

# Cornelia LAUF

## FASHION TURNED INTO ART. *SOFT? TACTILE DIALOGUES* AT THE MODEMUSEUM ANTWERP

She is slight, and her demeanor stern, with long blonde hair, with even features and a principled expression. On the day I interview her, Elisa De Wyngaert is wearing a gauzy black pants outfit and lizard-skin shoes.

The curator of *Soft? Tactile Dialogues* is a graduate from the Courtauld Institute, with a degree in curating, specifically in documenting fashion (her thesis was on Helmut Lang's transition into the art world). She obtained the coveted position at Antwerp's ModeMuseum after a brief stint working for fashion designer A.F.Vandervost, and some time as a journalist, above all for radio. That she is young, and with a mission to change the way fashion is perceived, is clear. She's quick to point out that her background is in art, not only fashion, and indeed *Soft? Tactile Dialogues* is the first exhibition at MoMu to showcase art and exhibit it side-by-side with clothing, or in this case, textiles. In fact, there's only one piece of clothing in this show, and even that is not for wear. It's a soiled frock with gaping burn holes, and resembles beggar's rags more than haute couture. Moreover, it's a sculptural work, installed as a painting, and certainly, most definitely, not a dress. Entering

the exhibition spaces of the Maurice Verbaet Center (MoMu is under renovation), which has generously opened its doors to a guest institution, one is greeted by the softly rounded exhibition graphics of star Belgian designer, Paul Boudens. His modern yet slightly vintage info-graphics lead one toward a seemingly soft and dust-covered sculpture by Anton Cotteleer, an amputated fetish object, perched uncomfortably to greet the viewer. "Soft," connotes tough, no matter how you cut it, at least in this exhibition.

The Verbaet Center is a multi-purpose building erected in the 1960s by the family that named and still owns it. Its nod to the International Style is manifested by a multistory building with glass-windowed, mostly unpartitioned offices, on each floor, offering visions of clean open spaces dotted with potted plants, filmic in quality. Decorative elements from the original construction survive in the detailing of the building, and we see that despite its paean to "non-ornament," Belgian handicraft has made its way into the Verbaet Center, with beautiful mosaics, and other such details, creating a welcome contrast to sleek modernity.

This sets the stage for the kind of interesting contrasts in *Soft? Tactile Dialogues*.







*SOFT? Tactile Dialogues*, Christoph Hefti, *Animal Mask*, 2016, (c) MoMu Antwerp Photo: Stany Dederen

The exhibition occupies a sizeable space on the ground floor and the entirety of the entrance lobby and stairwell. It is an overview of textiles by makers gathered together from Belgian resources, galleries, and collections. A historic section of the exhibition draws from the textile arts collection of MoMu, and includes works primarily from the 1970s and 80s. These tapestries or fabric sculptures are exhibited in counterpoint to a selection of artists that De Wyngaert designates as the contemporary section.

De Wyngaert's basic premise is to equivocate many kinds of making practice. Thus, the exhibition juxtaposes work by a very wide variety of figures, all installed with similar installation conventions. She applies the term "art" widely.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, exhibition design tropes such as wall-mounting, pedestals, and other forms of display, are united by an easy graphic frame to give further unity to what might otherwise be a very disparate group of objects (at least in less capable hands).

On the ground floor, we see thread declined in a marvellous rainbow of forms. A large sculpture by the Polish artist, Tapta (born Maria Kowalski, 1926, Koscian, Poland, died 1997, Brussels), is perhaps the most extraordinary creation, though it stands in strong rivalry to a wall-hanging by Veerle Dupont (b. 1942, Antwerp). Dupont's wall sculpture, *Alruin*, or *Mandrake*, was created between 1975 and 1980. In size and colours, it is reminiscent of the works of Abstract Expressionists such as Morris Louis or Helen Frankenthaler. It seems that Dupont created a very personal response to monumental paintings, transforming them into woven textile, through a brilliant recouping of materials closer in spirit to the work of Robert Rauschenberg or Alberto Burri. Her materials include remnants from carpet factories and weaving mills, and for the piece in the Verbaet centre, tar-drenched ropes from the shipyards of Antwerp. The whole unites in a matted, odorous tribute to mass and weight that symbolically touches on utopian promises of American painting, as well as trade with Africa and the post-colonial history of Belgium.

The twisting, golden spatial exercise by Tapta also arises in counterpoint to "modern

art," and the production of what was then still a predominantly male artworld. Long columns of twisted sisal recall the shapes of Naum Gabo, Nikolas Pevsner, and the like, but Tapta's use of material is more autobiographical and harks back to her time in the Congo, where she learned to use this material. The work in the exhibition is on loan from the Verbaet Collection, as is another work in the show, a flexible horizon of stiff undulating weaving which seems utterly contemporary both in its mathematical as well as chromatic structure. Maurice and Caroline Verbaet are dedicated collectors of Belgian art and in another area of the building, they chose to mount their own exhibition of roughly contemporaneous art to suggest parallel experiments in optics, figuration, theme, and material.

Most of the historic works on exhibit in *Soft? Tactile Dialogues* belong to the collection of MoMu, and were acquired via the efforts of a visionary Belgian curator, Jan Walgrave. Walgrave worked at the Provincial Museum of Antwerp and had the insight to acquire the textile artists of his time, figures such as Ferket, Tapta, and Marga and Lieva Bostoen. His choices were incorporated into the collection of MoMu. It is the first time this vision has been put on display, even in part, and De Wyngaert recounted the emotions and excitement her curatorial choices unleashed. In fact, by gathering material that has not been on view since decades, and by paying tribute to artists, whose work long deserved tribute, De Wyngaert has created a woven structure of her own, not least in a generous act of curatorial homage to the elder Walgrave. Flanders, with its history of wool trade dating back to the Middle Ages, is the perfect location to mount such an exhibition, and indeed, one leaves the project feeling that one has caught a glimpse of time unfolding. Perhaps the most poetic piece is an off-white tapestry by Edith Van Driessche (1932-2015, Mechelen), *Use No Hooks*, created between 1980 and 1985. Consisting of off-white bandages of found material, this painterly assemblage is singularly evocative. Whether or not it is a Belgian version of a Robert Ryman, Rauschenberg, or concrete poetry, riffing off of figures such as Picabia text-drawing or Schwitters,



seems not to matter. The work has a poetics all its own. One can't help but wonder if designers such as Martin Margiela didn't derive inspiration from this brilliant and utterly Belgian artist, weaving her painting-poems and refusing to commit to any one medium. Van Driessche's career mirrors that of some of the other artists in the show – trained in art academies, but ineluctably drawn to creating with fabric and weaving

While some of the aforementioned figures clearly work in counterpoint to art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Concrete Art, Minimalism, et al., other makers included in the exhibition take their cue from handicrafts such as appliqué, or quilting, and deliberately eschew the monumental. The wall hanging of Hetty Van Boekhout (b. 1945, Heerlen) features appliqué embroidery with stuffed figures of the kind that one often finds at craft fairs, and also invites comparison with children's book illustration, or some of the illustration-based painting notable especially in Eastern European traditions. Van Boekhout has worked much in batik, passing to abstraction after her figurative phase.

Liberta Ferket (1943–2017, Turnhout) creates volume through an extraordinary display of knotting techniques, using natural fibres such as wool and cotton to evoke spatial dimensions. The curator notes: “The basis of *Treurend Vangnet*, or *Grieving Safety Net*, is a thick rope hung in a triangle, forming three large loops. Ferket makes ropes, braids and loops flow or ‘fall’ like shadows on the ground. These movements are never uncontrolled, and there is order even in its apparent chaos.”

Then there is the monochrome quilt-like fabric assemblage of Kaye Regelski (Spilker), a delicate arrangement of personal correspondence that shows this artist's sensitivity to contemporaneous tendencies in a more Conceptual and Minimalist painting tradition, say, again the work of Ryman, or Sol LeWitt, as well as regional traditions of quilting, such as those of the Amish. Regelski Spilker has been the fashion and textiles curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles for many decades, and the presentation of her artwork at MoMu was apparently deeply gratifying to both

her, and artists such as well as Suzannah Olieux, whose batik compositions from the 1970s, such as the one on exhibit, have also eluded frequent display.

The daring nature of *Soft? Tactile Dialogues* is its free interweaving of textile art, usually created at a time lag to similar formal investigations in other materials, into a general art historical narrative. The curatorial “move” is to seamlessly merge artists whose innovations are conceptually based but materially grounded first with figures who stem from a training or tradition based on iconic revolutions, or traditional “high art” history. In De Wyngaert's show, we gaze at all the figures, whether heretofore facilely considered design or fashion, as “artists.” The curator's contemporary section includes the work of Nel Aerts, Kirstin Arndt, Stéphanie Baechler, Anton Cotteleer, Kati Heck, Christoph Hefti, Sven “T Jolle, Ermias Kifleyesus, Klaas Rommelaere, Jelle Spruyt, and Wiesi Will. A well-written and engaging publication narrates the motivation and background of each maker. It is in the contemporary section that De Wyngaert really seems to come into her own, and states what her generation feels about the dystopic world we live in. She smiles, as I question the harshness of theme, the decapitations and mutilations, if not body distortions, scattered around the show. “It's gloomy here,” she remarks, twice. At once a loving look back at the 1970s and 1980s, the show is also about the disconnect in contemporary life, and the dissonance between humans and the materials they are surrounded by. Virtual weaves are now as significant as traditional warp and weft. We are living in a rapidly changing world.

Nel Aerts (b. 1987, Turnhout, Belgium) creates colourful patchworked quilt-objects that straddle the divide between handicraft and art and call to mind the practice of someone like Jenny Holzer, or Keith Haring, in her preparation of what seem like easy “urban props.” Aerts is a postmodern Betsy Ross, a contemporary flag-maker who both understands icons and how an object and its material can rally emotions. Aerts often has her mother and other relatives helping her, a habit shared with Klaas Rommelaere, and calling to mind also the collaborative practice



*SOFT? Tactile Dialogues*, Photo: Ian Segal



Kati Heck, *Dreimal Selbst mit Magier*, 2016, Photo: © Tim Van Laere Gallery



of Wiesi Will. I feel the ghost of Philip Guston, Matt Mullican, Peter Schuyff, and even Gino de Dominicis, not to speak of Mike Kelly, or Thomas Grünfeld, in this work. It's clear that Aerts has had an art training, and is also cognizant of the possibility of fabric to be roped into a performative mode. Her conceits ("stand in that corner, behind a too-short curtain," "wear this weird mask") are a bit forced, but they make you think.

The work of Kristin Arndt (b. 1961, Otterndorf, Germany) is a similar *tour de force* of manuality, citing, with almost a sense of nostalgia, the work of sculpture-producing artists such as Frank Stella, Olivier Mosset, or even Lynda Benglis. Yet, eschewing a duel with stainless steel, Arndt just takes a piece of PVC and with effortless gesture, turns it into a kind of deconstructed and beautiful piece of origami. Longevity does not seem to matter, and this disdain of permanence makes the work all the more compelling and irresistible. I'd love to see her plan for a building.

Stéphanie Baechler (b. 1983, Switzerland), departed from a career and education in fashion, notably for designer Hussein Chalayan, and has taken that next step, freezing many of the garments, in detail, in other media. Her work for the MoMu exhibition is of particular delicacy: ceramic ribbons appended to a white wall and almost indivisible from the background, in that play of white on white that artists like Agnes Martin, Ryman, Imi Knoebel, and LeWitt proposed in other media and contexts. Here is an example of that maker whose drift into art is without pretence, and presumption, but at the same time, claims ground that work quite similar to it would have given rise to, from a very different background. Baechler uses forms and languages of simulacra that have actually been explored quite deeply by other artists. However, what distinguishes her work is the very ease with which it inhabits the pedestal and context of art. Baechler is particularly prescient in her attention to the materials of contemporary culture, plastics. She presents the colours of contemporaneity, the deathly, ghostly hues of cables, technology, the flicker of video monitors, the formless masses of objects, from dishwashers to vacuum cleaners, which somehow lurk in the background of her shapes.

Anton Cotteleer (b. 1974, Kapellen, Belgium) is educated in art, at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. An overview of the work at his gallery, White House, shows the same kind of palette that is in the work of Nel Aerts. Like Aerts and Rommelaer, Cotteleer seeks out the seeming simplicity of organic forms, anchored in a self-proclaimed "granny aesthetic," yet using high-tech means to elicit this lingering sensation of the decayed antique.

Gommaar Gilliams, (b. 1982, Lier), is one of the "artist-artists" whose emphasis on materiality fits the *leitmotif* of the exhibition. His work seems clearly to come from a tradition of painting without support structures (Giorgio Griffa, Supports-Surfaces). The softly structured painted works hark back to the 1980s, in their palette, and deliberate expressionism. There's a bit of melancholy for a world order that is no longer the case. Again, a citation of colours and motifs from the colonial past of Belgium, as well as tribute to the deconstruction of form in artists such as Claude Viallat or even Stella, make this an interesting compendium to the other works.

Sven t'Jolle (b. 1966, Antwerp), offered one of the most prescient works in the exhibition. It's a simple garment with gaping holes in it. Jolle is an artist using fashion as artistic material – an artist cognizant of Burri and also that it is art fashion which today features the distressed, while art (say Jeff Koons) in fashion, veers to the shiny. The piece of Sven T'Jolle is not fashion, however. It mimics fashion, and its straddling of product and proclamation. Titled *Yves Saint Lazare*, the work is a mixture of ballgown and vagrant's rag, Paris and Calcutta. With full cognizance of Arte Povera, tossed in the mix.

Kati Heck (b. 1979, Germany), was trained in fashion, switching to fine arts quite early in her career. The work on exhibit in Antwerp features a long sheaf of fabric and the many sections of bare hemp canvas that Heck – who stretches her own non-standard canvases – is famous for. We again think of artists such as Sigmar Polke, or the Supports Surfaces group, or Rauschenberg, who heralded the use of unprimed canvas, and insertion of domestic materials, even bedsheets, into the canvas. Heck's insouciant bravura seems



not to care about all that history and it's her personal narrative, not the weight of paradigmatic shifts, that matters.

*Animal Mask* by Christoph Hefti (b. 1967, Switzerland) is a composite of various animal masks. It is installed on a landing of the Verbaet Center, in a monumental conjoining of tufted carpet piece and fabric curtain installation. The carpet mixes different registers of image and recalls Swiss pagan folk masks as much as showtime in some extreme burlesque theater. Hefti has the tapestries hand-knotted in Nepal and is adamant in crediting his collaboration with local craftspeople. Kudos for his use of traditional crafts within a contemporary context. Behind *Animal Mask* hangs the forest, a textile piece entitled *Nature*. All of it vaguely, if not very, unsettling.

Ermias Kifleyesus (b. 1974, Ethiopia), works at the canons of Western art from the perspective of someone who still feels he is an outsider. In this, he is clearly in the centre, as the explosion of the contemporary African art scene and assignment of *Documenta* to an Indonesian collective, testify. His delicate wall-pieces are composed of several table-cloths and towels which Kifleyesus leaves in public places, where they become the site of graffiti for hapless long-distance callers, who cover the cloths with marks and doodles. The artist takes the pieces back and modifies them into a kind of Art Brut meets Neolithic cave automatism with clear affinities to textile patterns in his country of origin. The skill in which a readymade is turned into an image is what is striking about this work, and many others in the show. What matters is sincerity of political or social gesture. And the viewer is left wondering, why not? It is objectively beautiful.

Klaas Rommelaere has created one of the most ambitious installations in *Soft? Tactile Dialogues*. His series of embroidered, crocheted, and stitched-together canvases arranged in a Boogie-Woogie Mondrian shape are a riotous symphony of colours and patterns whose meandering domino board is expertly installed in the Verbaet Centre. It should be a permanent work. Rommelaere, like many of the others, has worked in fashion, for Henrik Vibskov, and

then Raf Simons. Like several of the others, he has moved into an art format in search of more freedom. His technical bravura in creating an installation for Verbaet is matched by his interesting formal vocabulary, which brings to mind Jean-Michel Basquiat and reminds us that Rommelaere's production takes place in what was once an empire.

The duo Wiesi Will (Vera Roggli and Laure Van Brempt) are the authors of *Air Dancers*. This layered gauze installation occupies the centre space of the Verbaet stairwell and with its sheets in yellow, lilac, and white, unites the many key colours and moods of the entire show. Trained as designers at Christian Wijnants, Wiesi Will have struck out on their own with a precise research which they describe well on their website: "The WSW LAB is a laboratory for material-minded people who enjoy profound research, keeping in mind the fusion of aesthetics and functionality. The outcome of their research can result in a sweater or a carpet, a curtain or an installation."

Can one equate all forms of material production, even if the naked eye cannot distinguish weaving commissioned by a designer, from weaving by an artist, to weaving by a weaver? Certainly curators in the modern period have thought extensively about how to categorize the full range of material production. Jean-Hubert Martin, in his 1989 universal exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, posed this very issue, with the explicit goal of subverting colonialist discourse. Who is really to decide what counts as "art," and what does not? A great variety of current artists are picking up a needle and thread and even sitting at a loom. For example, Elisabetta di Maggio, in Venice, creates extraordinary gauze-like thread-based structures that seem to rival nature itself. Andrea Grotto, also in Venice, has created an entire astrology-based series of pieces of embroidery on midnight blue capes that confound the viewer as to their status: fashion? embroidery? art? Argentinean artist, Alexandra Kehayoglou creates verdant landscapes through team work and greatly involving her own hand, as well. Susan Harbage Page works with nuns in the *clausura* in Spello, Umbria, to create evocative

shrouds with embroidered images and phrases alluding to innocence and its loss. Chrysanne Stathacos has been using embroidery on fabric since the 1980s, to create textile works that often seem part shroud, part sculpture. Sultane Tusha, a Milan-based artist of Albanian origin, creates surprising deconstructions of her native country's artisanal language, using embroidery to tell stories of war, of springtime, of mathematical scope or geometries that are more emotional than linear. Jan Wade, of Vancouver, uses quilting and chain-stitch techniques to create stunningly beautiful fabrics that hover between African-American textile, European wall hanging, and First Nation blanket, true to the multiple origins of Wade herself.

Collectives such as Un Pizzo, in Italy, have shown how weaving giant stitches can lead to a new style in design, verging on architecture. Ball & Nogues is an integrated design and fabrication practice based in Los Angeles and operating in a territory between architecture, art and industrial design. Their website states that they are "informed by the exploration of craft. Essential to each project is the »design« of the production process itself, with the aim of creating environments that enhance sensation, generate spectacle and invite physical engagement." Whether it relates to the Van Eyck altarpiece *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, or not, is ... well, irrelevant.

What happens when artists commission textile art and don't actually even lay hand on them themselves? These, ironically, are works that are often more quickly classified as artworks, thanks to the legacy of one Marcel Duchamp. Here, we may think of the works of Andrea Zittel, Elisabetta Benassi, Gabriel Kuri, Juliao Sarmiento, Ken Lum, Jonathan Monk, Liam Gillick, Rudolf Stingl, Richard Artschwager, Slavs and Tatars, Paola Pivi, Ulrike Mueller, Oscar Tuazon, Stefano Arienti, Flavio Favelli, Albert Oehlen, and many others.<sup>2</sup> There's an avalanche of textile production delegated by artists going on right now, if one wants to nominate such a category.

Perhaps we are facing a general shift in the medium world-wide, as urgency over the state of the world begins to dominate even navel-

gazing investigations of how to decipher artistic difference. Perhaps by pointing to weaving, as the basis of architecture, fashion, design, and art, MoMu is stating a universal. Textiles are our contemporary medium of choice.

*Soft? Tactile Dialogues*, is "about the freedom with which artists move between various media, about unexpected textile applications, about tactility and aversion, about the textures and the skin of sculptures." Perhaps we are in the age where history does not matter as much as contemporary experience. In the divisive landscape of Belgium, and Europe, making an exhibition in which artists, poets, weavers, and makers from diverse backgrounds place their hard poetry in soft shapes, surely opens the experience of art up to everyone, perhaps art's greatest mission.

*Soft? Tactile Dialogues*

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Maurice Verbaet Center, Mechelsesteenweg 64A,  
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the titles for further reading, kindly suggested by E. de Wyngaerd, see: Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: art and textile politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017; Walgrave, Jan. *Hedendaagse textielkunst in Vlaanderen*. Netherlands: Ministerie van Ned. Diensten, Kunstverspreiding, Kunsten en Musea, 1979; Walgrave, Jan. "Textielkunst." In *Vlaanderen: tweemaandelijks tijdschrift voor kunst en literatuur*, 1979; Wortmann-Weltge, Sigrid. *Bauhaus textiles: women artists and the weaving workshop*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1993. Special thanks also to David Flamée, Mode Museum, Antwerp. Additional research assistance provided to the author by Hannah Wolfram, Temple University, Rome.

<sup>2</sup> See my exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, on this subject, and eponymous catalogue: Cornelia Lauf, *Wall to Wall, Carpets by Artists* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016).

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