

## *Textiles as Webs of meaning*

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The English title of the exhibition, *Material Matters*, is both ambiguous and difficult to translate into Swedish. In one sense it simply states that the choice of material is of import. In other ways, it means "material issues," "material substances" or "important questions." The English "matter" has the same double sense as the Swedish "*ämne*" and can thus be taken to refer both to something material as well as immaterial. Furthermore, if an English-speaking person says that something is "material" he or she can do so both in the sense that it consists of a physical substance and that it is of great import, that it is "essential." In this way, the title *Material Matters* is a good summary of the discussions – between the artists who make up *Fiber Art Sweden* and the Norrköping Museum of Art – that eventually led to the realization of the exhibition.

The discussions have been about materials and the fact that "material matters" – that the choice of material is significant. But it is not only important, it is also meaningful – full of meaning! Material questions are important questions since both the choice of material and the use of the material may carry meaning. These material meanings, however, are without a doubt more "vague" and less well defined than, for example, the meanings of form or representation. Moreover, there is a difference between using a material in a meaningful way and choosing a material with the aim of emphasizing a certain meaning.

To a large extent the preparatory discussions for *Material Matters* concerned how "material-driven artists" focus on the working methods in a particular craft, while "conceptual artists" let the idea of the work delimit the choice of material and method. The participating artists in the exhibition have been selected to illustrate this opposition, but they also illustrate the difficulty of drawing a sharp line between the two categories.

The opposition came to a head in the 1960s with "conceptualism" and "minimalism." Conceptual art is art that only consists of an idea and that anyone, in

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principle, can make at any time. It is not limited by a material object. Supposedly minimalism is the complete opposite of conceptualism. Minimalist objects produced by artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris are experienced exactly as objects; they do not represent anything, and do not express any emotions. They are neither images nor sculptures in the ordinary senses of the terms. Otherwise put, they are not plastic structures, i.e., not a variation of a form within a specific frame or volume. Characteristically, minimalist objects are constructed out of standardised and symmetrically grouped parts or according to certain mathematical progressions. They can thus continue in infinity. But what is paradoxical is that these simple objects often become so difficult to understand that they call for theoretical explanations in order to be seen as works of art at all. This is the opposition between material and idea in a nutshell.

Both minimalism and conceptualism were part of a larger revolt against traditionalist painting and sculpture – a revolt that goes back to the 1910s, at least, with artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters. In Schwitters's collages, made from objects that he had found in his surroundings, the original functions of the different objects are clearly visible. They indicate everyday routines beyond their functions as forms in the picture. This fact creates a sharp contrast between the image and the material. Through American artists of the 1950s such as Robert Rauschenberg, the heritage from Schwitters acquired a significance that is still visible today in young artists such as Jessica Stockholder. Stockholder, too, worked with found and everyday objects, but without trying to conceal their original function. The generous range of colours in her work corresponds to some of Schwitters's works, and their use of textile materials makes both artists appropriate for an exhibition with the subtitle *The Substance of Textile Art*.

Such a title intimates that the content of the exhibition is something other than and more multifaceted than textile art purely and simply. Schwitters' ambiguous statement that the material is "unimportant" can be read as saying that all materials have the same value if the choice of material is free. But it is also possible to ask, with Schwitters, about the characteristics of the different materials and how they work together in a piece of art. Why are textiles used in art? What is textile? Most people would perhaps agree that textiles are fabrics made out of threads consisting of fibres, which are made from plants, fur/hair or synthetically. If one studies the etymology of the word, however, it appears that the words "textile" and "text" have the same origin, namely *texere*, to weave. And here we encounter something important.

A text can be seen as a fabric or a web of meanings, and this is also true of textiles.

An exhibition such as *Material Matters* may deal with both the material and the conceptual. A piece of cloth is not just a piece of cloth. Its patterns and material structure are also associated with certain meanings and characteristics – male, female, everyday, luxury, sexuality, class, etc. We dress our bodies and decorate our homes with textiles – fabrics and textiles are intimately related to identity. This is of course also true of materials that are not woven but have a similar connection to the body and to housing – fur, leather, rubber, plastic, latex, etc.

These soft materials have been devalued. They have been regarded as belonging to handicraft rather than the arts. The connection to the body and to the domestic sphere has been seen as feminine in societies where extrovert, expansive and monumental qualities are regarded as positive, male values. To promote textile and other soft materials has thus been to promote women artists. However, after a glance at the list of participating artists it should be clear that *Material Matters* is not an attempt at producing a purely textile exhibition, nor one of exclusively women art. Exhibitions such as *Guys Who Sew* at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University, California, in 1994 have also contributed to a dissolution of the notion that textile is a "feminine" material. And the manifesto for the exhibition *Hand Work* at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2000-01 states the following: "As concerns the selected artists . . . the conflict between 'typically female' and 'typically male' activities is no longer a central concern." Rather, what the organizers wanted to emphasize were the qualities in the contact between the material and the artists' hands – not the least the monotony and repetitiousness in activities such as sewing, embroidery and weaving.

The repetitive aspect and the emphasis on the work as a process rather than a product can be seen as a heritage from minimalism. But, while pure minimalism is characterised by smooth surfaces in hard and shiny materials, Eva Hesse (1936-1970) created a radically different minimalism in the 1960s which has become essential for the kind of art that was later presented in *Hand Work*. She chose to work with soft materials: woven fabrics, ropes, rubber, papier maché, chicken-wire, etc. The different variations of her work *Accession*, all made in 1967-68, consist of cube-shaped boxes open on top and with sides of perforated, galvanized steel. Through the holes Hesse and her assistants put pieces of identical, narrow plastic or rubber tubes which produce a fur-like effect in the cube. The fact that the inside is so different from the outside makes it proper to compare the box to a body.

At the same time, the prolonged process of making the boxes must have been fascinatingly absurd. In an "instruction" for the work *Addendum* from 1967, Hesse writes as follows: "Series, serial, serial art, is another way of repeating absurdity."

Also in sculptors active today such as **Cathy de Monchaux** we find the associations to the body and serial repetitions. Once Monchaux made an art object out of an ordinary, grey metal tool-box. The box is open and the different compartments are lined with pompous red textile upholstery. The contrast is suggestive of Hesse's *Accession* – a contrast between the hard outer shell of the body and the vulnerable inside. The red upholstery brings to mind lips or a womb – and in this way the contrast hard–soft can also be read as male–female, although it might be an over-interpretation. But it is fascinating to find how such interpretations are stimulated by Monchaux's combination of materials. The framework of her sculptures and reliefs is symmetric and serially constructed with irregular metal parts in repeated combinations. In this way they are also suggestive of flowers, crystals, etc. Like minimalist objects they could, in principle, go on for ever (the infinity of nature), but the dramatic and sensual combinations of metal, dyed leather and textiles also make them the polar opposite of minimalism.

A representative of British art from a slightly older generation, **Helen Chadwick** (1953-1996), produced works where the body, gender and nature are dominant themes. Like Monchaux she works in a visually attractive, decorative way that is also disquieting. Beauty is juxtaposed with the disgusting – flowers, worms, meat, hair, fur, etc. Her *Piss Flowers* from 1991-92 are casts of the holes that formed in the snow when Chadwick and her assistant urinated. They look like stalactites and other geological formations – or phalluses. The casts can thus be interpreted as negative phalluses, a transgression of the limit between male and female. In the sculpture *I Thee Wed* it is hard not to see the five green "cucumbers" as symbols of male fertility. In addition, four of the five "cucumbers" have been fitted with rings of fur while the fifth is lying by itself on its base. This can also be seen as a subtle way of questioning the gender roles.

Chadwick's work must have been important for younger British artists such as **Edward Lipski**, but in his work the relation between male and female is of less significance. His austere and perfectionist objects might produce an impression of being fragments from a nightmare. He has made this comparison himself, and admits his attraction to "a kind of frightening living dead." Compulsion and loss of identity are all-pervading themes. In his human figures, arms, legs and faces are often concealed or amputated. The work *Bad Man* from 1999 consists of a giant male head with growth of hair all over the face. In Lipski's work, hair and fur often take the function of blurring human identity. As a reverse image, *Poodle* from 1999 shows a white pet dog with its hair nicely done and blood around its nose and with human-looking eyes.

The interest in obsessions and compulsive behaviour is the smallest common denominator between Edward Lipski and **Berend Strik**, who in an all other respects is different. Unlike Lipski, Strik affirms colour, is generous and likes the flowery and gaudy (some would even say "bad taste"), but in spite of the attractive surfaces of his textile pictures it would be wrong to regard them as superficial. Above all they can be described as cultural fabrics with various meanings and bottoms. The most frequent material in these works are strongly patterned – sewing-threads in many colours, and photographs. The photographs are often appropriated from more or less explicitly pornographic contexts. His most important tool is the sewing-machine, which is used both for applying the various fragments of material and to produce a kind of textile "painting" with criss-crossing threads. At a distance, the pictures look like paintings more than anything. Sometimes they are made of photographs that have been covered and "painted" with threads. Consequently his pictures of the immediate satisfaction – and release – of sexual desire have been treated in a process whose repetitive monotony is similar to that of pornography. The pleasure and luxury of the skin and the flesh has been replaced by the luxury and light of the textile material. One obsession has been replaced by another.

It is not by accident that Strik's most recent collaborative project with **One Architecture** (Matthijs Bouw and Joost Meuwissen) concerns a specific kind of obsessive behaviour, Tourette's syndrome. This syndrome appears before the age of 18 and its main symptoms are motor and verbal tics. The purpose of the project is to construct a house for two twins, Claudia and Carla Huntley, who both suffer from a particularly grave form of Tourette's syndrome. The idea is to create an environment which takes the edge of the twins' violent behaviour and which facilitates their problematic life together (for example the fact that they take over one another's tics).

It is easy to regard the whole project as a prank, since the obsessive behaviour may seem comical for the uninitiated (for example making a small leap every tenth step, or incessantly trying to place a chair in the "right" place, etc.). In connection with *Material Matters*, the interesting thing is that the sketches and prospects for the project present the interior of the house as textile and very body-like. The two-part plan of the house is suggestive of the structure of the heart. The sisters will live in separate parts of the house, all the while being able to come and go as they wish in the other half. The textile membrane and punchbags in the interior are suggestive of cardiac musculature and provide an environment where the sisters can affirm their strange impulses. At best such an environment can also take the edge off the conflict between an ill person and the normal environment/architecture. It might

also diminish the hopeless desire for normality which probably only makes the condition worse for the afflicted person.

The emphasis on the body and sexuality has been a connecting thought in this text, but if we return to the 1960s we find another direction, at least in part, in **Claes Oldenburg's** textile works. They start off from the same idea: to represent everyday objects in fabrics, with sewing machine and paint. The flaccidity of these objects is intentionally emphasised. They become hides that have been skinned off things and hung in public displays. The opposition between soft and hard naturally becomes even more pronounced if it involves hard objects such as electrical switches, cupboards or tools. In these works, the meditative needlework is not emphasised. On the contrary, they seem to have been hastily assembled according to a particular method, and the manual work at the sewing-machine is supposed to have been carried out by his wife, Pat. What is of significance is the conceptual collision between material and motif.

When today, **Peter Rösler** makes his objects and installations, to a great extent he works with such collisions. He has made flowers, e.g., a water-lily pond, out of old German police uniforms. Another work is *Lioness (Snowwhite)*, which is sewn in a patch quilt technique out of the uniforms of American firemen. Here both the motif and material display a strong link to masculinity and physical strength, while the technique of stitching together an object with numerous pieces of cloth relates to "weak" qualities such as small-scale activities, disunion, slackness, an inability to take in the larger view. Again there is a contrast between diametrically opposed qualities and associations – but as the result of laborious needlework.

The artist **Mike Kelley** has also taken an interest in small-scale handicraft and pottering. He was trained in abstract painting, but early on he started to question its isolation from popular culture and from contemporary consumer society. In this way he joined Oldenburg and other pop artists of an older generation. Kelley can hardly be said to be interested in conventional beauty when collecting objects for his installations – instead he favours the ugly and the disdained. His interest in textile is an interest in the formlessness of soft materials and their use in the cuddly toys of childhood. With its large fields of dyed felt the application *Animal Self and Friend of Animals* from 1987 provides an opportunity to associate to the flannelboard, which is still being used at Sunday schools to illustrate stories from the Bible. But here the pictures seem to represent a new, contemporary mythology made up of fragments of partially forgotten traditions. The "animal self" in the left picture seems to refer to totem images from, for instance, various native-American peoples, but also to the idea of "the great snake at the base of the spine" in

meditation. The picture of a "lover of animals" to the right might be taken to suggest Moses' copper snake, while other animal symbols have completely different origins. Taken together these elements and the picture as a whole could be seen as an expression of the multicultural situation on the American West Coast.

The experimental Eastern European textile art of the 1960s is best known through the work of Magdalena Abakanovicz, who attracted international attention early on because of her bold combinations of different materials and her organic idiom.

**Urszula Plewka-Schmidt** started out as Abakanovicz's assistant at the Art Academy in Poznan in 1967. It is interesting that she chose a way of her own early on, and that she differed drastically from Abakanovicz. Before turning to art she took a degree in agronomy and biology, and her knowledge of the micro levels of nature might have stimulated her interest in the interplay between the geometric and the organic. In the first few years of the 1970s, her works often consisted of airy metal structures with woven or crocheted textile elements. Titles such as *Organic Structure*, *Organism*, and *Planet* are suggestive of earth and cosmic symbolism. In the large installation *Journey to the Origin of Time* at Galeria Sopotcka in Sopot outside Gdansk in 1978, there was a clear symbolism of death, and the exhibited sculptures with their arches and circular shapes seem like a kind of materialised time – the cyclical time of laborious repetitions.

The step might seem far from Plewka-Schmidt to the politically radical Western Europe of the 1970s that has been so important for the work of **Rosemarie Trockel**. While Plewka-Schmidt has tied her experiments with materials to a spiritual tradition and the universal questions of the meaning of life, Trockel's work has been materialist, political, and critical. For Trockel the choice of textile is a radical act that brings women's devalued work in the home, now and in the past, to the fore. The choice of material is in itself a way of challenging male art. Among other things, in the 1980s, she made her "knitted paintings." They consisted of machine-made knitted surfaces made according to Trockel's own patterns. In this way, Trockel completed the critique of modern art that was begun by Duchamp already in 1917 when he exhibited a urinal. If a urinal can be sculpture, why could not knitting be abstract painting? In the 1990s she has continued the textile theme in a number of video works. The video makes it possible to emphasise the process rather than the finished product, and in *À la motte* from 1993 one can see a knitted structure being eaten by a moth and then miraculously growing together again. In *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* from 1996 various chequered patterns make up an abstract rhythm, set to appropriately abstract music, and *Löwe* from 1999 shows children making intricate patterns with yarn between their fingers. Works such as these contribute to the sense that there is hardly a sharp line between art and

handicraft, or between "meaningless" and "meaningful" activities. As an example of art that highlights "the substance of textile art" they also show how the material fabric itself may be absent.

*(Translation: Peter Samuelsson)*

#### Literature:

*Eva Hesse's beautifully typed instructions for the work Addendum is reproduced in the catalogue for the exhibition After the Beginning and Before the End at the Art Museum of Bergen, 2001. The exhibition contained sketches from Gilbert and Linda Silverman's collection in Detroit. About Eva Hesse, see Lucy Lippard's standard work, Eva Hesse, 2nd ed., New York, 1992. Berend Strik's work can be studied in the catalogue Berend Strik, Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 1994, and in his web-based project Sadness, Sluices, Mermaids, Delay ([www.mediamatic.nl/conultancy/Smstrik/p0l.html](http://www.mediamatic.nl/conultancy/Smstrik/p0l.html)). About the exhibition Hand Work, see the exhibition catalogue or the home page of Haus der Kunst ([www.hausderkunst.de](http://www.hausderkunst.de)). Edward Lipski's comments are found in Erik van der Heeg's interview "Edward Lipski: Welcome to My Nightmare" in Material, 31 (1996), p. 7. About Helen Chadwick's work, see the exhibition catalogue Effluvia, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1994. What Kurt Schwitters says about the "unimportance" of material, see the exhibition catalogue for Kurt Schwitters, Kunstforum, Vienna, 2002. About Mike Kelly's nursery world, see Maria Lind's article "Mike Kelley på Whitney" in Material, 29 (1994), p. 5. Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd describes his first meeting with Claes Oldenburg in his memoirs, Closed for Holidays, Stockholm, 2000. In Rosemarie Trockel's exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 2001, her video work was emphasised but not so in the exhibition catalogue. Norbert Zawisa's essay can be found in Urszula Plewka, ed. Norbert Zawisa, Poznan, 2001. The exhibition Nutida polsk textilkonst ("Contemporary Polish textile art") at the Norrköping Museum of Art 1969, see the catalogue.*