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In the face of contemporary times



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Contemporary wall hanging as engaged art

Introduction

This text is an excerpt from the master's thesis *Threads of Understanding: The Wall Hanging Form in Polish Contemporary Art*, written under the supervision of Professor Marta Smolińska. The thesis makes for the first academic study devoted to wall hangings (*makatki*) as a form of contemporary art. It explores the artistic projects of seventeen female artists, as well as the historical contexts of their form and technique, along with their influence on the current functioning of the wall hanging genre. The following excerpt focuses on the wall hanging as a form of engaged art, both thematically and through an activist utilization of finished works and the creative process itself. For the purposes of the article, terminological complexities have been sidestepped, and the term "traditional wall hanging" should be interpreted as a kitchen wall hanging (*makatka kuchenna*).

New facets of the wall hanging

Several decades after wall hangings ceased to be fashionable and vanished from the walls of kitchens and bedrooms, they began to attract ironic admiration from members of the intelligentsia, with the few surviving copies making their way into museums. Once synonymous with kitsch and parochialism, the wall hanging form witnessed its revival. In

Jacques Rancière's terms, one could argue that a new aesthetic regime has emerged¹: the distance enables the reinterpretation of old patterns and the establishment of new rules for their application and deciphering. The first among them is the very consideration of wall hangings in artistic terms, albeit there has been (as of yet, one is tempted to add) more than just one new way of their interpretation. Nonetheless, I will try to demonstrate that there are, in fact, some dominant trends in the application of wall hangings.

Contemporary wall hangings can draw directly on the history of the form or use genre-specific designs without engaging tradition as a central theme. They involve the same means of expression as the old wall hangings, and manifest the same features that distinguished their predecessors: simplification, schematic illustrations, compositions enclosed in a rectangular pictorial field, the application of white canvas as a background, the employment of embroidery, and the combination of text and image. In addition, the characteristic shade of blue is often used as a reference to the old form, traditionally utilized in Polish wall hangings. It goes without saying that new pieces, while often even pointing to direct inspiration drawn from traditional wall hangings, do not always seek to reproduce them in formal terms, hence only some among the distinguishing features of the wall hanging that I have established can actually be identified in each of the pieces that can be referred to as wall hangings.

Wall hangings emerged as a noticeable trend in contemporary art with the rising prominence of feminist themes in social discussions on the occasion of repeated protests for women's rights, staged since 2016². However, contemporary variations on the wall hanging theme had predated this caesura. The first female artist associated with the growing interest in wall hangings and engaging in a dialogue with the tradition was Bettina Bereś, who created her first wall hangings in 2009 as part of a project featuring a series of napkins with embroidered inscriptions. Over a dozen years later, the list of women artists³ expressing themselves through the use of wall hangings also includes Anna Maria Brandys, Monika Drożyńska, Małgorzata Gwiazdonik-Müller, Elżbieta Jabłońska, Magdalena Jaworska, Berenika Kowalska, Paweł Matyszewski, Joanna Michalska, Między Słowa, Marcin Salwin, Roland Schefferski, Anna Paula Szmeichel, Hon-

» 1 J. Rancière, *Dzielenie postrzegalnego: estetyka i polityka*, transl. M. Kropiwnicki, J. Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2007), p. 86.

» 2 The 2016 protests have also been deemed a turning point in the use of feminist narratives by the likes of Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk. A. Graff, E. Korolczuk, *Kto się boi gender? Prawica, populizm i feministyczne strategie oporu*, transl. M. Sutowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej 2022).

» 3 When referring to the authors of the discussed wall hangings, I shall use the feminine forms by default, since they are predominantly the work of women and often focus on feminine themes.

orata Świdarska, Anna Zajdel, the *Złote Rączki* Collective and Paweł Żukowski. For some of the aforementioned, wall hangings constitute an essential component of their artistic practice, while for others they were part of one-off projects involving this art form.

In contrast to traditional wall hangings, which reproduced existing patterns and repeatedly recycled them, contemporary wall hangings are individual artworks, created by and associated with specific women artists, even when the compositions themselves are derived from quotations. The patterns are generally designed and executed by the authors of the works. It is likely because of their unique character that today's wall hangings are more frequently embroidered than executed using other techniques: despite the former popularity of printed wall hangings, the form is now commonly associated with hand-stitched embroidery. Thus, its application emphasizes the connection with the tradition of the form, while also lending a more personal touch to the finished pieces⁴.

Contemporary wall hangings often deal with the same themes as their traditional counterparts, yet address those themes in different ways. Typical motifs include the role of women in society and the stereotypes concerning women, derived from the patriarchal worldview. However, while wall hangings in the past used simplifications as a way to render reality and its general principles, contemporary pieces usually invoke stereotypes while fully conscious of how unfair they can be. Modern-day wall hangings often use humor and irony, harnessing them to challenge various prejudices. It is also characteristic of contemporary wall hangings to react to current events, often in a way that expresses discontent or indicates the need for change, which stems from the ties between embroidery and activist movements. Thus, rather than reasserting the status quo, as was usually the case with their historical equivalents, contemporary wall hangings call it into question.

It also seems that modern-day wall hangings place more emphasis on text than the wall hangings of old. Nowadays one encounters textiles devoid of any graphic elements other than the text, or ones that are decidedly dominated by the text, which was not the case with traditional wall hangings, typically focused on ornaments and illustrations.

I propose to divide contemporary wall hangings into three types: textiles that directly continue the wall hanging tradition, works that impersonate old wall hangings by making clear references to their visuality, and works that point to inspirations drawn from wall hangings and their subsequent transformation into other forms. The groups I have listed

» 4 It also emphasizes the aura of a work of art, as noted by Walter Benjamin. W. Benjamin, *Dzieło sztuki w dobie reprodukcji technicznej*, in: Idem, *Twórca jako wytwórca*, transl. J. Sikorski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie 1975).

as second and third can also be considered as two subgenres of the wall hanging category, ones that challenge the worldview tied to the old patriarchal conventions, typical of traditional wall hangings. The wall hangings that continue this tradition can be considered as their opposite, not so much because they sustain said worldview (which, by the way, does not constitute their hallmark), but rather because they are made as decorations without complex subject matter, and as such they do not aspire to critique any given issue. They are sometimes put up for sale as handicraft, sometimes without the author's signature, which determines their perception in the grain of traditional wall hangings, whose authorship was not emphasized unless they were embroidered by a friend or relative. This type of wall hanging includes both works based on designs used at the time of their popularity, as well as those with a modernized message or design. Unlike the wall hangings discussed in the subsequent part of my argument, these works not infrequently retain the typical straightforwardness, moralistic character and (non-ironic) humor, although sometimes the message of a particular canvas could not have appeared on a kitchen ornament in the mid-20th century.

The second category of contemporary wall hangings includes subversive pieces that impersonate ornaments popular several decades ago and employ visual resemblance to create an expressive message. Such an approach requires a conscious use of the medium and, in line with Rosalind Krauss's observations (which she admittedly expressed with respect to painting), its continuous reinvention⁵. The textiles in question apply some of the elements characteristic of traditional wall hangings, or deliberately retain many of them so as to evoke an unambiguous association with the traditional form and, solely by means of slight deviations from established conventions, stage a clash between the attendant customs and the dissimilar significance of a specific piece. Such wall hangings no longer focus on the decorative function, but on the message itself; this is also related to the increased importance of the text, which has gained in stature compared with the illustrations. While the inscriptions on traditional wall hangings sometimes conveyed no practical message⁶, their modern-day counterparts often address current social issues and even try to inspire change. They employ humor and irony, tend to be blunt or signal uncomfortable topics, as opposed to the polished, naive world portrayed by the wall hangings of old. Through the contrasts that emerge as a result of the unexpected combination of classical wall hanging aesthetics with an expressive,

» 5 R. E. Krauss, *Oryginalność awangardy i inne mity modernistyczne*, transl. M. Szuba. (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria 2011).

» 6 Some of the popular inscriptions included phrases such as "good morning" or "have a nice day".

incongruous message, these new subversive wall hangings often seem funny, although the comic relief conceals entirely serious themes. The most important difference between these pieces and the old wall hangings they imitate is the fact that the former merely feign naive messaging as part of a subversive game of impersonation. To an extent, these fabrics inevitably analyze themselves and the tradition from which they have emerged as a form, and as such cannot but be a conscious medium, deliberately opting for naivety while contradicting it at the same time. Examples of subversive wall hangings include Paweł Matyszewski's white embroideries depicting same-sex couples, and many of Anna Zajdel's works, including those with slogans such as "Virgin Mary welcomes refugees," "Princesses against sexism," or the well-known "Take off your uniform and apologize to your mother" slogan used during protests against police abuse.

The third category of contemporary wall hangings includes pieces featuring less direct forms of inspiration: these are pieces that point to the characteristic traits of wall hangings, but refer to them in a less obvious way than the impersonation pieces described above; they also include projects whose obvious resemblance to wall hangings results from coincidence rather than a conscious interplay with the wall hangings' aesthetics or a genuine interest in this form. This group further extends over projects in which the wall hanging is the subject, but not, in the strict sense of the word, the medium of a piece in question. In the context of these designs, the wall hanging does not necessarily constitute the overarching association or the most intuitive interpretative key. Much like the works I have included under the second category of contemporary wall hangings, this third group most often cuts across the associative patterns set by traditional wall hangings, or uses them to contradict the order of things construed by the wall hangings of old. One should also note that this kind of projects is often less about the physical results of the work and more about emphasizing the creative process itself and the underlying relations, in line with Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Such was the case with the collaborative embroidering of protest banners, organized by the *Złote Rączki* Collective, or the symbolic embroidery against violence proposed by Małgorzata Gwiazdonik-Müller.

Wall hanging as engaged art

Engagement, activism and defiance constitute recurring motifs in the catalog of contemporary wall hangings I have compiled. In a similar vein, the very title of the first group exhibition presenting new incarnations of the wall hanging, i.e. *Makotka wywrotowa* (The subversive wall hanging) at the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław, intentionally emphasizes the

rebellious applications of the form. Engagement has been embedded in the wall hanging for a long time. When describing the figure of suffragette Janie Terrero, Natasha Huges lists examples of the rebellious use of textiles, such as the myth of Philomela, who, deprived of speech, told the story of betrayal by weaving her words into cloth; and the story of Mary Stuart, communicating from prison through embroidered messages. Similarly, imprisoned suffragettes deprived of the ability to communicate through typical handwritten letters or even talk to one another, used embroidery utensils that were available to them and allowed them to speak out, challenge the hostile system, establish prison solidarity⁷ and, importantly from today's point of view, leave a testimony of their struggle.

The suffragettes also embroidered banners, which they carried during the marches, and which in many ways resemble modern-day wall hangings, especially the banners made by the *Złote Rączki* Collective. Even the circumstances of their creation are similar in the sense that they took (and still take) the necessary stand for their rights, although the two situations are a century apart. Contrary to the stereotypes of the time, the suffragettes sought to claim embroidery for their own use, so that it would continue to be associated with femininity, albeit according to an altogether different definition where a woman did not have to be delicate and weak, and could instead become bold and opinionated. The banners strove to inspire action, combining slogans with graphic elements; they were made by many pairs of hands and represented the suffragette demands as reformist and egalitarian rather than revolutionary⁸. The very same qualities can be related to the modern-day banners made by *Złote Rączki*.

The collective was formed in response to the announcement of the deliberations in the Polish Parliament on a bill completely banning abortion in 2016, and consists of people involved in the operation of the embroidery school for men and women, known as *Złote Rączki*, had previously operated as a solo project of Monika Drożyńska. In a text published by *Czas Kultury*, Karolina Wilczyńska noted the meanings already embedded in the school's name: "suggestive ambiguities have been incorporated [in the name – A.S.], from indicating that—contrary to stereotypes—embroidering is a culturally appropriate occupation for both women and men, to the appropriation of the stereotypical 'handyman' (*złota rączka*) as an exclusively male phenomenon"⁹. Currently, one of the Collective's tasks is

» 7 N. Huges, *Stitching Solidarity: Janie Terrero and the Political Power of the Needle*, <https://decoratingdissidence.com/2020/06/12/janie-terrero-holloway/> [accessed: 30.05.2022]

» 8 R. Parker, *Subversive stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc 1984), pp. 197-199.

» 9 K. Wilczyńska, *Haft Okupacyjny vs. craftywizm. Feministyczne strategie artystyczne*, <https://czaskultury.pl/czytanki/haft-okupacyjny-vs-craftywizm-feministyczne-strategie-artystyczne/> [accessed: 30.05.2022]

to run a school. Their first joint action back in October 2016 was *Occupational Embroidery*, during which, with the help of sixty people, the banner *I Think, I Feel, I Decide*, later used at the National Women's Strike, was produced. According to Kuba Wesołowski, the Collective was not physically involved in the embroidery process itself, but only in the provision of materials and coordination of the whole¹⁰, which only emphasizes that the artistic value of the project lies not at all in the object that was finally created, but rather in the shared commitment, the attendant sense of solidarity, and the interpersonal relations formed in the course of work¹¹. Projects akin to the already mentioned *I Think, I Feel, I Decide* are infinite in the sense that the ornamental elements filling the letters can be added on an ongoing basis. The most important part of the banner is the text itself, which determines its usability; however, the possibility of embroidering more ornaments in the space provided (inside the letters) renders the piece an open work, inviting more people to join the community. Solidarity, however, is not only established through the act of embroidering, but also on a symbolic level, when the banner, the work of many dedicated hands, is visible during protests and allows anyone and everyone to identify with its message.

Another strategy for protest—one that, by definition, employs textile crafts—is craftivism. As per the movement's manifesto, craftivism is a form of individual expression of dissent, a way to provoke change, to introduce uncomfortable topics for discussion, where the use of crafts, implicitly textile ones, is meant as a way to achieve these goals¹². The premises of craftivism determine the general nature of action, but the manifesto does not specify what activities need to be taken to bring about change, or what specific change it seeks to bring about. Indeterminacy can be viewed both as a lack of an actual plan and as a result of openness to different definitions and initiatives: "My craftivism can be different than your craftivism and that's okay"¹³. The very idea of resistance through embroidery and the notion of craftivism have often been referenced by Anna Zajdel, in the general sense of engaged embroidery.

» 10 A. Myśliwiec, *Smartfony won, tamborki w dłoń. Kolektyw „Złote Rączki” zmienia świat*, <https://kobieta.wp.pl/smartfony-won-tamborki-w-dlon-kolektyw-zlote-raczki-zmienia-swiat-6059639713014401a> [accessed: 3.07.2022]

» 11 N. Bourriaud, *Estetyka relacyjna*, transl. Ł. Białkowski (Kraków: Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej MOCAK 2012).

» 12 M. Callahan Baumstark, E. Carpanter, J. Davies, T. Gooderham, B. Greer, B. Harvey, R. Marsh, M. Marvel, A. Miller, I. Nectar, A. Nielsen, E. Peppelin, C. Varis, *Craftivism Manifesto*, <https://craftivism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/craftivism-manifesto-2.0.pdf> [accessed: 10.06.2022].

» 13 *Ibidem*.

The list of engaged forms ranges from motivational feminist quotes (although Zajdel claims she would not embroider them today¹⁴), to comments on political events, or private stories collected from other individuals willing to share their experience. The list of various forms of engagement spans embroidering in and of itself, but also displaying these motifs on Instagram, in art galleries, on a sweatshirt worn in public or on stickers handed out on different occasions. All of these activities fall within the general framework of the original American craftivism of the early 2000s. At the same time, however, Zajdel noticeably deviates from the original concept of ‘gentle protest’. She does not shy away from blunt vocabulary and profanities, nor does she care if anyone finds her work too radical, includes the word ‘attack’ in her very Instagram pseudonym, *atakamakotka*, which evokes aggressive connotations.

The craftivism that has been cultivated in Poland in recent years addresses specific problems (e.g., reproductive rights, body-positivity), and thus has the power to rally people around these topics, while the American craftivism of the early 2000s described (and criticized) by Julia Bryan Wilson readily adorned itself with a vocabulary of theoretical considerations, of which it made no use in practice. In seeking to be open to various applications, it was reduced to a collection of catchy slogans, and its effectiveness was limited to the declarations spelled out in the manifesto¹⁵. The difference in terms of practices stems from the fact that, in Poland, craftivism is not a popular trend that attracts scores of participants, but rather an artistic strategy employed by a few individuals¹⁶. The term ‘craftivism’ itself, by the way, has only recently emerged in Poland and remains largely unpublicized. Zajdel was one of the first individuals to have publicly referred to herself as a craftivist, making her actions likely to leave a major imprint on the future functioning of the term in the Polish language¹⁷.

Artivism as performed by both Zajdel and *Złote Rączki* is in line with the feminist populist strategies outlined by Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk. In this sense, populism is understood as a message that casts itself as a representation of the people (‘us’) opposing corrupt pow-

» 14 A. Gruszczynski, *Anna Zajdel, feministka, kraftywiszka: Wyciszam dzwonek i robię polityczne hafty*, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,24549470,wyciszam-dzwonek-i-robie-polityczne-hafty.html> [accessed: 10.06.2022].

» 15 J. Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2017). The author’s arguments extend beyond those cited above.

» 16 I compare Polish craftivist practice with American practice based on the invocation of Bryan-Wilson’s critical arguments in Wilczyńska’s article, to which I have already referred. The author juxtaposes arguments concerning craftivism in America with *Occupational Embroidery without referring to the different geographical contexts, which renders the comparison unwarranted*.

» 17 Evidence of the rare use of the term ‘craftivism’ in Polish is provided by the Google search engine: as of May 31, 2022, the phrase yielded only thirteen results in Polish, of which over a third were related to workshops with the burlesque performer and activist BettyQ.

er ('them'), which resonates most strongly in the context of the pieces referencing the Black Protests, one that Graff and Korolczuk incidentally examined as a clear example of the successful use of a populist narrative by a progressive force in Poland¹⁸. Złote Rączki's banners are part of the polyphony forged during mass protests, while Zajdel also extends this type of narrative to other social issues that affect minorities as well, as was the case with the government's reprehensions of LGBT persons, or with the coverage of wartime rapes. This kind of narrative helps to anchor the emerging undercurrent in society through a sense of community formed not only by means of the principles professed by the people involved, but also—if not most importantly—the shared expression of their emotions¹⁹. What can help in this respect is both the collective embroidering of the words I Think, I Feel, I Decide or We Won't Fold Our Umbrellas, on the one hand, and the social media displays of self-embroidered wall hangings that fit the theme, or the catchy slogans hastily written on a cardboard box and displayed at a demonstration. By the way, the cardboard placards featured at the Women's Strike have become a phenomenon covered by many articles on news and entertainment websites, as well as in academic analyses, on account of their eye-catching, humorous overtones. Comedy arouses the interest even among outsiders and serves as another way to foster a sense of community among the protesters: they are united by their sense of humor and the fact that they communicate in a common language; on top of that, the jokes draw very clear boundaries between 'us' and 'them'²⁰. According to Graff and Korolczuk, this "feminist populism feeds on a vision of radical democracy and equality of gender, race and class"²¹, which in turn resonates with the messages of many of the wall hangings created since 2016, including those that were not featured at the protests.

Another project that can be considered within the framework of craftivism is Małgorzata Gwiazdonik-Müller's *Embroider Against Violence*, which is, in a way, an intermediate form between the actions of Złote Rączki and Anna Zajdel. This action is not about making embroidering on one's own and expecting it to inspire someone to change or make another embroidery promoting the same idea, but about integrating many individual practices into a common manifesto of opposition. Gwiazdonik-Müller has created a simple pattern with the symbol of Venus, easy to embroider even for beginners, inviting all interested individuals to perform it and

» 18 A. Graff, E. Korolczuk, op. cit., pp. 259-310.

» 19 *Ibidem*, p. 270.

» 20 M. Kraus, *Rola humoru w realizacji podstawowej funkcji komunikacyjnej transparentów prezentowanych podczas strajku kobiet* in: *Wokół Strajków Kobiet* eds. E. Dziwak, K. Gheorghe (Katowice: Archeograph 2021) pp.115-117.

» 21 A. Graff, E. Korolczuk, op. cit., p. 270.

blend them together in a patchwork banner as a show of solidarity with those experiencing domestic violence. The finished embroideries can be sent to the artist or displayed on social media (these solutions were necessitated by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic); alternatively, one can take part in collective embroidering led by the artist (which was originally intended as the way for the project to unfold). Getting together and embroidering in groups establishes a platform for conversation: running the threads requires concentration and looking at the knitting over and over again, while also leaving space for listening and talking, which allows one to talk about difficult issues, such as domestic violence, chosen as the main theme of the project. Gwiazdonik-Müller describes the nature of the action as follows: “I let the participants set the tone for the meetings. During *Collective Embroidering*, various conversations take place that result from the needs of those gathered, accompanied by the exchange of insights on violence and all sorts of counseling, not only on the subject of domestic violence but also on seemingly trivial matters. Participants open up, with some recounting their own experiences of domestic violence. Moms bring their children to introduce them to the topic, teach them to talk openly about the problem and empathize with victims”²². The project thus has a dual dimension: a symbolic one that involves expressing solidarity with the victims, and an entirely practical one, stemming from what transpires at the meetings and directly affects those in attendance. One expression of the abstract notion of solidarity is the physical banner, the work of many hands dedicating their effort to those experiencing violence. Making the embroidery itself is not a great strain in the physical sense (although it can be a challenge for a person who is not adept with a needle), yet it requires just enough time and attention to enable one to connect with the subject, that is if such a connection did not exist beforehand. Meanwhile, the immediate effects of the project are less tangible. They may involve, for example, an increased awareness of domestic violence, a better understanding of the victim’s experiences, or the emotions resulting from sharing their stories. They are committed to the memories of those taking part in the workshops, and are perceived by everyone in an individual way, depending not only on personal sensitivity but also on the kind of individuals encountered while working together.

Embroider Against Violence is a project based not on the materiality of the created object and the space it occupies, but on the time devoted to its creation. Composed of many elements, the banner is first and foremost a testament to interactions, thinking about others, acting together, and

» 22 Małgorzata Gwiazdonik – Müller, *Problemy przemocy wobec kobiet w interpretacji artystów multimedialnych, master’s thesis written under the supervision of Dr. A. Saj, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu 2019*, p. 52.

the newly made acquaintances with people whom one would perhaps not meet outside of pre-arranged artistic settings. Combined with the context of activism, these types of situations escape the routine structure of everyday life determined by the rules of the market and constitute what Bourriaud calls 'interstices', although he uses this term mainly to contemporary art exhibitions, rather than semi-partisan art activism that also verges beyond institutional confines. Embroidering together, conversing with randomly met people while working, but also marching in protest with a collectively created banner at the forefront are all situations that resist market logic and generate value (including artistic value) through interactions with others²³.

Gwiazdonik-Müller's project weaponizes the metaphor of the needle: it is not generally regarded as a dangerous item used in combat, but instead associated with stereotypical female activities and, in a similar vein, with gentleness. However, a needle prick can hurt, especially when a larger group of motivated people comes together. In line with the ideas of craftivism, embroidery becomes a tool of struggle. The end of violence, however, is not in sight, and still more people have to face it. Similarly, the banner woven at the meetings organized by Gwiazdonik-Müller is infinite and constantly open to the addition of new elements, as enabled by the patchwork formula. Actions of joint embroidery have already taken place in various venues, including those unrelated to artistic activity, for example, in a tailor's shop, a beauty parlor or on the train from Wisła to Katowice. The project has not ended, and the artist's intention is to continue it as long as possible.

Interestingly, Gwiazdonik-Müller was not the first person to link the wall hanging with the theme of domestic violence. She was inspired to employ the form by the blue threads associated with wall hangings, used in an advertising campaign organized by the Association for the Prevention of Family Violence Blue Line and the Saatchi&Saatchi agency, which featured a wall hanging resembling a traditional one with the slogan "She tells no one what goes on at home". However, the typical wall hanging slogan and the typical image (a woman cooking and a man accosting her) was accompanied by an unusual ornament indicating the disturbing nature of both the maxim and the illustration: in addition to thorny roses, one sees images of clenched fists, knives and crying birds²⁴. Gwiazdonik-Müller's design deviates so far from the traditional form of the wall hanging that, in fact, the most important reference to the form is the use of blue lines, the same element that, when verbalized, symbolizes the struggle against domestic violence and its prevention.

» 23 N. Bourriaud, *op. cit.*

» 24 Małgorzata Gwiazdonik – Müller, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

Last but not least, the final form of engagement involving wall hangings is simply embroidering themes considered as engaged art. All of the projects discussed above will fall into this category (they are, after all, about the struggle for women's rights), including Paweł Matyszewski's wall hangings. In their case, the engagement relies on the very fact of signaling the marginalization of LGBT persons, even though the author does not claim that his artistic statement offers a key to changing the thinking of others or the system itself. He is a commentator on reality, not its creator; still, enough reactions to such commentaries can induce social change.

Embroidered with white thread on white linen, Matyszewski's wall hangings featuring traditional compositions and the most conventionally characteristic sentences indicate that LGBT persons have always been around, but their history has not been remembered and preserved in iconography the way the everyday life of others has, and it is certainly missing from wall hangings, subservient to a conservative worldview. Even nowadays, it is very common for non-heteronormative people to remain closeted, conforming to the majority; in countries such as Poland, they even function in a legal vacuum, as the legislation fails to account for the existence of non-heterosexuality or genders other than male and female. One should also note the year in which Matyszewski's original wall hangings were created (2010)²⁵. This was long before the rise of homophobia in Poland, which manifested itself most visibly in the form of resolutions declaring certain regions "LGBT-free zones" (starting in 2019) and the round-up of people protesting the arrest of activist Margot (2020). Despite the change in public sentiment, Matyszewski's work remains relevant, and has perhaps even become more intriguing in the face of the sharp polarization over attitudes toward the diversity of sexual identifications. Only upon closer inspection can one notice that the embroidered figures are same-sex (rather than heterosexual) couples, and in fact the differences between the two are negligible if one were to overlook those imposed by society, namely the invisibility of one of those groups.

In creating his monochromatic wall hangings, Matyszewski references the extensive tradition of white embroidery. The term refers to a number of embroidery techniques that were traditionally done, as the name suggests, entirely in white, using white threads on white linen. These include, for example, *broderie anglaise*, *richelieu*, drawn thread work, *hardanger* or *snutka golińska*. In fact, even today single-color compositions are created using these techniques, and still primarily in white. However, in the plethora of techniques described as white embroidery, it is difficult to identify wall hangings that operate with linear stitches as the main means of expression, as is the case with Matyszewski's pieces. Far more

» 25 The pieces were lost during one of the exhibitions before being restored in 2018.

common are various types of cut-out embroidery, with openwork, lace-like effects, or those in which the shape of the convex elements is distinct and its texture stands out strongly against the background of a textile of the same color as the thread. Simple, linear stitches, such as the i-cord, most commonly employed in wall hangings, are used in finishing details only, such as the nervure of leaves in the richelieu technique. Matyszewski's contoured image in white appears more like a drawing on a wafer than traditional white embroidery.

The reference to ecclesiastical morality coincides with that typical of the wall hanging and contrasts with the depiction of arrangements officially condemned by the Church, such as raising a child by a same-sex couple. On the other hand, however, the aesthetic associated with the Mass transforms the depicted situation into a symbol of purity and innocence, much like the white garments worn at baptism, first communion and wedding ceremonies. Despite their sincerity and the resulting goodness, the scenes depicted in Matyszewski's work are therefore 'condemnable', turning the Church's hateful rhetoric into a tacit antagonist of his wall hangings.

While from the viewer's point of view the manner in which Matyszewski's wall hanging were remains inapparent, it, too, confirms the aforementioned thesis. The Church lacks acceptance, while society is able to understand other people and empathize with their situation. Matyszewski entrusted the weaving of his wall hangings to his grandmother, aunt, cousin and his friend's grandmother, who worked based on his previous sketches. According to the artist, the entire collaboration progressed without any adverse incidents, and although he was never quite sure of his grandmother's approval, she embroidered the model wall hanging and remained open to discussions²⁶.

Matyszewski engaged specific women he knew for the project, but his works do not seek to build a community centered around them. They draw on a conventionalized form to highlight the injustice of the attendant worldview, the exclusion encoded in the good advice extended to families. Although the artist is directly affected by the problem because of his sexual orientation, he does not depict it from a personal perspective, and his audience may not even realize that the author is gay. Matyszewski has found a way to make the injustice strikingly visible, which may motivate viewers to take a stand, but the wall hangings themselves do not call for action, unlike the other projects I have cited above. While those pieces directly encourage one to join in on the act of embroidering, objecting together, carrying the collective banner, and exacting some change, Matyszewski's wall hangings seem passive in comparison, but they still constitute engaged art, specifically of that of non-intrusive kind, which

» 26 See the artist's own words in his correspondence (author's archives, 14.04.2022).

many people need as an incentive to take action and align themselves with communities built around other artworks seeking to introduce change.

The pieces I have referenced pursue various forms of expressing dissent through embroidery. Although they deal with different topics, all of them tap into feminism and seek to redefine the old order and establish a new one in its stead, which proves once again that despite the frequent association of the embroidery technique with traditional worldviews, it can, in fact, also be used to promote other values. Feminist dissent, however, stretches beyond the issues of reproductive rights, violence and homophobia. The authors of *Feminism for the 99%* contend that feminism that strives for real equality should not only be trans-feminist, anti-racist and anti-fascist, but also anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist, which not only goes hand in hand with the assumptions of relational aesthetics, manifested in the projects described, but also in wall hangings in contemporary art in general. After all, wall hangings are outdated—not vintage, but just out-of-date, unfashionable, schematic, reproductive, uninteresting, kitschy—and therefore, it is difficult to pitch them as folk art (although such attempts have been made), and so one still hears, every now and then, of the original 1950s wall hangings found in dumpsters²⁷. In a nutshell, wall hangings are considered unattractive, for in order to be attractive an item must have commercial and capitalist value.

As a means of feminist expression, wall hangings also disarm the populist rhetoric of conservatives, who juxtapose modernity and its purported problems (such as the ‘homo-lobby’ targeting ‘real families’) with tradition, which supposedly represent moral superiority. The use of the wall hanging makes this dualistic contrast between depraved modernity and superior past inoperative, as the discussed women artists adopt some of the expectations embedded in the wall hanging tradition, but choose to use them in their own way and for purposes that diverge from the expectations. Above all, however, instead of reasserting the status quo, contemporary, engaged wall hangings strive to provoke change and bring together those willing to participate in the process.

Wall hangings have evolved into protest banners and pieces (both artistic and hobbyist) that simultaneously connect to the past with its entire arsenal of prejudices and to a dream future where equality reigns supreme. Contemporary wall hangings articulate defiance and offer an opportunity to narrate oneself beyond stereotypes, so as to dispel them altogether. Thus, they do not seek to break the centuries-old associations between typical embroidery and femininity, but rather to defy the perception of femininity as one-dimensional, confined to patriarchal discipline,

» 27 A case in point can be found on Między Słowa's Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUaddGXsliY/> [accessed: 10.06.2022]

while also showcasing its many forms through the language of threads and fabrics similar to those embroidered decades earlier.

However, the women artists creating new incarnations of wall hangings do not simply rely on the belief that the power of art can change the world. Instead, they propose to collective action and strengthen ties, whether through spontaneous spurts or planned gatherings curated by a cultural institution of choice. There is less emphasis on the object itself—the wall hangings—and more on the process of their creation, the relationships established in the course of the project and the energy involved therein. ●

Abstract

Artistic textiles based on a style of old wall hangings have become a noticeable phenomenon in Polish contemporary art in the last several years. These artworks use various strategies in order to challenge stereotypes that were typical for wall hangings of the past and examine our relation with tradition. Historical patterns are still used in an unchanged way but they also are the subject of subversive games and they serve as an inspiration for other artistic projects that are not wall hangings anymore. Contemporary wall hangings are often connected to political topics, they are brought to street protests and serve as a platform to form new connections.

Keywords:

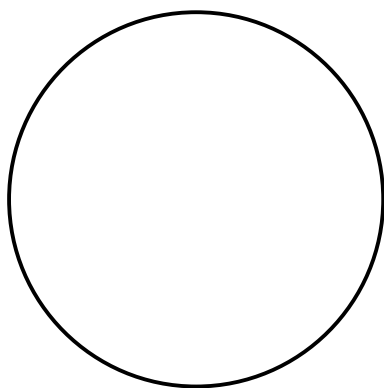
wall hanging, embroidery, relational aesthetics, feminism, activism

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