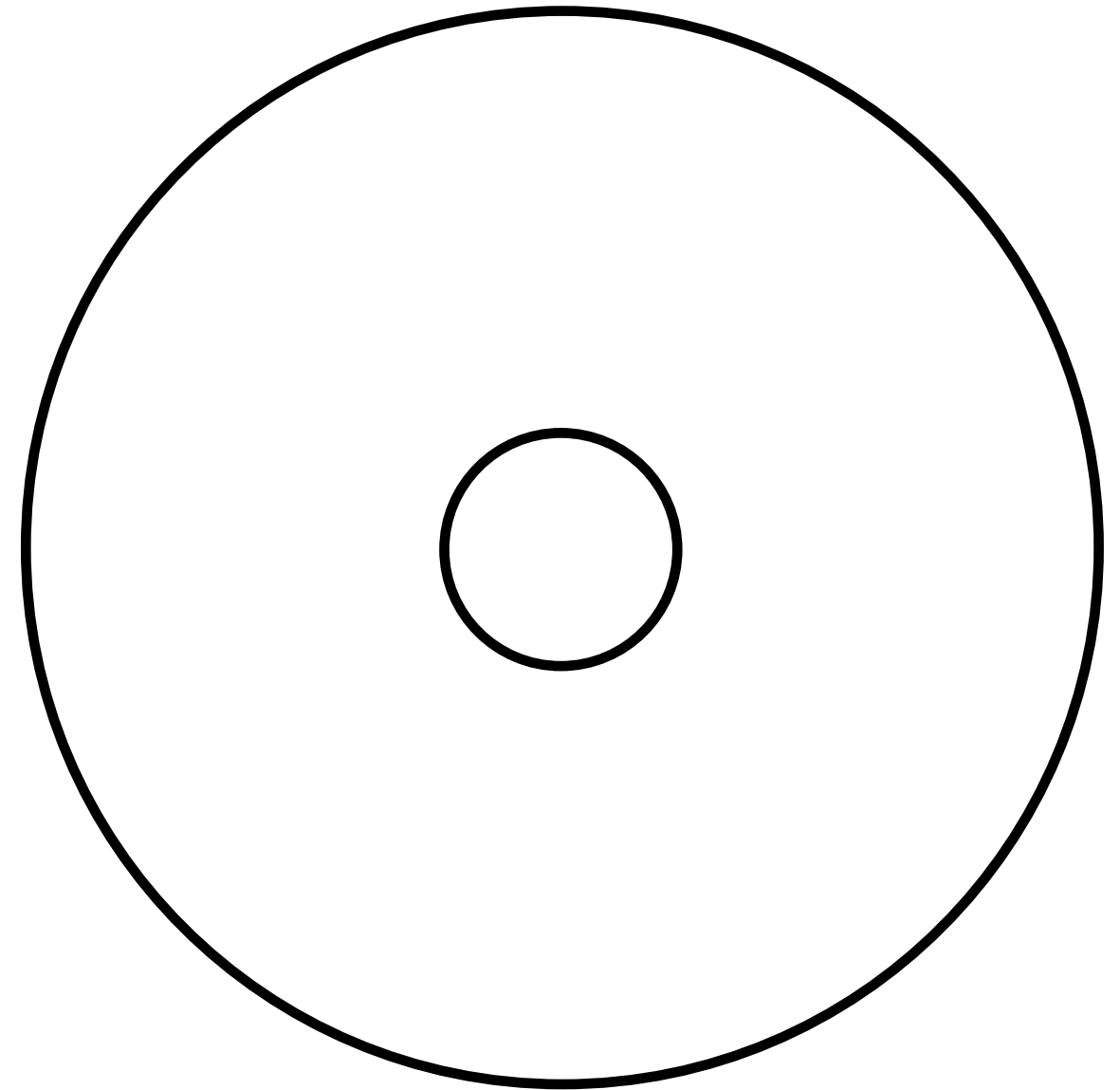


# The Age of Wire and String

A text by **Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk**  
on the work of **Mila Lanfermeijer**

**Tunic, The** I. Textile web, shared, at one time or another, by all members of a society. It is the only public garment. Never may it be cast off, altered, shrunk, or locally cleaned. Its upkeep is maintained under regulation of the Universal Storm Calendar, which deploys winds into its surface to loosen debris and members or persons that have exceeded their rightful term of inhabitation. II. Garment placed between preage boy and girl members to enlarge or temporarily swell the genitals and shank during weather birthing.<sup>1</sup>

Following a number of conversations with Mila Lanfermeijer around the history and current application of textile in the field of contemporary art, this text was agreed to serve to clarify and amplify the different terms, actions and processes that are part and parcel to her artistic practice. One of the aims of the text concerns a revaluation of textile as an (art) historically overshadowed category, seeking for its recovery in contemporary artistic application, as a medium that allows different cognitive structures to collide, and as a potent nexus within art as the cultural field of inter-human energy-exchange. More specifically, as an approximation to Lanfermeijer's work, and resonating with novelist Ben Marcus' text *The Age of Wire and String*, this essay seeks to excavate a space where manual and everyday actions become ritualistic in nature, stripped from their common applications and meanings to form a new patchwork of significations: where a garment becomes both a sculptural vessel and a painting canvas, where making is thinking and thinking is making — beyond bifurcation and binary dialectics. As a collection of sorts, we shall first meet each other at the index.





Detail of **Edith (100%)**, 2018

## Subsection I

### I am the index, you can find me in the fold

In the documentary series *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1988–89), philosopher Gilles Deleuze speaks about the responses he received to his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988, published in English in 1993).<sup>2</sup> Deleuze received a letter from a surfer who wrote about how he rides and dissects waves, and reacts to the folds they provide. The surfer's words allowed Deleuze, in turn, to exemplify the idea of “going outside of philosophy by means of philosophy,” to detour and to let this “outside” inform his practice. In Lanfermeijer's practice, the application of the fold has a two-way application. In her work she applies different techniques — ranging from acid (stone) washing, tie-dye, to vegetable dyes and macramé — as the fundamental building blocks of her artistic practice. Techniques that are commonly ascribed to either the textile and fashion industry, or the domestic realm of the crafty hobbyist. In so doing, Lanfermeijer evokes an ambiguous relation between different fields of application and their cultural connotations: at once sidestepping and making a detour from the art field, to gain insight and knowledge of different techniques and applications, to then re-evaluate and re-inscribe their rulesets and aesthetic registers onto her artistic practice. Going outside of the arts by means of art; finding her inscription into contemporaneity by folding and extending the logic of the art field — and the dominant media it propagates — to generate a new patchwork of significations and meanings, found in the key of a subtle balance act between different categories, fabrics and substances. The second dimension of the fold can be found in Lanfermeijer's treatment of textile, fabric and its relation to pattern and the body. Whereas pattern-making could be seen as the process of outlining and grading the shape of a garment in relation to



an envisioned body, it maintains a dubious and tense relation with the body proper, insofar as the sewing template as a two-dimensional and geometric translation table does not follow the morphology and anatomy of the human. In that, the pattern could be judged as an architectural outline, applied in the movement from flat plane to following the dimensionality of the three-dimensional body. Lanfermeijer shows a keen attentiveness to this tension between dimensions, scales and reaches in her work — between the geometric pattern and the organic shape of the body — but rather than to devise new garments, she analytically reevaluates patterns, how they break and fold in relation to the body, and, more importantly, how the flat garment could be discussed as an abstract work of art, in relation to the discourse of abstract painting. An interesting example of the relationship between textile fabric and painting can be found in the novel *The Doors of Perception* (1954) by Aldous Huxley:

Civilized human beings wear clothes, therefore there can be no portraiture, no mythological or historical story telling without representations of folded textiles. But though it may account for the origins, mere tailoring can never explain the luxuriant development of drapery as a major theme of all the plastic arts. Artists, it is obvious, have always loved drapery for its own sake — or, rather, for their own. When you paint or carve drapery, you are painting or carving forms which, for all practical purposes, are non-representational — the kind of unconditioned forms on which artists even in the most naturalistic tradition like to let themselves go. In the average Madonna or Apostle the strictly human, fully representational element accounts for about ten per cent of the whole. All the rest consists of many coloured variations on the inexhaustible theme of crumpled wool or linen. And these non-representational nine-tenths of a Madonna or an Apostle may be just as important qualitatively as they are in quantity.<sup>3</sup>

[...] Draperies, as I had now discovered, are much more than devices for the introduction of non-representational forms into naturalistic paintings and sculptures. [...] It is a knowledge of the intrinsic significance of every existent.<sup>4</sup>

From Huxley's example we could deduce a longstanding sculptural and painterly tradition in which craftsmanship, mastery and skill is displayed through the application of folded garments, textiles and fabric in works of art. As mentioned

by Huxley, these elements did not necessarily serve as representational elements of a narrative, but rather as an excess of substance, of the author and — commonly and rather normatively — his authorship, shown through a sensibility of observing a given reality and adding additional mental building blocks in the shape of robust and ornate elements. For Lanfermeijer, however, we should reverse the order and extend the discussion further as to address the persistently implied hierarchy of fine art over craft, and male (public) authorship over female (domestic) handiwork.



Detail of Laura (75%), 2018





Detail of Laura (100 %), 2018

## Subsection II

### I have a strange hobby

Functioning as a basis or grounding principle for her artistic practice, Lanfermeijer actively engages her work in an ambiguous discussion of applied techniques in relation to art making and the art field proper. The treatment and inclusion of knitted, woven and dyed textiles in her work have different social, religious and historical groundings, but a main strand could be formulated as a response to an inherited modernist legacy of dialectics and consequential binaries. Here it could be said that the field of craft — even until today — has maintained a problematic relationship with processes of art historical categorisation and canonisation, let alone for its acknowledgement as standing on an equal footing with the fine arts (capital A). From a modernist perspective, the function of an art work would be inherently tied to discussions of aesthetic autonomy and aura, of formalism and internalist self-organisation and self-referentiality over functionality and interdependence. In that sense the latter category of functional objects deemed to be merely utilitarian in nature, such as craftwork, applied arts and techniques, have long been subjected to the exclusion mechanisms of a dominant order of hierarchisation, propagating art for art, reserving a lesser and more peripheral standing for crafts. This polarisation of seemingly congruent wholes in zero-sum conflict, such as culture versus nature, male versus female, head versus hand, fine art versus craft, idea versus object, modern versus ethnographic, and so on, and so forth, may arguably have informed the field of craft to be a lesser and peripheral occupation and activity (as compared to the modernist-artist-cum-abstract-painter), more strongly connected to the amateur and hobbyist and its interlinking domestic sphere.



In series of work such as *Reclining Nudes* (2014) and *Untitled (Tapestry Series)* (2014) one could observe Lanfermeijer's facilitation of a discussion around the position of the hobbyist and the artisan in relation to the art field. The aesthetic registers of different techniques — such as macramé plant hangers, reminiscent of seventies domestic spaces, or the application of tie-dye — are being stripped and released from their domestic underpinnings and transposed and repositioned to the time and space of art and its modes of presentation and exhibiting. This movement or shift could be said to embody a conceptual integration between different modes of expression, fields of activity and the aesthetic registers they produce. One that is indebted to developing new languages and translation tables beyond the hierarchical and categorical. Or, in the words of philosopher Donna Haraway: Weaving is a useful practice, to be sure, and an economic one; but, fundamentally, weaving is also cosmological performance, knotting proper relationality and connectedness into the warp and weft of the fabric.<sup>5</sup> The notion of relationality and connectedness seem integral to the thinking-process prompted by Lanfermeijer's work and practice. But how can one balance and establish connections between different (artistic) spaces if they are gendered on the reductive axis of male and female, masculinity and femininity, as well as haunted by the spectres of abstract expressionist painting and its heterogenically-inscribed white male figureheads?

Detail of *Edith (100%)*, 2018







Detail of Laura (75%), 2018

### Subsection III

#### I love painting (a girl in a maxi dress)

For most it will not be difficult to recall an instance or image where a male painter — commonly photographed from the backside — is sitting in front of his painting subject, contemplating and reflecting on the canvas' state of becoming, taking some distance to regain overview — sometimes even with brush in hand, to suggest the possibility of immediate action. Arguably this type of imagery forms an art historical sub-strand that has actively informed, or at least contributed to a certain perception of the male painter and artist as an enigmatic figure and author; the painter as genius, giving shape to the cosmos from the characterising microcosmos of the studio space. For Lanfermeijer, this type of iconic imagery has become an object of interest and study, for which she has compiled a collection of male painting subjects (from Rothko and Pollock, to Magritte and Bacon) as to raise questions about the male painter as a public persona, versus the domestic as the female realm. The highpoint of masculinity in painting — or what we would now call toxic masculinity — could be ascribed to abstract expressionism, especially through art critic Clement Greenberg as the advocate and spokesperson of a group of artists, among Anthony Caro, Kenneth Noland, Jackson Pollock, Michael Steiner. Or how many female artists have stood in the shadow of their male counterpart; can one just mention Pollock, whereas Lee Krasner needs to be introduced by both first and surname? And what is to be said about figures like Anni Albers, Lygia Clark, Sheila Hicks, Agnes Martin, Lygia Pape, and Lenore Tawney, to mention a few, that not only account for mere footnotes in art history — increasingly but still not adequately subject to image corrections — but were also set aside for working with fabric and textiles in their artistic practices?



We could locate Lanfermeijer's practice on this charged cross-junction, sitting in between the space of abstract painterly discourses and the field of textile. In recent works, among *Hot Red Chequered Drape* and *Untitled* (both 2017), one could observe a merger between the vocabulary of abstract and colourfield painting, with large, sometimes monochrome surfaces, placed in direct relation with patterned surfaces of jute. By merging different tactile and material surfaces she mediates a discussion of the normative ethics inherent to painting and art historical categorisation, whilst excavating a space where a new patchwork of relations between different material registers comes into existence. A working process that could be seen as the result of synthetic thinking — crossing different histories, geographies and cultures, joining different materials, techniques and applications — and thereby moving away from contrived notions of original thought, so often tied to the gendered space of the male artist studio.

Detail of *Edith* (50%), 2018







Detail of **Laura (100 %)**, 2018

## Subsection IV

### I will not follow suit

A further exploration and recent chapter in Lanfermeijer's practice concerns an inquiry into further diffusing the boundaries between the textile garment, painting and sculpture. In that, she has devised a new series of works taking the shape of a joint array of monochromatic textile elements — close to a colour chart, but this time with no apparent logic — displayed in different circular and angular wall-mounted shapes and configurations. The respective application of colours in the work stems from an analysis of different paintings — among the *Portrait of Edith Schiele* (by Egon Schiele, 1915) and *Portrait of Laura Dianti* (by Titian, 1520–1525) — both portraying textile garments in the shape of robes. The different colours drawn from the source material are isolated and subjected to a process of abstraction, presented in diagrammatic fashion, to some extent connoting colour field paintings. However, on closer observation, one could discern a zipper attached to one of the untied circularly shaped works, as well as different waist sizes, marked by the variations in space left in the centre of the work. From the flat wall-based and painterly surface, one could start to project the morphology of the human body onto the work, adding to its dimensionality, and, moreover, coming to terms with the idea that the work is not quite resting comfortably in its category of being. That is to say: by performing acts of abstraction, by loosening the work from the constraints of its imposed and attributed functionality, by leveraging between object and subject, by joining different material and aesthetic registers, Lanfermeijer distils and hybridises the work to the extent of being on an equal material footing. Here the acts of folding and abstracting are employed analytically as to shift the focal point to textile as imbued with cognitive and conceptual merit beyond



functional application. Material reductions become a means for Lanfermeijer to give momentum to different (historical) references, of hosting and evoking the voices of ghosts from different time periods in a current and ongoing debate of textile's inscription into contemporaneity. Thus creating a material and perceptual ground that moves beyond binary dialectics and hierarchies, becoming more of a space of reference and citation without entitlement or authorial pulling. From research and fieldwork-taking in charged and often toxic socio-historical territories, Lanfermeijer engages in acts of patchwork-making that prompt new assemblages of interconnections and relationality, of mutual exchange and interdependence between elements, moving towards a state of artistic practice where the usage of textile is stripped from being a mere utilitarian object to become a generative subject that is in no one's pocket.

Edith (100%), 2018





## References

- 1 Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 139–140.
- 2 “In *The Fold*, Gilles Deleuze argues that Leibniz’s writings constitute the grounding elements of a Baroque philosophy and of theories for analysing contemporary arts and science. A model for expression in contemporary aesthetics, the concept of the monad is viewed in terms of folds of space, movement, and time. Similarly, the world is interpreted as a body of infinite folds and surfaces that twist and weave through compressed time and space. According to Deleuze, Leibniz also anticipates contemporary views of event and history as multifaceted combinations of signs in motion and of the “modern” subject as nomadic, always in the process of becoming.” From the back cover of: Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold – Leibnitz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
- 3 Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 16.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 5 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 91.



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