

Włodzimierz Cygan

Institute of Textile Architecture
Faculty of Material Technologies
and Textile Design
Technical University of Lodz
ul. Żeromskiego 116, 90-924 Łódź, Poland
E-mail: wlodek@cygan.art.pl

Materials and Techniques Used by Artists – the Participants of the International Triennial of Tapestry in Łódź

Abstract

The author of this article makes an attempt to follow trends in the materials and techniques of artists from information inserted in exhibition catalogues, as well as the actual state which could be verified during fibre art exhibitions. The investigation is based on catalogues from the last four exhibitions of the International Triennial of Tapestry in Łódź as well as on the author's own observations from the point of view of either a participant or member of the jury.

Key words: *means of artistic expression, tapestry, own techniques, mixed techniques, material innovations, technical innovations, source of inspiration.*

I belong to the generation of artists who grew up on the impulses sent every two years from the International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne. I still believe that this legendary event had the most significant influence on the world's fibre art in the 20th century. What conclusions have the organisers of subsequent exhibitions of this field of art drawn after the end of the Biennial? Generally, two types of fibre & textile art

exhibitions emerged and have been established: the first one tries to maintain an open form with reference to materials and techniques e.g. The International Textile Competition in Kyoto (Japan), and the Biennale "From Lausanne to Beijing" (China), while the other tries to stick to weaving rigours, and from this point search for the references to the present e.g. ARTAPESTRY (Denmark), KARPIT (Hungary) and ATA Biennial



Figure 1. (Grand Prix) 13th ITT in Łódź, Anne-Gry Løland (Norway) *Monuments*, 2009, print, fabric – an example of a textile which exists and does not exist. An openwork net keeps the pieces of an image of some unspecified architecture together. A creative use of the *devore* technique and a perfect display adding shadows cast by the openwork object make this artwork extremely attractive.



Figure 2. (Silver Medal) **Kari Dyrdal** (Norway) *The Jacquard story – lingo*, 2009, wall-hanging, cotton, silk – a machine weaving but looks like hand weaving. It attracts with rich colour and a provocatively simple composition. After coming closer, it intrigues with its unique way of using Jacquard loom.

(USA). Nowadays, the Polish Triennial, which is an example of the first type, is the oldest and biggest event of such in the world. The differences between the concepts of the exhibitions in Lausanne and Łódź are too numerous to give them careful consideration in this article. One of the most significant is the way of selecting the artworks. In the case of the majority of Lausanne exhibitions, the jury selected the artworks from the proposals sent by artists, whereas in the case of the Triennial of Łódź, the artworks are selected by the international consultants chosen by the organizers. It is hard though to maintain the uniformity of the artistic convention of an exhibition composed of 50 authors – the consultants, who choose the representatives of particular countries, where the definition of textile art might be understood in many, totally different ways. Matters get even more complicated by the fact that the Polish event does not provide any theme - keynote around which artistic contemplations could concentrate. The artists, chosen as representatives of their countries, are allowed to present any artwork without further selections by the jury. Such a situation increases the feeling of criteria heterogeneity, making it even harder to find significant trends.

Similar problems occur when an attempt is made to describe national schools. The easier and faster exchange of information

on a global scale makes artists more or less consciously yield to the fascination inspired by the content of catalogues,



Figure 3. (Silver Medal) **Izabela Wyrwa** (Poland), *Something in the air*, 2009, own technique, wire, metal net, plastics – this is also an example of an artwork co-existing with air and light. Unlike previous work, it is three-dimensional, to be seen from each side. The main building material is black wire, with which the author drawing in the air a recording of some transitory phenomenon. Dematerialised metal.



Figure 4. (Bronze Medal) *Dzintra Vilks* (Latvia) *Meeting of World Torn Winds*, 2007, own technique, bamboo, cotton – a coil of ribbon of nearly 1 m diameter; made by the author. The work might be associated with a ball of dry grass blown away by a desert wind.

both hard-copies and on-line versions. Everyone draws from something, but hardly anyone would admit to it. Consequently, the characteristics which enable to define the affiliation of a given attitude to a specific national school are getting harder to notice. In the times of Lausanne Biennial exhibitions, it was possible to tell without doubt the origin of an artwork (or an artist), for example from France, Japan, the United States, Scandinavia or Poland. Today the representatives of these countries are often artists with origins of other countries (Poland is an exception here, the flow of immigrants is still relatively low).

As a practicing artist, I always look at the exhibitions of the Triennial in Łódź with an eye to searching for an excuse to play with my own imagination. As a professor at the Faculty of Textile Art and Fashion Design at the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź and also as a professor at the Faculty of Material Technologies and Textile Design at the Technical University of Łódź, I pay special attention to the materials and ways of constructing an artwork. Such techniques, the definition of which is easy to understand, do not need any additional analysis, unless there

is something that suggests they should be revised.

One of the criteria of describing an art exhibition most commonly used is the virtue of novelty. In the case of textile art exhibitions, it is usually identified with a new way of using materials and techniques, rarely with the semantic context of the artistic language applied i.e. such a way of using a well-known material which enables to perceive the reason for its application in a different way. As an example we may use an artwork of the Lithuanian artist Severija Incirauskaite-Kriauneviciene presented at the 13th Triennial, entitled “Way of roses” No.1, No.2 and No.3. The author used cotton thread as the material, cross-stitching as the chosen technique, and as a background for embroidering the title roses – car parts. Such a combination of means surprises, makes one ponder as well as search for one’s own interpretations.

The joy of introducing new surprising raw materials for the needs of artistic expression is no longer sufficient in itself. Reports from textile art exhibitions present lists of surprising materials, which, after all, are applied only to create subse-

quent, more or less decorative objects. Certainly, original materials are often a magnet for a wider audience; the fact of being photogenic makes them perfect for promotions inserted into publications. However, in the most cases they are still only the objects of decorative functions and hence do not acquire the qualities of artistic comment to the present times. Some may ask if they must? In my opinion, they at least should, but on the other hand, other attitudes are also valuable, one of which being the search for special relations between the artistic reason for acting and the technical opportunities of artistic expression. To make it clear, it is all about such artworks whose essence is the fabric itself, being the eternal and autonomous phenomenon of human creativity, that is, an object of textile art made from fabrics, a textile artwork which presents a fabric, or an artefact which exceeds the limits of its own definition. Is it art for art’s sake? No. It is a field for searching for new possibilities, seeds of novel technologies. A significant role is played here by new materials, techniques and tools. In the history of art, they often became an excuse to change the language of art. As an example we may take the use of such a device as camera obscura or the use of oil in European painting as a solvent for colour pigments which enabled the revolutionary change in the quality of artistic expression. For artists nowadays, maybe even more than ever before, science and technology opens up new possibilities of observing reality and new methods of relating to it. As the camera or microscope once opened the eyes of artists to the world seen through them, nowadays the new achievements of technology allow to obtain images, process and save them as an unlimited source of artistic search, inspiration and technical solutions.

Has the last Triennial given viewers many examples of such novel solutions? This year I had the honour of being one of the jury members¹⁾ of this prestigious event. We, the members of the jury rather agreed that the repertoire of artistic expression was not any richer in significant novelties comparing to previous editions. However, it does not mean that the artists are not interested in the newest materials and technologies. Maybe we, as the viewers do not follow them well enough? Perhaps in recent years they have not been so numerous, or maybe there are innovative solutions in artistic presentations, but they do not catch the eye due to the lack of hints given by the artists or the authors of catalogues. Contemporary

art greatly depends on verbal comment, without which it might be totally misunderstood.

Observing the artistic textiles in recent years, I have the impression that the latest novelty in this field are optical fibres²⁾ as a material and digital printing as a technique. One of the most interesting examples of such a creation was presented at the 11th Triennial in 2004 by Danish designer Astrid Krogh, entitled "Blue". It was a sort of curtain woven with a plain weave from a transparent monofilament transmitting light, which constantly changed its colour and intensity. One end of the fibre bundle was attached to the lens of a projector, and a transparent web was woven from the other end of the bundle. The light emitted directly to the transparent monofilament softly changed the shades of blue, which led to the curtain shining with a soft glow. Light as an integral component of artwork has been exhibited by artists at the Triennial in Łódź, but this was not on a large scale nor consistently present. May the newly renovated part of the White Factory become a hotbed for such ideas.

In search for any significant tendencies in the choices of materials and techniques made by artists, as well as in the search for answers to the question concerning innovative technological solutions, I browsed through the catalogues of the last four editions of the Triennial: 2001, 2004, 2007 & 2010³⁾ and tried to find out whether there are any significant processes occurring.

The repertoire of techniques appears constant. The ones most declared are as follows: "own technique" – in 2001 – 40.8%, in 2004 – 39.8%, in 2007 – 40.4 and 2010 – 40.4%, "mixed technique" – 8.0%, 15.5%, 21.3% & 14.6%, respectively, and "wall-hanging" – 19.7%, 16.8%, 15.4% & 16.9%, respectively. The first two techniques, "own" and "mixed", can be declared by the author in almost every case due to a very wide range of definition. The third most commonly used is 'wall-hanging', whose definition can also be understood in many different ways. Bearing in mind the previous exhibitions discussed, this time I paid special attention to comparing the materials and techniques given by authors and the actual state of the display I remembered. I have noticed that for many artists the technique is of minor importance; it is very common that the artist does not know the correct name of the technique they instinctively used in their

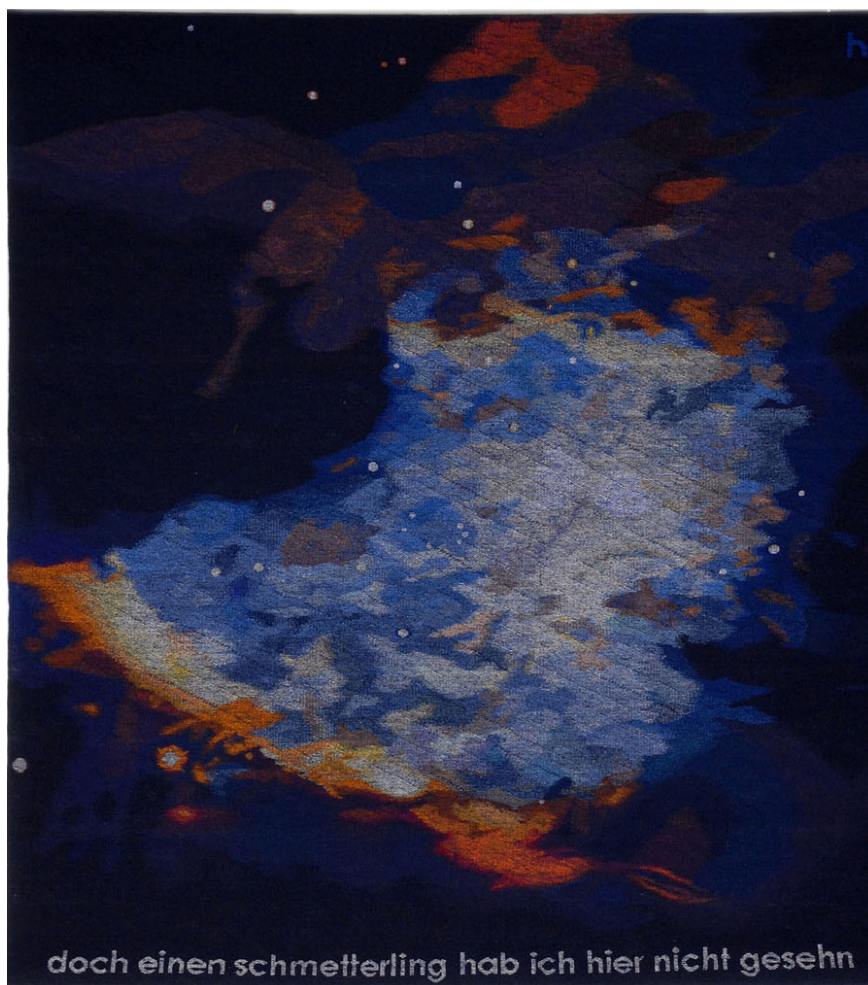


Figure 5. (Bronze Medal) **Peter Horn** (Germany) *Orion Nebula*, 2009, wall-hanging, cotton, wool. The author has already been a prize winner in this event. By consistently improving the variation of the tapestry technique elaborated by himself and being greatly fascinated by the latest images obtained by telescopes, the author leads the viewer's imagination into interstellar space.

work. Moreover, intentional departures from technical correctness in order to achieve more interesting effects are very frequent. In such cases, it is much safer to use the term "own technique", rather than leave the viewer confused by complicated technical terms. The reader of a catalogue might be pleased with such a solution, while the astute observer is not. For designers looking for new solutions, these "own" techniques may be an inexhaustible source of creativity. Viewers leaning really closely towards the fabric, trying to reach for the techno-material essence, are a common sight at the exhibitions. Such curiosity might motivate further search. In that case, why not publish a catalogue with more precise information on special cases where such knowledge enables to understand the artistic reason for creating a particular artwork. On the other hand, this happens quite often when the works submitted are made using a recognisable, well-known technique, although the author declares it as

their "own technique". The term "mixed technique" is often used in the same meaning as "own technique", which does not tell the reader much. What exactly is 'mixed' here? Basically, everything is mixed.

The third most common one is "wall-hanging" (mainly in the meaning of "tapestry technique"⁴⁾, which is confusing. Since I can remember, the environment of artists - weavers has been divided into those following strict compliance with the historical definition of the technique and those using this term with reference to the artistic fabric, that is, to all works woven by hand, in order to distinguish them from knitted or printed ones. This separate group known as "wall-hanging" refers to the display rather than the technique. Due to the lack of an equivalent in Polish for "wall-hanging", the editors of the Polish version of the catalogue considered the majority of works with such a description as "gobelin". As a result,



Figure 6. (Bronze Medal) **Konrad Zych** (Poland) *Pervasion*, 2009, own technique, cotton – a cotton bend piled to look like geological layers of sedimentary rock, with relief disrupted here and there in its monotony. The authenticity and simplicity of the author's method of Konrad Zych was recognised in the form of a Grand Prix at the last – 12th International Triennial of Tapestry in Łódź.

there were many cases of an obvious discrepancy between what we saw at the exhibition and how it was described (in Polish). The jury of those exhibitions, aiming to cultivate traditions of tapestry, such as the American Tapestry Biennial or European ARTAPESTRY, usually turn a blind eye to the compliance with the historical definition, sanctioning new terms i.e. “woven tapestry” or “personal technique”.

The remarks mentioned above aim to consider the purposefulness of imposing restrictions on technical descriptions. I recognise and respect the right of authors to freely describe their artworks, but at the same time I wish to draw attention to recent tendencies in terminology, reveal-

ing a disregard for the names of traditional techniques. Examples of works created using these techniques could be found at all four exhibitions, although they were usually declared by the authors as “own technique”. On the other hand, the diversity of the modern meaning of “tapestry” makes one wonder whether or not to replace it with a new, more adequate one. The editors of exhibition catalogues often withdraw from presenting any techniques at all. Personally, I am not a supporter of this solution.

Since I have named the techniques most commonly used, it is also worth mentioning the other side of the list, where one may find rug(kilim), plait, and batik. I will not present here the percentage val-

ues as they are within the limit of statistical error, which were sometimes not even mentioned at some exhibitions. However, it would be worth following the actual content of the techniques termed by artists as “own” and “mixed”. Without going into details of statistics, I will list the techniques used by artists/participants of the Triennial in Łódź: carpet, jacquard, double fabric, knitting, plait, lace, application, collage, quilt, embroidery, felt, machine sewing, shibori, ikat, painting on silk, print, installation, and video performance. My conclusions are that there is not any significant growth (or drop) in the popularity of any of the techniques presented by the authors, which cannot yet be considered as a tendency, at least not in such a short time (10 years). When

it comes to materials, the situation is very similar.

The materials declared by the artists rarely differ from the actual ones, although some explanations are necessary as well. The leaders of the lists in those particular years are cotton (29.1%; 37.8%; 33.0%; 30.7%), wool (24.0%; 17.5%; 24.2%; 29.2%), silk (18.9%; 18.2%; 17.6%; 17.6%) and various artificial, synthetic fibres (18.9%; 16.2%; 17.6%; 21.5%). The last group is the least precise, including the most diverse and numerous groups of raw materials. For example, the term “acrylic” refers to both acrylic fibre and acrylic paint, the fibre being the main building material of the work mentioned above, which beautifully transmits light, described by the author as only “polyester”. The next on the list worthy of note are paper (14.5%; 14.1%; 11.7%; 13.8%), metal (8.0%; 12.1%; 12.5%; 11.5%) and wire (5.1%; 8.1%; 7.3%; 10%). Here we can talk about a significant growing tendency. Similarly, under the term “metal”, we may find products at different stages of processing, including wires, ribbons and nets, which are a separate group, regardless of the fact they are made of metal or plastic. The term “paper” includes works made of paper produced by the author, as well as all kinds of manufactured paper. The list ends with journalists’ favourite curiosities, such as dregs (in 2001), bags for bread (in 2010), and onion skin or casing (in 2010). Amongst the most popular ones, and the most surprising, are fabric, net, linen, sisal, jute, raffia, hemp, beads, alpaca, plexiglass, plastics, foil, monofilament, acrylic, metal threads, nails, toothpicks, photographs, wood, leaves, straw, exotic plants, leather, horsehair, feathers, stones, minerals, glass, resin and glue.

The information meant for a catalogue, including photographs of works, given by the participants of the Triennial does not always give a right picture of the essence of the artwork, which, along with the description of the materials and techniques (not always precise), leads to the organisers being greatly surprised after receiving the object declared. Exhibitions of fibre art are an important source of inspiration for designers and creators of new technologies. In order to get correct information about the materials and techniques used by the artists/participants of the International Triennial of Tapestry in Łódź, it is necessary to verify the information included in the catalogue with what is actually on display.

Regardless of the depth of insight and usefulness of my observations, I would like to clearly express my opinion: I consider the International Triennial in Łódź to be an event of historical significance and I do hope that, not less than the Lausanne Biennial, shaping the sensibility of future generations of artists and viewers of fibre art.



Editorial notes

1. The other members of jury were Kyoko Kumai (Japan), Androna Linartas (Mexico), Velta Raudzēpa (Latvia), Lauren Whitley (USA) and Norbert Zawisza (Poland).
2. By optical fibres I mean all fibres which can transmit light.
3. The number of works participating in the last four editions of the Triennial: in 2001 – 137 works, in 2004 – 148, in 2007 – 136, and in 2010 – 130.
4. Tapestry is a form of textile art., woven on a vertical loom. It is composed of two sets of interlaced thread, those running parallel to the length (called the warp) and those parallel to the width (called the weft); the warp threads are set up under tension of a loom, and the weft thread is passed back and forth across part or all of the warp. Tapestry is weft-faced weaving, in which all the warp thread is hidden in the completed work, unlike cloth weaving where both the warp and weft thread may be visible. In tapestry weaving, weft yarns are typically discontinuous; the artisan interlaces each coloured weft back and forth in its own small pattern area. It is a plain weft-faced weave with weft thread of different colours worked over portions of the warp to form the design.

References

- 10th International Triennial of Tapestry Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź 2001, catalogue
- 11th International Triennial of Tapestry Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź 2004, catalogue
- 12th International Triennial of Tapestry Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź 2007, catalogue
- 13th International Triennial of Tapestry Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź 2010, catalogue
- 5th International Fiber art Biennale “From Lausanne to Beijing”, Beijing 2008, catalogue
- XIX Monstra d’Arte Contemporanea “Miniartextilcosmo” Como 2009, catalogue
- ARTAPESTRY 2 European Tapestry Forum, Copenhagen 2008, catalogue
- American Tapestry Biennial Five, American Tapestry Alliance, 2004, catalogue
- Karpit/Tapestry, International Millennial Contemporary Exhibition, Budapest 2001, cataloguePr

Received 08.01.2010 Reviewed 18.03.2010



Prize of the Akapi Foundation. **Paweł Kielpiński** (Poland) „Without title”, 2009, own technique.



Honorary Mention. **Regina V. Benson** (USA) „Ablaze III”, 2009, own technique.



Honorary Mention. **Ewa Latkowska-Żychska** (Poland) „Blue, after all”, 2009, own technique.



Honorary Mention. **Maria T. Doromby** (Hungary) „Upwards”, 2009, own technique.