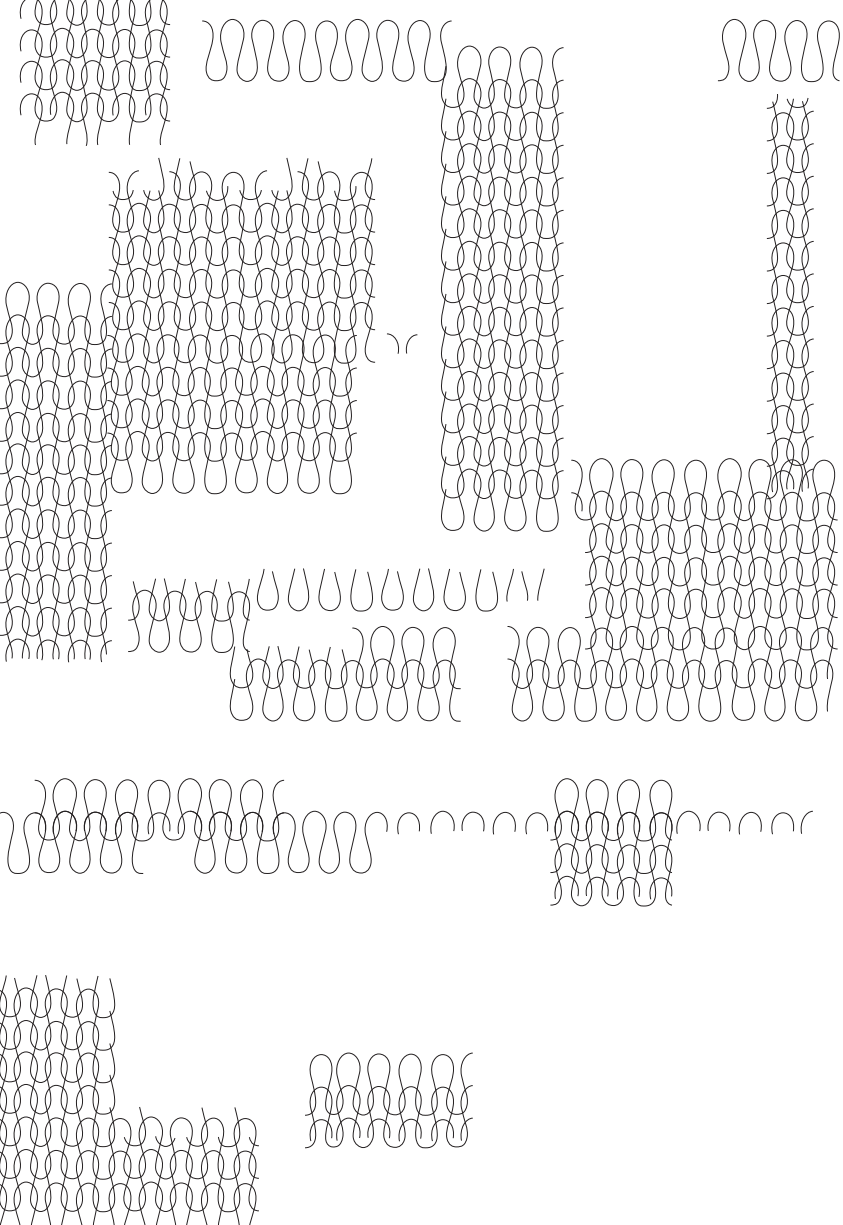
Knitting as a Method of Communication

Signe V. Boilesen



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Signe V. Boilesen
Gerrit Rietveld Academie
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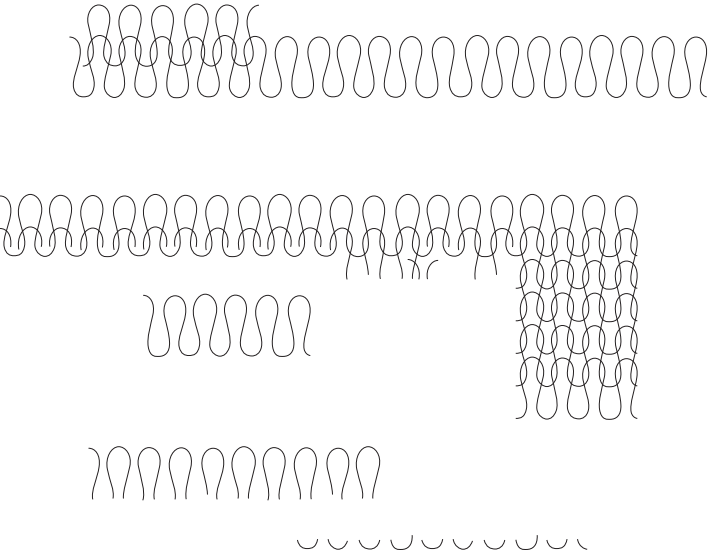


Introduction

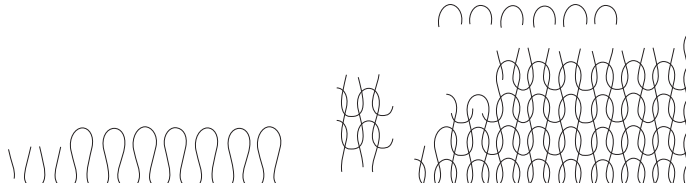
For as long as I can remember, working with textiles has been a part of my life. From an early age, I had to help my grandmother prepare her knitting projects by winding the yarn she was going to use. Later, she 'allowed' me to become part of the actual process of making and she taught me how to knit.

Every week when I was visiting my grandmother, she would sit next to me on the couch and we would go through the different techniques she had taught me to check if I had progressed. Occasionally, she would invite me to go with her to the monthly handcraft gatherings she hosted for the women who lived in the area. I remember thinking at the time that it felt more like an obligation than an actual invitation — just another thing the adults had decided I had to do like going to school, learning to write, or taking swimming classes so I would not drown in the pool on the family summer holidays.

Throughout my teenage years and early twenties, I did not give much attention to working with textiles and it became a basic tool to fix broken clothes or make a DIY gift for a birthday when I was short on money. Working with textiles was, to me, basic knowledge. Therefore, when a teacher came up to me around six years

ago while I was experimenting with watercolors and said that she thought working with pattern making and textiles would be a good future career opportunity for me, my only thought was "oh no, here we go again", another woman trying to push her own interests onto me.

Six years have passed and I have gradually let go of some of my personal stubbornness and fear towards working with textiles. Without purposely giving textiles any attention for a long time, I now find myself writing a thesis about a topic that has always simmered in my subconscious. My thesis touches upon the history of weaving as the most common textile medium in the context of Fine Art and the potential of knitting as an artistic medium. I have been looking into the social contexts of crafting and art to investigate why knitting is stigmatized as either a technical hobby or, in art, as feminist activism and why I have, for severaval reasons, found it rather difficult to claim knitting in my practice without having to defend my position. Using a combination of personal experience and the development of textiles in art over time, this thesis examines how knitting can be used as a tool for communication between different social classes and interests as a nonverbal common language through tactility, memories, and the feeling of home.



Weaving as an Extension of the Body

One of my Swedish friends introduced me to a series of documentaries about textiles, one of which was about the life of Hannah Ryggen.[1] I was immediately interested in both her life and her artistic practice. Ryggen spoke about her work as if there was no doubt that her woven tapestries had to be a depiction of her own life and how she was determined to use materials from her own surroundings. All the different tones of colors she used in her woven works were made from her own natural dying process. She found different plants and herbs close to her home in the north of Norway and experimented until she created the exact color she wanted to use in her tapestries. Ryggen's dedication was such that she kept a pot outside her home where family members had to pee so that she could use the urine to create the blue-colored wool in the blue color she wanted. Her family and her artistic practice were always intertwined. Ryggen was self-taught in both weaving techniques and choosing materials. She took control of the entire artistic process from A-Z: carding, spinning and dying the yarn herself. The material research and tests that Ryggen did were just as important as the

1 Hannah Ryggen, *Bildväverska*, documentary on Hannah Ryggen, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuvrmPvsBB-M&t=3s (accessed 5 March 2022).

finished work. It is indeed a time-consuming process to card and dye your own wool, and I find the time and care spent in the process reflects her choice of medium and the most important topics in her life: her family and current political themes. I relate to her practice in the way that family and work are intertwined in my own practice. The personal life is the most important of all and can't be ignored.

Considering my interest in letting everyday life speak within the artistic practice, I was especially interested in two of Hannah Ryggen's tapestries, *Vi og våre dyr (Us and our animals)* and *Grini*. *Vi og våre dyr* was made in 1934 and expresses the deep and abiding love that Ryggen had for her family and her animals. The tapestry is a portrait of her little family and how they were living with their animals. As Ryggen herself described:

> It is us with the foal Nussa, the cow Metta and the two sheep, Kakeleja, the goose and the turkey. I had 10 geese. We slaughtered all of them at once. I haven't eaten goose since. It is to that memory I have woven this tapestry.[2]

There is realism and a recognition of the necessity of having to slaughter animals in order to survive. Yet, Ryggen did not take it

2 Marit Paasche, *Hannah Ryggen: Threads of defiance* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), p.70.

lightly — the animals were important, and they were loved.

Ryggen's choice to unfold the imagery in a band that resembles a frieze makes me think about my daily life growing up on a farm and how some of those memories have been preserved as if they were woven into my memory. For example, the day when I came home from school, and I was told that my granddad shot my dog with my dad's hunting rifle. *Vi og våre dyr* resonates with my knowledge of family and farming as a lifestyle where the animals are part of the family until they are not. In December, there are presents for our animals underneath the Christmas tree and in May they might be shot with a hunting rifle while eating sausage.

Another example of how Hannah Ryggen intertwined her political interests and private life in her artistic practice is the tapestry *Grini*.[3] Ryggen started to weave *Grini* in the summer of 1945 when her husband was held captive at Grini outside of Oslo during the Second World War. In the tapestry, her husband is displayed with his prisoner number, 13243 while he paints the skull-and-crossbones signs that the Nazis placed in the minefields. From the left, the daughter comes riding in, as if in a dream. Through her messenger, their daughter, Hannah bestows a dream on her husband, or the power to imagine. When I look through the work of

3 Paasche, *Hannah Ryggen*, p.139.

Hannah Ryggen in chronological order, I see how her focus point became more and more political during the war. She started to incorporate her antifascist beliefs into her tapestries. At the same time, she was still working with the motives of her family members. How she communicated what was on her mind through weaving appeals to me in the sense that her honest emotions have been the anchor point throughout her entire carrier.

Hannah Rygen, *Vi og våre dyr (Us and Our Animals)*, 1934, wowen in wool and linen, VG Bildkunst, Bonn 2019

Hannah Rygen, *Grini*, 1945, wowen in wool and linen, VG Bildkunst, Bonn 2019

While Hannah Ryggen challenged the formal traditions of Norwegian textile folk art, combining figurative and abstract elements, Anni Albers created striking utilitarian woven objects and helped reestablish textile works as an art form. Albers joined the Bauhaus school of design from 1922—1928. Because of her gender, she was unable to study painting, which was instructed mainly by male artists. Women were restricted to weaving, which she originally considered a girly craft, but the particulars and the useful aspects of textile as a material soon became her main interest. Albers tested the technical limits of textiles and avoided the pictorial representation. She had a philosophy about the tactile sense she felt so strongly attuned to and its modern insensitivity. In weaving, Albers' primary material was textile, but she never limited herself to cotton and linen. Instead, she considered plastic, metal, and wire as material to be woven. By mixing various materials in a single work, Albers was able to alter the perception of the surface and saw the materials through their capacity for visual effect. Anni Albers was also fascinated by communication and made works with references to text and writing in the titles of multiple pictorial weavings.[4]

Her work *Open Letter* from 1958 was, she said, her missive to her husband Josef. *Open Letter* is a striking black and white

4 Textile Arts Center, Anni Albers material and meaning, https://textileartscenter.com/feature/anni-albers-material-and-meaning/, (accessed 5 march 2022)

cotton textile constructed in a leno-open weave, that upon closer inspection reveals small and brightly colored supplemental weft threads, each added in manually during the weaving process — writing a message through pieces of thread, that in the end shapes a story that can be read through the choices of color and the tactility. I see it as a poetic gesture, a physical way of communicating instead of using letters. That Albers let her textile work speak without using an image is, for me, another suggestion of a personal way of writing that compares to how Hannah Ryggen wrote thoughts and memories using images. *Open Letter* makes me draw parallels to a handwritten letter, as if the words could only be read if the letters could grow out of the paper and be physically present.

Another work of Anni Albers is *Six Prayers*, a piece developed between 1966 and 1976 that was commissioned by the Jewish Museum in New York to memorialize victims of the Holocaust and developed. The six panels in a dark toned palette of grey and beige cotton and linen threads, highlighted by silver accents, were made to be presented with spaces between them. The intent was for the memorial to be meditative rather than monumental. The interlacing of endless lines suggests both control and chaos, darkness and light, and symbolizes the good and the evil in human beings on the loom of nature. The abstract image of *Six Prayers* makes me once again think about how textile can be used to pass on information to the viewer when language and letters are inadequate.

In her active career, Anni Albers saw herself principally as a designer rather than as a craftswoman who happened to design her own wares. And yet, she saw designing and making as two inextricable activities. The distinction between design and high craft was strengthening in the time of Bauhaus, and the title `designer´ became more widely used, defining a craftsperson of the technological age who was no longer forced to do her/his own making.[5] In my research of Anni Albers and her artistic practice, I noticed that she has been called both a designer and an artist. As Priyesh Mistry, one of the curators of Tate Modern's vast 2019 said in retrospective:

> Anni Albers is very much a "designer's artist" and "an artist's artist," and a woman relucent to label her as anything at all: "She was a teacher, an artist, a designer, an architect…and she wouldn't separate those. She just didn't have those boundaries.[6]

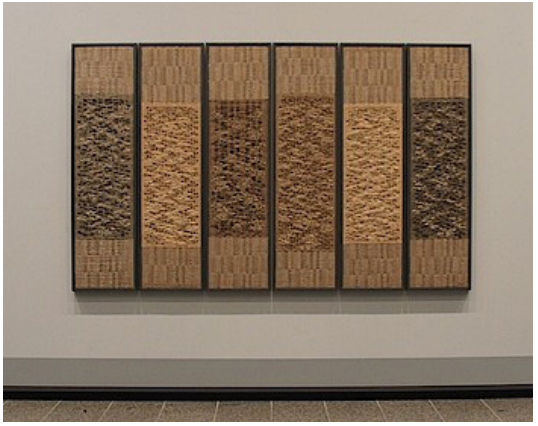
In the last century, textile work has evolved from being seen 'only' as a craft. This evolution created a more solid ground for new textile artists, textile designers, and the once in between to stand on. The work of Anni

5 Lucy Lippard, *Making something from nothing: (Toward a Definition of Women's `Hobby Art')*, orig. pub. 1973, The Craft Reader edited by Glenn Adamson (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018) p. 48.

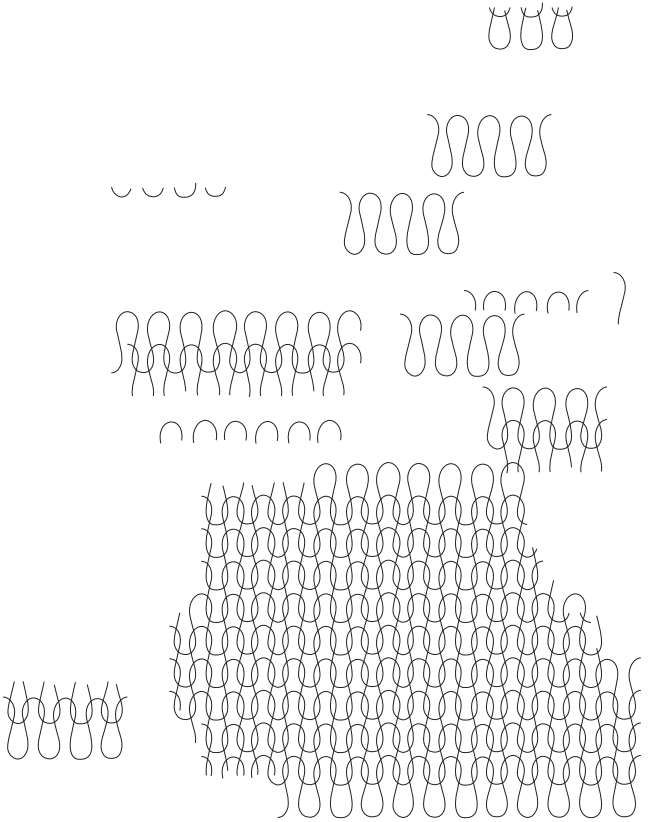
6 Eye on design, *Anni Albers: The "Designer's Artist"*, https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/anni-albers-the-designers-artist-who-put-women-on-the-grid/ (accessed 5 March 2022).

Albers and her way of pushing the limits by letting textiles speak, is one of the main reasons for that change.

Anni Albers, *Open Letter*, 1958, cotton, Tate Modern, 2018.



Anni Albers, *Six Prayers,* 1965-66, cotton, linen, bast and silver thread, Jewish Museum.



Digital Weaving for the Sense of Sight

Time has passed and new technical possibilities have been introduced in weaving. Though weaving was only a matter of the loom and the threads as an extension of the artist's body and mind before, the technological age has brought another aspect into the field of textile in art.

On my trip home to my family last year, I visited the contemporary art museum Aros, where I saw one of six tapestries from the series *The Vanity of Small Differences* by the contemporary artist Grayson Perry. The series tells a story of the social mobility of the twenty-first century and suggests that consumer culture has a critical impact on modern society. The six tapestries are inspired by William Hogarth's moral tale *A Rake's Progress* that follows Tom Rakewell, a young man who inherits a fortune, but fritters it away on sex, drinking and gambling and ends up in a psychiatric ward. Hogarth used the paintings to make fun of 18th-century society for the ways in which people tried to fit into certain, often `higher´ social classes. About his work Perry has said following:

> Ever since I was a child, I have been very aware of the visual environment people build around themselves. When I got older, I wanted to decode their choices. Why did my nan's front room, with its

> brass ornaments and pot plants, look like it did? Why do middle-class people love organic food and recycling? Why does the owner of a castle and 6,000 acres wear a threadbare tweed jacket? People seem to be curating their possessions to communicate consciously, or more often unconsciously, where they want to fit into society. I thought it refreshing to use tapestries – traditionally status symbols of the rich – to depict a commonplace drama (though not as common as it should be); the drama of social mobility.[7]

What Perry said about the choice of expressing himself through tapestries, and how it has traditionally been a status symbol of the rich, is something that caught my attention. If Perry refers to the history of tapestries woven in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when tapestries were symbolic emblems hung behind or over a throne as a proof of authority, then I understand his choice of textile as a medium. But, if we scroll forward to the mid-late 20th century, or even today where tapestries are made by hobbyists with the purpose of decorating the wall behind the tv, or designers who make tapestries for their sound isolation function, or artists who want to tell a story with the use of treads, then I guess the way

7 Art Fund, *The Vanity of Small Differences by Grayson Perry*, https://www.artfund.org/whats-on/more-to-see-and-do/listicles/object-of-the-month-the-vanity-of-small-differences-by-grayson-perry, (accessed 5 march 2022).

that Perry's tapestries are looked at depends on which social class the viewer identifies with and in which context it is shown.

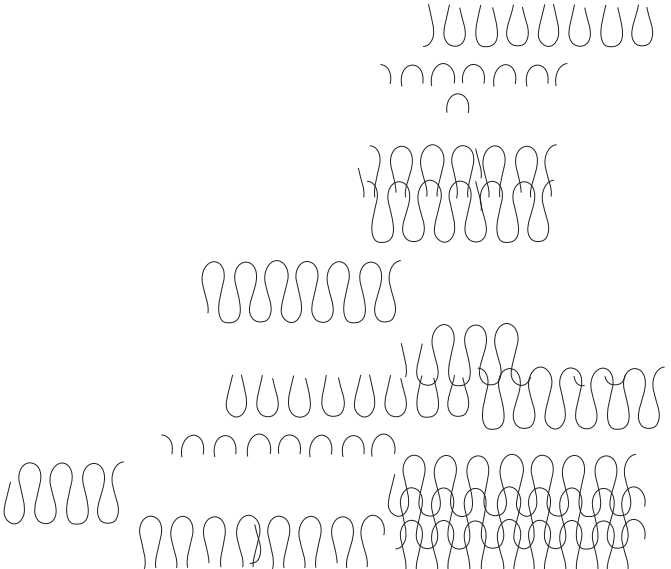
When I looked from a distance at the tapestry *Explusion from number 8 Eden Close*, the one tapestry exhibited at Aros, what I noticed was the pictorial representation rather than the medium it was made in. It was as if the longing to touch the textile work had turned into something which only spoke to my sense of sight. I had a similar experience when I recently visited the installation *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries* by Merzedes Azpilicueta at Stedelijk museum.[8] *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries* aimed to explore unseen, often informal, modes of social organization, and the forming of intimacy and solidarity in everyday life. In the center of the exhibition space, a sculptural tapestry was shaped by a wooden structure so that the woven material in which subjects such as food economies, young female workers at textile factories, and women-led global rights movements coalesce. Azpilicueta drew these subjects together in the context of her research into the Potato Riots of 1917 in the Jordaan neighborhood of Amsterdam, organized by working class women in response to food shortages during the First World War. Due to the placement of the wooden structure, I could look at the tapestry from both sides, and

8 Stedelijk, Prix de Rome 2022, www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/prix-de-rome-2021-2, (accessed 5 March 2022).

here again my experience was that my sense of sight took over for the longing to touch. I figured that after having the same experience twice, the way the tapestries had come to life might have been the same, which I later found out to be true. The tapestries were woven from digital files on a jacquard loom. With the use of a digital jacquard loom, the artist doesn't leave any trace of process and it is no longer a matter of technical ability, which is probably why I was unable to read it in the same way as woven work made on simple back strap loom. With the absence of what I normally would define as tactility, I wonder if a digitally produced tapestry is in "need" of some sort of pictorial representation which can clearly explain its content. If that's not the case, must it be defined as design rather than art?

Grayson Perry, *Expulsion from number 8 Eden Close*, 2012, Jacquard loom, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk, series The Vanity of small differences, Aros Aarhus Kunstmuseum.

Merzedes Azpilicueta, *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries*, 2021, Jaquard loom, objects, garments and sound, Stedelijk Prix de Rome, 2021



The Social Context – Craft and Art

In my research on female textile artists, I stumbled upon one type of sentence many times, e.g.: “Hannah Ryggen managed to elevate from handicraft to fine art”.[9] The word ‘managed’ is what catches my eye. How I understand the word in that common sentence is that Hannah Ryggen succeeded because her work was looked upon as fine art and not as handicraft. But why is fine art the criteria for success? Why is art finer than handicraft? These questions make me think of Lucy Lippard and her essay *Making something from nothing (toward a definition of women’s hobby art)*. In the essay, Lippard writes about the difference between art, handicraft and hobbyist work and how those fields are separated in relation to social context. The distinctions between ‘fine’ art and ‘low’ art and ‘fine’ craft and ‘low’ craft are something that has particularly affected women throughout generations.

Speaking of generations, the last time I was home visiting my family, my grandmother and I took our annual journey through my grandmother’s physical memories which consist of articles, materials, samples and her works. During the trip, I asked her for the first time

9 Nordenfjeldske kunstindustri-museum. *Hannah Ryggen*, https://nkim.no/en/hannah-ryggen, (accessed 8 March 2022).

about her experiences making textile work as a craft woman. I asked her if she thought that her many working hours in her sewing room with a threaded tapestry needle in her hand had been appreciated and if the hours she had spent had "paid off". Her answer was that she had come to terms with the fact that people didn't understand all the time and energy she had put into developing new patterns and techniques, since what she was doing was considered similar to what all the other wives knitted or embroidered before going to sleep — a female hobby. The only people who could really apricate her work were the ones who explored and experimented with textile on a part -or fulltime basis themselves.

In the sewing room, we took some of the old folders down from the bookcase and started looking through documentation of her work in the shape of articles she had cut out from newspapers. One specific photo caught my attention, a photo from 1981 showing four important men (three mayors and one administrator) holding the tapestry made by my grandmother, commissioned by the Municipality. When I looked at the photo for the first-time, what struck me was the way that they were holding the tapestry. Since my grandparents' house is full of my grandmother's textile works hanging on the walls, I know that the intention was that this tapestry should have been presented on the wall too. How the four men in suits decided to present the tapestry to the press seems, to me, rather awkward, like it lost its value in the

hands of anyone other than the person who made it. It turned into matter of formal gift giving, like giving two bottles of wine as a gift for the hostess. Lippard writes in her essay:

> But there are also "high" crafts and "low" ones, although women wield more power in the crafts world than in the fine art world, the same problems plague them both. The crafts need only one more step up the aesthetic and financial respectability ladder and they will be headed for the craft museums rather than for people's homes. Perhaps until the character of the museums changes, anything ending up in one will remain a display of upper-class taste in expensive and doubtfully "useful" objects.[10]

In 1978, Lippard wrote that the crafts need only one more step up the ladder to be headed for the craft museums rather that people's homes. 44 years have passed, and I wonder if the step has been taken? Why I cannot tell if craft has moved forward could be because of the social classes I am trying to navigate between; the one I grew up in as a middle-class farmers daughter and the other as a fine art student. My experience is that there is still a gap between what good art and good craft is in relation to which social context I am in.

10 Luzy Lippard, *Making something from nothing (toward a definition of women's hobby art)*, p.48

From the perspective of my family, where most of the men were born to be farmers and the women were the glue in the family helping their men on a full-time basis, I understand their point of view on what they consider to be 'good' art and 'good' craft. It is not in their interest to make use of a museum; it is inconvenient to have to go by car into the city center, and the price of the tickets are ridiculous when one considers that they already paid their part through the tax system. Another factor is that the contemporary art scene is often not relatable to their vision of good art. When I asked some of my family members what their definition of good art is, they said that a good art piece must be aesthetically satisfying and something that has taken a lot of time to make ("if it can't be beautiful why make it"). If not, then at least make something functional. How they describe good art is probably how I would describe good craft from my art student point of view.

I am not sure why I haven't had a conversation with my grandmother about what it means to be a woman working with textile. Maybe because I have thought of the craft as an extension of her hands and probably because I first started digging into the same medium as her during the last couple of years. Before, I didn't give it that much attention, since it is a common thing for the females in my family to know at least one technical aspect of textile such as knitting, embroidery or sewing, before we learned how to write. This might be one of

the reasons that I didn't bring textile as a medium into my studio to begin with. I have taken textile for granted, especially knitting. My resistance is caused by thoughts of not wanting to be looked at as one more female from my family "expressing my creativity" through knitting in a social context where it is cute to keep yourself busy when the real working day is over. I have started to understand that this might have been my belief without knowing it — a belief that still haunts me now and then in the process of making. Another reason why I have been avoiding textile as a medium of fine art is the fact that textile has been used as a political statement of female artists since the 1970s. The political aspect of feminism and textile is not been something I was familiar with when I was first taught different techniques from craft women, and therefore it has been something I have had to "unlearn" to be able to understand it from a fine art perspective. During my years of studying, I have had several studio talks with fine art teachers where I have been asked why I think what I am making is art. This is probably always a valid question to someone who is trying to move around in the field of art, but I have the feeling that this question is asked more often when it comes to working with textile as a medium when there is not a loud and clear political feminist voice. In the book *Thinking through craft*, Glenn Adamson writes about feminism and the politics of amateurism in the 1970s and 1980s feminist movement, which

makes me understand how female textile artist and their work can be interpreted at first sight.

> Amateurism became a middle ground which women artists could articulate the very difficulty of their position. — Feminists conceived of amateurism as a strategy that held both the traditional home and the mainstream art world at arm's length. Craft was the most material expression of that strategy. It served double duty as a symbol of unjustly quashed creativity, and a token of the Feminist desire to break out of the stultification of domesticity.[11]

I understand that the history of the feminist movement cannot and should not be forgotten, and that I, as a female working with textile with interests in both craft and art, will necessarily be compared to that era. But I wonder if textile is often at first sight looked at as a political tool, a way of materializing a feminist strategy in an art context? Not long ago, I had an experience when I was setting up my work and I asked some of my 'art friends' what first came to their mind looking at my work. Independently, they respondedsaid "that it had a Pussy Riot kind of vibe". I understood where they were coming from, three knitted objects hanging on the wall in the shape of what we consider scarfs.

11 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through craft, Feminism and the politics of Amateurism*, (London: Berg, 2007), p.151.

But, then again, I was thinking that if that is ´the name of the game´, that a textile work made with techniques other than weaving will often be referred to feminist activism like the Russian feminist punk and performance group.[12] I consider the use of amateur craft as an artistic vocabulary to be both positive and negative. The positive side is that it became an alternative to art history and gained a language that summed up women's experience.
The negative side could be that amateur craft was seen as inherently female and faced the negative aspects of the gendering.

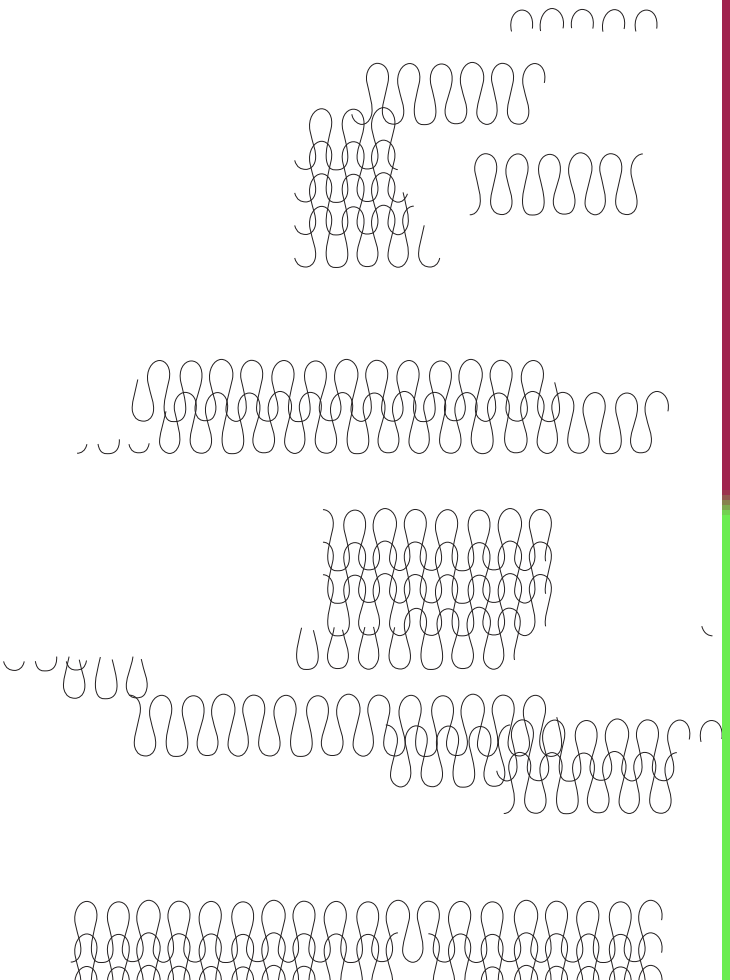
> When craft manifests itself as an expression of amateurism it becomes genuinely troublesome. The problem begins with the word itself. 'Amateur' means roughly 'lover', from the Latin Amare (to love), and one of the hallmarks of amateur activity is as lack of critical distance from the object of desire.[13]

For me the word amateur is negatively loaded, especially within an art context, as it recalls being a hobbyist who could simply be a person knitting on a pair of socks every night following youtube tutorials after a day at work.

12 New Musical Express, *Who are Pussy Riot?*, https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/who-are-pussy-riot-russia-activist-group-world-cup-final-pitch-invasion-2354987, (accessed 5 March 2022).
13 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through craft, "The World's Most Fascinating Hobby"*, p. 138.

It is not because I don't see any value in it as a hobby, but as someone who wants to work with different textile crafts in the field of art, *amateur* is a word that is contradictory to what I would like to achieve as, hopefully, a critical thinker and I am also not sure that textile in art benefits from it.

Official present from Bjerringbro municipality (DK), to the mayor of Wahlstedt (DE), Photo from article, 1981.

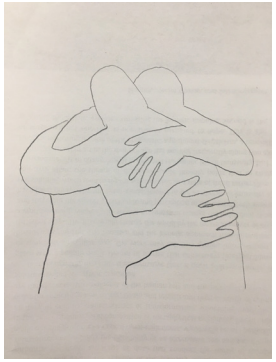


Embrace

Since I started to focus more on textile as the main medium I am working with, I have noticed that something has changed in my communication with my family, like textile has become a meeting point where we speak a common language, a language that goes beyond different social groups and interests. The labor of yarn that intertwines and creates an object is something that can be understood from both a craft and an art perspective, as if the language textile speaks has a familiar, soft and warm voice. The tactility created by the different techniques or the material itself, that might be recognized by the tips of the fingers, or as a soft and warm feeling in the shape of a scarf that embraces you around the neck bring up these familiar feelings. For me, the embrace through textile appears both in the act of making and in the act of touch. When two single threads meet and intertwine, they start depending on each other in order to exist in the shape of an object. If one thread breaks, the other one loses it shape and the embrace is no longer present. To create a textile object using the techniques of handicraft is a time-consuming gesture. With the act of giving in mind, an example could be my thoughts towards the receiver that goes from my brain to the needles and meet with the threads of yarn while knitting a scarf. When the making is done, and my thoughts have been

captured in the repetitive motions of knitting it is now a symbol of the embrace which becomes physical in the way of holding someone closely in one's arms.

A familiar and soft voice is, for me, also what I relate to feeling at home. Home is not the physical place where I currently live, but the area I grew up in where all my relatives still live. It is a meaningful place even though it can bring painful memories and diverging political opinions on the table, and it still induces the romantical feeling of belonging. Memories of shared experiences with family contribute significantly to understanding a sense of identity. The feeling of embracing one's home is, for me, directly related to the feeling I get wearing the old broken jumper I got from my mother while watching one episode of my favorite tv-series.



Embrace, by me, September 2021

Techniques

In weaving, two threads called the wrap and weft are used to create a fabric. The wrap is stationary while the weft is moving and interlaced. When the wrap and the weft meet each other, they start creating a stiff non- stretchable fabric. The opposite goes for knitting, where only one thread is used to create several consecutive rows of connected loops that intermesh with the next and previous rows to create a stretchable fabric.

Anni Albers wrote the book *On Weaving*, pub-lished in 1665. I consider *On Weaving* to be crucial to the acceptance of weaving in relation to contemporary art. The book illustrates the luminous mediation on the art of weaving, its history, its tools and techniques, and its implications of modern design. *On Weaving* bridges the transition between handcraft and the machine-made, highlighting the essential importance of material awareness and the creative jump than can occur when design problems are tackled by hand. Focusing on materials and handlooms, Anni Albers discusses how technology and mass production place limits on creativity and problem solving and argues for a renewed embrace of human ingenuity. In the first chapter of *On Weaving*, Albers writes about the fundamental constructions to let threads articulate again and find a form for themselves to no end other than their own

orchestration — not to be sat on, walked on, only to be looked at. The way she explains the technical aspect is, for me, almost as if she was to explain an equation in mathematics, a different way of experiencing textile through words on paper instead of learning by the process of making:

> The choice of the raw material. The interrelation of the two threads, the subtle play between them in supporting, impending or modifying each other's characteristics, is the essence of weaving. The thread intersects diagonally in relation to the edge of the fabric, or radially from a center and then we have a braided material. The wraps threads are stationary, and the filling threads are in motion. The woven piece has the tendency to be stiff. The threads cannot be pushed together very closely it appears perforated when held against light.[14]

Albers meant that the acceptance of limitations, as a framework rather than as a hindrance, is always proof of a productive mind, and the origin of its rectangular thread-interlacing will be better than one which conceals its structure and tries, for instance to resemble a painting.[15]

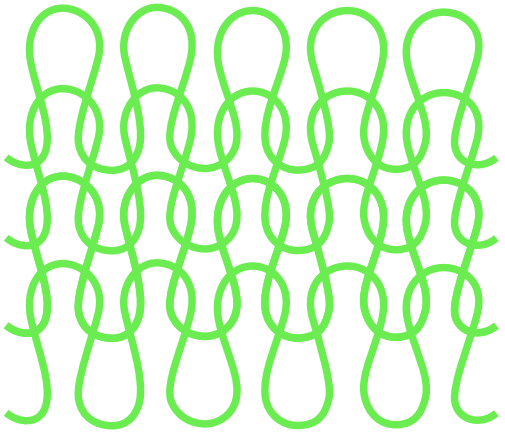
14 Anni Albers, *On weaving: The fundamental constructions*, (Cambridge: M The New Gallery, Charles Hayden, Memorial Library, Massachusetts Institute of Technology,1959), p. 23-28.
15 Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, orig. pub. 1959, The Craft reader edited by Glen Adamson (London:Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018)p. 30.

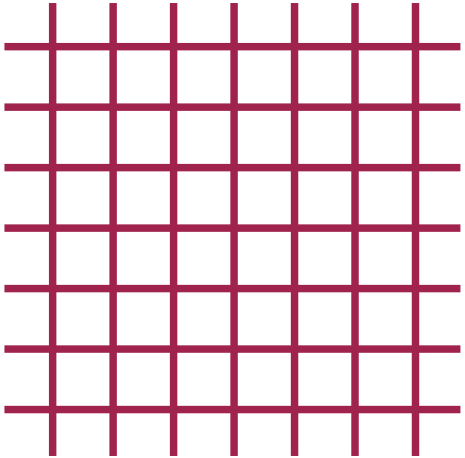
When I read this sentence, I thought of her use of the words "acceptance of limitations", as a restriction on what can be done using textile as a medium in art, and if we still need to draw comparisons to other mediums such as painting today. My impression is that the comparison is still made, since I have been told several times that I talk about textile as if it was a painting. I wonder if textile can stand on its own in the field of art if the comparison is not made, or if the comparison is necessary occasionally for textile to not be looked at as craft.

As mentioned above, a knitted fabric is made from one single thread that is structured from a series of loops. The most common technique is weft knitting. By using this technique, the construction allows very flexible textiles to be made, which can be stretched and shaped even if the thread used is not in itself stretchy. In the weft knitting process, the thread within the different stitch structures moves relatively easy, which enables the knitted textile to be distorted in any direction.[16] The technique of knitting is often used and recognized as a wearable object because of its functionality. Within weft knitting there are many different techniques which can create different structures and patterns called stiches. The most common stich in knitting is the garter stich which is often the first step into knitting for the majority of people.

16 Francoise Tellier-Loumagne, *The Art of Knitting: inspirational stiches, textures and surfaces*, (New York:Thames and Hudson, 2005) p.18-20.

I don't see weaving and knitting as different in relation to skill, but the crafts differ through the history of textile, where weaving is represented often as aesthetic images that symbolize religion and wealth, hung on the wall as art, while the makers might have been wearing knitwear to keep themselves warm.





The Potential of Knitting as an Art Medium

My first experience with a handcraft was knitting. I clearly remember my struggle linking the loops together, and how my patience slowly disappeared. Meanwhile, my grandmother, who sat by my side on the couch reassured me that I would soon be able to make my own scarf. When I talked with my friends about their relation to knitting, they told me a similar story, something about a family member showing them the technique. I even saw a commercial on Danish flow-tv some months ago, saying that 39 percent of the public knows how to knit, so my guess is that my friends and I are not alone in the way we were taught. When it comes to knitting a lot of people have a relation that goes beyond the handcraft. Knitting is associated with relations and memories of people that they care about. When it comes to weaving, I don't have the same kind of memories, and I am sure not many people have these when compared with knitting. The essential tools of knitting are the needles, which are quite handier than trying to find space in your home for a loom. This is another reason why knitting might be more widespread as a handcraft in the social context I am a part of.

A knitted fabric is stretchable, and a knitted object can easily become three-dimensional using a pair of circular needles and is soft

and easy to wear. These might be some of the reasons why knitting is more related to handicraft than art when seen from the perspective of someone who identifies as an art professional. Another reason why knitting is seen more as a handcraft is that there has been no great book written about the potential of knitting as an art medium such as *Weaving a metaphor* by Sheila Hicks or *On weaving* by Anni Albers. In my research, I have found it quite hard to find someone who works specifically with knitting as an art medium.

When I searched for books related to knitting in the library database what showed on my computer screen were a lot of books about pattern design and one book with the title *The Art of Knitting* that turned out to be about hobbies and craft. While browsing, a memory came from the back of my mind. I remembered when I was a child, knitting started to appear in the public space with the so-called Yarn bombing.[17] Yarn bombing is part street art, part graffiti, and part activism, which combines the seemingly "cute" and comforting elements of knitting and crocheting, where public objects are getting "tagged". Yarn bombing started as a movement in 2005 in Houston, USA and soon it could be seen all over the world, often in urban environments. In 2006 the Danish Artist Marianne Jørgensen made the work

17 David Charles Fox, *What is yarn bombing*, https://davidcharlesfox.com/what-is-yarn-bombing-about-the-guerrilla-knitting-art-movement/, (accessed 7 March 2022).

Pink M.24 Chafee in collaboration with crafters and activists around the world to knit and assemble over 4000 squares into a covering for a World War 2 combat tank as a protest to the current war in Iraq. The project used a democratic process where each contributor was able to knit their dissent mindfully. Each individual panel of the blanket acted as a stand-in for a signature as a gesture made to occupy the public space. The use of the crafted object aimed to call attention to what was underneath and created a crack in the ways in which the public interacted with the tank as a public war monument. The blanket gave the tank a physical presence, rather than a symbolic one when covered in pink and it lost its authority.[18] For me the *Pink M.24 Chafee* is an indication of how activism is in focus when it comes to knitting rather than it being looked at as a work of art.

Another work my teacher introduced me to was *Tapestry (Aran, Small Braid)* (2014), made by the artists Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicque.[19] The work is hung from the ceiling with the oversized measurements, which is not in fact a tapestry but an Alpaca wool jumper, too large and clumsy to ever be worn. Its vast, dense, woven folds serve only to shroud rather than

18 Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, *Craft hard, die free: radical curatorial strategies for craftivism in unruly contexts*, The Craft Reader edited by Glen Adamson, (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), p. 611- 612.

19 Frieze, *Combining concept and technique*, https://www.frieze.com/article/daniel-dewar-gregory-gicquel, (accessed 7 March 2022).

clothe any potential wearer. The work is both contrived for and indifferent to the human form. The work refers to a world where hand-made objects become redundant and combines the concept and technique to make by hand with an emphasis on the material. The idea of taking an object that is normally recognized and looked at as wearable and making it unwearable is, for me, a smart take on how to use knitting as a medium of art. To remove the function of an object where the technique is still closely connected to handcraft could be a solution for avoiding the discussion about craft or art if needed.

Marianne Jørgensen, *Pink M.24 Chaffee,* 2006, crochet and knitting object in collaboration woth crafters and activists.

Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel, *Tapestry (Aran small Braid)*, 2014, alpaca wool.

The range of existing craft communities is something I have been introduced to recently through my part-time job at the yarn store *Stephen and Penelope* in Amsterdam. When I first visited the store, what caught my attention was the sign on the window display saying "Stephen and Penelope, fine yarns for handknitting and crochet". The use of the word ′fine′ made me think of the choice of ′fine′ rather than another word, and what ′fine′ might mean depending on the context it is in. The ‘fine’ in front of yarn refers to the quality of the material and is familiar to craft people for its softness. It is also often made from high quality merino wool. The ′fine′ in front of art primarily refers to the imaginative, aesthetic and intellectual content. In both cases ′fine′ is a high standard, but still ′fine′ has a different meaning in craft and art and can be distinguished by separating the two ′fines′ from each other into the different contexts of craft and art. I see this as a good indication of the differences and what is essential in craft and art. In a craft community, the work is judged by the quality and the tactility of the material, its colors and the used techniques whereas in the field of fine art the work is mainly judged by its content and context.

One of the owners of the fine yarn store is Stephen West. Stephen is known for his knitted colorful designs by knitting communities all over the world and is getting as much fame as if he would have been a famous popstar. I was quite shocked when I first started working in

the store, since I found out that it is an everyday experience to talk with customers about their often-personal stories and relation to Stephen and his knitting patterns. Through Social medias and several book-launches each year, each knitter has the chance to become a part of the creative process by getting to learn new knitting techniques and picking the right colors of fine yarn with help from his knowledge and recommendations.[20]

As mentioned, I have had difficulties finding artists who mainly use knitting as a medium in contemporary art, and therefore I started to google my way through it and what occurred to me was how artist as a title is used differently in craft -and art communities. In the knitting community that Stephen West has built up, many hobbyists define him as an artist rather than a designer even though what he does in his process is similar to what I know as a design process. Stephen West’s process involves preparing and modifying instructions for others to turns out as knitting patterns that can be read by hobbyists to create a functional object, often in the shape of a shawl. His end-result is the same as many knitting designers, a readable knitting pattern that can be bought and read on, for example, Ravelry, which is a global online community database for knitters and crocheters.[21] So why is he defined by many hobbyists as an artist

20 Stephen West, *Westknits Bestknits: Number 3- Shawl*, (Amsterdam: Stephen West, 2019).
21 Ravelry, online community for yarn lovers, https://www.ravelry.com/about, (accessed 7 March 2022).

if his aim is to create a functional object? My answer to this is that he is a front runner when it comes to experimenting with bold colors and shape and has a unique way of communicating about these things through his online platforms on Instagram and YouTube. The title of artist is given to him within a craft community context that I consider roughly separated from what I believe to be an artist in a fine art context.

How the distinction is made between being an artist or designer in relation to the contexts of craft and art is also something I thought of while I was watching a table talk on zoom last year including Lærke Bagger, who is known for her way of working with textures and colors with the focus point on giving new life to left over materials using scrap yarn. In her book *Strik (knitting)* published in 2021 during the corona pandemic, she suggests new ways of working with yarn by having a more open idea of what a knitting pattern is and how it can be customized by the maker.[22] *Strik* is a book for knitting beginners as much as it is a personal book full of images and quotes taken from her Instagram account. With *Strik*, Lærke Bagger has started a new knitting movement in Denmark that has opened up the discussion that a good knitter is not necessarily someone who knows every single technique, but can also be the knitter who is not afraid of experimenting.

22 Lærke Bagger, *Lærke Bagger: Strik*, (Lærke Bagger og Gyldendal A/S 2021).

Strik has reached a wider social group during the lockdowns consisting of especially young people through social media.

In the table talk, Lærke Bagger was asked if she saw herself as a designer or as an artist. She commented, if she really had to answer that she would see herself as a designer because it is somehow a more "open" title without too many rules. I could relate to the rather weak answer and can imagine that Lærke Bagger had probably been asked it a bit too many times. Maybe her decision to use designer as a title did not necessarily come from her own belief, but rather from a long history of functional objects in female handcraft, and how artists and art critics are taught to separate craft and art in order to be able to comment on the work. In the essay *And what is your title*, Zandra Ahl writes about her similar experiences on how people consider it necessary to know her title. With a contemporary approach, she explains depending on the event how her profession changes names, but the core question of her work does not:

> In my practice I can be anything. I investigate different layers of the design culture and politics in Sweden, as a project manager, a curator, a writer; as a fanzine editor, craft artist or a documentary filmmaker. To me it has been important not to interpret or look at different aspects of production from the outside, but instead to do them myself. I'm a maker,

> and if I want to learn about institutions, I go work for them.[23]

When I read Zandra Ahl's essay, it made me think of times when using knitting as the main medium in my practice doesn't necessarily benefit from claiming the artist title, since my experience is that I either will be looked at as one who is mainly activistic, or as a young woman who made the wrong decision of not signing up for the textile department to begin with. The fact that I must defend my position and what I am doing, makes me, to be honest, a bit tired, and I believe it to be a discussion we should have finished many years ago. The same goes for Lærke Bagger and her practice. Perhaps the title of craft maker should have been more than enough. This does not mean that I have not claimed it in my practice, but rather, I leave it open since knitting represents much more. Knitting is a medium of art, an expression of female activism, an aesthetic and functional decision by the designer, and a technique that unites hobbyists around the world. Knitting is a tool that can be used to communicate between different creative fields, different social classes and generations, and the vawriety should be embraced.

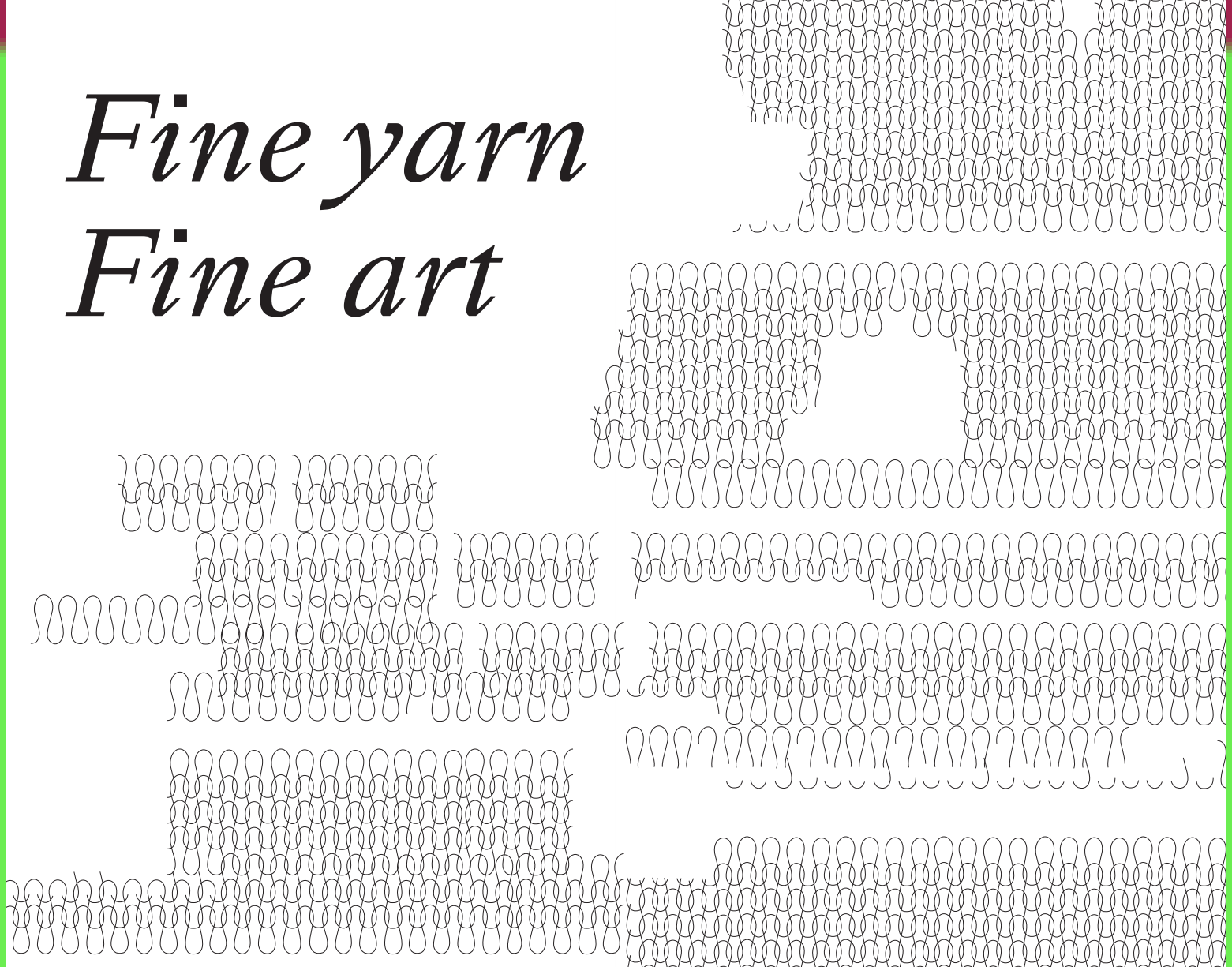
23 Zandra Ahl, *And what is your title?*, The Craft Reader edited by Glen Adamson, (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), p.608.

Ravelry meetup at New York State Sheep and Wool Festival, October 2019, screenshot of Ravelry.com (8 march 2022)

Sweater by Lærke Bagger, screenshot of Laerkebagger Instagram account, (8 march 2022)

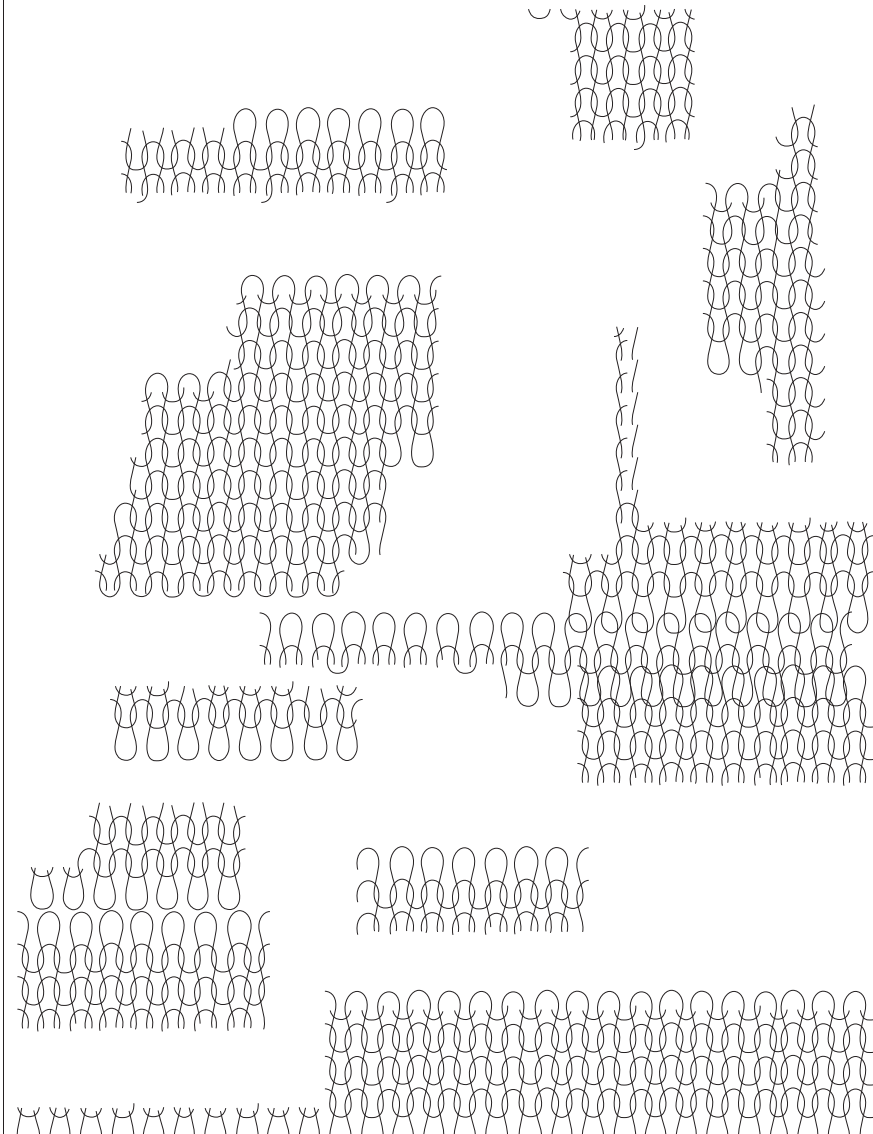
Shawl by Stephen West, screenshot of Westknits Instagram account, (8 march 2022)

Fine yarn
Fine art



Conclusion

Textile is both a craft and a medium in art, and the focus on either content or material is what makes the differentiation. Weaving dominates as a medium in art whereas knitting is still more closely connected to craft and the act of making. The reason for the distinction could be explained by the different contexts the different techniques of weaving and knitting have been placed in throughout history. Weaving is often represented as a tapestry hanging on the wall while knitting is more likely to take the shape of a functional object. The fact that there has been no great book written about the potential of knitting as an art medium such as *On Weaving* by Anni Albers, I find to be one of the most crucial factors of why knitting is still looked at as dominant genre of hobbyist work. The potential of knitting as a medium of art should be found in its widespread diversity between social classes in-between art and craft. With its physical presence, knitting communicates as a symbol of an embrace which is well-known no matter what social class or profession you might identify with.



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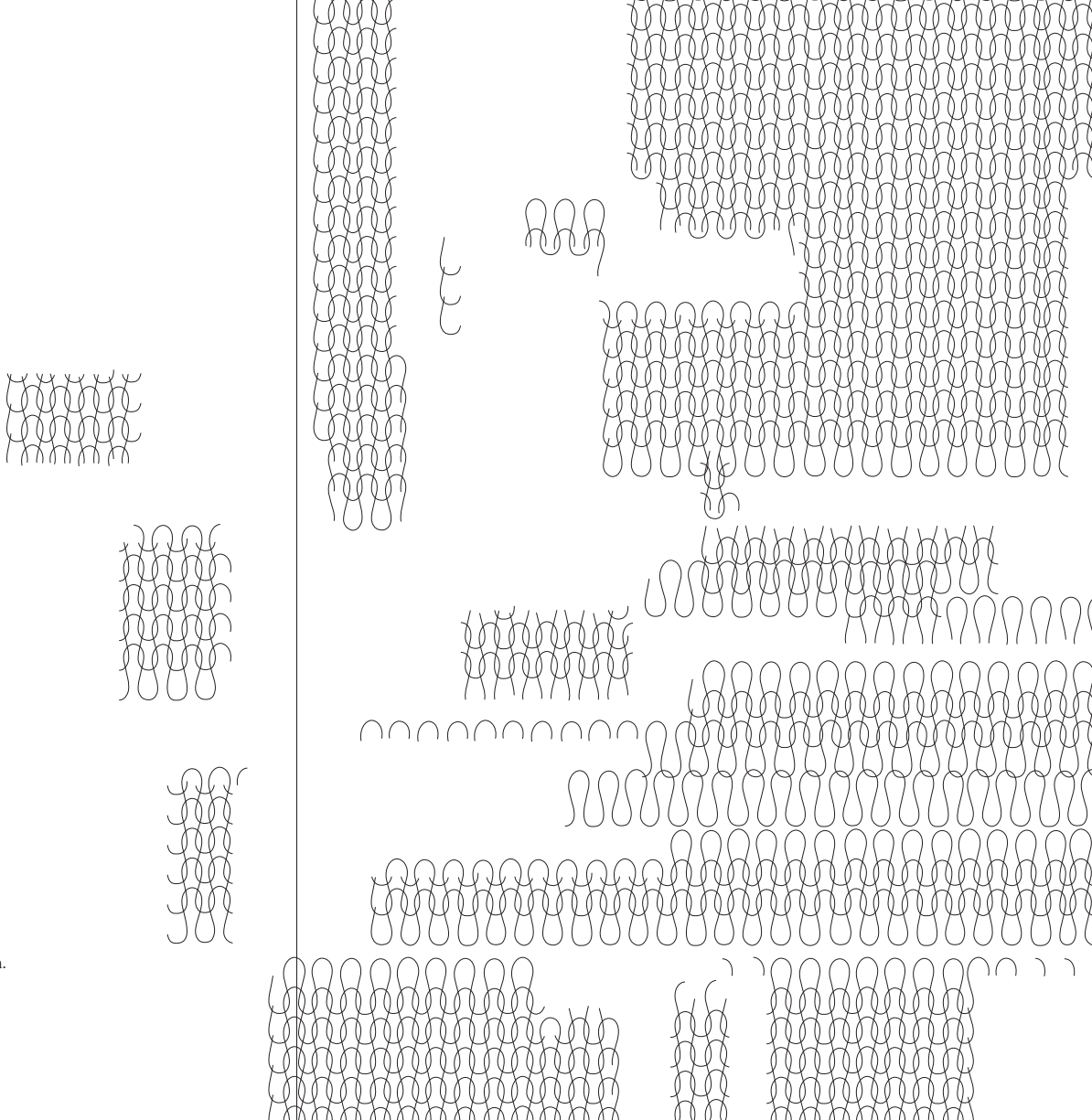
Illustrations



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