

#44

Zeszyty Artystyczne

TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA
Wobec współczesności

TEXTILE ART
In the face of contemporary times



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
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Textile as a subject of significance and vessel for substance. Perspective

An artistic strategy related to social activism has been on the rise in recent years, which is certainly a sign of the times and a telling factor with respect to the present. My own educational practice and more than decade-long experience in this regard have led me to some conclusions concerning the growing interest and need for this form of expression among young artists. Mindful reflection prompts authors to criticize and comment on reality. Their speculations extend far beyond the typical framework of creation that accounts primarily for the expression of matter and a routine affirmation of the broadly defined surroundings, one that rarely carries additional weight.

The idea, then, is to evoke a disinterested disposition that is not limited to a focus on appearance alone (in line with the premises of the Kantian contemplative tradition)¹.

It is my perspective as an artist, designer, lecturer, curator, Pole, as well as a woman and mother born in the late 1970s, that informs this text, in which I seek to find an answer to the question of what determines the choice of such a specific creative strategy, and the role played therein by

» 1 Morawski S. *Na zakręcie. Od sztuki do po-sztuki*, chapter: "O funkcjach sztuki oraz funkcjach twórczości najnowszej". Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985 p. 211.

a particular medium, one that sits at the center of this issue of *Zeszyty Artystyczne*.

The most plausible form of illustrating such ruminations seems to be that of self-reflection and presentation of my own output, in which the issues raised by the editors have materialized. An attempt to locate one's own work in a broader context and on the map of other artists' work encourages explorations extending beyond one's own cultural, geographical and linguistic territories.

'Disobedient' objects

Creativity does not occur in a vacuum, and so in addition to the motivation and presentation of my works, I will cite historical examples that have significantly influenced my perception of textile as an activist medium. It is, in fact, the semiotic dimension that appears to be the most interesting issue at hand.

"One of the most notable examples of the textile's power, in terms of sheer scale, can be found in Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and his use of the textile as a tool in the ultimately successful Indian independence movement."²

"Susan Bean describes Gandhi's use of textile, nothing that "From 1908 on, these two elements – the economics of cloth and the semiotics of cloth – united in Gandhi's thought." Her essay outlines Gandhi's own experience with clothing as a tool for expressing his identity and status, and the evolution of those ideas into his use of fabric as a method of non-violent resistance. The creation and wearing of *khadi*—since this was the textile form used in clothing that I have in mind—became a powerful tool. As Bean explains, in India "English cloth had become the most potent symbol of English political domination and economic exploitation."

Gandhi's use of textiles remains an important example of the material's capacity to not only comment on, but also effect, change.

Gandhi's choice of this particular and traditional form of clothing as a signifier of political views was crucial for a nation that was multilingual and characterized by a high rate of illiteracy. It should be noted, therefore,

» 2 Editors's introduction to "Gandhi and *khadi*, the Fabric of Indian Independence" Written by the anthropologist, art historian and curator Susan Bean, the essay first appeared in the oft-cited collection of essays titled *Cloth and Human Experience*, edited by Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider.

When it was published in 1989, Susan Bean was a curator of South Asian and Korean Art at the Peabody Essex Museum in the United States. Since retiring in 2012, she has chaired the Center for Art and Archaeology at the American Institute of Indian Studies and been a fellow of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Bean's essay was published as a contribution to *The Textile Reader* edited by Jessica Hemmings, published by Berg in 2012.

that visual communication (rather than written or oral one) was more important in such a culture, as a form that offered greater reach.³

One can venture the thesis that historic examples of “disobedient”⁴ utilitarian textiles are common and identifiable throughout most cultures and handicraft traditions around the world. For the purposes of this text, I should cite examples that also function as works of art and exhibition objects.

For thousands of years, women from nomadic tribes in the areas of present-day Afghanistan and surrounding areas have been hand-weaving rugs. The oldest known and intact example of these rugs in the world is the “Pazyryk rug”, which dates back to the 4th century BC. Such traditional folk art pieces have long depicted the same deep-seated motifs and patterns, with occasional images drawn from the daily experience of craftsmen and women. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, certain changes in carpet design became noticeable. Tanks replaced flowers, rocket launchers replaced vases, and airplanes replaced abstract borders. This new category of rugs became known as war rugs, sparking an underground movement in the art world. Many collectors view rugs not only as works of art, but also as historical documents and testimony of then and now, as their design continues to evolve in response to changing realities.

Another example is the African *kanga* fabric featuring images of Nelson Mandela, a form commemorating the key figure and moment in South African history, but also the symbol of political resistance. Prior to Nelson Mandela’s release from prison on February 11, 1991, the National Party government banned the public display of Mandela’s effigies and the colors of the African National Congress (ANC). Following Mandela’s release and the subsequent collapse of South Africa’s oppressive apartheid system, these printed garments bearing Mandela’s portraits and the colors of the ANC (black, green and gold) were mass-produced, widely distributed and proudly donned in public.

Traditional textiles, impressive in their complexity and craftsmanship, are used around the world not only for making clothes or everyday objects, but also to express opinions and views, to comment on social and political events, to commemorate special occasions, holidays and rituals, and as an essential attribute in a number of ceremonies. Traditional weaving techniques, patterns and styles are a vital part of almost every culture. According to the mythology of many peoples, the skills of weaving and spinning—the production of fiber, thread and cloth—derived from mythical beings. Observers and researchers organize and characterize the symbol-

» 3 *Ibidem*, p. 193.

» 4 I borrow the notion from the title of the exhibition *Disobedient objects*, London, V&A, 2014.

ic connections between the art of weaving and speech. Weft and warp threads interweave to form a fabric, just as sounds coming out of one's mouth form words. In many cultures, textiles are considered a non-verbal means of communication, a kind of storytellers in their own right. They help convey what is difficult to say, and serve as a medium of messages important to individuals or entire communities. Drawing on tradition can therefore provide an important key for artistic statements. Activism usually springs from idealism and a growing awareness of threats, which concern both minorities but also those that seem particular yet actually affect the entire planet. Another important reason for taking action is a sense of responsibility.

The linguistic thread. The axiological thread

I should begin by clarifying some linguistic issues and explaining my attachment to certain terms and my reservations about others.

The founding myths of the Polish schools of textiles, the poster, etc., which stemmed from claims about the 'artistry' of these disciplines, derived from design and handicraft, as well as crafts, have provided me with the starting point for the following considerations.

First and foremost, 'artistry' is a peculiar definition, one that makes it possible to distinguish artistic textiles from other types of fabric, and as such it has in fact become dogma, a value criterion that has enabled one to bestow upon textile the status of a work of art, ordaining, as it were, a utilitarian product and assigning it to an exhibition context or theoretical framework.

Artistic strategies.

In the case of the Polish School of Textile Art, this was also associated with the liberation of technique and the search for its own unique and experimental methods of creation, which detached fabric for good from the functions it had performed for centuries as a facilitator of human life. For the authors of this category, it became equally important to deprive unique works of extra-aesthetic narrative and strip them of the burden of meaning, instead focusing on the affirmation of beauty and leaving one, above all, with a multi-sensory experience, which is often a consequence of interacting with 'textile art'.

Such a strategy arguably contributes to egotistic gratification, essentially materializing a personal vision that rejects external criteria or universal rules. Keeping in mind the slogan that the personal is political, we do not quite have a say as to where audiences will situate 'artistic' creation

and to which current it will be classified in the future, regardless of the creator's own intentions.

I have narrowed down my observations on purpose, so as to indicate a counterbalance to activities that are part of the field of activism, which programmatically engages in social issues and is sometimes denied artistry on account of this burden.

Creative strategies seeking results that are critical, speculative, or simply comment reality, often have more in common with a regime of design, which defines the context, addressee, reasons, goals and methods of action at the outset. At the same time, repetition—so important in design—is not always a preliminary assumption. This is because in some instances one knows from the very beginning that the planned artifact will remain a unique, one-of-a-kind piece touring galleries and other venues that help publicize it and 'broadcast the message' contained therein, which when 'designed' has a chance to reach a larger audience and effectively resonate with them.

We must remember, of course, that design has limited causality, nor is it completely autonomous, and as such it is insufficient to fix the world. To effect change and shake up the unjust system as a whole calls for the consolidation of many groups, the most effective of which will be politicians, governments and institutions at the global level. After all, design does not lay down the laws that govern societies, it does not sign contracts, agreements and treaties, nor does it cast votes in elections, but it nevertheless means a lot because it holds the power, instilled therein by the designer, to mediate relationships and communicate through objects and products through which it engenders new situations.⁵

"Speculative design is political because it seeks to challenge the status quo. If it fails to provide a substantive, implementable alternative solution, it nonetheless typically offers an accurate diagnosis of the problem. In this sense, therefore, designers resemble researchers and intellectuals, except that they are perhaps more effective in communicating with the public"⁶.

Art or design? The search for the perfect language

Based on the above findings, and wishing to engage in social issues, I decided to use design methods in my work, locating my activity in the field of 'critical' textile.

» 5 P. Boradkar, *Designing Things. A critical introduction to the culture of objects*, Oxford 2010.

» 6 Rosińska M. "Deklaracje zależności. Kilka uwag o nieantropocentrycznym projektowaniu spekulatywnym". In: *Antropocen*. Eds. Kępiński K., Krężlik A. Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2022, pp. 131-139.

I see a certain danger in drawing closer to a propaganda activity, which could be used against the original plan, instrumentalizing the author and bending their work to fit an ideological rhetoric.

Programmed activism in art, as I understand it, involves an attitude that is, as it were, anarchistic with respect to patterns.

In connection with the attachment to the term 'textile art', which I have noticed in a wide range of artists, but also art critics and audiences, I see a certain analogy with the discourse around the notion of 'poster art' and the Polish school of poster art, which has emerged on the basis said discourse.

Like textile art, poster art requires a certain design and consideration of the viewer, whose definition significantly affects the ultimate form of the work.

Elevating both disciplines to the rank of art situates them in a hermetic and detached theoretical, or more specifically, exhibition-related museum context, leading to an aestheticization that often undermines their respective identities and primary functions. This vague criterion, if it is at all legitimate to use the term, accords (above all to artists) the freedom to act and search for 'auteur' and 'artistic' solutions, whose quality frequently cannot be measured or verified, but can only be acknowledged.

Due to the fact that applied textiles—devoid of ideological values—were often disregarded by 'true artists', they were relegated for years to the margins of the visual arts. A true revolution in this regard came with the so-called 'Lausanneers' who, through their formal and material experiments on 'organisms' such as woven or fibrous structures, led to the emergence of the notion of 'textile art'. Perhaps it was so because it was easier for audiences to recognize aesthetic qualities of textiles (as was the case with posters), than to "understand the laws of structure construction". For the perceiving brain, the intelligibility factor is triggers a reward in the striatum, bringing one satisfaction and contentment, because it paradoxically draws one back to thinking about oneself, about how one is affected by the artwork.⁷

An artist's work consists most generally in the search for the most perfect language to express and visualize one's thinking about... The determination of the code is most often intuitive and has little to do with the programming signified by the very word 'code'.

» 7 See Bieczyński M. *Zeszyty Artystyczne*, 39. numer / *Polska szkoła plakatu – geneza, tradycja, kontynuacja*. Chapter: "„Artystyczność” plakatu jako mit założycielski „polskiej szkoły plakatu”".

Delicate social issues. Soft matter. Woven voice

Soft social matter – Soft woven voice.

The 3rd edition of the Textile Art Biennial, along with the entire program of accompanying events, was framed around the theme of “The Future of Freedom”, which provided me with a unique opportunity to summarize my creative research and reflections of the past few years. I was invited to write an introduction to the catalogue, whose excerpts I will cite below as examples of activism operating with a textile ‘vessel’ for substance.

The *Textile Talks* conference was heralded with the following statement:

Po_Wolność! (De_Liberation!)

I follow a path where I encounter signs, norms, regulations. I doubt, question and propose those of my own. My signs evolve. In my pieces, I refer to a different order than the purely aesthetic one. Signs are personal but operate with a conventional system, they can be universal, with universality understood as the potentiality contained therein. I have no power to abolish prohibitions, but I strike them out from my work by suggesting that very possibility, as if in an experiment. The search for personal liberty occurs in the world of visual messages, which I materialize in the form of functional textiles. The Polish language does not provide an equivalent for the English term *comfort cloth*; however, that which eludes the language, exists in the real world. When creating a patterned soft object, I want my message to be enveloping. I seek to render utilitarian textile unusable and the message applicable, confronting values with things. I am, ask and look for answers.

I speak out by designing, creating and teaching.⁸

The above statement outlines a creative framework that has guided me for at least ten years. I will illustrate my considerations, conclusions and intuitions most reliably by using examples of my own attempts to materialize that framework.

The voices I weave are soft and haptic, and the involvement of many senses is intended to help me communicate the substance I consider

of utmost relevance. The issue of liberty has received significant attention; and yet, this vociferant notion entails a lot of manipulation and attempts to subjugate the crowd, and so I suggest de_liberation, mindfulness, and accountability for all of one's activities, because it is in those activities that liberty is realized to the fullest extent.

During the "For Freedom!" exhibition⁹, hosted by the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź together with Jakub Stępień aka *Hakobo*, our students, and the artistic duo *Lou Cantor*, we strove to present visitors with an exhibition, rather than a walkthrough. To give them the pleasure of interacting with soft objects that took the utilitarian form and shape of blankets and scarves. Through the gesture of envelopment, we sought to thank the audience for taking the time to receive our messages. We also pushed the boundaries of the freedom of perception by allowing live interaction with the objects and rearranging the exhibition. The object evoked here—the blanket—continues to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration and analysis. This is why I write about it and create new objects that bear oft-difficult and important messages in an accessible and pleasant form.

The 'extraordination' of the blanket and the transfer of a unique artifact and artistic statement to the street. The new ornament.

One of the more obvious ways to communicate is through the use of text, especially if one's vantage point is the realm of language and human interaction. The combination of text with a non-transparent medium, such as textile (as opposed to paper), opens up new possibilities for 'transferring' the message.

When describing ideas and phenomena, examples can prove helpful, which is why I cite those resulting from personal impressions and analyses.

In 2019, the city of Białystok, Poland, became host to a violent crackdown on a demonstration for equality, setting off a wave of successive manifestations of aggression against minorities and women. Homophobia and hatred became part of the ruling party's political agenda in Poland. My need to respond to the unfolding evil spurred me to action. The only thing I could do at the time without multiplying violence and hatred in social discourse, was to act critically, commenting on reality, pointing out certain phenomena and dependencies. I feel that it is my duty to speak up, and I do so by creating art based on my skills and sensitivity.

This internal imperative prompts one to take action, e.g. by reacting to the denial of rights to social groups. The protest blanket *BIAŁOSTOCKA*

» 9 <https://cmwl.pl/public/informacje/za-wolnosc,101>

TKANINA 2.0 directly refers to the site of the incidents, but also to the historical tradition of the Białystok Textile.

One can perceive it as a symbolic ‘color template’, although it is the commentary on human rights that comes to the forefront.

Pas_s_a_long, on the other hand, is a story about the suppressed voice of women, presented in relation to the typically patriarchal symbol, the kontush sash. Kontush sashes were worn by Polish noblemen as a manifestation of their status and have persisted in the national memory as a symbol of social inequality and class discrimination.

Not unlike 16th-century Polish feudalism, modern-day turbo-capitalism has brought about an imbalance in wealth and, consequently, growing social inequalities, i.e., the greatest threat to be faced by humanity. A number of interest groups appropriate space in many areas without considering the needs of others. Privileges are distributed according to a key that favors those closest to power, leaving the weakest vulnerable and devoid of representation. The second important message of the piece is its feminist theme, namely a female version of the kontush sash, based on the traditional patriarchal symbol borrowed from classical compositions. Traditional motifs, mainly floral, that filled the various sections of the design, are replaced with flowers patterned after anatomical elements associated with the woman, her objectified, instrumentalized body and suppressed expression. In my version of the sash, historically worn by privileged men, the motifs reveal similarities between the anatomical patterns of the ‘floral’ larynx and uterus.

As an author, I want to engage the female voice, therefore I created an ornament built on the transformation of other anatomical motifs as well. The stylized glottis depicted in three states—speaking loudly, whispering and silent—multiplied in the center field, can be a tribute to all beings who are inaudible or even smothered. It is also a tribute to Rebecca Solnit, an author of reliable studies, such as *The Mother of All Questions*, that organize the knowledge concerning the etiology of violence, its scope and its consequences and risks. An important conclusion that emerges as a result of observing human relationships and analyzing literature is that if we can speak and are heard, we probably enjoy the privilege of being free (once considered an inalienable right).

Thus, the jacquard banner resulted from a heartfelt desire when I found myself deeply moved by the shocking events that transpired in Białystok, and thought to design a blanket based on the capacities and limitations of a factory located near Białystok. The entire Podlasie region is famous for its traditional double fabric, known as the Białystok textile. The blanket was produced in a suburban factory, using modern technology, with a special color palette of yarn from the factory’s color chart used to

hint at the rainbow effect. The object is very large and can shield and ‘protect’ about thirty six persons; as a banner designed to be carried during a march, it requires the collective action of a larger group of individuals—a particular type of consolidation—reminding us that to increase the chance of resolving minority issues, the majority should become involved.

The perfect circumstances to display the banner occurred during the June 2022 Equality Parade, whose participants took turns carrying the blanket-banner, as if in a relay of support.

The participation and involvement of a larger group of individuals was filmed and photographed by the media. It was captured in the documentary *PARADA – Don’t Rain On Our Parade*, directed by Ewa Krawczak AND Misi Joachim. Premiering on May 17, 2023, the film covers the Equality Parade, and was featured earlier this year in a documentary film review at the 20th edition of Millenium Docs Against Gravity¹⁰.

Because of its scale, color and softness, the blanket was eagerly touched by passersby.

Protest banners are usually DIY (Do It Yourself) objects made spontaneously from materials available at hand, so the protesters were very curious and moved by the fact that this huge banner was designed and made specifically for such an event, with a view to expressing concern and solidarity.

The piece sits at the intersection of tradition, craftsmanship and anthropology, at the same time constituting a product of industrial production, and, above all, an ‘disobedient’ object, a record of collective memory and a testimony to its time, despite its softness and visual appeal, perhaps also appearing as uncomfortable and irritating, since it is a reminder of behaviors and incidents that the oppressors would prefer to erase from history.

‘Przenośnik’ (Vessel)

The growth of interest in textile as a medium or tool used for artistic purposes, as observed in recent years, has rendered it both a subject of significance and vessel for deeper meanings (it has always appeared in this role, albeit without being internalized and disseminated as art in each and every culture).

In Polish, the word *noszenie* (*carrying*) is combined with a number of prefixes; however, Polish lacks a word that, as mentioned at the outset of this text, would capture the essence of a woven product that has supported humans in nomadic lifestyle for centuries. The most apposite and ambiguous word, one that is open to multiple interpretations, is the word

» 10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBREtOU_6V4

przenośnik (*vessel*) which takes into account the physical properties and multidimensional potentiality of textile as mediating the communication of ideas. For the purposes of this text, I used the principles of word formation in the Polish language to denote what I believe to be the paramount function of textile, and to capture its essence, i.e., textile's portability, which is extremely useful in activities committed to social causes, or activism tailored to fit broader issues.

Relations between textiles and language

In conclusion, it seems important to recall that even Roland Barthes himself addressed the connection between textiles and text, which is reflected if only in the common root of both words 'text' and 'textile', from the Latin *texere*, to weave. Many of the terms we use to describe our interactions with words derive from this common linguistic stem, and countless other expressions related to reading and writing draw on the rich vocabulary related to textiles. Barthes linked the meanings of text and textile in his polemic entitled *The Death of the Author*, but it was especially in *The Pleasure of the Text* that his reflection on the subject is most fully revealed:

Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web).¹¹

Such firmly rooted and thoroughly analyzed relations account for and legitimize the use of textile as a tool of activism; the recognition of the 'artistry' of the products can remain a supporting act to the artist's intentions, rather than comprising a value criterion.

The search for tropes describing textile in the languages and traditions of various cultures leads one to several conclusions, of which, for the purposes of this article, I have chosen the one related to the usability of textile, its ability to facilitate humans in carrying other objects, as well as transferring meanings and ideas, i.e., interceding, mediating. The proposed theme is the result of a search in Polish for an equivalent of one of the English terms and a differentiation that evades straightforward, dictionary translations. The notion I have in mind is a generalized term

» 11 Barthes Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. Richard Miller. New York 1975, p. 64.

denoting the function of textile as a product used for carrying, transporting other objects—a vessel—or more specifically a travelling bag, a bundle, a sack. In Japanese, the name *furoshiki*, which denotes a textile bundle, also connotes the womb, in which we are carried before being born.

Another example concerns the English terms meaning and significance, which can only be translated into Polish *znaczenie*, hence the difficulty encountered in a simple translation that inspired further explorations and an attempt to capture and name the reasons why the medium in question seems particularly useful as a vehicle for activism and “notations of collective social reminiscences and concerns”.¹²

The presented area of inquiry lends itself to further study and remains an interesting starting point for research, analysis and artistic output. •

Abstract

Written from the perspective of an artist and lecturer, the article seeks to illuminate the strong connections between textiles and various forms of activism using handicraft, design and artistic creations. This attempt to demonstrate a particular usefulness of textile creations for communicating content and commenting on reality is based on a historical review with a focus on anthropological tropes. The review of sources and the identification of selected examples from the world of material culture serves primarily to account for the continuously universal choice of the tactile medium as the most adequate for conveying critical and speculative content.

Linguistic issues related to the description of woven matter and its meaning and symbolism in the world's traditions and cultures, as well as the commonly accepted and employed terms for the artifacts that constitute the main area of research evoked in this issue of *Zeszyty Artystyczne*, form an important part of the author's reflection on the evoked medium and lead her to propose a rethinking of the use of the word 'vessel' (evoked in the title of the paper) as one that aptly characterizes the function of the fabric. The text also includes a polemic with the term 'textile art' and its customary and at times excessive applications.

The adopted perspective warrants the use of examples from the author's own oeuvre to illustrate a strategy of action oriented toward social activism. The examples cited occur in both exhibition and non-exhibition contexts: on the street, much like activism, which could not realize itself to the fullest within an exclusively theoretical framework.

Keywords:

critical textile, critical design, fabric, jacquard, speculative design, textile art, protest, activism, disobedient objects

» 12 Excerpt from the *TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA. Wobec współczesności* call for papers published by *Zeszyty Artystyczne*.

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