

# FROM STRUCTURE TO TEXTURE: THE CHANGE OF FUNCTION IN TEXTILE MEDIA SINCE THE 1960s

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the positioning of textile as a medium, whose structural qualities enable it to be viewed within the dominant trends of the development of modern and postmodern art. Scrutinizing the changes in the function of textile art refers to the removing of its media utilitarianism for the sake of exploring its artistic and spatial possibilities. Starting from the premise that the structure of textile contains mathematical qualities, which basically reflect the structuralist conception of the work of art (dominant in the historiographical contextualization of the development of modern art), we explore the possibility of integrating textiles (fibre) in the context of mainstream line of the twentieth-century art. In order to do that, we rely on the formalist-structuralist tendency in the development of modern art, which announced the “death of painting”, confirmed in the post-war context by Clement Greenberg’s notion of “the crisis of the easel painting”. Application of the Greenbergian concepts to the very structure of the textile medium allows us to interpret high modernist premises as factors that led textile/fibre to become an independent art element. The topic is approached from an interdisciplinary perspective, although the basic methodology includes historiographical contextualization and structural analysis, which provides us with a framework for the revaluation of textile art seen through the nature of the material itself. The paper intends to show that the change of function in textile media can be explained by the internal dynamics of formalist reductionism and seen from the perspective of the deconstruction of painting and canvas.

**Keywords:** the crisis of the easel painting, structuralism, textile art, fibre as a fine art element

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Belgrade’s Museum of Contemporary Art hosted an exhibition titled *Travelling around the world (Na putu oko sveta)* which presented the corpus of artworks from the private collections of contemporary German artists created in the period from 1949 till today. A particular piece by Rosemarie Trockel titled *Untitled* (2002) that features a red-white-blue wool pattern on a large-scale canvas served as a pivotal point for our consideration of the role of Greenbergian premises in the contem-

porary use of textile media. The plastic element of this “knitted” painting relies on the concept of decentralized composition made out of identical patterns repeated all over the large-format canvas. Recognizing in this piece the well-known concept of *all-over* painting – a sort of paradigm of high modernist art – prompted us to question the possibility of interpreting the changes in function of textile art, intensified since the 1960s, from the point of view of dominant theoretical and practical stages of the development of modern and contemporary art.

The idea of introducing a sideline in modern art history that includes textile artworks as a logical component of its development seemed even more tenable taking into consideration the basic structure of material aspects of textile media, which seem to correspond to the formalist and structuralist tendencies in painting. Furthermore, the confirmation of our reflections can be seen in the work of artists who pushed the limits of textile media by investigating the structure and semantic connotations of fibre and fabrics. This includes many contemporary textile artists who used (and use) the same operational procedure as that which led to the disintegration of painting. Their efforts were directed towards the expansion of formal possibilities of a media that used to have exclusively utilitarian and crafting purpose, finally introducing fibre to the institutions of (what is officially considered as) high art (e.g. MOMA, etc.), while also providing different perspectives in the context of its theoretization.

This paper tends to position the appearance of textile media in the high art institutions as a natural derivate of the progressive deconstruction of modernist painting. In order to offer an argument to our hypothesis, this essay deals with three levels of analysis. Two of them are based on the historicist presentation of: 1) the main concepts of modern art that speak in favour of our hypothesis, and 2) the historical development of the use of textile media in high art practices, which enabled legitimacy in transition of textile/fibre from crafts into art. The third analytical point focuses on the structural analysis of textile media, whose material aspects could be considered as a firm proof of the integral analogy of structure of textile media with structuralist propositions of modernist aestheticism. A wide scope of structuralist thought, which includes also semiotics and post-structuralism, allows us to observe textile’s structure from a multiperspective point of view, including its visual, technological, semiotic and culturological aspects.

### FROM SELF-SUFFICIENCY TO THE CRISIS OF THE EASEL PAINTING

The phenomena of the Russian avant-garde marked parting with most of the previously existing art traditions; first and foremost, they designated a radical break with the use of figuration in painting. To a certain extent, they represented a referential framework for all future practices in modern and contemporary art and as such could be considered as the initial point both for redefining the notion of art and, consequentially, for the widespread use of non-painting media during the second half of the twentieth century.

In his paradigmatically titled study *From the Self-Sufficiency till the End of Painting* (*Od samodovoljnosti do smrti slikarstva*), Slobodan Mijušković uses the notion of self-sufficiency to mark an attainment of the Russian avant-garde, which is most accurately illustrated by Malevich’s non-object suprematism. The author underlines that the notion of self-sufficiency is synonymous with the notions of self-purposefulness and self-referentiality, which all express a tendency in a wider spectrum of

modern and contemporary art to remove all properties that are not immanent to art as such, or more precisely to the nature of its media.

The Russian avant-garde radicalized the analytical line of art development, which started with Monet and also largely determined the form of Cézanne's art, only to be followed by cubism, neoplasticism and all other avant-garde movements across Europe. The analytical procedure assumed that the axis of "pictorial signs moved from the domain of signified to the domain of signifier", thus bringing to the surface the plastic traits of picture.<sup>1</sup> The reduction of formal elements that accentuated pictorial material facts during the first decades of the twentieth century enabled the suppression of narrative in favour of formalism, which became visible in the emphasis placed on the structure of the plastic traits of a painting. Mijušković underlines that the significance of the plastic traits of a painting – its flatness, texture and colour – extends in art discourse from the early avant-garde to the post-revolutionary constructivism. Moving from complete self-sufficiency to its own death,<sup>2</sup> constructivism concluded the analytical work of the easel painting that was brought to the brink of its decomposition, leaving an 'austere' narrative, which a painting can construct about itself as such.

In the post-war context, Clement Greenberg reaffirms this radical modern discourse in a series of critical essays in which he reviews European traditions, but also the contemporary practice of "American-Type" painting. Greenberg's writings re-evaluated the significance of plastic elements: flatness, texture and colour. In an essay from 1948, Greenberg refers to analytical tendencies in European modern art in which he finds the *all-over* principle of the American expressionism. The so-called *all-over* picture was defined as "'decentralized', 'polyphonic' picture that relies on surface knit together of identical or closely similar elements which repeat themselves without marked variation from one edge of picture to the other".<sup>3</sup> The mere description of the *all-over picture* is rather applicable to the weaving procedure, as this analysis will later demonstrate.

In the concluding remarks of this essay, Greenberg states that leaning towards the uniformity of the *all-over* principle suggests a certain tendency in contemporary sensibility, which is observable in the evident anti-aestheticism. Recognizing "the dissolution of pictorial into sheer texture", Greenberg concludes that the future of the easel picture, this purely Western invention, "has become problematical".<sup>4</sup>

A confirmation of Greenberg's conclusions can be found in the subsequent directions of contemporary art. He argued that the artists like Jackson Pollock, who follow the conventions of the *all-over* painting, are on their way to destroy the easel painting. This claim eventually proved him right. In the 1950s, owing to the work of Allan Kaprow, the *all-over* concept makes progress from the two-dimensional canvas surface to the sphere of everyday life. In his essay from 1958 titled "The legacy of Jackson Pollock", Kaprow says that "in the present case the 'picture' moved so far out that the canvas is no more a reference point".<sup>5</sup> For Kaprow, the near destruction

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1 S. Mijušković, *Od samodovoljnosti do smrti slikarstva: teorije (i prakse) ruske avangarde*, Beograd, 1998, 47.

2 In that context Alexander Rodchenko's pure monochromes can be seen as a "metaphor of death of a painting". *ibid.*, 285

3 C. Greenberg, "The crisis of an easel picture", in: C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston, 1966, 155. [https://monoskop.org/images/1/12/Greenberg\\_Clement\\_Art\\_and\\_Culture\\_Critical\\_Essays\\_1965.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/1/12/Greenberg_Clement_Art_and_Culture_Critical_Essays_1965.pdf)

4 *ibid.*, 157.

5 A. Kaprow, "The legacy of Jackson Pollock", in: *ARTnews*, New York, 1958.

of the old easel painting tradition marks a returning point to the stage in which art is more concerned with the ritual, magic and real life than it was before. The announced need for a fusion of formal preoccupations and life itself will become a basis for the later semiotic interpretations of textile art.

Although opposite to this semantically induced understanding of art, minimalism – an art direction which, historically speaking, appears on the borderlines of high modernism and postmodernism – will keep up with the basic principles of the Greenberg's *all-over* concept. Decentralisation of composition and uniformity, translated to epistemological framework of minimalism, as axioms of their operative procedure takes: accuracy, measure and systematicity.<sup>6</sup> If we exclude the rare exceptions (Frank Stella for instance), minimalism completely rejected a brush stroke on canvas, with the intention to deprive the work of any form of expression that could construct a meaning. As such, minimalist artwork becomes utterly self-referential, characterized by the monotony of symmetrically-set, modular, factory-generated units which are to be seen as a very precise illustration of Bart's *death of author*.<sup>7</sup>

Going step by step in line with the development of structuralist epistemology, minimalism integrated the actual theoretical framework, its "ideals of geometrical beauty, the laws of necessity and order".<sup>8</sup> Analytical deconstruction of artwork, directed towards the construction of total self-referentiality, radically postulated during the historical avant-gardes, embodied the climax of its form in minimalism, which liberated the art not only of all the signs that are not immanent to its nature, but also of the signifier – art as such.

Tautological comparison of the crisis of modern ideals in easel painting and these postulates of minimalism allow us to conclude that after the final rejection of brush and stroke, we are left with the canvas – art reduced to fabric as such.

## TEXTILE DISINTEGRATION: STRUCTURE AND TEXTURE

Structuralists' principles of language construction provided a basis for a sort of mathematical research of all other spheres of human creativity. Initially, the word structure had an architectonical meaning and it described a way in which something was constructed,<sup>9</sup> while in theoretical premises of structuralism it is related to the construction of meaning in different linguistic systems.

Analogous to the language structuring in the linguistic system based on phonetic units, a textile fabric is also constructed out of fibre as its basic constituent. Using the loom or some manual techniques, a system of rationally organized relations between threads constructs a fabric whose resulting form has an architectonics of its own kind and it is built on the laws of order and its inherent logic. In the technology of textile, fabric is seen as a complex system consisting of an infinitely large number of variables, determined by the construction parameters as well as the technological

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6 S. Gablik, "Minimalism", in: *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. N. Stangos, London, 1994, 245.

7 R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, New York, Aspen, 1968.

8 According to Nikola Milošević, the ideals of geometrical beauty – the laws of necessity and order – represent the axioms of Claude Lévy-Stroś's structuralism-based scientific approach. N. Milošević, *Filozofija strukturalizma*, Beograd, 1980, 150.

9 The parallels that can be drawn between architecture and textile constructions are numerous, and in the history of arts and crafts the relation between the two is probably best exemplified by the works and writings of Gottfried Semper and Anni Albers. Semper even tried to grasp the origin of architecture through textile processes, arguing that its 'earliest basic structural artefact was that of the knot'. G. Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, Cambridge, 2011.

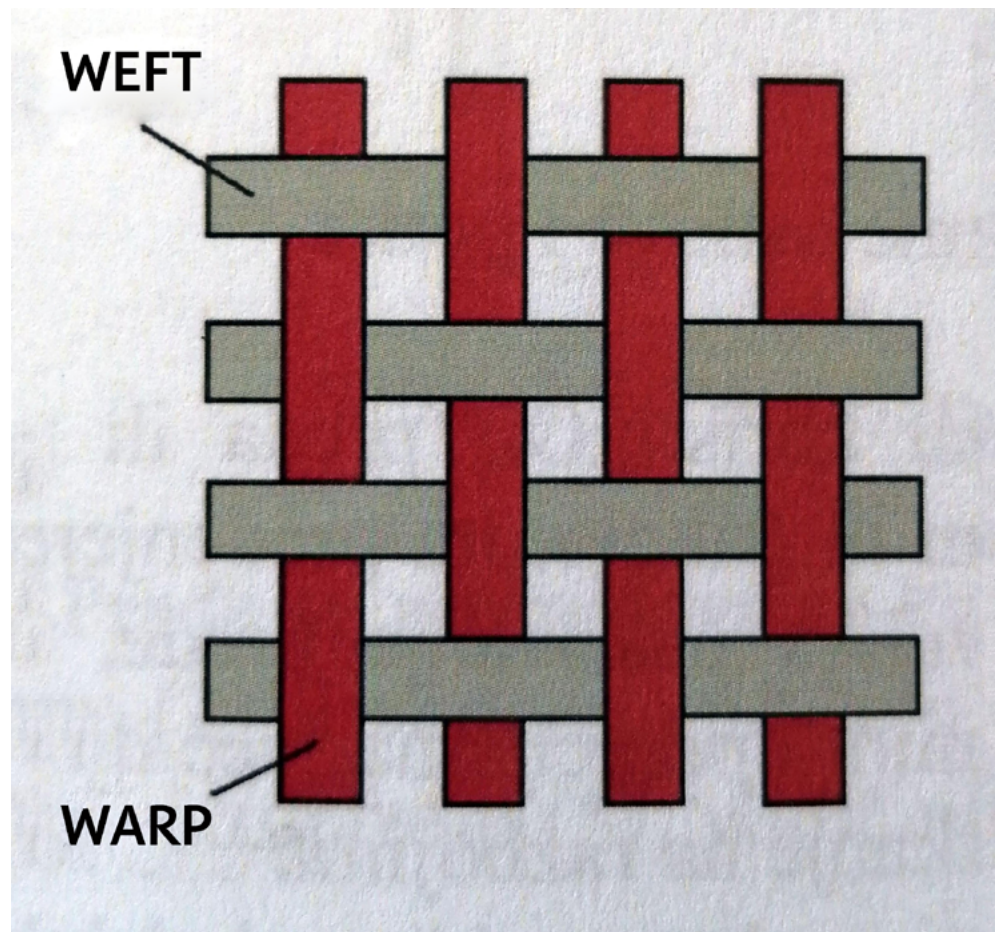


Fig. 1

ones.<sup>10</sup> General literature, which studies textile from the point of view of technological sciences, often states the same observation<sup>11</sup> we find in the writing of Anni Albers: “every fabric is mainly the result of two elements: the character of the thread construction, that is, the building material and the construction of the weave itself”.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking about the weaving constructions Albers underlines that:

“The fundamental constructions, in common with all fundamental processes, have a universal character and are used today, as they were in our early history, here and elsewhere. They show the principle of textile construction clearly. With only a few exceptions, all other constructions are elaborations or combinations of the basic three: the plain weave, the twill and the satin weave”.<sup>13</sup>

Most fibre materials are composed of usual structures, biaxial (pic. 1) and triaxial,<sup>14</sup> constructed on the basis of patterns of intertwined threads. These patterns repeat at certain intervals and they can also be subjected to further structuring in transversal

<sup>10</sup> M. Nikolić, *Struktura i projektovanje tkanina*, Tehnološko-metalurški fakultet, Beograd, 1993, 14.

<sup>11</sup> P. Škundrić i dr., *Tekstilni materijali*, Beograd, 2008, 115.

<sup>12</sup> A. Albers, *On Weaving*, Laondon, 1974, 59.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> P. Škundrić *et al.*, 99.



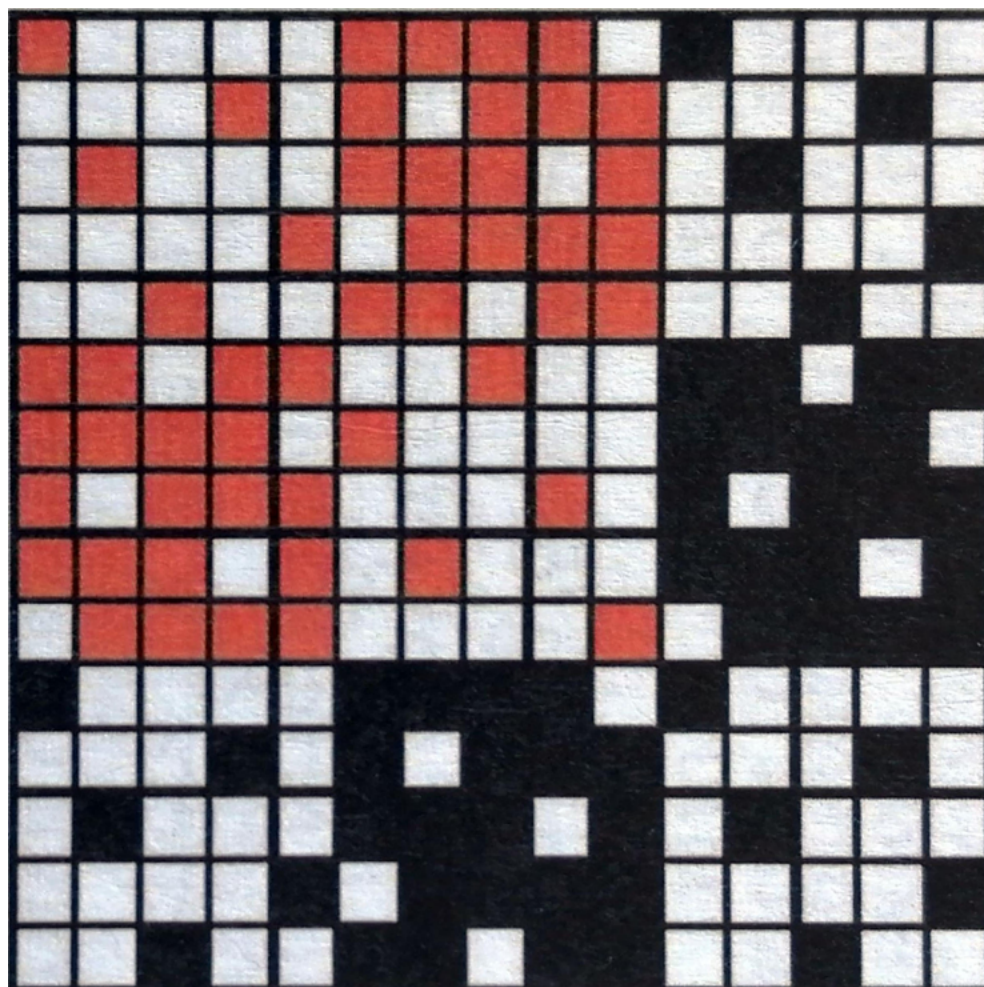


Fig. 2

directions. However, the fibres' direction is not always rectilinear and it has been shown there are examples of weaving and interlacing where the fibre is subjected to isotopic deformation.<sup>15</sup>

Milanka Nikolić holds that studying cloth structures is related to the analysis of a very complex geometrical system.<sup>16</sup> Its construction parameters are projected mostly through geometrical and geometric-mechanical models, based on extensive calculations that usually could be represented by formulas<sup>17</sup> that reveal the relations of its constitutive mechanics. This, so to speak, mathematical quality of textile structures is colloquially recognized as an important artistic observation and some of the contemporary textile artists notice in their media the work of 'pure mathematics'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> S. Grishanov, A. Omelchenko et V. A. Meshkov, "A Topological Study of Textile Structures. Part I: An Introduction to Topological Methods", in: *Textile Research Journal* 79 (8). SAGE publications, 2009, 704. <http://trj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/79/9/822>.

<sup>16</sup> M.D. Nikolić, „Grafički model tkane strukture kao baza njenog projektovanja“, u: *Tekstilna industrija: jugoslovenski stručni časopis tekstilne i odevne industrije*, godina XXX-III, br.1/2, Beograd, 1985, 29.

<sup>17</sup> These formulas are based on the laws of physics that construct a textile structure and they represent the relation of various aspects that are part of that process, such as the position of warp and weft, the size of threads and density of interweaving. M.D. Nikolić, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Local contemporary artist Dragana Dražović Ilić stated that she sees weaving and interweaving as "pure mathematics and often relates architectonic constructions with it". I. Leković, „Intervju sa Draganom Dražović Ilić“, *EKO KUĆA – magazine za eko arhitekturu i kulturu*, n.32, 2019, 85.

Adding to the parallels between modernist aestheticism and structure of textile fabrics, it might be indicative to mention that technologists conceive of it as a “conditionally two-dimensional structure, that is, textile ‘surface’.”<sup>19</sup> The two-dimensionality (flatness) and surface (texture) have often been mentioned by theoreticians, in the context of modernist self-referentiality, as the elementary components of an easel painting. Moreover, the graphic representation (pic.2) of textile structures shows very similar patterns (square, rectilinear, dotted) to the ones present in the visual structures of high modernism art.

This points to the fact that textile typology is based on the principles of order, repetitiveness, measure, modularity, preciseness, some of which have already been mentioned with regards to the principle categories of modernism, whose most explicit visual expression has been formulated by the minimalist aesthetics. The structures of minimalist works most explicitly invoke an analogy to textile structures, and here we are inclined to presume that both minimalism and textile units mimic the same visual system of pattern construction. Subduing the content of art to its structure, the operating procedures of minimalism function in accordance with the actual theoretical premises of structuralism. Their aspiration towards the objects made from identical components, or Robert Morris’s leaning towards the notion of self-sufficient units,<sup>20</sup> render textile as a material whose construction responds to the idea of “a priori composition, which Clement Greenberg referred to as minimalist ‘feat of ideation’ ”.<sup>21</sup>

Construction of a fabric enables creation of artwork through the creation of the material itself, achieving at the same time the criteria of self-sufficiency and resulting in a work created by identical elementary units. Considering the nature of the textile media, it comes as no surprise that precisely Morris (pic.3) was one of the artists who brought textile objects to the institutions of high art during the historical transition from minimalism to post-minimalism.

Since fibre and textile are more often a subject of analysis of natural sciences, in that context the fibre structure refers to its physical and chemical properties.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, scientists from different disciplines started theoretical investigating of the structure of fibre, and by dint of the production innovations and changes in the market, the 1960s brought the escalation of this research subject. Simultaneously with the expansion of the fibre discourse, in the cognitive system of sciences, its cultural meaning undergoes a change. Deconstruction of an organic (material) structure of a media also changes its discourse within the systems of art and culture.

In a synthesis of a language and a system of art, as Adorno would say, art uses various strategies of negativity and, through its own destruction, reflects the destruction of the spiritual environment in which it was generated or the distortion of the pre-existing system of (essentially false) values.<sup>23</sup> In accordance with the

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19 P. Škundrić *et al.*, 99.

20 S. Gablik, *op. cit.*, 251.

21 K. Paice, “Felts 1967–1983”, in: *Robert Morris: Mind/Body Problem*, Monographic Exhibition, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994, 212.

22 These chemical and physical properties (water repellent, crease-resistant, flame-retarding) are classified by Anni Albers as invisible, which is why she understands the structural aspect of weaving as the visual structure. A. Albers, *op.cit.* 13.

23 v. I. Leković, „Umetnost Gergelja Urkoma u ranim sedamdesetim godinama”, *Zbornik seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu*, br. 12, Beograd, 2016, 207.



Fig. 3

aforementioned, the dissolution of textile into fibre simultaneously disintegrates the construct of textile as a craft media. Using fibre as a referent, fibre/textile art drives out from its own materiality a generic potential. Fibrous texture<sup>24</sup> thus generates its own semantically induced textuality, represented through the system of signs, the signified and the signifiers, which are dynamically correlated.

The crisis of high modernism aesthetics coincided with the research and use of different materials and the expansion of new media. The flatness of the canvas, accentuated by the avant-garde artists, as well as by theoreticians such as Greenberg, is considered by Rancière as a “flatness of a book page, flatness of a poster or tapestry” and “its anti-representational ‘purity’ is inscribed in the context of intertwining of pure and applied art”.<sup>25</sup> We are prone to assume that these ‘anti-representational’ properties of the modernist aesthetics emulate the textile’s own anti-representa-

<sup>24</sup> The term *texture* is used in the text to denote one of the properties of fine art, which implies its tactile (physically-conditioned) and visual appeal. In a way, it is synonymous with the term *structure*, when it refers to the material, constructive, physical aspect of a (two-dimensional) visual artwork. Also, the word *texture* seems suitable in this context, because it allows us to draw an analogy between the derivatives with the same root: textile-texture-textuality.

<sup>25</sup> Ž. Ransijer, *Sudbina slika. Podela čulnog*, Centar za medije i komunikacije, Beograd, 2012, 143.



tional structure, providing a possibility for the change of the textile function, transforming its status as a craft into a fine art media.

The terminology of textile art can also reflect a structuralist-analytical point of view. The term textile art, which is most frequently used in the Serbian language, is semantically closest to the translation of the term *fibre art*, which is used in the English-speaking world. The use of the term *Fibre art* refers to the smallest indivisible elements that construct textile as a medium and textile artworks in general.<sup>26</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s a great number of American artists, who were drawn by the fibre's aesthetic possibilities, its structural potential and semiotic power, had either adapted or experimented in the field of textile media.<sup>27</sup> It gave the artists a possibility to explore the material's structure and texture, its history and different historical techniques.<sup>28</sup>

A process of self-reflection, similar to the one that led to the disintegration of the easel painting, started questioning the position of textile art and its status as a craft. Formal deconstruction brought to the foreground the textile's constructions, highlighting the media's material qualities. Art critiques started underlining the value of the fibre as "an autonomous abstract element",<sup>29</sup> its anthropological significance and a whole series of associations and connotations fibre was able to generate through history. To that end, N. Rengin Oyman's idea, with regards to the history of textile media, stating that "all pictures on the canvas are textile artworks" strikes us as rather interesting and we are inclined to accept it as true.<sup>30</sup>

In the theory and history of textile art, the role of textile/fabric is often mentioned in initiation rites<sup>31</sup>, starting from birth till death. Fibre, thread, twine and yarn often appear as paradigms of time, life and narration. As Lesley Camhi put it: "We are born and swaddled, buried in shrouds; most of us are even conceived between sheets".<sup>32</sup> In mythology, Moirai (Parcae) hold human fate in their hands, spinning the treads of life.<sup>33</sup> In folk tradition threads are used as a metaphor of speech, so the expression

26 Structuring of the fibre into a fabric or textile unit presumes the use of different techniques such as weaving, sewing, stitching, embroidering, crocheting, braiding, coiling, knotting, netting, twining, wrapping and other methods, while the more recent history of this art media acknowledges woven forms, textile sculptures, art fabric, wall hangings, new tapestry, and fibre constructions. R. Twist, "Fiber Art Then and Now", in: *Fiber Arts Now: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. R. Twist, Oregon, 2012, 11–12.

27 E. Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis, 2009, xii.

28 R. Twist, *op.cit.* 13.

29 E. Auther, "Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960–1980", in: *The Journal of Modern Craft*. Vol.1/1. Taylor & Francis, 2008, 14.

30 N. R. Oyman, "The Movements of Environmental Fiber Art and Three-Dimensional Sculptural Textiles", in: Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series. Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, 2013, 7. [https://www.academia.edu/5395262/The\\_Movements\\_of\\_Enviromental\\_fiber\\_Art\\_and\\_Three\\_Dimensional\\_Sculptural\\_Textiles](https://www.academia.edu/5395262/The_Movements_of_Enviromental_fiber_Art_and_Three_Dimensional_Sculptural_Textiles).

31 E. Auther, 2009, 171.

32 L. Camhi, *Some of the Most Provocative Political Art is Made with Fibers*. The New York Times Style Magazine. March 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/t-magazine/art/fiber-knitting-weaving-politics.html>.

33 The author of this paper used the metaphor of Moirai and spinning of threads in the context of the interpretation of the Group 484 and Snežana Skoko's work with migrant women, as a symbolic aspect in the process of the migratory population's integration into a new environment and the act of weaving their own lives despite the circumstances. In this essay we also attempted to express the connection between textile art and the concept of the "death of painting". I. Leković, "Konstruisanje narativa – dekonstruisanje realnosti: Izložbene postavke u okviru projekta „Mi i oni drugi“ Grupe 484". u: Ur. Korać-Sanderson, M. i Dragičević Šešić, M. (2019). *Interkulturalnost: časopis za podsticanje i afirmaciju interkulturalne komunikacije*, br. 18., 2019, 67–76.

“spinning the stories” or, as of late, “spinning the news”<sup>34</sup> is widely heard. Gottfried Semper argued that the “beginning of buildings coincides with the beginning of textiles”<sup>35</sup>, while Anni Albers believed that even thoughts can “be traced back to the event of thread”.<sup>36</sup> Threads and fibres also store the information about those who use them, thus becoming a verbatim constituent of identity.<sup>37</sup> Their function comprises a wide range of personal and political implications, transforming the fibre into a subject of time and space and into an object of memory.

## THE CHANGE OF THE FUNCTION OF TEXTILE MEDIA INTO FIBRE ART

A review of historical development of modern art premises reveals that formalistic and analytic tendencies of the twentieth century art brought redefinition of art categories and institutions. As a consequence, by the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s, there came a revolution in textile art,<sup>38</sup> which would, according to the wider context of *new art practices* and use of non-traditional art media, allow its appearance to the institutions of high art.

The arrival of the fibre on the scene of high modernism started unwinding the hank of its history, reviewing the range of its utility and changing its function. Textile’s utilitarian qualities, treatment and production determined its marginal position in the hierarchy of art and crafts through out the centuries, as a medium that is firmly related to household and womanhood. What proves to be unquestionable is that its history belongs, to a great extent, to the postcolonial discourse – that is, to the cultural studies of non-European nations and gender studies. In the context of Western culture, the history of the Middle Ages reveals a wide (but also rarely preserved) production of textile artwork, both profane and sacral.<sup>39</sup> With the rise of easel painting in the early modern period, the production of tapestry paintings began to gradually decline all the way up until the nineteenth century. The revival period introduced a sort of Renaissance to the medium’s history, thanks to the authors of the period of historicism. Semper in Austria, as well as John Ruskin in Great Britain, intended to decrease the existing dichotomy between arts and crafts. Semper’s fusion of architecture and textile art was also influential in the context

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34 In the Serbian language, the expression “raspredati priče” translates as “to spin the stories” which indicates that words are used like fibre in a yarn. J. Dugić, *Tekstil kao sredstvo umetničkog izražavanja* (doktorska disertacija – umetnički projekat), Beograd, 2016, 10.

35 Semper, G., *op. cit.*, 247.

36 A. Albers, *op. cit.*, 15.

37 Magdalena Abakanowicz’s work draws on these ideas, but they can also be found in the work by the local contemporary artist Dragana Dražović Ilić. Ilić uses fibre as a sign, code, a piece of information, in which she finds layers of time, traces of movement and preserved epithelium. See: I. Leković, *op. cit.* 2019, 84–85.

38 R. Twist, *op. cit.* 2012, 13.

39 In the history of (European) art, one of the oldest and best known examples of textile art is *Bayeux tapestry* from the eleventh century, although there are indications that painted tapestry was produced during entire Middle Ages, from the early Middle Ages to the early modern period. Middle Ages also gave birth to numerous reliquaries which represented a Holly image on textile (*Mandylion*, *Turin shroud*). The late Middle Ages and Renaissance period saw rich tapestry production, especially in North Italy and Netherlandish cities. Brussels workshop, known to be the most prestigious ones, spawned some of the most famous tapestry paintings, like those done based on templates by Bernard van Orley and Raffaello.

of historical avant-gardes, as well as in the constructivist practices of *INKhUK* and Bauhaus.<sup>40</sup>

Bauhaus workshop greatly facilitated bringing weaving to prominence, and some of the first theoretical works on the subject did the same. Anni Albers was one of those who contributed the most to the theory of textile.<sup>41</sup> She will continue her theoretical work after emigrating to America and in the mid-sixties will have the first edition of her capital work published under the title *On Weaving* (1965). Albers is an artist whose work was inspired by the forms of the Pre-Columbian America,<sup>42</sup> based on the ideal of “geometrical beauty”. Her dedication to the experiment and object forms of weaving matched the vision of modern art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. By virtue of her art (pic. 4), she would be one of the first artists to exhibit textile objects in MOMA (1949).<sup>43</sup>

Systematic and collective efforts directed towards the re-evaluation of fibre as a new medium of fine arts<sup>44</sup> occurred owing to a series of exhibitions during the 1960s and early 1970s. Curators of these exhibitions intended to reassess the dichotomies of applied and fine arts in the textile medium within their curatorial concepts. Exhibitions such as *Woven Forms* (1963) held at New York’s Museum of Contemporary Crafts and *Eccentric Abstraction* (1966) at the Fishbach Gallery which dealt with the phenomena of anti-form initiated such vivid polemics concerning the nature of textile media that it could be seen as the rise of a new movement.<sup>45</sup>

The exhibition *Wall Hangings* (1969) could be considered as a turning point in the process of institutional change of the function of textile media. Curator, Mildred Constantine starts working in co-authorship with textile designer John Lenor Larsen in 1966 on the organization of a touring exhibition that would establish the “artistic use of fibre and fibre-like materials”<sup>46</sup>. In that institutional sense, a great success of their project was that the selected works were exhibited at the MOMA’s first floor special exhibitions gallery, not at the department for Architecture and Design.<sup>47</sup>

The exhibition had an international character as it brought together American and European artists whose woven forms (pic. 5) made a radical break from the

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40 N. Marković, “Tekstilna radionica Bauhauusa i teorije tkanja”, *Zbornik seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu*, br. 14, Beograd, 2018, 195.

41 Besides Anni Albers, also Gunta Stolzland Otti Berger made a great contribution to the Bauhaus textile workshop. *ibid.*, 193.

42 The catalogue for the exhibition *Small-Great Objects* represents a collection of objects Albers collected together with her husband Joseph Albers in Mesoamerica, in a quest for indigenous art. J. Raynolds-Kaye (Ed.), *Small-Great Objects: Anni and Josef Albers in Americas*. Yale University Art Gallery, exhibition catalogue. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2017.

43 E. Auther, *op.cit.*, 2008, 22.

44 Textile (Fiber) as a medium enters the cannon of high art due to pop-art, minimalism, process art, conceptual art, and land art, and thanks to its prominent names such as Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Jones, Alan Saret, Robert Morris, Christo and Jean-Clod, and Eva Hesse. However, the textile works by these authors were not interpreted in the context of textile art, but rather within the conceptual framework of listed art directions of the second half of the twentieth century.

45 *ibid.*, 14.

46 *ibid.*, 16.

47 *ibid.*, 22.

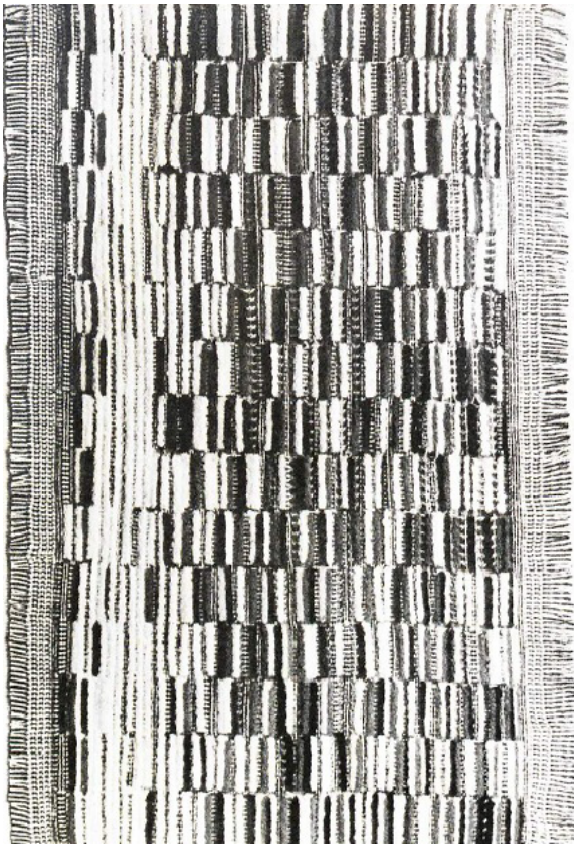


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

mainstream practice in textile art.<sup>48</sup> The concept was contrived in such a way so that the exhibits could be seen “within the context of the twentieth-century art”.<sup>49</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, curators Constantine and Larsen say:

“The weavers from eight countries represented in this catalogue are not part of the fabric industry, but of the world of art. They have extended the formal possibilities of fabric, frequently using complex and unusual techniques.

Only about half of the works included have been based on conventional weaves, often with tapestry interlocking. These and other ancient techniques, more and more often free of the loom, have been reworked into modern idioms.”

They conclude by stating that the exhibited artists:

“[...]experiment with form, they respond to twentieth-century sculptural and graphic influences, but they are largely indifferent to certain recent developments which might supplement hand tools with machine techniques. This has not yet limited their inventiveness; indeed the works they offer here are products of surprising ingenuity. They reflect the new spirit of the weaver’s art.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The exhibition staged the works by 28 artists from 8 different countries, among whom there were Leonore Tawney, Sheila Hicks, Claire Ziesler, Key Sekimachi, Walter Nottingham, Françoise Grossen, Jagoda Bujić, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Gunta Stolzel, Wojciech Sadley, Ewa Jaroszynska, Anni Albers and other authors.

<sup>49</sup> M. Constantine et J. L. Larsen, “Introduction”, in: *Wall Hangings*, ed. M. Constantine et J. L. Larsen, New York, 1969, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



Constantine and Larsen tried to establish fibre art as a new genre of fine arts.<sup>51</sup> However, paradoxically to the main presumption of this paper, precisely the critics of Greenbergian provenance were very eager to maintain the high status of painting and sculpture as opposed to the media traditionally used as a craft. In order to reduce the gap between applied and fine arts, alternative approaches to the new phenomena in textile art turned to some hybrid categories. Terms such as *soft art* and *soft sculpture* marked the concept of several exhibitions by the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s. Although neither of the new classifications was accepted by critics, enthusiasts argued that the term *soft sculpture* “could logically include any three-dimensional form made by flexible joining, fibrous materials, modules with no fixed beginning or end, soft materials made hard and vice versa”.<sup>52</sup> Some of the critics tried to underline the difference between the authors whose work was preceded by a premeditated mental activity (such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra) and others whose manual work was described as “craft/fetish” (and it was made mostly by women).<sup>53</sup>

Morris’s felt (waste wool) objects reflected modernist principles and minimalist sterility. The mental process which precedes their creation is based on exploring the material’s formal properties and finding a form that is present both in the final product and during its processing. Choosing soft material, such as felt (piled and heaped, draped, tangled, hung, and dropped) fulfilled the need for investigation of the influence of gravitation in the constitution of a form – a process analogous to Pollock’s *dripping* technique.<sup>54</sup> Kimberly Paice argues that Morris’s work with felt marked a new openness towards the process of making, gravity and formal disposition, but more broadly it should be “seen as part of a larger transformation within artistic discourse”<sup>55</sup>.

Using a soft material, Morris leaves a firm structure that characterized his previous work (made out of steel, wood, etc.) and starts introducing variable structures whose variations could convey anthropomorphic forms (pic. 6). In an interview from 1983, Morris himself explained his opting for this medium by saying that “felt has anatomical associations; it relates to the body – it’s skin-like.”<sup>56</sup>

Fibre’s anthropomorphic associations are also to be found in the work of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (pic. 7). Reflecting on the nature of the fibre, she says:

“While building the organic world in our planet, I consider the fiber as the most mysterious element of our surrounding. We, all living things, plants and tissues were formed from fiber. Nerves, our genetics code, veins, muscles. All these are strands. Our heart is surrounded by the heart muscles. By processing the fiber, we, in fact, process the unknown. (...) To which artist’s hands and intuition can fiber guide? What is the fabric? We weave it, sew it, shape it into forms. When the biology of our body fails, skin can be cut in order to

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51 E. Auther, *op.cit.* 2008, 19.

52 *Ibid.*, 29.

53 *Ibid.*, 30.

54 Morris referred to Pollock in what he signified as a “recovery of the process”, which presumed “a profound re-thinking of the role of both materials and tools in making”. K, Paice, *op.cit.* 213.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*



Fig. 6

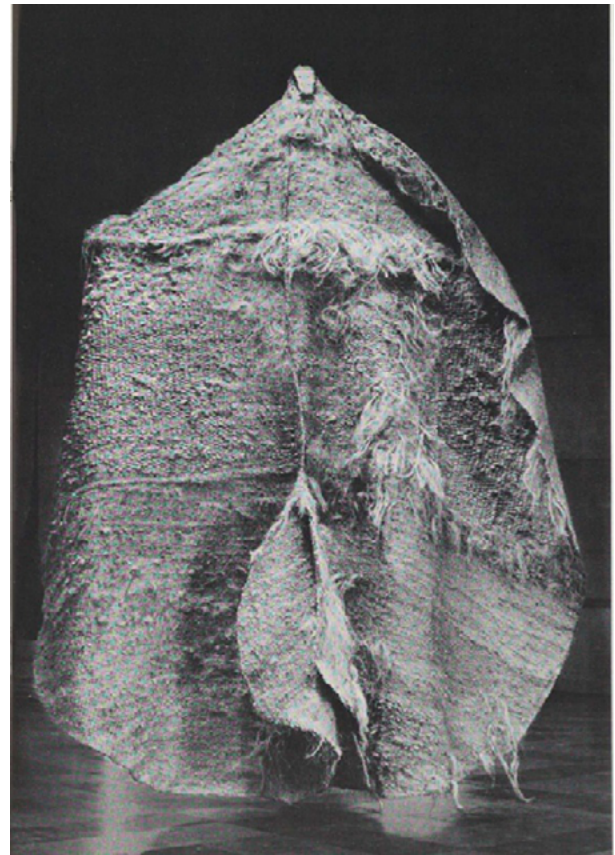


Fig. 7

gain access under it. Then, just as cloth, it can be sewn. Fabric is our shell and dress we make with our hands, and this is a record of our souls.”<sup>57</sup>

In Abakanowicz’s as well as in Morris’s work we can notice a conceptual consideration of fibre (fabric) that corresponds precisely to the notions which Greenberg describes as opposed to the term *decorative*, commonly attributed to the craft. In their statements we observe *conception*, *inspiration* and *idea*, which are, according to Greenberg, characteristic of high (fine) art.<sup>58</sup>

The work of Claire Ziesler in *macramé* technique, which was classified during the 1960s as a hobbyist, female technique, also reveals an art-oriented practice.<sup>59</sup> In the interview for *Arts Magazine* in 1979 she will state the following:

“When I first started knotting, it was not a trend... You certainly have heard the word *macramé*. Some people call it Claire Ziesler *macramé*... I do mind the word *macramé* because *macramé* today means a decorative knot and I use knotting technique as a structure. The knot becomes a base of a piece, like the canvas is a base for a painting.”

Elissa Author pointed out that Ziesler’s reference to knotting as integral to the “structure” emphasizes the formalist nature of her art, which can also be found in

<sup>57</sup> Quoted according to: N.R.Oyman, *op.cit.* 8.

<sup>58</sup> E. Author, *op.cit.* 2009, xvii.

<sup>59</sup> E. Author, *op.cit.* 2008, 25.

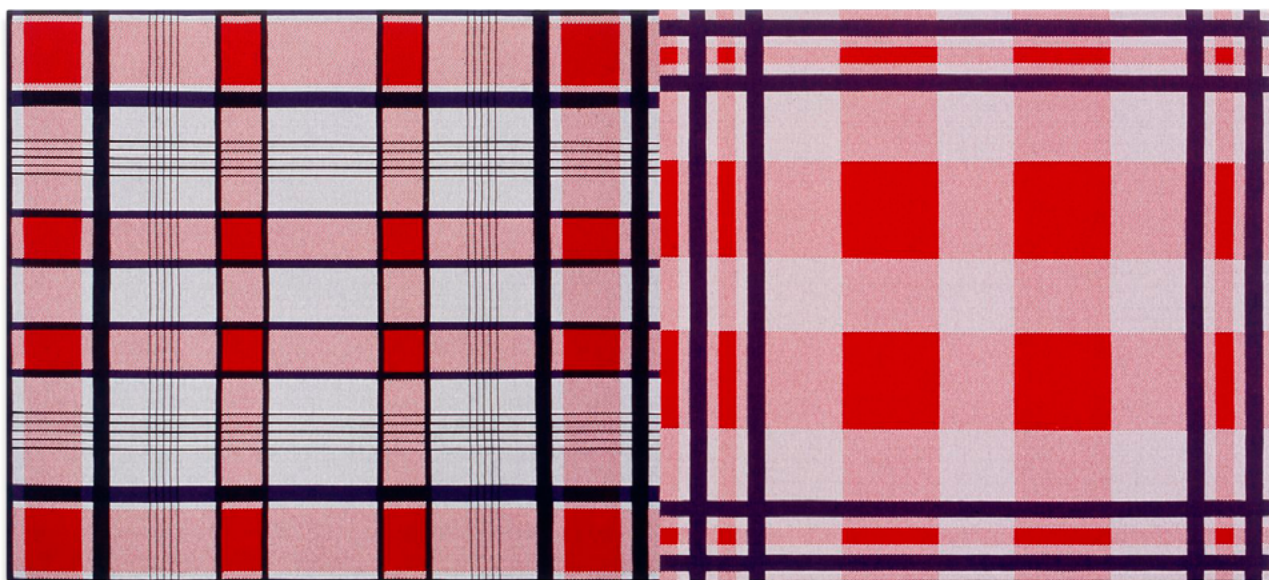


Fig. 8

contemporary painting, as something that places her work firmly within the category of 'fine art'.<sup>60</sup>

While Claire Ziesler's preoccupations reside within the framework of modernist formalism, a category of feminist art appears as a postmodernist critical reaction to modernist discourse. Appropriation of a culturally-induced semantic layer was used in order to create a different art history discourse, in which women and their creative work will find their place. Textile artists whose work was inspired by the third wave of feminism started referring to the categories of womanhood, household and manual work as to the assets of subverted criticism and deconstruction of power relations in society. Their<sup>61</sup> work confirmed that "once negative associations of fibre or craft with the femininity and home were recast as distinctive and culturally valuable features of an artistic heritage specific to woman."<sup>62</sup>

Within the connotative field of womanhood and household, the work of Rosemarie Trockel (pic. 8), mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was interpreted.<sup>63</sup> But, as we can see, in the contemporary postmodern theoretical context, such connotations are institutionalized within the context of fine (conceptual) art. Trockel's work, just like the work of artists who participated in the process of change of the function of textile media into the fibre art during the groundbreaking period of the 1960s and 1970s, bridges the gap between modernist formalism and art's integration in to everyday life. Their work confirms the ability of textile medium, and that of fibre as its integral part, to contemplate and to reveal to the observer the "complex, ironic truth of the world" characteristic of art."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> E.g.: Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, curators Mattias Fliege and Mattias Winzen wrote about her work: "Her wall objects from the 2002 *Untitled* evoke men's handkerchiefs, linen and oil cloths. This opens a connotative field of household, comfort and femininity... However, mechanical abstraction of plaid pattern in this monumental 'knitted painting' also creates the connection between signs of womanhood and industrial production of commodities." *Na putu oko sveta*, brošura izložbe. Beograd, 2018, 91.

<sup>64</sup> E. Auther, *op.cit.* 2009, xix.

## CONCLUSION

Initiated during the 1960s, the open debate in the art world about one of the oldest media and its function would continue through out the twentieth century. Metaphorical and literal unravelling of the threads opened layers of fibre's intertextuality. Its rich semiotic field provided the artists with a means for expressing the issues of identity, gender, race, social status, environment, globalization, post-colonialism, consumerism, political and other issues. Binarisms that started gathering around the question of classification of textile have become wider than the ones we extracted as important issues in the context of our subject.

Using different techniques, materials and construction processes, fibre had shaken the art scene by questioning the relation between arts and crafts, the dichotomies of male and female art, the relation of manual work and industrial production and so forth, at the same time bringing up other numerous questions and lateral histories of art.

Constantine and Larsen had left a significant framework for reflection with the concept of their exhibition which showed that textile/fibre art should be observed in the perspective of the twentieth-century art development. Positioning fibre in the context of this development process, the intention of this paper was to accentuate that its appearance in the art can be explained as an evolutionary consequence of theoretical preoccupations and main directions of contemporary art. Within the formalist-structuralist framework of modernism we also observed and tried to highlight the work of those artists who changed the form and function of textile art.

Contemporary painting left canvas denuded, inspiring fibre to lean towards its own self-sufficiency. Operating outside the imposed limits, leisure and utility – to paraphrase Anni Albers – threads were becoming more articulated, finding their own form, “to no other end than their own orchestration, not to be sat on, walked on, only to be looked at”.<sup>65</sup>

Owing to the nature of its media, textile art managed to bridge the gap between radically deconstructed plastic traits of modernist artistry and constructivist demand for an art form deeply integrated into the notions and functions of everyday life, confirming fibre to be a legitimate fine arts element.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Structure of a biaxial fabric. (Škundrić, Petar, Kostić, Mirjana, Medović, Adela, Mihailović, Tatjana, Asanović, Koviljka i Sretković, Ljiljana. *Tekstilni materijali*, Tehnološko-metalurški fakultet, Beograd, 2008, pic. 3.1. (a))
2. Graphic representation of a plaid fabric. (Škundrić, Petar, Kostić, Mirjana, Medović, Adela, Mihailović, Tatjana, Asanović, Koviljka i Sretković, Ljiljana. *Tekstilni materijali*, Tehnološko-metalurški fakultet, Beograd, 2008, p. 3.39 (a))
3. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Six Legs)*, 1969, felt, 4.59 m × 1.84 m × 2.5 cm overall, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gilman Foundation Fund.  
(*Robert Morris: Mind/Body Problem*, Monographic Exhibition. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Guggenheim Museum Publication: New York, 1994, pic. 94)
4. Anni Albers, *North Westerly*, 1957, cotton, rayon, and acrylic, pictorial weaving, 38.8 × 59 cm, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, New York (A. Albers, *On Weaving*, London, 1974, pic. 105)
5. Anni Albers, *Wall Hanging III*, 1965 (designed in 1927), silk, double weave, 58 × 48 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
(*Wall Hangings*, ed. M. Constantine et J. L. Larsen, Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1969, pic. 33)
6. Robert Morris, *House of the Vetti*, 1983, felt, steel bracket and metal, 240 × 243, 8 × 91,4 cm overall, private collection Madrid.

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65 E. Author, *op.cit.* 2008, 27.



- (Robert Morris: *Mind/Body Problem*, Monographic Exhibition. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Guggenheim Museum Publication: New York, 1994, pic. 100)
7. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Yellow Abakan*. 1967–68, sisal. tapestry, 315 × 304.8 × 152.4 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mr. Walter Bareiss, Mrs. Watson K. Blair, Mr. Arthur Cohen, Mr. Don Page, and anonymous donor. (*Wall Hangings*, ed. M. Constantine et J. L. Larsen, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969, pic.12)
  8. Rosemarie Trockel, *Untitled*. 2002, wool, red-white-blue plaid pattern, 180 × 400 cm, *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen*. (Na putu oko sveta, brošura izložbe, Beograd)

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Ива М. ЛЕКОВИЋ

#### ОД СТРУКТУРЕ ДО ТЕКСТУРЕ: ПРОМЕНА ФУНКЦИЈЕ ТЕКСТИЛА ИЗ МЕДИЈА ПРИМЕЊЕНИХ У МЕДИЈ ЛИКОВНИХ УМЕТНОСТИ

У раду смо се бавили променом функције медија текстила и текстилне уметности, дефинисаном напуштањем медијске утилитарности зарад истраживања његових формалних могућности. Појава формализма у текстилној уметности сагледана је у контексту доминантних токова развоја модерне и постмодерне уметности и настојали смо објаснити дати феномен структуралним својствима текстила/тканине. Показали смо да материјалност самог медија резонује са естетиком високог модернизма, концептуално дефинисаном терминима критичког дискурса Климента Гринберга. Будући да је уметност модернизма у великој мери одређена формалистичко-структуралистичким редукционизмом, рад пружа историјску линију развоја те разградње, чију парадигму проналазимо у идеји „смрти сликарства“. Историографска систематизација и структурална анализа текстилног медија потврђује могућност сагледавања појаве текстилне уметности у институцијама високог модернизма. као резултат прогресивне разградње штафелајног сликарства. У датом епистемолошком оквиру, након одбацивања потеза четке на платну, долазимо до разградње (анализе) самог платна (тканине), односно текстила као медија. То нас доводи до једне врсте текстилне аутореференцијалности, која је по природи ствари уткана у идеју модерности и модерне ликовности. Да је наведена перцепција и предложена развојна нит могућа, потврђено је примерима теоријског и практичног рада уметника чија и формална обрада текстила је већ препозната у историографији и кустоским праксама као радикалан отклон од приступа текстилу као занатском медију, самим тим и значајно доприноси сагледавању влакна (финалног стадијума предложене разградње) као аутономног ликовног елемента.

**Кључне речи:** криза штафелајног сликарства, структурализам, текстилна уметност, влакно као ликовни елемент