Unknown Territory*, the floor



ILL. 2.

Anne-Sofie Overgaard: *Crater of the Unknown*, 2021. Tapestry, 160 × 360 cm. Duo exhibition with Olga Benedicte, Kunstpakhuset, Ikast. Photo: Olga Benedicte. Detail. Special thanks to the artist for kindly allowing us to use her work.

is covered in soil on which small hollow, conical sculptures made of soap with coffee grounds in them are placed, as if to indicate that something is 'boiling' (there is also sound to the installation).

The mountain landscape, which the artist refers to as a tapestry, is woven on a shaft loom with wool, cotton, viscose, cord, glitter thread, corn straw, fabric and plastic. Frays, shreds and un-sewn threads hang from the tapestry as if to suggest that the landscape is unfinished or could be unraveled at any time. As you approach the tapestry, the different textures of the weaving reveal themselves, and you are drawn into the materiality of the tapestry as you move around it to discover the whole structure (Ill. 2). At least this is what your impulse tells you will happen. However, standing in front of the work you realize the contrary: that you will never be able to see 'the whole picture'. What will happen instead is that in the movement around the gallery space among other bodies (works of art, the architecture, other visitors) you will synthesize all the synesthetic impressions going on in your sensory apparatus into potential visions of diagrammatic relations.

Yet, the image that you strive to put together in your mind will never be completed. This is the result of your always moving-seeing-feeling-listening-smelling body that is never in standstill. As such, comprehending the work could be said to form a relationscape (with Manning). Anne-Sofie Overgaard stresses the three-dimensionality of weaving and argues that weaving has more in common with sculpture than with pictures.³ The fact that the weaver makes front- and backside simultaneously makes it relational, or potentially biogrammatical (as defined in the next section). The weaver cannot see the whole picture until she has finished the tapestry and unfolds it.

But then, what difference does the weaving make? Would this way of thinking not apply to other forms and materials? To some extent, but the special quality of textile/fabric/woven cloth is that all human bodies are always in contact with it; across cultures, human bodies are wrapped in textile, from the new-born to the dead body, clothing protects the human body from weather or taboo but it is also the extension of the body and a marker of cultural affiliation and individual identity. Across cultures, textiles both fold around bodies and unfold in spatial interiors. It is this ubiquitous sense of bodily belonging and cultural diversity that textiles bring to art.

There is something appealing about unfinished weavings. As if you were invited to pick up the thread. In the exhibition *Søvn er livets Sum* (Sleep is the Sum of Life, 2023), November Høibo let her loom with unfinished weavings be part of the installation.⁴ The loom was placed alongside a curtain wall window on a coconut mat, beside it the chair *Gravity* by Norwegian designer Peter Opsvik upholstered by November Høibo. During the exhibition, November Høibo would work at the loom for periods, however outside opening hours. The exhibition of the loom shows the labor of the weaving-in-progress as art historian Jorunn Veiteberg writes in the catalogue (Veiteberg, 2023). And art critic Andreas Breivik remarks that the whole installation points to the absence of the body, and he finds that the artist plays on our desire to unravel the mystery of the creative process, which she only covers up even more, according to him (Breivik, 2023). But what is it the art critic expects? What is his idea of the creative process? For is this not precisely what the loom shows us? Is this not what

is laid out for all to see? Namely, the collaboration of the hand's and the mind's work in weaving. That the thinking processes in weaving is computing. The warps are stretched out on the loom, and different pieces with different weft threads in different colors have been begun. November Høibo apparently weaves more tapestries simultaneously, and you are invited to envision an image of your own.

Steihaug uses re-cycled knitwear and re-cycled garments as material.⁵ She unravels the textiles and makes single works and large-scale installations out of them where the very threads and frays are dominant features. The distinct quality of used textiles, she says, is that they carry with them a sense of time past:

[Textiles] are readable in a different way, perhaps it has to do with memory. A handmade garment embodies a form of knowledge, or experience. It reveals the time it took to make it, to use it and to wear it out. A fragility, a connection to the body and life. (...) Clothes are washed and used. Even when you unravel them, their story is still there, in the threads. The garment no longer exists but you cannot remove the story. The thread is the source of all textile construction, it holds and binds the piece together. The unraveled thread is like a kind of timeline for me, between a then and a now, between memory and expectation (Henmo, 2022, p. 161-162).

Stories are unraveled, time dissolves, and yet the passing of time stays present in the materiality of the threads. Steihaug's works are about the unraveling of time, not the making of a new 'garment'. Catherine Dormor observes that Steihaug's works bring to the fore clothing's proximity to the body and its caressing phenomenology when she states that:

In Steihaug's work the intimacy of the cloth with the body becomes a generative space between body and cloth. (...) Steihaug's unravelling clothing, this hovering, tenuous intimacy becomes drawn out and memories of that erotic charge are evoked, or caressed into presence, through the dispersed threads. (Dormor, 2020, p. 105).

However right Dormor may be about the relationship between clothing, skin and caress, it seems to us that it is the phenomenology of unraveling that is in focus and hence the passing of time. Is Steihaug not rather suggesting relationships?

A Biogrammatic Intervention: Relationscapes

The works of Steihaug, November Høibo, and Overgaard seem to create intervals, which is Manning's word for the Whiteheadian concept 'eternal objects' (Manning, 2009, p. 20). She specifies that "[t]he interval is not a *thing* but a *quality* of light, speed, closeness, purpleness" which "incites that actual event to shape-shift [and] will remain potentially active for the next preacceleration. The interval is eternal." (Manning, 2009, p. 20).

What is pointed out here is how certain saturations, lightings, expansions or contractions can carry weight as qualities and form events across actual occasions, since they can 'live on' long after for example a specific light, a change of weather or a dance performance has come to an end. In this sense, all configurations and compositions of bodies in relation to other bodies or environments hold the potential to take part in new compositions and new events. Manning's exploration of relationscapes presents a diagrammatic reading in which the movements of bodies are conceived as being always relational. She specifies that this might better be discussed as *biogrammatic* with reference to Brian Massumi (Massumi, 2002). According to him, the problem with Euclidean space is that the body is seen as enclosed and boxed into a space that moves in time (more on this below).

In order to open this path theoretically, we will dwell on a literary example, namely Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf, 2022). This novel is famously written in the literary tradition of *stream of consciousness* where narrative pace and intensity are modulated according to the flow of thoughts in the minds of the different characters. This literary tradition was inspired by the philosophy of William James and was also practiced by James Joyce. At the end of the novel, the painter, Lily Briscoe, who has been torn between the family-orientated character of Mrs. Ramsay and the outgoing character of Mr. Ramsay, finds herself able to finish the painting she has been working on all along. When she realizes that the boat with Mr. Ramsay "will have landed" (p. 151) on the lighthouse island even though she cannot actually see it, since the horizon is blurred, she calms down. Meanwhile, she has already been reassured by the sight of Mrs. Ramsay who sat "quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat." (p. 147). The impression of knowing that Mr. Ramsay had landed, even

though it could not be verified, becomes somehow certain to Lily Briscoe, as she in this same instant notices how Mrs. Ramsay's shadow cast on the step to the house has disappeared. This makes it possible for her to finish the painting in one move-vision:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attic she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (Woolf, 2022, p. 151-152)

This relationscape between knowing the not perceptible landing of Mr. Ramsay and noticing the non-visible shadow of Mrs. Ramsay so-to-speak creates Lily Briscoe's event-vision which moves her hand to finish the composition. The final stroke assembles the synesthetic (non-visible) cues of the experience into a composition combining the non-assembled colors and lines of her canvas. Together the non-perceptible impressions form a composition or a diagrammatic relationship; her vision's intensity combines the actual milieu in the composition's abstraction, as she draws the final line. The diagram is used here in accordance with Charles Sanders Peirce's definition: "The greatest point of art consists in the introduction of suitable abstractions. By this I mean such a transformation of our diagrams that characters of one diagram may appear in another as things" (Peirce, 1997, p. 226). In the novel, the diagrammatic gesture of creation reads, "She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred." (Woolf, 2022). It is explained how it is the absence of Mrs. Ramsay's shadow and the absence of clear view of the boat in the horizon that sets her imagination free to finish the painting. But to understand how this is diagrammatic, we must keep in mind that this is a novel. We, the readers of Woolf's description of Lily Briscoe's event-vision can neither access her vision nor see her composition. Her character's diagrammatic experience contained in the composition of the painting cannot be seen by us. This point is important since it becomes clear that it is not only Woolf's

aim to describe the stream of consciousness (the thoughts as processes) of the novel's different characters. With this ending, she underscores how both life and creation are relational. By reading the ending, we can get a diagrammatic access to how the abstraction laid down in the composition of the text (from thing to abstraction) can be dynamic in the reverse sense. Readers will spontaneously get an imaginary idea of what Lily Briscoe's painting might look like. In this sense, Briscoe's finished painting, which successfully creates a diagrammatic abstraction by bringing Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's characters into the same composition creates another diagram in reading when textual abstraction becomes imagined in space and takes on the character of things.

In Brian Massumi's chapter "Strange Horizon" in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Massumi, 2002), he highlights how our understanding of three-dimensional Euclidian space (especially regarding architecture) does not take into consideration how our experience is always synesthetic. Often, we do not notice this, but in experiencing events we often feel like "seeing time in space" (Massumi, 2002, p. 187). He refers to these experiences as biogrammatic, defining the biogram as "a lived topological event" (p. 206) and he specifies:

They are more-than visual. They are event-perceptions combining senses, tenses, and dimensions on a single surface. Since they are not themselves visual representations, they cannot be accurately represented in mono-sense visual form. Oddly, although they appear in front and in the midst of things, the biograms are "larger than my visual range, like looking at the horizon" They are geometrically strange: a foreground-surround, like a trick center twisting into an all-encompassing periphery. They are uncontainable either in the present moment or in Euclidean space, which they instead encompass: strange horizon. (Massumi, 2002, p. 187)

In Massumi's explanation, it becomes clear how it is the relational 'more-than-visual' level of perception that forms the inspirational strange horizon or 'blue haze' (Woolf, 2022, p. 151) explored by the character Lily Briscoe. Therefore, these experiences of synesthetic events do not really belong to psychological nor to cognitive realms of knowledge since they are not individual. Later in the same chapter, Massumi states that the reality of change cannot be explained, unless we include the virtual in our bodily

orientation in time and space and he argues for “logics of transition” or “qualitative topologies”, that are “abstract yet real” (Massumi, 2002, p. 201). With this biagrammatic expansion of ‘seeing time in space’ the body with its sensorium of the world should rather be seen as a membrane entering different relations or more than one dimension of space.

In continuation of this, we will argue that textiles and fabrics have had and still have the function of mediating or modulating between body and world including imaginary worlds. They could be seen in almost the same way, as Massumi imagines that architecture could become, if it extracted itself from Euclidian space and approached the biogram: “a materialist art of qualitative body modulation, a translogical engineering of matter gone mindful. [...] More modulatory. More flexible membranitic.” (Massumi, 2002, p. 207).

The Flexible Textile Membranes

We argue that a lot of the so-called functionality of fabric and cloth is attributable to their biagrammatic modulatory function as membranes. Whether woven, knitted or felted the materiality of fabric and textile composes “a materialist art of qualitative body modulation” (Massumi, 2007, p. 207). They protect bodies from heat and cold, from infectious surfaces, and they negotiate ingression and passageways between qualitatively different environments – present and virtual. They can be decorated, ornamented, and indeed patterned for many purposes and situations according to culture. Fabrics negotiate affects such as discomfort, insecurity, and inclinations, as they modulate transitions between skin and world and even between actual and virtual time and space. In these (semi)ritual functions they play the role of a minor gesture in Manning’s definition that in some ways seems to clarify the implications of relationships:

A minor gesture cannot be known as such. It is what the minor gesture does within the field of experience that makes the gesture felt. In the field of art, the artwork, the object, or even the effect created by an ephemeral composition is not, in itself a minor gesture. The minor gesture is what activates the work under precise conditions, what makes the attunements of an emerging ecology felt, what makes the work work. [...] (Manning, 2016, p. 65. Manning’s italics)

The minor gesture works when the gallery guest approaches Anne Sofie Overgaard's *Crater of the Unknown* and s/he is drawn into and around the textile structure because of its materiality. The minor gesture causes the body to immediately, without touching the textile, recognize the feeling of fabric against the skin, the union, and yet the difference in the encounter. Manning proceeds:

Introducing into the work's process a kind of continuous variability, a minor gesture makes times felt, but not time as measure: time as duration. This variability, into the event of a work's becoming artful (a work's *faire oeuvre*), makes felt how the work co-composes across the measured time of the object and the a-measure of event-time. The minor gesture foregrounds the art of time. (Manning, 2016, p. 65. Manning's italics)

When Ann Cathrin November Høibo lets her loom with a work-in-progress be part of the exhibition, she foregrounds the minor gesture. The greatest achievement of the work is to activate and make the biagrammatic forces of expression felt. As such, it can be conceived as a diagram that includes the gallery guest and heightens awareness. For even though the minor gesture cannot be 'known as such', it can be felt as a modulation that includes event-time in the variation of duration: "[t]he minor gesture foregrounds the art of time" (Manning, 2016, p. 65) In dwelling on the material side of artistic expression and not its final form as artwork, November Høibo manages to make the viewer aware of the compositional diagram by including the viewing process as a biagrammatic force that can activate time as an event. It cannot be seen as such, but it can be felt.

In the same chapter of *The Minor Gesture*, Manning also touches upon how contemporary art can open a field "between art and craft, between what is displayed and what is worn, between what is seen and what is felt" (Manning, 2016, p. 75), while so-to-speak borrowing their "material-force" from the "ritual object" and its "[t]echniques for crossing the threshold from the everyday into rituality and back" (Manning, 2016, p. 68). It needs to activate "not the object-as-such, the activity-in-itself, but the shift in register embodied in the crossing of the threshold. The material quality of the object is important only insofar as it is able to carry experience elsewhere" (Manning, 2016, p. 68-69). In this sense, the minor gestures of contemporary

art have the potential to “trouble existing forms of value” (Manning, 2016, 75). Kari Steihaug’s consistent re-use of worn-out clothes in different states of unraveling can exemplify this. Displayed to activate the viewer, the feeling of the knitted garment or unraveled knitwear against the skin creates a more-than-visual perception. Her work seems to suggest Manning’s idea of the crossing of borders between the everyday and the ritual, between art and craft, and between what is on display and what is worn, between what is seen and what is felt. It has the ability to create shifts in registers.

The reason why these artworks function so well today is in our opinion that they make textiles perform minor gestures that draw on experimental textile art from the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these already expanded on the weaving-computer relation as shown in the 2022 Venice Biennale in the case of the Swedish weaver Charlotte Johannesson. Living in the digital age, weaving moves into the foreground as the original digitizing procedure with long-standing artistic and cultural traditions. With this article’s focus on the potentiality of textiles, we hope that an awareness of the minor gesture in contemporary textile art may be applicable to new valuations of the genre. In our view, many contemporary artworks seem to activate the relations of fabric and cloth to (the movements of) the body in ways that resemble of performance and performative speech. They perform modulations and function as transitional membranes with no reference to symbolic meaning but with multiple perspectives and relational potentials which together open new relational paths for art and exhibition forms. Furthermore, the advantage of textiles and textile art is their transcultural materiality. Across the globe, all cultures have produced or produce textiles, wear them, and make art out of them. All this questions the very foundation of the art historical value systems in which the Western painting tradition has reigned supreme.

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SUMMARY

Contemporary Textile Art

Membranes of Relation

The premise of the article is that textile art has been ignored as a contributor to art historical thinking. At the same time, in recent years, we have seen how textile - whether weaving, embroidery, appliqué, and more - has gained a foothold on the contemporary art scene. This schism has inspired the article, which first briefly presents its topic through a historical review of the status of textile works in the history of art, then introduces to the concepts of ‘relationscapes’ and ‘minor gesture’, developed by Erin Manning, to be applied on a discussion of current textile works by artists Anne-Sofie Overgaard, Kari Steihaug, and Anne Cathrin November Høibo. It is the article’s aim to demonstrate how the activation of spatial relations between the artworks and viewers should be included in art historical thinking as minor gestures questioning art historical judgements in which painting has hitherto been the dominant art form.

NOTER

- 1 In her book, weaving is explored to understand pixelation and the binary code of digital programming. The actual writing, however, is shaped as a feedback response related to her first trial productions of digitally woven wall hangings, commissioned by Ørestad Gymnasium in Denmark.
- 2 The Mataaho Collective received this year's Golden Lion for the Takapau installation. Among the committee members was the American art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, who specializes in textile art. The fact that the board of The Venice Biennale has chosen a textile specialist for the committee shows that textile art is being reevaluated.
- 3 Unpublished interview with Overgaard by the authors (Kolding, October 2023).
- 4 See images at Kristiansand Kunsthall, <https://www.kristiansandkunsthall.no/arrangementer/sleep-is-the-sum-of-life>, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 5 See images at <https://www.karisteihaug.no/>, accessed 7 January 2025.

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