

**ART & TEXTILES: FABRIC AS MATERIAL AND CONCEPT IN MODERN  
ART FROM KLIMT TO THE PRESENT, MARCUS BRÜDERLIN (ED.)**

Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag (2013), 392 pp., Hardcover,  
ISBN: 978-3-77573-627-5 (English), ISBN: 978-3-77573-626-8  
(German), €49.80

*Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, York University*

The intersection of 'fine' and applied arts is an area that requires the continual negotiation and redefinition of boundaries. In the case of textiles and textile-based art, the distinction between art and craft is not so clear-cut. *Art & Textiles: Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present* addresses such issues in the catalogue for an exhibition of the same name at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. Both the book and exhibition examine ethnographic artifacts, textiles as a subject matter for art, and the use of textiles as material in art production. The exhibition itself was vast, containing almost 200 objects and over 80 artists and the catalogue reflects this with its sumptuous illustrations and encyclopedic content. *Art & Textiles* is divided into three sections: two essay portions bisected by the catalogue proper. The massive volume well documents the historical context for art and textiles across culture from medieval tapestry to contemporary art (although this historical content is not referenced in the title). Late curator Markus Brüderlin's introduction to the exhibition opens the preliminary essay section, and precedes writings from several contributors on textiles and their cultural and social context. Following this is the catalogue portion, containing a series of chapters based on the exhibition themes, and a related group of essays. Part coffee table book, part academic study, the publication is extensive in its reach both historically and geographically.

In his introductory essay, Brüderlin highlights four areas of interest in the exhibition: textiles (read: canvas) as foundation for painting, textiles as painting, and its inverse; the form and space of textiles; textile abstraction in modernity; and lastly, the timely topic of textiles, the architecture of the 'web' and digital technology. Functioning simultaneously as a broad history of textiles and art throughout modernity, Brüderlin's text addresses both the scholarly – Rosalind Krauss's theorization on the modernist grid – and the vernacular of craft, as seen in urban examples of guerrilla knitting or 'yarn bombing'. In the subsequent commissioned essays, a variety of methodological approaches are taken, from architecture to the cultural anthropology of textiles, all of which deal directly with the exhibition themes of the section that follows.

The first six chapters in the catalogue portion provide a chronological overview of the relationship between textiles and art within the framework of modernism, examining currents such as Bauhaus, Art Informel, Fluxus and Arte Povera. However, the remaining five chapters/sections take a cue from the global turn, and speak to contemporary issues including gender and networks. The seventh chapter, entitled 'Global Art and the Universality of the Textile', singles out Africa, the Americas, Asia,

and the grievously outmoded category of 'the Orient'. A closer look at the exhibition's floor plan reveals that each of these geographical areas were allotted individual spaces in the exhibition, and placed along the side of the building corresponding to an exterior Japanese garden. While it is tempting to theorize the physical marginalization and tokenistic placement of the global in the exhibition space, the categorical separation of a grand versus global narrative mirrors a situation endemic to the current state of art history as a discipline. In a response to *October's* 'Questionnaire on the Contemporary', art historian Miwon Kwon identifies that while western art history is organized chronologically in terms of movements or periods (e.g. Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Modern), non-western art history is grouped spatially into general sub-fields by countries or sometimes even by whole continents (e.g. Chinese, African, Middle Eastern). Although contemporary art history temporally follows that of the western modern narrative, it has now expanded to encompass a global perspective (Kwon 2009: 13). How, then, does one go about merging two varying modes of classification, the western temporal with the global geographical? In the case of textiles, perhaps this is not so complicated as the history and production of textiles has been a global one for centuries, made possible through trade and industrialization. Furthermore, the chapter themes are already global in their comparisons. As a case in point, the second chapter, 'The Birth of Abstraction from the Spirit of the Textile', groups the modernist works of artists including Anni Albers, Sophie Tauber-Arp and Paul Klee with Coptic fabrics, Congolese raffia cloths and a Chinese temple banner fragment. It is curious how Brüderlin specifically creates a dialogue between the histories of western and non-western objects, only to later dissociate them under a banner of the 'Other'. The global need not be discussed apart from modernism/modernity as it was, willing or otherwise, inherently part of it. Despite addressing and aiming to dismantle the hegemony of modernism in art history and cultural production more widely, Brüderlin in fact re-engages dominant discourse by speaking of the universality of textiles. His syntactical use of 'the textile' as a proper noun without capitals interprets textiles as a singular rather than plural concept. This instance only further highlights the problem of centre and periphery within art history today, and the need to redefine the discipline's epistemological framework. As these contentious issues demonstrate, both catalogue and exhibition could do with some structural redefinition.

While the companion essays provide a thorough and thoughtful look at the ongoing relationship between textiles and art throughout history, their exact engagement with the exhibition was at times redundant or tangential. In the second set of essays, Brüderlin's 'Global Art: How Can Intercultural Dialogue Be Staged in an Exhibition Context?' repeats – at points, word for word – concepts in Chapter 7 and is a digression from the overarching subject of the intersections of art and textiles. While any attempt to trouble the terms of a global art history must be applauded, Brüderlin's text is limited in that it speaks to art and not directly to textiles. Thus, the gap between the 'applied' and 'fine' arts becomes wider, effectively undoing the curatorial premise of uniting textiles with art, including that which is investigated by Marie-Amélie zu Salm-Salm's text, 'Fabrics and Painting: The Interaction between Fine and Applied Art around

1900 – A European Movement’. This inconsistency is an indication of the struggle to maintain a series of binary relationships in the publication: the historical with the contemporary, western and non-western, the applied and ‘pure’ arts. The categories foregrounded by the catalogue, beginning with something as fundamental as its title, collapse under the weight of its content and fail to guide the concept more clearly. It is not that the questions the exhibition catalogue asks are too big, it is that there are in fact too many of them. A more focused argument, such as that proposed by the publication’s subtitle, might have provided a clearer trajectory for the categories addressed in both catalogue and exhibition.

Such theoretical and organizational disorder is in part reflected in the arrangement of the catalogue’s contents. The catalogue proper of *Art & Textiles* presents a documentary view of the exhibition, yet its placement amidst two groups of commissioned essays is perplexing structurally. Essentially interrupting the exhibition’s theoretical framework, the thematic chapters require the reader to recalibrate focus. It may have been more effective to intersperse the interpretive texts amongst the chapters, therefore allowing the reader to more easily draw the lines of connection between the exhibition themes and its accompanying essays. Despite these caveats, the catalogue functions well independently of the exhibition. Its wealth of source material makes it suitable as a reference guide, and provides a comprehensive account of the role textiles play in historical and contemporary cultural production.

## Reference

Kwon, Miwon (2009), response to ‘Questionnaire on the Contemporary’, *October*, 130, pp. 13–15.

E-mail: cklau@yorku.ca

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## **THE GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY AND THE RISE OF NEW ART WORLDS, HANS BELTING, ANDREA BUDDENSIEG AND PETER WEIBEL (EDS)**

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press with ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (2013), 464 pp., Paperback, ISBN: 978-0-26251-834-5, US\$50.00

*Reviewed by Meredith North, University of Pittsburgh*

To live in a ‘global’ present is to recognize not only the importance of space and time, but also to demonstrate a willingness to understand the ways in which those terms have been manipulated. The ‘contemporary’ is not merely a marker of the present time – this designation also gathers its