

Reviewed by Patricia Malarcher

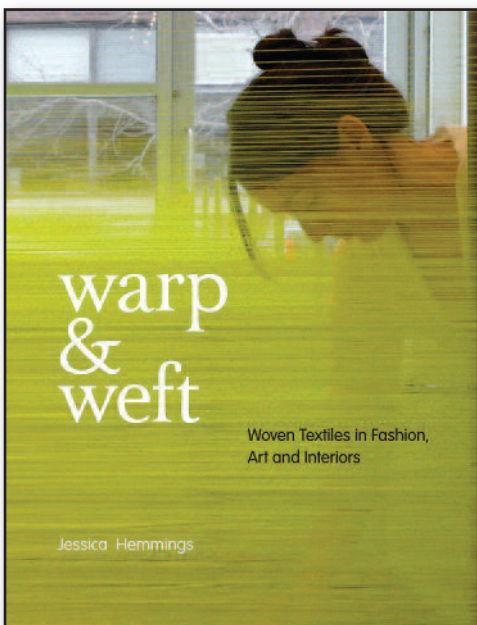
Warp & Weft: Woven Textiles in Fashion, Art and Interiors

By Jessica Hemmings

Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2012

ISBN: 978-1-4081-3444-3

Don't let the textbookish titles of Jessica Hemmings's two new books dissuade you from exploring their stimulating and surprising contents. *Warp & Weft: Woven Textiles in Fashion, Art and Interiors*, a succinct survey of radical new directions in weaving, introduces many projects that could



not have been imagined a decade ago. For *The Textile Reader*, Hemmings gathered a rich and astonishing selection of writings that collectively delve deeply into the cultural significance of cloth and the practices that produce it. Hemmings, who frequently writes for the *Surface Design Journal*, is Head of the Faculty of Visual Culture at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Ireland. She is also a peripatetic scholar whose global research is reflected in the international thrust of both books.

In *Warp & Weft* (a title taken from a 2010 exhibition at the Oriel Myrdding Gallery, Carmarthen, England), each chapter encompasses a broad category such as thread, sound, or motion. This allows even-handed coverage of diverse genres such as experimental studio art, environmental

installations, innovative fashions, and industrial weaving. Thus, in "Light" one finds a factory-made tweed with reflective elements for cyclists' clothing as well as a room-size fiber optic web. Hemmings's organizational strategy also permits techniques like jacquard weaving to come up in more than one chapter.

Warp & Weft predictably covers weaving in 21st century materials like electroluminescent light cables and laser-cut strips. Also included are unorthodox uses of timeless materials, as in Sue Lawty's interlacing of flattened lead strips. Many of the projects cited involve intersections of weaving with other disciplines, such as engineering and architecture.

Throughout, the book documents the application of computer technology to textile processes, sometimes providing new insights into long-held ideas. For example, diagrams for patterned weaves have often been compared to musical notation. In "Sound," Hemmings writes of the collaborative project *Let the Loom Sing, and Let the Music Materialize* in which the same binary code is used to transpose musical information into a loom and, conversely, to create sound from weaving information.

Among other innovative projects discussed are Barbara Layne's garments with expressive LED elements, Maggie Orth's use of electric circuits to change the colors in fabric, and Suzanne Tick's weaving of recycled hooks from dry cleaners' hangers.

The Textile Reader

By Jessica Hemmings

Berg, London and New York, 2012

ISBN: 978-1-84788-634-7

The Textile Reader, an anthology of 45 texts by 45 authors that fills almost 500 pages, is a delicious read as well as a major contribution to textile scholarship. Everything here was previously published; some parts were segments of books while others appeared in small circulation journals or limited edition exhibition catalogs. A quick scan of the authors reveals not only prominent textile authorities including Anni Albers, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, and Rozsika Parker, but also well-known writers such as Italo Calvino, Alice Walker, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

In this unexpected mix of essays spiced with literary gems and an occasional oddness, Hemmings has laid a foundation for a grand conversation. It is a treat to be able to move from



"1440: The Smooth and the Striated," an intriguing analysis of textile surfaces by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to "Weaving as Metaphor and Model for Political Thought" by critic Arthur Danto and then to "The Blank Page," Isak Dinesen's short story on linen weaving in a cloistered convent. A reader with a long memory might recall that "Reflexive Textile" by Philip Beesley first appeared in the *Surface Design Journal* in 1999.

For every essay like Matilda McQuaid's "Stronger, Faster, Lighter, Safer, and Smarter"—a curator's statement on the *Extreme Textiles* 2005 exhibition of hi-tech fiber at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum—there is a piece that pulls in a different direction, such as Peter Stallybrass's moving reflection on human experience, "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things."

Important insights into the place of textiles in the art world are provided by Elissa Author's "Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960–80," which led to her book *String, Felt, Thread* (2009, Minnesota Press). The political power of textiles is discussed in Susan S. Bear's "Gandhi and Khadi: the Fabric of Indian Independence."

The book is enriched by Hemmings's introduction to each piece of writing, placing it in context, and a bibliography suggesting further reading at the end of every section.

—Patricia Malarcher is a studio artist, independent writer, and former editor of *Surface Design Journal*. She lives and works in Englewood, NJ.