

TEXTILES, TEXT AND TECHNE

Victoria Mitchell

Editor's introduction: Victoria Mitchell's essay "Textiles, Text and Techne" opens this *Reader* because of its attention to the act of writing. Mitchell has written extensively about textiles and here provides us with a map of writing about textiles in relation to textile making. The etymological links between *text*, *textile*, and *techne* (Greek for craftsmanship or making with intention), as well as the distinct differences in these ways of working, are acknowledged. This leads to Mitchell's reminder that the one thing the written word can never do is to physically touch, in the most literal sense, the textiles that are of central concern to all the writing in this *Reader*. "The privileging of words and the ocularcentrism of western culture can mask some of the sensibilities conveyed through textile practice," Mitchell observes. An attention to the needs of the textile is crucial to our understanding of not only textiles but also the value system that has relegated touch to its current undervalued position.

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In E.B. White's story for children, *Charlotte's Web*, the spider Charlotte weaves the word 'SOME PIG' into her web.¹ The farmer Mr. Zuckerman and his workman Lurvy are taken aback at the sight of 'the writing on the web' and Mr. Zuckerman immediately informs his wife: "Edith," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "I think you had best be told that we have a very unusual

pig." He explains how the words were woven right into the web and were "actually part of the web . . . There can be no mistake about it. A miracle has happened and a sign occurred here on earth, right on our farm, and we have no ordinary pig". "Well," said Mrs Zuckerman, "it seems to me you're a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary *spider*."

Despite Mrs Zuckerman's observation, it is not Charlotte's skill which becomes the centre of attention. Charlotte's ability to transform the instinctual web into a slogan of support for her friend the pig Wilbur achieves the desired result and Wilbur is spared from a chopping-board death. She uses her ingenious skill to promote the specialness of the pig; going beyond her instinctual skills as a maker of orb webs for the purpose of mating and capturing prey, it might be said that the web is transformed from one kind of snare (for tricking flies) to another (tricking the reader).

The fact that the words are 'actually part of the web', and are therefore impressive on that account, reinforces the 'miracle' of their effect which causes the message to be divorced from the skill which produced it. Peter Dormer spoke of the making which begins with the production of the raw material, as 'below the line'—that which is hidden from sight and which the consumer takes for granted.² In the case of the spider this might be the secretion of silk from the abdominal glands, drawn out by spinnarets, or the highly developed muscular sense which enables it to detect changes in tension in the thread.³ In *Charlotte's Web* these aspects are secondary to the function of the signifying power of words.

Charlotte's Web is of course a fiction. Spiders make webs throughout their lives but they don't get better at making them. Whilst their ability to send and receive signals through vibration is subtle and complex, this ability is understood in terms of the mechanics of the nervous system; it therefore falls short of the kind of language experience typically associated with the written word. The linguist D. McNeil says that: 'We tend to consider "linguistic" what we can write down, and "non-linguistic" everything else, but this division is a cultural artefact, an arbitrary limitation derived from historical evolution.'⁴

In this paper I consider transitions and boundaries between text, textiles and *techne*, many of which are implicit in E.B. White's fictional example. Text, textiles and *techne* are etymologically

linked, reflecting an intimacy and a complexity for thought in its association with making. Etymological links are not, however, the only form in which evidence of such association is manifest, and indeed the manner in which words are formed, in their differences and similarities, is often supple, subtle and cunningly playful in a way which can mask or even contradict those cognitive functions which are directly evidenced in the actions of making through materials.

Relationships between text, textiles and *techne* are of critical interest not only for what they may reveal about textiles and language; there are implications in their association which may be relevant to an understanding of what it means to create forms through materials. Such implications may require a refiguring and disrupting of the boundaries which divide instinct from cognition and nature from culture. The effect of such disrupting might be to create an enhanced significance for those practices which, sometimes with derogatory overtones, are referred to as 'craft'.

I begin by considering the senses as a basis of a phylogenetic and ontogenetic *conjunction* between language and textile. I will then suggest an historical, cultural context for their *separation*. Examples are drawn from the writings of Anni Albers and Edward Johnson to illustrate ways in which these associations and disassociations have affected the making of textiles and the perception of craft within the twentieth century. Finally I will consider the theorising of textiles from a contemporary perspective. I will argue that the privileging of words and the ocularcentrism of western culture can mask some of the sensibilities conveyed through textile practice, and that making sense through the tactility of textiles has implications for perception in a wider sense. In particular, the formative relationship between words and textiles alerts us to what I would like to call the textility of both thought and matter, a neologism which may be formative in minimising the separateness of the spheres within which text, textiles and *techne* might otherwise operate. The textility of making suggests a practice which informs

thought; unlike an architectonic framework for cognition, it provides evidence of a more supple fabrication.

Language and textile formation share pliability as well as an inherent capacity to form structural relations between components. In both there is a suggestion of the drawing forth of minute physical sensation, fibre or particle into a form which is versatile and adaptable. The etymological and metaphorical use of words gives indications of some common associations, thus, according to Cecilia Vicuña: 'In the Andes the language itself, Quechua, is a chord of twisted straw, two people making love, different fibres united,'⁵ and in Hungarian, the word for fibres is the same as that for vocal chords. The word 'language' derives in Latin and in Sanskrit from that which makes it, namely the tongue, and on a spinning wheel the point at which the yarn emerges fully formed is called the orifice. Text and textile share common association through the Latin *texere*, to weave. These fragile references suggest for textiles a kind of speaking and for language a form of making.

Making and speaking, beginning with gesture and utterance, are both primarily tactile and sensory, of the body. Through the senses, touch and utterance share common origins in the neural system and in the pattern of synaptic, electrochemical connections between neurons. It is the fibrous form of the neuron which is said to provide 'the key to its role in the nervous system', and the synapse, both morphological and physiological in origin, which creates continuity and articulates differences between nerve cells. From each neuron, the dendrites which snake and twist as an extension of the cell body act as antennae, receiving impulses through the large surface area of their arborised endings.⁶ Recent neuroscientific reconstructions of individual neurons are described by Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield as 'neural architectures',⁷ but the intricacy of these architectures is of a fibrous form for which the metaphor of textiles might be more appropriate. In the fibrous tissue of the sensory body both the

gestures of action and the utterance of speech are finely connected.

The complicated organisation of the nervous system confirms the views of psychologists of perception such as J.J. Gibson that the senses are perceptual systems and are integral to the formation of cognition.⁸ Studies of gesture in the formation of language have also drawn on neurological evidence to support the link between oral and manual gestures and cognition. Language is an articulatory gesture of movement and feeling rooted in the body through neural activity:

language, whether planned or produced, is always realized in some physical medium. At the level of planning, this medium is neural; at the level of utterance, it is articulatory (gestural). There is no translation from mental to physical; there is only motor activity brought about by neural activity.⁹

Of the various forms in which the senses are said to operate, the sense of sight has been, historically, the most privileged, whilst touch, with its implication of earth and base matter, has been less well served. Both philosophy and science have constructed a privileged role for sight as a cognitive organ, indeed Aristotle considered sight to be noble precisely because of the immateriality of its knowing, and hence its apparent approximation to the intellect.¹⁰ In his book *The Eyes of the Skin*, the Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa tries to redress this oneness, by arguing that 'all the senses, including vision, can be regarded as senses of touch'.¹¹ This argument is necessary because, he suggests, sight has become a privileged social sense, whereas touch is now considered an archaic sensory remnant 'with a merely private function'.¹² He suggests that this is not the case for traditional cultures in which haptic and muscular senses of the body guide construction 'in the same way that a bird shapes its nest by movements of its body'.¹³ The spinner and historian Patricia Baines reflects this polarising of

the senses when she says that: 'it is difficult to describe in words and still pictures something which is a continuous movement, a rhythm and co-ordination between hands, foot and fibre, and which also sharpens the sense of feel.'¹⁴

It is clear that textiles are *not* words and the differences between them benefit the conceptual apparatus of thought at the expense of its sensory equivalent. Thus when an activity is *labelled* as textiles it ceases to be a substance and becomes instead a 'material of thought', and as such enters into the internal logic of a system which tends to privilege the autonomy of the mind. The word becomes surrogate for the substance. Despite the evocative power of the word, its potential to embody a presence through memory and association, there is a gap between word and thing which grows apace as verbal becomes written and written becomes printed, as the context of the thing itself recedes from view.

Historically, the development of writing coincides with a shift away from the locus of making. According to the structuralist Jean-Pierre Vernant, for example, a distinction was made, at the birth of the city state in Greece, between the private domain of the family and the public polis of the citizen, a category which excluded artisans, women and slaves.¹⁵ Vernant suggests that the development of writing occurs in the exclusive public domain of the polis. Those who did not enter the polis, who did not write, who did not engage in the activities of the public space of the agora, were thereby marginalised both visibly and verbally. In the context of the polis, the deliberate and conscious construction of reflection was informed by the *Logos*, the authority of the word as instrument of exchange of ideas.

A similar shift, away from the sensibility that arises through making, occurs with the advent of technology. With the advent of technological progress, Baudrillard suggests that the integrity of objects no longer is contingent upon individual needs which can be satisfied by artisanal production but upon a system which is technological and economic and which coheres around

signifiers (notably words) which have the ability to select and direct the functioning of needs.¹⁶ Thus exchange value, located in the signifying power of 'some pig' comes to predominate over the use value of the web. Charlotte's words, the *Logos* of the Greek citizen and the signifiers of exchange value reflect the privileged status of language as associated with notions of authority, truth and thought.

The yielding, domestic, female, decorative and material associations for textiles have in general determined their absence from this cultural hegemony, but it is an absence which may also be or have been an expression of resistance. In writings by textile practitioners in the twentieth century (until recently there are noticeably few), there is evidence of a desire to resist too great an involvement with words as the material of thought because it might hinder the articulation of meaning through the handling of materials. This resistance is repeatedly conveyed in the writings of Anni Albers, whose book *On Designing* (published in 1959 but based on writings from the late Thirties onwards) is one of the most substantial, analytic and wide-ranging in interpretation to have emerged from a textile practitioner in the modern period.

In her writing there is a tone of resistance to words as instruments of thought and, paradoxically, a note of discouragement to would-be maker-writers. Making through materials is justified as almost a superior kind of thought. She says: 'The inarticulateness of the artistic person is interpreted easily as a lack of intelligence while it is rather an intelligence expressing itself in other means than words.'¹⁷ It is as if, by resisting one branch of intelligence, another will present itself through receptivity to the materials, thus: 'Resistance is one of the factors necessary to make us realise the characteristics of our medium and make us question our work procedure.'¹⁸

Albers distances herself from the subjective, and from the belief that knowledge gained through intellectual skills can benefit the maker. She says, for example, that 'with expanding knowledge goes

limitation in range', that 'information means intellectualisation . . . onesidedness, incompleteness', and that 'layer after layer of civilised life seems to have veiled our directness of seeing' whereas the '*direct* experience of a medium' is seen as preferable. It is therefore 'better that the material speaks than that we speak ourselves'.¹⁹ This denial of the self and of emotional introspection conveys a canonically Modern sensibility towards function and away from the obfuscating potential of art, or the privileging of the ego. For Albers, 'crafts become problematic when they are hybrids of art and usefulness',²⁰ and thus by 'losing ourselves in the task we . . . would arrive at a result that is not individualistically limited.'²¹

In her practice, Albers was both a weaver who believed in the primacy of what she called 'the most real thing that there is', namely material, but also a graphic designer, particularly at the end of her life.²² Weaving, writing and drawing share a common denominator through the practice of *graphein*, the graphic, a practice which demonstrates a formative trait for both text and textiles. A number of her woven pieces are given titles and forms which suggest writing or graphic signs. She wanted, she said, 'to let the threads be articulate again'. Pieces such as *Ancient Writing* (1936), *Memo* (1958), *Jotting* (1959), *Haiku* (1961) and *Code* (1962), suggest that she was exploring and rediscovering a graphic potential in both text and textiles, a coincidence conveyed through a response to the material.²³ Her deep regard for ancient Peruvian textiles, which predate the written word, reinforced this. Speaking of their double, triple and quadruple weaves she comments: 'if a highly intelligent people with no written language, no graph paper, and no pencils could manage such invention, we should be able—easily I hope—to repeat these structures.'²⁴

Despite her concern for material processes, much of her work was designed for contemplation rather than practical use, to be touched with the eyes rather than the hand. Also, Albers increasingly gave titles to her works from the late Thirties onwards, again suggesting a relinquishing of

the tactile as the agent of formation. The naming and visual contemplation of textiles mark a shift in perception from the physical to the mental, a shift which grows apace through the development and proliferation of exhibition and publication contexts for textile and other crafts. As a consequence, physical responses of use and touch cease to operate as primary entry points of understanding. Like words and pictures in books, exhibitions tend to marginalise the technical, artisanal aspects of practice, and they do not, in general, allow the involvement of touch. In a review of the 1954 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society exhibition, Peter Collingwood drew attention to the problem of textiles as objects of contemplation, suggesting that they suffered by not being felt: 'because a piece of cloth is only half-experienced unless it is handled, the visitors find it impossible to keep their hands off.'²⁵

It may be said that words are substitutes for use. For Albers the articulation of threads as a formation from within and through interaction with the material gives way to a reading in which the threads are represented by the words which are used to describe them.

The typographer Edward Johnson, a maker for whom articulacy through words is formed through a combination of making *and* reading, analysed some of the problems posed by the distancing of tactile involvement in the exhibition of crafts in an address given to members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1933:

There is something necessarily artificial about a formal Exhibition. The objects are *posed* in a gallery to be *looked at*, and the Percipient—i.e., the 'Public'—can only use *one* of his five senses in appreciating them. On his own family goods and chattels all five senses confer in daily judgement. *Here* he must be content with Sight alone.

But even the sense of sight is restricted to viewing *motionless material effects* often little more than one-sided views. The Exhibits cannot by action demonstrate their fitness for use. We may not touch, still less handle or try the

use of Things meant to be daily used and handled. An exhibition is, in fact, apt to be a kind of *lying in state*—of Talent at rest.²⁶

It is in this gap, between use and sight, that words can function as a form of closure, as a mediation which can effect a partial recovery of that which has been lost. Rather than considering words as a further loss to sensory embodiment of meaning, Johnson's proposed solution is to encourage makers to 'write *critical and explanatory* . . . labels to accompany their work'. Even though, he suggests, the work itself is a 'sort of special language' and 'the thing he makes not only speaks for him, but also speaks for itself', through engagement in writing: 'we can give a partial *translation of our Works into Words* which will assist understanding.' He appeals to the poet in the maker and suggests that 'We are . . . *Makers* of word arrangements by which we exchange ideas'.

Whilst the main purpose of Johnson's address concerned the maker's written interpretation, he also went further in suggesting that exhibitions might show evidence and explanations of materials and processes. Johnson's overall aim is not only 'to help people to see what they are looking at', but also to assist the understanding of the maker, and to enable makers to communicate through words with one another. In other words, writing becomes a form of making—making words—and an aspect of seeing. The sense of touch functions vicariously through a combination of indirect agents. Writing establishes the involvement of the viewer in forming a relationship between seeing and making, potentially guiding the viewer away from the flatness of a static object to the activity and ideas which it embodies.

Both Albers and Johnson are, in interconnected ways, entering into a system which coheres around signifiers which select and direct the viewer's response to the work. Seen from a contemporary perspective, the exhibition may be encountered not as a space within which objects are contemplated from a physical distance through the immateriality of the eye but as a medium of

making or an intertextuality of signs in which the viewer's response is formative. Nevertheless, the tactility of making, touching and using remain as secondary and are silenced.

Within recent literary and critical theory there is evidence of a desire to make sense of the gap between words and things. In this, metaphors referring to textiles have been formative and transformative. Thus Michel Foucault uses the metaphor of interweaving to describe the relationship between things and words, and Roland Barthes uses the analogy of braid to illustrate the multiplicity of intersecting codes that constitute what he calls textuality: 'each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices form the writing', and the feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks enticingly of the fraying of the edges of the language-textile as seen from the perspective of translation between one language and another.²⁷

In transferring, perhaps appropriating, the articulacy of threads from material to textual practice, the metaphorical ambiguity of textile terminology has unleashed previously undisclosed meanings for textiles as well as for critical theory. In recent years textile practitioners have begun to participate in ambiguous verbal play, for example speaking of the 'language of textiles' and suggesting that textiles are a form of writing or speaking. Textiles as metaphor have assumed in recent writing the agency of a sensory idea, a material of thought, so that it becomes possible to speak of textile thought and tactile literacy. The haptic and the conceptual have moved closer together through the agency of textile experience as expressed through metaphor and through words. Such writing and the making to which it refers have become manifest at a time of critical appraisal and disruption of the primacy of language and its privileged relationship to thought and power, and it is significant that textiles, which the contemporary artist Pierrette Bloch suggests is a 'dark other side to writing', has entered into and contributed to the disruption of that primacy.²⁸

Textile practice remains, however, rooted in material, and for textile practice which identifies with craft the role of making and of handling materials is only partly served by textile-theory word-play. In the catalogue of a recent textile art exhibition, *Textile Art*, curated by makers, Judith Duffey Harding asks: 'Can a practice that grows out of making, that thinks with its hands by making, evolve its own theory, in a way that doesn't intimidate or constrain the makers by imposing it?'²⁹

Perhaps, in response to this, it may be helpful to return to the formation of the word textile, and reconsider its origin within the practice of making. Within literary criticism the etymological link between text and textile, from the Latin *texere*, to weave, has been central in developing notions of textuality and intertextuality. The etymology that links text and textile can, however, be traced further back, to Greek and Sanskrit associations which emphasise the activity of making and forming. The Sanskrit words *takman* meaning 'child' and *taksh*, to make, and the Indo-European root *tek-* used of men, meaning to beget, and of women, to bring forth, have all been linked to the Latin *texere*. In these, the sense of physical formation is emphatic. Through *tek-* the formation of *techne* further demonstrates the association of skill and through the Latin *texere* the sense of joining or fitting together reinforces the association of textiles with materials and away from the metaphorical associations illustrated by reference to text.

The notion of textuality, with its associated reference to textiles, evades, I suggest, these earlier traditions of making, joining and putting together, of bodies and buildings. Textiles, whilst they lend themselves to associations of text, also mediate between the fibrous body and the fabric of architecture. They articulate subtle physical sensations between substance and surface, and are most closely known to us through their relationship to the skin and to the sense of touch, a sense which is actively encountered through the making of textiles by hand. In addition to the analogy

with the textuality of language and the intertextuality of signs, textile practice may also acknowledge this contiguity with the physical forms of bodies and of things, a kind of textility operating through and in-between forms in space. As suggested here by Pallasmaa, the architectonic may give way to the tactile:

With the loss of tactility and measures and details crafted for the human body—and particularly for the hand—architectural structures become flat, sharp edged, immaterial and unreal. The detachment of construction from the realities of matter and craft further turns architecture into stage sets for the eyes into a scenography devoid of the authenticity of matter and construction.³⁰

In her reappraisal of the myth of Arachne and Athena, Nancy K. Miller reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf's awareness of the fragility but tenaciousness of fiction's relationship to the real:

Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners . . . When the web is pulled askew . . . one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.³¹

We realise of course that it was a good thing Charlotte could write words in her web: it saved Wilbur's life. Within contemporary textiles it is also true that issues of gender and class, for example, have been voiced and heard through textiles. The subtle nuance and fragile pliability of textiles as embodied metaphor have contributed actively to the disruption of the authority of language, and have been abundant in intonations of sensory experience, thus serving to enable senses other than sight to achieve an enhanced status. Nevertheless, the manipulation of textiles has

implications for meanings which come about directly, if not instinctively, through making, and these are often least well served in a culture of sign consumption. The spider's web has recently been the subject of tensile structure research with reference to use in architecture, as if, at last, Mrs Zuckerman's voice is heard.³²

NOTES

1. E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1952; Puffin Books, London, 1963, p.78.
2. Peter Dormer, *The Meanings of Modern Design*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1970. p.15ff. Peter Dormer highlights the way in which engineering is often hidden and divorced from style. I am extending his notion of engineering in this instance (with reference to the production of spider silk), to suggest that 'natural' processes might be hidden from cultural products in a similar way. Dormer suggests that the hidden only comes to be questioned when the product (in this case the signifying power of words) fails in some way.
3. Theodore H. Savory, *The Spider's Web*, Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London and New York, 1952.
4. D. McNeill, 'So you think gestures are non-verbal', *Psychological Review* 92, 1985, p.351. Cited by David F. Armstrong, William C. Stokoe, Sherman E. Wilcox, *Gesture and the Nature of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp.7-8.
5. Cecilia Vicuña and Rosa Acala, *Palabra e Hilol Word & Thread*, Morning Star Publications, Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, University Press, 1996.
6. Alan Peters, Sanford L. Paley, Henry de F. Webster, *The Fine Structure of the Nervous System*, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991.
7. Peter Coveney, Roger Highfield, *Frontiers of Complexity*, Faber & Faber, London, 1995, p.290 (illustrated). From a conversation between the neurophysiologist Colin Blakemore in 1994 and Coveney and Highfield, Blakemore is quoted as saying, 'The interesting parts of the brain are driven by the senses, right through to language, which surely evolved from sensory categorisation' (p.283).
8. J.J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1966.
9. Armstrong, Stokoe and Wilcox, *op cit.*, p.33.
10. On this subject, a clear overview in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994.
11. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Academy Editions, 1996, p.29.
12. *Ibid.*, p.7.
13. *Ibid.*, p.16.
14. Patricia Baines, *Spinning Wheels, Spinners and Spinning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, p.13.
15. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*. First published in French in 1965, in English by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983, pp.256 and 324. The four essays of Part Four, 'Work and Technological Thought', provide an excellent analysis of the way in which artisans were ostracised from the thought-forming *polis*.
16. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, edited and introduced by Mark Poster, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.14-15.
17. Anni Albers, *On Designing*, Pelango Press, New Haven, 1959, p.32.
18. *Ibid.*, p.33.
19. *Ibid.*, pp.5,6, 45.
20. *Ibid.*, p.15.
21. *Ibid.*, p.26.
22. *Ibid.*, p.50.
23. These works are reproduced in *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1985.