

Materials in Time and Space

by Johanna Rosenqvist

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In the public square of Kristinaplatsen the Norrköping Museum of Art meets the streets of the city. A lawn constitutes the border area of the Museum's outdoor premises, where one finds a driveway and entrance as well as a sculptural park. The lawn indicates that the sculptural park continues around the corner. On the front lawn Carl Milles's *Dancers* and Arne Jones's *Spiral Gesture* can be seen. The *Dancers* is cast in bronze and represents two nude women dancers. Jones's work revolves and squirts water. It is a sculptural fountain strategically placed in relation to the Museum's austere redbrick façade. Inside the Museum, the collections reflect principles that used to rule the art world - mostly male painters, many modernists - as well as contemporary attitudes. During the exhibition period of *Material Matters* the participating artists show materials and motifs that may serve as alternatives to those that have dominated the art world. What unites the works in the exhibition is the fact they all use textile in one way or another. One of the first works that a visitor to the Museum meets is a piece of pink cloth, through which **Emese Beczúr** wants us to look at the world. The title of the work is written on the fabric: *Try to See the World Through...* The artist may want us to endure, to survive or suffer the prevailing order, or are we to see through it? Would the world be different in pink?

Not only the pink colour but also the textile itself carries feminine connotations, suggestive of the way Woman is constructed, and a link to a cherished tradition. In her art, Emese Beczúr problematises these connections. Among other things, she has investigated embroidery as a form of obsessive, almost self-tormenting activity. Her embroideries, made on anything from lemon-peel to marking tape, can also be seen as a hope for change: the world is being re-marked and re-labelled. On the international art scene many artists, men as well as women, are working toward change. Those who initiated the present exhibition - Inger Bergström, Anna-Lena Carlsson, Elizabet Christiansson, Tarika Lennerbjörk and Maria Wahlgren - are members of a network of artists, *Fiber Art Sweden*. There is no smallest common denominator in all the work that these artists represent, but broadly speaking they all share an interest in textile techniques and materials. They investigate the limits of art, usurp a public place and make room for textile.

The what and where of art changes with the time and place. Griselda Pollock has investigated the arenas for artists in the French Impressionist circles at the time when the modern flaneur was in great repute. The scenes in Impressionist works are taken from brothels, bars, cafés, theatres and parks. But Impressionist women artists only depict the latter two of these environments. Domestic motifs are much more common. However, women occur as motifs in works of art by male artists that represent all of the above-mentioned places.

Have artists who have happened to be women and/or worked with textile had access to the public sphere? The answer is both in the affirmative and negative. On the one hand, there are many textile artworks in public places; on the other hand, the utility aspect of textile works has had the effect that much of what has been done is found in domestic settings. When the history of art is written selections depend on issues such as who had access to the art venues for a long time, who exhibited at the museums and galleries, who made a name for themselves in the papers and magazines. The normative tradition in art, the canon, consists of the reproduction of allegedly universal ideas based on officially selected masterpieces according to principles that range "from innovation to influence." Dividing lines and points of transition are constructed and brought to the fore. The norm creates a sense of alienation not just for women.

Also men who do not endorse the canon are excluded. Artists' choice of what material to work with is of vital importance. Art histories could be written which cover more women artists who painted and attracted attention in their life but who have subsequently been forgotten by the art historians. But what has also to be done is to investigate what women did with their creative energy elsewhere. In such a way it would really become possible to undermine the canon.

In **Inger Bergström's** work, size and repetition usually matter. Previously she has sewn series of clothes that grow progressively large - or small, depending on whether we read them as being for an imagined wearer who gets bigger or as a space that it continuously shrinking. This time it is definitely a matter of something growing bigger. A soft revolution seems to be at hand. Inger Bergström's sewn sculpture is called *Indicium I, II, III* ("Indication I, II, III"). It is fixed to the wall and displays vaguely recognisable shapes and patterns. The colours and patterns are soothing and are often found in recreation rooms or on the seat-cushions of kitchen chairs. But it is as if the sculpture is coming out of the wall, as if it is a parasite which happens only to be visible at this moment. The organic, fungiform and coral-like shapes appear to be growing uncontrollably (like cancer, or is there mildew in the museum?). A pattern that we seem to recognise has taken a new form and is eating itself through the wall. In time it might take over and consume the load-bearing structures.

Could textile be load-bearing? The German art historian Gottfried Semper caused a debate when in 1860 he named textile as the first and most original construction material. He describes it as a technique that joins, rather than as an integrated material in itself. He maintains that the basic element in textile, the original state, is a fibre or a string made of hide. The first technology is the knot, and then comes the interlacing of fibres, the more complex technique of weaving. It is the technique of joining together, according to Semper, that defines the architectonic qualities of textile. As a consequence wickerwork and basketry assume a natural place in Semper's textile category, and in the same way the transition to ceramics is fluid because of the wattle and daub technique used in half-timbered houses. This view of the transition between the different qualities of materials has had a great influence on many contemporary architects.

In *Secret Places*, the German artist **Max Mohr** chooses to freeze his textile objects in order to make them more firm and textured. Yet, when they are frozen, the objects are not recognisable from our everyday lives; they are preserved in a frozen condition, filled with a new content, but separated from their normal usefulness. Another one of Max Mohr's working methods is to construct objects which he covers with a layer of skin-coloured cloth. Again the shape is recognisable. His well-designed objects might look like tubs, sinks, chairs or doorknobs, but at the same time the unexpected skin make them strange. The artist animates or humanises them, and so he emphasises the function of textile as the first artificial skin on top of the natural skin, as the first architecture.

In the midst of the planned architecture of modern society there are forgotten areas, zones in between, that no one seems to care about. They are the starting point in **Anna-Lena Carlsson's** art. In the past she did projects around the Motala River in the industrial quarters in central Norrköping. In the competition *Längs Strömmen* ("Along the River") she shared the first place with another artist for her idea of planting flowers in unexpected places. This time she is taking the water as her point of departure in a more concrete way. Water does not have a shape of its own but is formed by its surroundings. It is hard to define something lacking in form. Anna-Lena Carlsson tries to represent it in various ways and in various materials, for instance beadwork and knitting with fishing lines. She draws the whirlpools in the river, which a naked eye might not have detected had it not been for the foam floating on the surface. In one way the motif is eternal, in another transient. She takes a snapshot that she then works with and translates into beadwork, which takes about three months to complete. It also becomes manifest that the fishing line, which was used in another part of the project, is material, having a form and a colour, in spite of the fact that it is the function that gives it its name. Usually the line is tied into a fishing net, which is a form of textile. The choice of place also adds to the meaning of the work, since the area around the Motala River used to house textile industries, and in this there are also connotations to business or utility as opposed to the pleasure

that beadwork and fishing could be said to stand for today. Is it possible to upgrade places or activities? Can time be valued? What makes one person's time more contemporary, more with the times, than other people's?

The American cultural theorist Rita Felski links different representations of time and history to feminist theory. In *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) she writes that modernism is never the same for everyone. Instead she claims that many voices must be heard. In the introductory chapter she notes that in representations of modern life, women are repeatedly made into the historical other and that their work is devalued as a consequence. What will happen if texts about, or by, women come to the fore in a study of modernism? If previously marginalised phenomena are placed at the centre of an analysis of modernist culture? In *Doing Time*, Rita Felski writes about the theorisation of everyday life that philosophers and sociologists have done. At the same time as phenomenology and existentialism have focused on everyday objects, everyday life as a modern phenomenon has been described in negative terms. It is placed at the side of modern life or presented as something problematic. Although everyday life is not tied to a specific place, it has often been associated with the domestic sphere, not exclusively in negative terms, though, but also as a kind of exotic haven beyond the factories and confines of the city, a place where time is supposed to be slower. Despite the fact that the everyday is everybody's business, it is often women who are associated with its slow pace. Women's time?

The title of **Elizabet Christiansson's** work may suggest a woman who could not take it anymore: *She Went Out with the Garbage - and Never Came Back*. But it is perhaps also pointing to the danger of leaving home. In any way, the alleged reason for going out, to throw away the garbage, becomes suspicious. Elizabet Christiansson is interested in both the time we have to spare and the things that are left over. She has done material investigations of how much she is able to produce in different textile techniques during defined periods of time. During the exhibition at the Norrköping Museum of Art she is making what she describes as a "picturesque installation." It is about taking charge of one's physical environment. She attacks the fixtures in the exhibition. She annexes the room with ropes and yarn, clothes-lines and wire. The installation is made in situ. But some of the objects in it were made at home in her combined kitchen and temporary studio. The latter aspect of the work concerns the issue of what one does with one's hands when one has time to spare. Restless hands make ropes out of rags. Ordinary wrappings from household products become moulds for making concrete foundations for holding forks, between which strings can be stretched, electric cables that become part of new power mains. What happens when a material enters a new environment? She observes its transformations as she moves it about in time and space.

Renown 20th-century artists have been able to bring textile to the fore in the art world getting stuck in the toils of tradition. The American artist **Louise Bourgeois** works in every conceivable material. Her use of textile is often described as a way of dealing with childhood memories. Born in 1911 in Paris, where her parents had a store for antique tapestries, she helped her mother restore worn fabrics at an early age. In a new she uses a tapestry in blue, white and red to make a tight mask with openings for the eyes, mouth and ears. In addition to commenting a hard French upbringing it could be viewed as an ironic comment to early modernism's interest in exotic masks.

Is it possible to choose a material in order to reinforce an idea - for example an idea that is based on a gender perspective? Are there outsider materials, forgotten materials and demoted materials - materials that are charged with meaning or emotion and therefore interesting for an artist? Have the hierarchies and boundaries between different materials collapsed? Or is, for example, an embroidered tapestry still worth less than a bronze piece? In a text entitled "Den broderande konstnären: Om genre, konstnärskap och kön" ("The Embroidering Artist: Genre, Art and Gender"), Anna Lena Lindberg writes about embroidery at three fin de siècles. She describes how the meaning of embroidery has shifted between art and handicraft, and how it changes with the changing gender position in society. At the end of the 18th century embroidered pictures could be included in exhibitions at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts. The art of embroidery was, however, soon

excluded from the professional art scene, and a century later it was regarded as art for amateurs and handicraft for women. At the last fin de siècle, embroidery had re-entered the art scene but in a whole new way. As an example of the postmodern collapse of genres, Anna Lena Lindberg cites several exhibitions from the end of the 1990s where the stated purpose was to present artists who "have worked with fibre to dissolve the boundaries between painting, sculpture and drawing, word and image, computer-generated and hand-made pictures, masculine and feminine, art and handicraft." In this context, **Tarika Lennerbjörk** is one of the artists singled out as a saboteur of the canon: "Here we meet trivial items of clothing that are (paradoxically) raised to the status of art through the mediation of long-despised embroidery. The bird motif looks as if it is taken from an ordinary tapestry, with its female associations. The result can be viewed as a sabotage. This is particularly obvious in the case of the shoes: the "feminine" embroidery needle writes "Kilroy was here" on the masculine leather." In the work *Mönsterbård* ("Pattern"), Tarika Lennerbjörk uses several different materials. If clothing was a skin that could be tattooed with threads in her earlier work, this time the clothes, the blue and chequered men's shirts, define the room where they hang, newly unstitched on the lines. Tape in different colours runs along the floor, like marks at the scene of a crime or providing borders for rooms in a child's game. The pieces of tape branch off and pass into rubber bands, supplemented by small balls of modelling clay. The materials are suggestive of school and how we were all once formed in its rooms.

When I was a little girl, I built huts all over the place. I always carried one hut with me, made out of my sweater and my body. I pulled the sweater down over my knees, tucked my arms and head in, and in this way I constructed a space that was big enough only for me. Later, my best friend and I created a room of our own by putting up a tent in the garden. With the help of the metal structure of tent-pegs, the textile was moved away from the body and out into the landscape and now there was room for more people than me. Textile can be nomadic architecture, quite literally. The architecture of the tent or the cultural baggage one always carries around on one's back.

Hans Hamid Rasmussen has taken down a piece of our starry sky with his own bare hands. His work *Måne och stjärnor* ("Moon and Stars") dissolves all our notions of space, from the cosmic to the constructed spaces of architecture and nature. He has worked with this piece for as long as it takes for the earth to revolve around the sun. In this time, he maintains, he has created an understanding of the fact that the universe's movements include all spaces, all thoughts. When working on the project, he not only saw the sunlight moving over the walls in his flat but also moving shadows. This provided a frame for his understanding of the tautological experience of his work. It can be related to Søren Kierkegaard's notion of "repetition" but also to other, previous projects of his. He works with various techniques that reinforce the idea of a particular artwork and the process of finishing it. Embroidery becomes a way of moving closer, a way of learning to understand through the work of one's hands. At the same time this is a meditation on time and eternity.

On the January 29, 2001, **Maria Wahlgren** took note of the weather and temperature. In order to describe the weather she picked one colour of embroidery cotton for each day: light-grey, sun-yellow, azure. A year later she ceased gathering weather information, and now it forms the basis of the embroidered statistics that are part of her work. The observation of the seasons became a way of making time more real, she says, or structuring a life marked by a sense of loss in the transition between the past and the present. The the weather and the seasons connect the two worlds - something permanent, as a general frame of reference - a foundation. Anyone can relate to the weather and take up an attitude towards it. It is a link between people, but also a scene, a setting, a narrative frame, which grounds works of literature, art and music in everyday reality. But it also has to do with the love of nature, which Maria Wahlgren thinks that we all carry within. But in her work, the patterns and motifs are so universal, so formal that they can no longer be read as patterns or motifs from literature, diaries or family portraits, tapestries or the Farmer's Almanac. In *Ändå vill jag det som inte finns* ("Still I Want That Which Does Not Exist") she embroidered her grandfathers portrait in white on white. It can be viewed as a faded portrait of a person in, or outside the modern world - or as a tribute to art, a homage to Malevich - but it is more of a challenge to the art world of

today than painting a white square on a white ground would be.

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1 <http://www.fiberartsweden.nu>

2 Griselda Pollock, "Det moderna och kvinnlighetens rum" (1988), *Konst, kön och blick*, Stockholm, 1995, ed. Anna Lena Lindberg

3 Johanna Rosenqvist, *Kvinnor och textil: En konstpolitisk förstudie*, ("Women and Textile: A Preliminary Study of the Politics of Art"), B.A. dissertation, Department of Art, Lunds University, 1996

4 The art historian Nanette Salomon cites the art histories of Vasari and Jansons as the primary representatives of the principle. What they describe is a father-son relationship which reinforces and establishes the connection between both individual artists and the historical accounts with the past. Nanette Salomon: "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission," *The Art of Art History: A critical Anthology*, red. Donald Preziosi, Oxford, 1998

5 Rita Felski, "The Invention of Every day Life", *Doing Time. Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, New York, 2000

6 In *Tiden är. En antologi om det vi kallar tid* ("Time Is: An Anthology of What We Call Time"), ed. Cecilia Bengtsson, Stockholm, 1999

7 *Sekelskiften och kön*, ("The Fin de Siècle and Gender"), ed. Anita Göransson, Stockholm, 2000

8 Anna Lena Lindberg, "Den broderande konstnären. Om genre, konstnärskap och kön" ("The Embroidering Artist: Genre, Art, and Gender"), *Sekelskiften och kön*, p. 177