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"Pictures made of wool": The Gender of Labor at the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop (1919-23)

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In 1926, one year after the Bauhaus had moved to Dessau, the weaving workshop master Gunta Stölzl dismissed the earlier, Weimar period textiles, such as Hedwig Jungnik's wall hanging from 1922 [[Fig. 1](#)], as mere "pictures made of wool."¹ In this description she differentiated the early weavings, from the later, "progressivist" textiles of the Dessau workshop, which functioned industrially and architecturally: to soundproof space or to reflect light. The weavings of the Weimar years, by contrast, were autonomous, ornamental pieces, exhibited in the fashion of paintings. Stölzl saw this earlier work as a failure because it had no progressive aim. The wall hangings of the Weimar workshop were experimental—concerned with the pictorial elements of form and color—yet at that they were still inadequate, without the larger, transcendental goals of painting, as in the Bauhaus painter Wassily Kandinsky's *Red Spot II* from 1921. Stölzl assessed the earlier, "aesthetic" period of weaving as unsuccessful, because its specific strengths were neither developed nor theorized. Weaving in the early Bauhaus lacked its own discursive parameters, just as it lacked a disciplinary history. Evaluated against the "true" picture, painting, weaving appeared a weaker, ineffectual medium.

Stölzl's remark references a fundamental problem that goes unquestioned in the literature concerning the Weimar Bauhaus weaving workshop and the feminized status of the medium. According to recent studies, the weaving workshop consisted mainly of women due to the political agenda of Walter Gropius, who sought to segregate the large female population from the rest of the school.² The (male) Bauhaus masters considered the practice of weaving to be domestic "women's work." Though the painter Georg Muche acted as the weaving workshop master of form, for instance, he swore never to pick up a piece of yarn. Yarn and thread were seen as "feminine" materials, easier to handle than the purportedly "masculine" materials of metal or wood. Yet, this explanatory narrative seems insufficient. The literature concerning gender at the Bauhaus weaving workshop, though extremely valuable, tends almost to repeat, rather than disentangle, the

interpretation of weaving as a lesser, “feminine” form of handicraft production.

Pictorial weaving, I argue, occupied a feminized status at the institution for its apparent inadequacies in relation to painting: its simultaneous *excess and lack*. On the one hand, weaving is seen as a degraded version of painting, marked by the excessive, laborious³ transfer from pictorial design to weaving. In fact, Stölzl’s statement underscores that these woven “pictures,” are “*made*”—that is *manufactured, fabricated*—“of wool.” The particular relation between the weaver’s body, the loom apparatus, and the physical labor of the process, threatens the “transcendental” or spiritual position of art that the early Bauhaus painters sought. Given the socio-economic history of textiles, the terms of industry necessarily haunt the weaving medium. The history of weaving’s entwinement with labor subtends the language deemed essential to it.

On the other hand, in the Weimar Bauhaus, the medium was left untheorized. Unlike painting or architecture, early Bauhaus weaving lacked its own disciplinary definitions. The painter Johannes Itten, who directed the Bauhaus preliminary course until 1923, simply regarded the weavings pictorially, not as an independent form. Without a theoretical dimension or goal, weaving remained, in the eyes of the Bauhaus masters, a form of labor.

The category of labor, in other words, is central to this problem of excess and lack, or the feminized status of the medium.

What, then, is the labor of Bauhaus weaving during the years of 1919-23? And how does the history of textile production, as fundamentally bound with social modernity and the division of labor, frame the medium as “feminine,” in distinction to the “masculinity” of painting? This paper will trace the particular conditions of the weaving medium so that we might understand these “pictures made of wool” differently, so that we may see their possibilities, not their inadequacies.

In order to develop retroactively a theory of weaving from the early Bauhaus, it would seem reasonable to turn to the writings of Itten, who also acted as *Formmeister* for the weaving workshop until 1921. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, the craft of weaving is conspicuously absent from his pedagogical theories. His theory of contrasts focuses on the practice of painting for its capacity to express the artist’s interior soul. Considering watercolors, such as this one by Gunta Stölzl from 1921 [[Fig. 2](#)], Itten describes the process of using a brush:

The beginner becomes aware of the elastic point of the brush only when he...feels the form and is ready to follow this feeling. Brushes are superior to charcoal as expressive media because they achieve

richer nuances. Charcoal always produces the same dark stroke whether it is applied with a right or a left slant. *But the brush allows rich variation.*[4](#)

The “brush” is valued by Itten for its capacity to convey “rich nuances” or “variations” in the movement and force of the hand and body with respect to the surface. Painting practice is superior to charcoal in this account because it seems to allow infinite possibilities, a negation of habit or repetition.

The practice of weaving, by contrast, would notably disallow the body to participate in the “nuances” of movement, as we see in this photograph of a Bauhaus weaver working at a loom, on the left. The positioning of the body with respect to the loom is significantly more structured; the body must incorporate the physical habit of the practice, or the systematic loom technique, in order for the work to be produced. A sense of unmediated “expression” is lost in the process of weaving.

Of note is Itten’s insistence on a comprehension of the whole; formal and value contrasts exist only within the composition of an entire pictorial field. The space of the canvas precedes the implantation of the painterly gestural mark. Accordingly, the artist pays attention to the entire surface at all times, (relatively) randomly adding compositional elements throughout the field. Yet the weaver does not work with an already established field. For in painting, the material difference between the canvas and paint obtains, while in weaving, as is seen in this wall hanging by Lore Leudesdorff from 1923 [[Fig. 3](#)], the design and the surface are one and the same—they are made from the same material and process. The design can only emerge through the practice of constructing the woven “ground” (of warp—vertical threads—and weft—horizontal threads). No prefabricated field, we could say further, exists prior to the construction of the textile.[5](#)

In this way, the practice of weaving is structurally analogous to the process of building, working from the base and adding to it, as is shown in this textile sample by Gertrud Arndt [[Fig. 4](#)]. Through a systematic procedure of weaving weft through warp, back and forth, the image emerges from bottom to top. A wall hanging by Stölzl from 1923 [[Fig. 5](#)] shows how the horizontal process builds vertically, layering yarn as in the stacking of bricks. And the addition of layers is predicated upon the completion of previous layers. While in a painting the artist may move or return to an area in the compositional field, either to build up the paint on the surface, or to cover over the previously established paint, the technical practice of weaving is necessarily *sequential*. With the process of adding weft to weft, over and under the warp, bit by bit, the compositional field is literally built. At once analogous to the architect who conceives a building and the laborer who constructs it, the weaver develops the design in tandem with the fabrication of the

surface. Unlike painting, where the formal idea is laid *on top* of the canvas support, weaving's pictorial design is *embedded in* the material and process of its making. The weaver's "picture," in other words, is integral to the fabric's structure.

While painting is purportedly uncontingent and "free," the loom overtly structures and organizes the weaver's product. The practice of weaving, defined as a handicraft, can never sublimate its labor with the free "play" of the imagination, as in Immanuel Kant's delineation of Art. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant differentiates Art from handicraft:

[Art] is called *free*, the other may be called *industrial art*. We look on the former as something which could only prove final (be a success) as play, i.e., an occupation which is agreeable on its own account; but the second as labour, i.e. as business, which on its own account is disagreeable (drudgery), and is only attractive by means of what it results in (e.g., the pay)... (§43)

Together with its systematic process, weaving's significance in socio-economic history links the medium to a notion of labor. In Max Weber's *General Economic History*, published in 1923 from lectures written during the winter of 1919, the German social theorist traces the historical organization of "labor" within the development of Capitalism.⁶ Of particular note is the way in which Weber frames the category of labor: it can be defined technically according to the parameters set by the machine or apparatus, but its *implications* are sociological, involving class divisions and, most significantly, gender divisions. Regarding the "masculine" work of medicine men and blacksmiths, he notes their claim toward spirituality or "magic."⁷ "Men's work," such as curing illness or appropriating territory through war, is seen to have "ends," leading onto some greater goal. "Women's work," such as tilling the soil, or producing textiles⁸ for the household, by contrast, is considered a mode of maintenance, a form of "pure labor," a means without ends.⁹ Women's labor historically lacks a spiritual, magical, or otherwise theoretical dimension.

Providing an account of the movement from agricultural and domestic production to guilds, and from shop to factory production, Weber's *General Economic History* pays particular attention to developments within the textile industry. Weaving is, for Weber, an exemplary case in economic history, and particularly crucial for a social theory of modernity. Textile production, so Weber argues, is the first historical instance in which the social organization of the shop institutes a schematic division of labor, *on account of the loom apparatus*. Even prior to its mechanization at the hands of modern technology, weaving is already systematized. In the first textile shops, Weber puts it succinctly, "the worker was entirely separated from the

means of production.”¹⁰ The obverse of alienated labor would be the disciplinary history of painting since the Renaissance. Unlike the shop weaver, the painter (ostensibly) controls both the means and the product.

Thus the history of weaving as a form of labor, and as women’s work, became apparently essential to the medium itself. Where painting, as “free play,” would seem to transcend the economic division of labor (like the “magic” of blacksmiths or medicine men), weaving’s “labor” is caught *within* socio-economic determinations. Of course painting *does* occupy this social terrain. Yet it could be defined as masculine, in contrast to the feminine, laborious practice of weaving. Insofar as class and labor are already gendered terms, weaving is feminized because its practice represents labor, and nothing more.

As Stölzl’s remark made clear, pictorial weavings are, more or less, “a linguistic absence”¹¹ in the history of the Bauhaus. For weaving practice is, on the one hand, “feminine”—unable to sublimate the body and its labor into the transcendental realm of painting, and on the other hand, “feminized”—kept untheorized, or without discursive parameters. My purpose has been to give a theory of weaving so that it can be assessed on its own terms. For though grounded in process and labor, weaving has other possibilities from *within the limits* of its craft. As in this detail of Stölzl’s wall hanging [Fig. 6], contrasting material features, such as silky versus rough, or shiny versus matte, as well as contrasting weaves (vertical versus horizontal), show that the formal design is not merely imposed onto the material, but itself transformed by the different weaves and yarns harnessed in the process. The pictorial form, the materials, and the fabric’s structure are mutually entwined. The limitations of weaving, in other words, are not inadequacies. Rather, they help us understand weaving as a medium, which, like other disciplines, generates its own ideas.

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1. Gunta Stölzl, "Weaving at the Bauhaus" (1926), cited in Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 116. ↑
2. See Anja Baumhoff, "Gender, Art, and Handicraft at the Bauhaus" (Ph.D. diss., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994). Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993). ↑
3. Labor is considered "excessive" insofar as it introduces the body, toil, and process. As well, the feminization of labor can be seen throughout the writings of Karl Marx or Siegfried Kracauer, for instance. Though Marx does not explicitly state the correlation between feminine and labor, his discussion of alienated labor in industrial society tends to position a "subordinated" subject-worker—a figure who is made object, or subjected to the workings of the machine. Kracauer's essay "The Mass Ornament" makes this analogy more explicit in the figures of the Tiller Girls, whose bodies are analogous to the abstract functioning of the Taylorized machine and the female office worker who files papers. ↑
4. Johannes Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 147. Emphasis mine. ↑
5. Thus the weaving is not a receptacle that receives the artist's expression or design imprinted on it. ↑
6. Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight, PhD (New York: Greenberg, Publisher, 1927). ↑
7. Ibid, 117. ↑
8. Weber writes: "As to weaving there are indeed characteristic exceptions. In Egypt, Herodotus was rightly impressed by the fact that men (servile) worked at the looms, a development which took place generally where the loom was very heavy to manipulate or the men were demilitarized." Ibid, 116. ↑
9. Ibid, 26-27. ↑
10. Ibid, 159. ↑
11. The philosopher Luce Irigaray uses this phrase to refer to the discursive category of "woman." See *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Though weaving is indeed discussed, its implications for the Bauhaus have not been sufficiently explored. ↑

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