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WEAVING THE SPACE WE STILL CALL HOME

TEXTILES AND BELONGING This text, articulated as an imaginary exhibition, connects questions of home and belonging to the use of textiles in contemporary art. In order to introduce it, we would like to recall a story that establishes a similar connection, although in a very specific context. bell hooks' 2009 book titled *Belonging: A Culture of Place* explores the very subject of leaving and going back home from an autobiographical perspective, one marked not only by racialized and gendered experiences in Kentucky, in the United States, but also by the practice of feminist critical writing. hooks recounts that when she left home for the first time, she brought with her „[...] braided tobacco leaves and the crazy quilt Baba, mama's mother, had given me when I was a young girl. These two totems were to remind me always of where I come from and who I am at my core. They stand between me and the madness that exile makes, the brokenheartedness" (hooks 2009: 16).

As explained later in the book, the author's grandmother was a gifted quilt maker, using scraps of cloth to create colorful quilts that were used to cover the bed, decorate the house, and keep the family warm. „To her", writes hooks, „quilt making was a spiritual process where one learned surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quilt making from her mother" (Ibid.: 155). Although envisioned as a specifically female occupation, quilt making emerges here as a practice that made space for imagination in an often hard and industrious everyday life. It is also a practice whose history is marked by gender and social class. As indicated by hooks, for example, in the context of slavery in the United States: „Often black slave women quilted as part of their labor in white households" (Ibid.: 157). At the same time quilts, as textiles, in the context of hooks' narrative, function as symbolic objects creating a series of relations between the sense of belonging and identity, possibilities of making new homes, family genealogies, creativity and labor, as well as shaping a specific, material relation of intimacy with space and the body.

This text aims at exploring – through an itinerary in a virtual exhibition space – questions which are similar to those mobilized by bell hooks' narrative. In particular, we are interested in analyzing how, in the field of contemporary art, the use of textile materials is sometimes connected to the exploration of notions of home and belonging – or (un)belonging (Rogoff 2000: 18) – in the

context of stable dwelling or in the context of dislocations such as migration, diaspora, exile or expatriation. What do we mean here by *home*? First of all, we will refer to home as a dwelling, but also a more extensive and critical space of negotiation between the past and the present, memory and imagination. In this space, which feminist author Chandra Mohanty would call „strategic", the alliances and solidarities that we create shape our home as much as the relations we inherited and the location which we may call our place of „origin". „Political solidarity and a sense of family could be melded together imaginatively to create a strategic space I could call ‚home'", writes Chandra Mohanty (Mohanty 2003: 128). And also, „[...] home, community, and identity all fit somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities and friendships."(Ibid.: 136)

Secondly, as Nira Yuval Davis points out, belonging as a „[...] dynamic process [...]" associated to identity formation can refer to different interrelated facets such as „[...] social locations [...]", „[...] identifications and emotional attachments to various collectives [...]" and different „[...] ethical and political value systems [...]" (Nira Yuval Davis 2011: 5–6) to which one can choose to belong. According to the author, belonging, which can be a conflicted field of interaction, should be distinguished from the politics of belonging which can take the form, for instance, of nationalist political projects. Finally, it seems important to point out that home, envisioned again as a process of continuous making and unmaking, entails a specific relation to temporality in which the present interacts with the past. And often, in the context of dislocation, this relation can engender feelings of nostalgia (Sara Ahmed et al. 2003: 9).[1)]

Textiles relate to the question of home and belonging – in the extended sense that we have tried to sketch here – in multiple and heterogeneous ways. Our view in the context of this introduction can only be partial, but a few preliminary considerations seem relevant. As in bell hook's narrative, the work with textiles, particularly sewing and embroidery, has often been viewed as a gendered activity performed in domestic space by women – and so it was or it is in specific historical, geographical and cultural locations. It is thus vital to refer, in relation to textiles, to specific historical (con) texts marked by gender, class, race and nationality. For instance, as observed by Rozsika Parker referring to Britain, „The notion that women are selected by nature for needlework – genetically programmed to embroider – conceals the fact that up to the eighteenth century the majority of embroiderers to the Kings were men"

1) Reference to this volume of essays was found in Marsha Meskimmon (2011).

(Parker 2010: 60). According to Parker, though, the „feminization" of embroidery started as early as the sixteenth century.

Another important node between home and textiles concerns its relation to dwelling and architecture. As discussed by Mark Wigley for instance, nineteenth century German architect Gottfried Semper explored in a particularly interesting way the connections between architecture and ornament. In Wigley's words, according to Semper, „Building originates with the use of woven fabrics to define social space [...]. Specifically, the space of domesticity. The textiles are not simply placed within space to define a certain interiority. Rather, they are the production of space itself. Weaving is used „as a means to make the ‚home', the *inner life* separated from the *outer life*, and as the formal creation of the idea of space [...]. This primordial definition of inside and, therefore, for the first time, outside, with textiles not only precedes the construction of solid walls but continues to organize the building when such construction begins" (Wigley 1992: 367).

Textiles also relate to the sphere of trade and to specific forms of labor and capitalist economy, adopting very complex forms in the context of globalization. In the early modern world, already, textile trade routes between Asia, Europe and Africa had a very wide reach and varied functioning. Today, the textile industry worldwide and the delocalization of production by Western enterprises present new challenges concerning the ethics of labor and the rights of textile workers in a variety of countries. On one hand, recent events reported by world media, such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh, reveal to a Western audience economies of exploitation in which Western industries are also involved.[2)] On the other hand, economies of resistance develop alternative modes of production and distribution that do not obliterate tradition and self-determination. An interesting example in this sense is the experience of Maru Meghvals women in India and their invention of Suf embroidery (Sabnani / Frater 2012). Finally, textiles are inextricably linked to clothing and body adornments. These may be considered as supplemental elements, whose existence depends exclusively upon the body but that, at the same time, guarantee to the body the possibility to signify socially and culturally.

If we turn to the field of contemporary art and to the narratives of Western art histories, a strong connection is often established between the use of textile materials and art informed by feminism created since the early seventies. Early examples of the rehabilitation of the textile arts and of craft in general, considered

2) See for instance Olivier Cyran (2013).

as underestimated feminine endeavors, include the very different works of North American artists Faith Wilding, Miriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold. At the same time, and in a broader cultural perspective, it is important to note that since the late sixties, artists such as the Portuguese Lourdes Castro and the Italian Marisa Merz, whose work is not directly engaged with feminist politics, produced interesting work related somehow to textiles. In 1969, for instance, Lourdes Castro first embroidered shadows of friends on bed sheets. Born on the island of Madeira, where embroidery was then a female traditional work, Lourdes Castro conceived these pieces as real sheets meant to be slept on. As for Marisa Merz, in 1968 she started knitting in her atelier using nylon or copper threads, as in the work *Scarpette* of 1968. At the same time, the use of fabric has also been present in a variety of ways in works by male artists such as, for instance, Claes Oldenburg, but also the Bulgarian Maryn Varbanov and the Spaniard Josep Grau Garriga, exploring the limits of traditional tapestry.

Since the eighties, artists of a variety of nationalities, both men and women, have differently used textile materials and techniques such as sewing, weaving, knitting and embroidering in their work. An interesting and well-known example is the work of U.S. artist Mike Kelley, who reacted in the eighties against the appropriation of textile arts by what he saw as ‚essentialist feminism': „When I first [began to use knitting], it was a reaction to essentialist feminist art. Not to put it down, but to say ‚What if I do this, then what happens?' I have been accused of being just another man co-opting feminist art. Well, I refuse to say that knitting is only for women. That's sexist. It's just as much mine as theirs, because whether it's men or women that are supposed to knit is totally random" (Adamson 2007: 159–160).

Why choosing to articulate our exploration of textiles in contemporary art as an imaginary exhibition? Drawing on feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, we also think „[...] the exhibition as *encounter* that opens up new critical relations among artworks, and between viewers and artworks, that points to repressed narratives in the histories of art and continues [...] the feminist project of *differencing the canon*" (Pollock 2007:13). In this sense, the exhibition form is meant here to open a playful and heterogeneous space in which the reader is stimulated to weave a variety of relations among the artworks presented, a set of connections and differences that is never exhaustive and continually remade.

ROOM 1. PROCESSING TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY ART: ALIGHIERO BOETTI'S EMBROIDERIES In the context of the 1960-70's renewal of art practices, artist Alighiero Boetti (Italian, 1940-1994) is of great significance in merging *high art* and craft, specifically in the form of embroidery and weaving. As part of mental and conceptual processes, these specific mediums refer to a personal mythology,[3] questioning the authorship of the artist, his biography and philosophy of life, and the global geopolitical context of his time. Textiles in Boetti's artworks assume a singular value, merging his interest in the historical, political, cultural and philosophical traditions of oriental countries, and a meditative meaning related to the handmade process of production.

Since his first embroidery, *Territori occupati* (1969), Boetti focuses on the Middle East geopolitical context and post-World War II repercussions on it. The map embroidered on the canvas borrows its form from the one published on the front page of the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa* on June 10, 1967. It represents the new configuration of Israel after the Six Day War (June 5–10, 1967) in which Israel conquered the Sinai peninsula, the Gaza strip, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Yet in this artwork, and later in the *Maps* series, Boetti combines the time of geopolitical changes with the manual process of embroidering. Indeed, the *Maps* visually represent alterations of the global context from the 1970s to the 1990s. At the same time, their large formats required a time-consuming handwork often taking as long as a year.

Moreover, Boetti's lace work *EMME I ELLE ELLE E....* (1970) refers to the Italian spelling of the date 1970 and alludes to the powerfulness of the passage of time. The letters composing the date's spelling are disposed so as to form a magic square of 7 x 7 squares. This particular piece introduces time and magic squares as essential components of Boetti's entire work.[4] In this specific context, magic squares also emphasize those mental and spiritual values related to the mathematical structure and system of symbols of textile handmade production.

By delegating the production of artworks to female and male embroiderers and weavers, Boetti also questions his authorship in different ways. First, he separates the artistic gesture and handmade work, realizing a work-in-progress that moves from the artist to the producers and then comes back to the artist. Secondly, he makes a clear distinction between the global economical context – industrial and mechanical production and global exchanges – and personal and local handmade work. Finally, the fact of delegating

3) We refer here to the definition of ‚individual mythologies' as outlined by Harald Szeemann at documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972, where he presented works and installations as the result of a global and intellectual thought and philosophy of life of the artists.

4) These components will be developed further in *Ordine e disordine* series, made by Afghan female embroiderers.

the production of artworks reflects the duality of Boetti's persona – in 1973 he renamed himself Alighiero e/and Boetti. The artist incarnated himself in a double; eventually his wife and a lace maker in his first embroideries, Afghan female embroiderers and male weavers in later works.

One should mention the fact that using textile as the medium of his artworks may also be emblematic of Boetti's personal story. Indeed, the artist has possibly been impressed by the activity of his mother, who set up a circle of female embroiderers decorating linen for future brides' dowries. Furthermore, Boetti claimed a special fascination with his ancestor, Giovanni Battista Boetti.[5] Starting his trajectory as a Dominican monk, in 1762 he became the head of an apostolic mission in Mesopotamia, Kurdistan and Armenia. Then, approximately ten years later, he abandoned the Dominican Order and its Italian origins, thus beginning, under the new name of Boetti Shaykh Al Mansur, a new life in Constantinople, engaging with the Muslims, struggling against Russians, and being taken prisoner during the battle of Anapa.

When Boetti traveled for the first time to Afghanistan, in 1971, he found in Sufi culture a philosophy of life, a meditative peace corresponding to his need of philosophical abstraction. Boetti was fascinated by the culture and the way of life of Afghan people, and certainly found there a second home where he could have remained longer had the USSR not occupied the country. There, he met people still working in the field of fabric production in an ancestral manner. Since his first trip, the artist went back to Afghanistan twice a year and started to collaborate with Afghan women for his embroideries. When in 1979 Afghanistan was invaded by Russian troops, numbers of families Boetti was collaborating with sought refuge in Pakistan. Prevented from returning in Afghanistan, the artist still continued to work with Afghan refugees in Peshawar.

ROOM 2. KILIM STORIES Connected to an ancestral technique, kilims embody memory and identity of the sedentary, nomad or semi nomad communities who weave them. Their patterns are a form of symbolic writing inherited from ancient shamanistic beliefs, and they are produced in a geographical area that goes from Pakistan to the Balkans.

For his last series of artworks, Boetti chose to produce 70 kilims, woven by male Afghan weavers in Peshawar, Pakistan. These pieces, presented at Le Magasin in Grenoble in 1993–94, combined another important element of the artist's thought: that is,

5) Only two months before his first journey in Afghanistan, Boetti published a portrait of his ancestor in the catalogue of the exhibition *Formulation* at the Addison Gallery of American Art of Andover.

possibilities given by permutation rules, with a very rigorous and meditative traditional technique. Mathematical processes of permutation express a philosophical meaning borrowed from oriental philosophies.[6] At the same time, the fabrication of kilims in Boetti's practice relates to tradition, but also to new expressive values that emerged during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Indeed, in the eighties, kilims were used to symbolize military and patriotic propaganda expressing mujahidin resistance to soviets. Afghan refugees in Pakistan wove war rugs, combining the geographical form of Afghanistan with stylized weapons (panzers, missiles, helicopters, rifles, grenades, etc.) that functioned as symbols inviting to the guerrillas.

In the Balkans, kilims acquired new expressions and symbolisms in contact with Muslim and Christian cultures. In 2008, Sarajevo born artist Azra Akšamija (b. 1976) created a kilim inspired by both traditional Balkans kilims and Afghan war rugs. *Monument in Waiting* was woven in collaboration with refugee women to remember the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1992–1995 war,[7] when an extremely high number of civilians were exterminated, with the purpose of erasing Islamic cultural heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Over 1000 mosques were also destroyed.

Akšamija started to work on the project with historical and archival investigations about destroyed mosques, engaging in interviews and research about individual war experiences, mosques histories and stylistic choices for their reconstruction. The documentation collected was translated into a series of symbols reviving the traditional iconography of the Balkans kilims. Each pattern encoded „both personal memories and historical facts, and their interweaving makes visible the collective memory of the Bosniaks' war experience" (Akšamija 2008). Kilims with a central composition surrounded by three borders are specific to the Afghan tradition. Akšamija's kilim transforms traditional local motifs into weapon-like motifs inscribed in the borders, whereas in the central composition of her work is the *tree of life*, the metaphor of the paradise garden and eternal afterlife.

ROOM 3. NOSTALGIA TALES FROM GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES

Because of its traditional and cultural-related values, textile is often symbolically used by artists to express feelings of belonging and forms of nostalgia. The word *nostalgia* comes from the Greek word *nostos* (a return home) and *algia* (pain or longing). In her essay *Nostalgia and its Discontent* (2007), Svetlana Boym focuses

6)
As several artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Boetti was interested in the Chinese *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, an ancient method used for interpretation of the present and future based on chance principles, and where each of the 64 answers coincides with a combination of hexagrams referring to yin and yang elements.

7)
It was produced in collaboration with Amila Smajović and her Sarajevo based workshop STILL-A, which employs refugee women as weavers.

on different aspects of a contemporary form of nostalgia characterized as an *historical emotion*. She examines, more particularly, those forms of nostalgia that make people attached to a specific local context that manifests itself in opposition to the global context. She also refers to questions of belongings in relation to a specific time, the time of childhood and the past. This kind of nostalgia seems to be particularly present in former Yugoslavia; the generation of people who grew up under Tito's ideology would in fact be nostalgic of a country where different ethnic cultures lived together.

Maja Bajević's (b. 1967, Sarajevo) first performances of the late 1990s react against the war and its consequences on nationalistic feelings, and present aspects of female everyday life, stressing the impossibility to recover life as before the war and the absurdity of the actual situation. *Dressed Up* (1999), in particular, was performed in the City Gallery of Sarajevo. During many hours Bajević cut and sewed a dress made by a fabric printed with the map of the former Yugoslavia.

Svetlana Boym also mentions in her text a prospective form of nostalgia, in which „[t]he fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future. [...] [N]ostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory. While futuristic utopias might be out of fashion, nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension – only it is no longer directed toward the future" (Boym 2007: 9). This description could somehow be related to what happened during the movement for independence of the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the 19th century. During the Great Arab Revolution, Pan-Arabian ideas and political movements emerged, with the purpose of creating an independent political entity bringing together all Arabic-speaking people and allowing them a visibility on the global arena. Pan-Arabian ideas were born as a reaction to the increase of Islamist ideas, in which identity coincided with religion. Pan-Arabia would have been larger, bringing together all different aspects of Arabian culture. *Arab Army* (2007, video) by Palestinian artist Fawzy Emrany (b. 1968) refers to these ideas when showing a semi-mechanical machine, sewing onto military uniforms the symbol of the Arab army, a pan-Arab military force established by the Kingdom of Hejaz to support the Arab revolt.

ROOM 4. WEAVING HOME Textile as a contemporary art medium may refer to a particular geopolitical space, but also to the time of personal stories and memories. It is often used to allude

to the history or cultural traditions of a specific country. The performance *Women at Work – Under Construction* (1999) by Maja Bajević took place at the National Gallery in Sarajevo that was being renovated at that time. Seated on scaffolding, five women embroidered traditional patterns on the façade of the gallery. Those women were Srebrenica refugees whom the artist met in a humanitarian association helping women after the war. Their embroideries establish an intimate connection between the cultural and identity space of the refugees, outside the museum, and the official art in the interior of the museum. Furthermore, this work, which is traditionally female, took place on scaffoldings, a typically masculine place. Bajević's performance allowed the five women to symbolically reconstruct their identity by this creative act.

In 2008, Portuguese artist Susana Mendes Silva (b. 1972) created a work titled *Symbol*, a historical and material exploration of the flag that was unfurled on the occasion of the Republican Revolution in Portugal, on the 5th of October of 1910. In order to unveil the ‚micro-history' of the flag – a symbol of national belonging and Republican ideals – Susana Mendes Silva undertook historical research that lead to the supposed identity of the two women who, in secret, (according to some historical sources) sewed the flag that was to be used during the proclamation of the Republic. The artist could not establish with certainty if the flag still exists nor discover its exact design. The work's installation is thus composed of red and green cloth, threads and other instruments for sewing, the photos and biographical notes of Adelaide Cabete and Carolina Beatriz Angelo, the women who supposedly made the flag, and photographs of the proclamation of the Republic by Joshua Benoliel in which a flag is visible. It is important to note that Adelaide Cabete and Carolina Beatriz Angelo were both educated, professional women, engaged in feminist political activities, and were among the first women to vote in Portugal and in Angola, then a Portuguese colony.

The flag is certainly symbolic of Portuguese women's engagement with Republican ideals, but it is also a locus of articulation between the private and the public sphere, between domestic values of femininity associated with sewing and embroidering and the growing participation of women in the political life of the nation during the Republican period. Considering that the current Portuguese flag originates from the Republican flag, it seems that the artist's work also questions national identity today in Portugal and the role played by women in its making. In particular, national

identity is materialized here as a representation that has a specific historical and cultural construction in which gender plays a significant cultural and political role.

Living in Paris for the past 22 years, South-Korean artist Seulgi Lee (b. 1972) will conclude our itinerary. In a recent interview, she explained that she feels more Parisian than Korean and suggests that she did not choose her culture of origin, but she looked for her adoptive culture. As in Boetti's relationship with Afghanistan, home can sometimes be a foreign place that corresponds better to our personality, or desire of a certain way of life. These examples teach us that we can choose where to make our home.

Lee's Korean origins are a constant trace in her most recent artworks, permeated by an outstanding sense of color and humor. If some of the works Lee realized with fabric are political, corresponding to the idea of social fabric, as in the flags of the series of *Strikes*, we will consider here the work-in-progress *U* project.

U is a series of blankets that the artist is currently realizing in collaboration with Korean weavers. Each blanket corresponds to a Korean proverb. As in Akšamija's kilim, proverbs are translated into high colored geometrical patterns. The technique employed here is very popular in Korea, and this kind of blanket used to be offered in the eighties during celebration parties. By creating these blankets, Lee aims to explore intimate links between oral culture and craft, but she also wants to convey a message of protection (if the letter U is reversed, it becomes like a home), and to symbolize, through the blanket, places of wonder. Geometrical compositions can be, after all, an invitation to tell stories.

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