

reviews

The Textile Reader

Editor Jessica Hemmings

The Textile Reader is the first book to consider textiles in its role as a specific and distinctive area for study and research. In this it offers itself as an anthology of writing, predominantly from the last two decades, setting out the framework for textiles.

Arranged over six sections – touch, memory, structure, politics, production and use – this book offers a thematic organisation of the 45 chapters, suggesting ways of approaching ideas associated with textiles through a variety of modes including poetic, diary, blogging and conversational.

Many of the texts included have been published elsewhere, but their power within the field of textile study and practice lies in the conversations that Hemmings highlights between contributions: Sue Prichard's questioning of collecting and categorisation strategies within museums and textile collections immediately precedes Robyn Healy's notion of cloth's mortality and ways in which decay and degradation challenge the authority of museum collections, thus establishing a subtle dialogue about the role of textiles within the museum context. Similarly, Anni Albers' treatise on weaving, which observes the lack of technological advancement in the structuring of cloth, is set alongside Suzanne Lee's blog which records her sampling and testing of BioCouture, or grown cellulose textiles – it is as if the science has finally caught up with Albers' vision and quest, marking cross-generational thinking and practice.

The selection and organisation of the texts found within *The Textile Reader* is undoubtedly a difficult and highly contentious task, which Hemmings has managed with a subtlety that reveals gaps and connections between writers of textile. Some of the texts are strategically positioned to underpin the whole reader; such as Susan Bean's text on Gandhi's choice of cloth and clothing as a political tool, and Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use', which questions the role of handcrafted textiles; themes repeated and echoed throughout.

What Hemmings offers is an opportunity to consider the structure of textiles as a practice, a concept, a mode of production and a language. The textiles field urgently needs such an anthology that champions these individual contributions, brings them together to frame textile practice and further to promote this undervalued field lying between art and craft realms.

This is a book that will undoubtedly become a key resource for all those interested in considering the location of textile practice, but also for those who seek to understand and challenge textile practice's perceived inferiority as a mode of practice.

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