Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

Weaving Abstraction

Review Essay on Charlotte Johannesson, Save as Art? @ Kunsthalle Friart, Fribourg

Tobias Ertl

While the historical relationship between textile work and a gendered division of labor has recently gained prominence in art history, the parallels between the loom and the computer have received less attention. In this essay, I discuss Charlotte Johannesson's solo show *Save as Art?* at Friart to explore the connections between weaving and coding as well as between radical leftist politics and 1960s–1970s countercultures.



On one of the woven tapestries that hang freely from the ceiling, a low-res world map in bright magenta stands out against a dark background. In the lower half, as if simply another continent, the artist's portrait is indistinctly outlined in the same color, pixelated, traversed by oblique, barcode-like lines. Smoke rises from a cigarette in her mouth, almost reaching the tip of South America. Like warp and weft in the loom, self and world appear here to be made of the same stuff, reduced to a pattern of pixels, dissolved into zeros and ones.



Charlotte Johannesson, *Self-portrait*, 1981–86. Computer graphics plotted on paper, 23.5 x 31.5 cm, © Charlotte Johannesson. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

In the center of the image, the words «SAVE AS ART? YES/NO» appear as in a pop-up window. The question, from which the title of Charlotte Johannesson's solo show at Friart is derived, speaks to the profound skepticism she holds towards the art institution and its mechanisms of canonization. But if it wasn't art before it could be stored in the museal archive, if it wasn't art when it was produced, then what was it?

Johannesson (Malmö, 1943) is a self-taught artist who rarely worked in the context of a professional studio and mainly at her home. In the 1970s she produced weavings with countercultural and leftist political imagery which she sometimes showed in galleries – almost never outside of Sweden and mostly within her own circle of friends. In the early 1980s she switched machines, moving from the loom to the Apple II microcomputer and a plotter with which she programmed colored digital prints. Later on in the same decade, she eventually abandoned the digital image when it became, in her own words, too easy to do, and more recently she turned to painting and lacemaking. Overlooked for decades, her work has recently received some institutional recognition following a retrospective at Madrid's Reina Sofia in 2021 and the inclusion of her work in Cecilia Alemani's 2022 Venice Bienniale.

Friart's survey of Johannesson focuses on work from all stages of her career. A selection of weavings (some original, some reproductions from surviving design patterns) and digital prints is installed on the mezzanine floor of the Kunsthalle's industrial building. Recently produced paintings, weavings and lace works are exhibited on the upper floor, while a small room in the basement displays photographic documents and digital work stored on floppy disks in a vitrine and viewable on projection screens.



Exhibition view, Charlotte Johannesson, *Save as art?*, Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Python. Courtesy of the artist and Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg

Walking through the exhibition, I get the impression that principles of repetition, reproduction, and remake –procedures that elude modernist notions of originality – are central to Johannesson's way of working and thinking. The woven self-portrait *Save as Art? Yes/No* (2019), for instance, is recycled from a 1983 digital graphic that is itself varied in a series of plotter prints. Here, the combined image of face and map, rendered in dots and broken lines, appears in horizontal (i.e. screen) format, the continents forming an extravagant hairdo or something like a virtual extension of the brain. In the more recent series, the digital abstractions are rematerialized in fabric. I would like to suggest that Johannesson's choice to reuse her earlier digital material in a new series of weavings (semi-automated this time, with a digitally controlled loom) can be read in the light of a fundamental homology between the loom and the computer as abstract machines, which grounds her practice in general.

If, in an act of transposition from one medium to another, it appears as if the textile is imitating the digital image, this only conceals that the digital image was already imitating the textile. The techniques of weaving and coding images both depend on mathematical abstraction and are intertwined with the history of automation. The homology has been noted from early on. «We may say most aptly,» notes nineteenth-century mathematician Ada Lovelace about one of the prototypes of the modern computer, «that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.». [1] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b1] Even before Jacquard's invention, the production process of weaving depended on the digital abstraction of the grid pattern. [2] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b2] Johannesson states that she discovered the «synchronicity between the

two machines» when she realized that the grid paper on which she designed her weaving patterns had the same dimension – the same number of pixels – as the images she could make with her early home computer.[3] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b3]Contesting the idea of artistic «progress,» the work's sequence unfolds as a joyful repetition, abundant with difference and invention, establishing circuits between the digital and the analogue, ink and thread, matter and code.

II

Seeing the work for the first time, it immediately struck me as edgy, uncompromising, and extremely well aged. Like with any true pioneer, Johannesson's work radiates beyond its own time. It is not so much the countercultural imagery itself – short-circuiting between the Californian cyber-hippiesque, British punk and glam, and the language of the radical left – or the singular and rather idiosyncratic combination of motifs – pixeled avatars, angels, cannabis leaves, cartoon characters, safety-pins, computers, brains, maps, soldiers, ballot boxes, mermaids, guns, planets and spheres, palm trees, caravans, mathematic formulas … – which I find most exciting, but the individual pictorial solutions Johannesson finds for each composition and the consistency with which the work presents itself as a singular artistic project, or rather, as a life project.

Undoubtedly, the current appeal of Johanneson's work can be partially attributed to retromania, through which the digital primitivism of early computer game aesthetics, for instance, is hailed as a prefiguration of so-called post-internet art. But there is more to it. What makes Johannesson's works look contemporary today is rather the way in which the folksy, utilitarian and domestic qualities of weaving are dissolved in the negative spirit of punk and later translated into the new medium of the personal computer. Weaving, in Johannesson, is a dissident and wayward practice, and it is primarily through material dissonances, not political content, that its radicality is conveyed. Aloof from both high modernism and the folkloristic, her textile products are handmade though without pretension to virtuosity or authenticity. The stereotypical association of the textile medium with the domestic and the feminine is countered by visual equivalents of the electrified noise of (proto-)punk and a blatant, joyful embracing of the technicality of the machine. Just as Woody Guthrie's folk guitar, hers was a machine that «kills fascists»; indeed, it was in such terms that her work was received by the (local) press: «The loom is her weapon against repression». [4] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b4]



Exhibition view, Charlotte Johannesson, *Save as art?*, Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Python. Courtesy of the artist and Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg

After entering the exhibition, weavings from the early to late 1970s (or replicas after the original patterns thereof) are loosely affixed to the walls with the aid of wooden latches. What is striking is a certain carelessness or deliberate poverty when it comes to the choice of materials. This is not the kingdom of good craftmanship where the honesty of the profession is signaled by precious materials, their authenticity belonging to vernacular traditions and communities. Rather, Johannesson used synthetic fiber, wool, hemp (she sometimes even added non-textile material like wire, paper, or safety pins to the finished tapestry) in the same patchwork-like fashion in which she combined iconographical elements. The latter's provenance is mostly mass culture, but there are some hints to the (religious) Western pictorial tradition as well. This mash-up imagery combines with words to form brief and catchy slogans, woven into the fabric in the same pixelated style as the image signs that are recycled from mass-cultural trashcans.

No Future (1977) shows an angel in profile with flying hair (or is it a winged Justitia with her blindfold?) who faces an odd and clumsy figure reminiscent of avatars in early computer games, a cyborg of sorts, covering their ears and weeping. Judged by its composition, the scene looks like an annunciation. In the preparatory pattern drawing on grid paper displayed in one of nearby vitrines, I recognize an object in the angel's hand (barely visible in the finished fabric) which is identifiable as a gun. This may perhaps be a link to the series of works produced the previous year and included in a Stockholm show the artist and her partner, Sture Johannesson, organized as a memorial after Ulrike Meinhof's prison death in Stammheim. In one of these works, a pixeled Snoopy, here retrained as a fighter pilot, shoots down a tank, flanked by the slogan «FREI DIE RAF» woven into a German flag.

Whether revolutionary justice or John Lydon's cheeky outcry, the message the angel brings is a violent one. The second figure, a pixeled alien human being, reappears in many works, including a 1970 vertical weaving with paper letters pinned to its surface spelling out the word «TERROR.» The figure could be read as the generic (male) citizen terrified by the political and countercultural revolutionary movements of feminism, pop music and anti-state

militantism. Angelic innocence is not Johannesson's game, as a work from 1972–73 makes already unmistakably clear. Here, Mickey Mouse conjures a roughly outlined putto from Aladdin's magic lamp while the words «I'm NO ANGEL» are shot from a novelty gun.



Charlotte Johannesson, *Chile eko i skallen*, 1973/2016. Wool, cinnamon stick, handwoven reproduction of a missing artwork by Tiyoko Tomikawa, 108 x 59 cm © Charlotte Johannesson Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

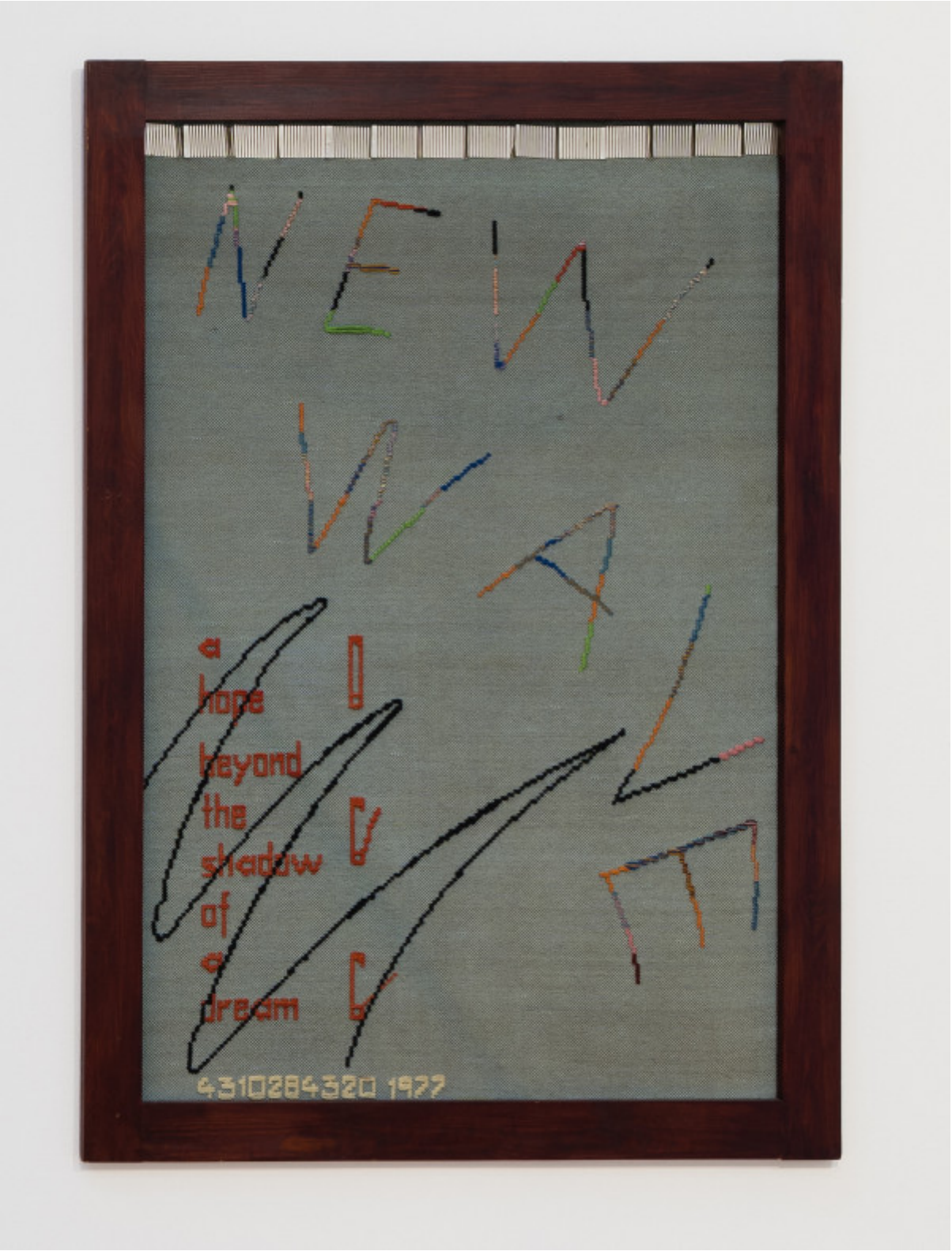
Many of the motifs can be read as partisan comments on current political events, both internationally and locally. In an almost abstract and particularly moving work, Johannesson mourns the victims of the CIA-backed neofascist putsch in Chile (*Chile Eko Skalen* [*Chile*

Echo in my Skull], 1973) while in another weaving which imitates the petty domestic kitsch of embroidery, a few pixelated figures representing the spectrum of Swedish political parties (from socio-democratic rose to fascist pig head) dance to what appears to be a Scandinavian proverb: «no choice amongst stinking fish dream-walking.» An appropriate statement for the year 2024 too, or as some might say, one that resonates with parliamentary politics in general.

III

Embedded as it is in far-left militantism and proto-punk sloganeering, there is yet another politics to Johannesson's woven work: a politics of form, one could say, but I would rather speak of a material politics, one which must take questions of the medium, technology, the mode of production and its concomitant modes of temporality and subjectivity into account.

One of the major characteristics of woven images is the fact that, in contrast to other pictorial techniques such as drawing, there is neither a material «support» or «ground» distinguishable from the image itself, nor is there any place for spontaneous expressivity. In weavings, medium and form are one, the product stands out as a record of a controlled mechanical process the outcome of which is – much like the later images realized on the Apple II – always programmed in advance. In her work, this medium condition appears ironic, for it locks punk's spontaneity and expressivity into the punctuated, digitized structure of the grid pattern and the repetitive, contemplative temporality of its realization on the loom.



Charlotte Johannesson, *New Wave*, 1977. Wool, handwoven, 156 × 107 cm, Stockholmmodern, Stockholm. Photo: Nottingham Contemporary

In one of the weavings the title *New Wave* (1977) appears written diagonally across the blue tapestry in flashy letters, creating the impression of a vibrant rhythmicality, as if, in a single gesture, the writing was applied to a surface and not woven in a painstaking and careful process. As demonstrated by the grid patterns on paper, some of which are shown at Friart, what appears to be uncontrolled handwriting is actually coding, filling out a pixel with pencil or leaving it empty, a process in which not a single inch is left to chance or spontaneous expression. These contradictions between process and appearance amount to a logic of impurity that manifests itself in the works as mimetic play. The qualities of gestural

handwriting or spontaneous linguistic expression, colored prints or silkscreen and other textile procedures like embroidery are mimicked, faked, by the weaving, betraying the latter's medium specificity.



Exhibition view, Charlotte Johannesson, *Save as art?*, Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Python. Courtesy of the artist and Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg

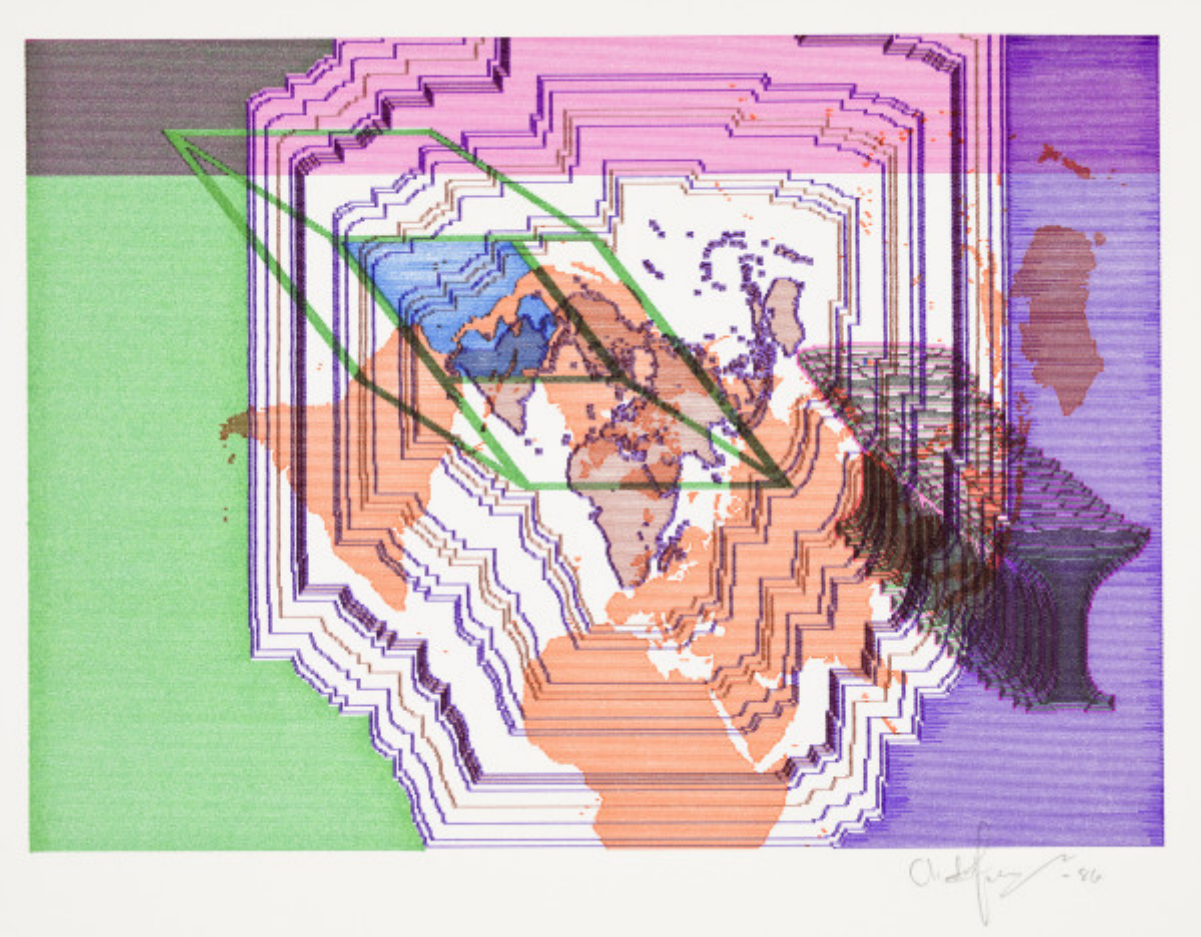
At the level of content, it is mainly the pop-cultural and political imagery confronting the folkloristic, domestic, and handcrafted expectation patterns of the medium that account for this impurity, one that also extends to signifiers of national culture. The horizontal tapestry *Street Life* (1976) presents a peculiar amalgam of national colors (German, Swedish, Jamaican) and could be read as an image of the modern metropole as a porous field, the state of dissolution of urban identity's roots in national culture, mediated by the post-colonial hybridizations of pop music.

Street Life is also the title of a 1973 Roxy Music song. Expanding on this association, early band member Brian Eno's sonic textures seem to offer a more fitting musical counterpart to Johannesson's visual work than the Sex Pistols. Eno's solo work from the early 1970s embodies a similar tension between the raw proto-punk energies of electrified guitar sounds and the quasi-digital production methods, alongside epic, spacious soundscapes, and repetitive loop structures. On the cover of the 1973 recording *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, Eno's polaroid portrait is serially depicted, possessing an optical quality which emulates the soft texture of fabric, his head appearing against the backdrop of a woven carpet's floral decor.

IV

Eno's feather-boa decorated portrait could easily (but does not) figure among Johannesson's 1980s digital prints representing famous personalities of which some are displayed in the show – next to the similarly androgynous David Bowie whose pixelated head repeats in six slightly different versions on Friart's gallery wall. A principle of Warholian indifference reigns in Johannesson's portrait gallery: Swedish tennis player Björn Borg appears next to

Richard Wagner, nineteenth-century writer Victoria Benedictsson next to Ronald Reagan, Afghan military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud next to Joseph Beuys.



Charlotte Johannesson, *Pray*, 1986. Computer graphics plotted on paper, 23.5 x 31.5 cm, © Charlotte Johannesson. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

Despite the aforementioned continuities between weaving and computing, Johanneson's small format digital prints – which she would write directly in code, monitor on the screen, and print out in a laborious, repetitive process on the plotter – take different turns when compared to the 1970s textile work. While the latter displays a punk sensibility, the former engage more strongly with a 1960s Californian countercultural heritage and its ramifications in cybernetics and early network culture, both thematically and stylistically.

In general, one could state that the works become more spacious and introverted. This is already visible in the titles and fragments of text which occupy parts of the pictorial space: from the aggressive brevity of the punk and political sloganeering («NEW WAVE,» «NO FUTURE,» «TERROR,» etc.) to the mushrooming depths of psychedelic journeys («the BRAIN is wider than the sky,» «TAKE ME TO ANOTHER WORLD,» etc.). This spatial expansion has a correlate in the material quality of the different mediums. In terms of its medium quality, the plotted print is nothing else than an automated drawing, pen on paper. In reintroducing the pictorial difference between image and material support, the computer prints also reintroduce perceptual illusionism and spatial depth. Abandoning the flatness of fabric in favor of a principle of layering, Johannesson employs these traditional pictorial means for the purpose of constructing virtual spaces.

Oscillating, as it were, between the flat surface of coded digits and the depth of rampant multilayered spaces, the computer prints introduce a new electronic imaginary in Johannesson's work. Pulsating optically, these images display dreamlike abstract patterns

through which objects (palm trees, rockets, globes, glasses, etc.) emerge and are repeated and distorted in illogical and diaphanous spaces. There are no original objects, only shadows. Every image is only an instance of an infinite series of variations (placing almost similar editions of the same motif next to each other, the hanging at Friart makes this perfectly clear). In the end, they all add up to one big, stoned dream of the «world wide web.»

In this pixelated universe, many more palpable signs of the connection between psychedelic hippie culture and cyberculture can be found. The computer is reflexively depicted as the medium which links self to world (*Me and My Computer*, 1981–86), and the world is not locally or phenomenologically confined but represented in its planetary dimension. The recurring imagery of globe and world map, in combination with the conception of space as both a virtual interiority and a mediatized extension of the brain, culminates in what could be called a panpsychism of the digital condition: «The BRAIN is wider than the Sky.» It seems likely that Johannesson was familiar with Steward Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* (1968), possibly sympathetic to the ideological brewage it contained, namely a mixture of libertarianism, cybernetic communalism, computer engineering, and cosmic holistic worldview. [5] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b5]

As is symptomatic of the entrepreneurial turn of hippie culture, her work also took a somewhat more commercial direction with the Digital Theatre, a production studio for graphic design and a platform for multimedia and computer art she cofounded with her partner in Malmö in 1981. On one of the archival photographs displayed in the basement, we see her proudly sporting a rainbow-colored Apple sweater after returning from her Californian voyage in 1981 where she had met with Steve Wozniak and other pioneer computer engineers and entrepreneurs.

At least retrospectively, at this point her work enters dangerous – or differently dangerous – political territory. It would be easy, albeit necessary, to critique the ideological configuration which shows in Johannesson's work in the '80s as a naïve expression of the *Sturm und Drang* phase of the Internet, where romantic hopes have long been absorbed by the vitalist and libertarian ideology of capitalist corporations, Big Tech's surveillance apparatus and, more recently, the neofascist turns of net culture. But this would also mean to limit its analysis to either iconography or the history of ideas. As mentioned, there is a material politics to Johannesson's work, one which is connected to the production process and which allows for an interpretation of her digital work as being somewhat at odds with the immediate ideological context in which it emerged. Looked at through the prism of production, a facet of Johannesson's digital work shows as almost the direct opposite of the libertarian subjectivist worldview and the productivist «anything goes» mentality of so-called creative digital industries. What emerges is a much less harmonious, a much more dialectical picture of the relation between subjectivity and technology than what is implied in its holistic ideological content. Johannesson's works, I wish to claim, reflexively register their production process as a desubjectifying effect of technological and social abstractions. Among other things, this has to do with the history of weaving.

V

Despite decades of criticism by feminist struggle and scholarship, the feminization of textile production and its concomitant exclusion from the canon of artistic modernity remains a powerful aspect of contemporary culture. One of the key tropes of Western art history's reduction of weaving to a mere «decorative» art is the practical and theoretical relegation of femininity to spheres that border on but are alien to the humanist definition of the subject: machinery and natural reproduction.

In her cyberfeminist classic *Zeros + Ones*, Sadie Plant sketched the manifold historical and logical connections between textile production, digital culture, and gendered labor. Textile and software, she writes, have «no authenticity, no essence» and can thus be used as machines to attack the patriarchal discourse of originality and authorship. [6] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b6] Plant's argument rests on a critical reappropriation of the sexist naturalization of textile production as an evolutionary function of natural reproduction. Quoting Sigmund Freud's comments on weaving as example of women's incapability of true invention, she writes: «Their work is not original or creative: both the women and their cloths are simply copying the matted tangles of pubic hair.»[7] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b7] Women are not the masters who use technology to their own ends, they are an immanent part of a natural process. In her seminal study of the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus, T'ai Smith quotes Oskar Schlemmer's remark that «[w]here there is wool, there is a woman who weaves, if only to pass the time.» [8] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b8] Weaving is not even labor, but a pastime, almost reduced to being a mere bodily function of female anatomy.

One can easily turn this misogynistic logic on its head, for instance by referring to Karl Marx's comments on productive labor. From the standpoint of developed industrial production, individual artistic activity within the realm of its traditional forms of expression – the male domain of «autonomy» – appears to be rather primitive when compared to the cooperative potential unleashed by the mechanization and socialization of modern labor. The poet produces his work «as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of *his own* nature.» [9] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b9] The same can be said about modernist painting. To rephrase Schlemmer: where there is canvas, there is a man who waves his brush around in public. Marx's statement about the «naturalness» of poetic production has often been understood as a utopia of non-alienated labor, but he is rather mocking the outdated character of the individual artistic craft in times of universal socialization and division of labor, a process in which the loom assumes a key role.

Retrospectively, the history of modern art can, among other things, be told as the male subject's institutionalized resistance to collective processes of industrialization, instrumental rationality, and the functionalization of culture. The aim of the ideology of autonomy was to uphold the illusion of self-determined creativity amidst the increasingly social and technological mediation of the world. The materialized space of this ideology is the studio, a private production facility connected to the public sphere via the market and the art institution.

Johanneson's work stands – quite literally – outside the professional realm of autonomy, opposing its logic. The use of the home as workshop occupies a paradoxical place in her practice for it combines the presumed asociality of the domestic space – its ascription to a naturalized realm of pure utility and pure pastime – with productive technologies that exhibit a higher degree of socialization than most media used in professional artistic studios at the time. Johannesson's work process is both distinct from and connected to the general mode of social production, the loom and the computer being key technologies in the development of capitalism's industrial and post-industrial phases respectively, but it makes these technologies operative in the context of an individual production which is neither autonomous art nor its functionalist negation.

VI

As much as the question of medium is crucial for Johanneson's work, it must be said that it has nothing to do with the discourse of medium specificity that played such a vital role in the recognition of weaving and its female agents. Johannesson's work is not in conversation with artistic modernism. It has no point of intersection with the ‹feminist art› of Judy Chicago and

the likes, or with the «Fiber Art» wave of the 1960s–70s, where the abstract and freely sculptural («off-loom») treatment of raw textiles was seen as a means to ennoble female practice as fine art. Neither does it oppose high-modernist notions of universality by recourse to the vernacular as a signifier of a resistant femininity or communality, a trope especially familiar to the art world in the last years. Conversely, its opposition to the local craft image of weaving is founded not on some high-modernist idea of the universality of medium, but on the international style of cannabis, safety pins and anti-imperialism.

Needless to say, Johanneson's work is at odds with the current liberal feminist attempt to integrate women artists into the institutional canon of artistic modernity by the token of claiming the textile medium's relevance for modernist abstraction. Two current exhibitions are symptomatic in this respect. *Weaving Abstraction* opening in March 2024 at the Metropolitan Museum, New York reiterates an anthropological hypothesis known since the 1970s as the ‹carpet paradigm›, which claims that the grid structure of weaving and ornamental, non-figurative structure of textile work from all epochs indicates abstraction as an anthropological constant. Hung next to prehistorical Peruvian textiles, work by weavers such as Anni Albers, Sheila Hicks, or Leonore Tawney can thereby be presented as a «firm commitment to abstraction as the language of modernity.» [10] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b10] Although more subtly located in the historically specific configuration of the twentieth century, *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art also presents itself as a politics of reintegration of the excluded, resting entirely on the modernist framework and the aim to use the formerly dismissed textile medium as «vehicles to craft subject positions and to voice collective histories» within the liberal art institution. [11] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b11]

Whereas feminist counter-modernism (an opposition to modernism's sexism articulated within modernist discourse) attempted to elevate textile production to high art and thereby get rid of its functionalist and domestic aftertaste, Johannesson's practice affirms the utilitarian connotations of its material procedures without collapsing textile work into the functionalist realm of use-value. We could characterize this gesture as a utilitarianism beyond utility or we could refer to socialist feminist art historian Lu Märten's notion of art production as «life work of an individual» [12] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b12] rather than professional institutional practice. Johannesson in fact makes weaving and computing a feature of her everyday life, but we should be careful not to confuse this with the heroic (masculinist avant-garde) notion of fusion of art and life, in which «life» is a phantasmatic mirror image of art's public autonomy. Every production as imbricated in daily life is highly dependent on heteronomous factors (in the last instance economically determined), and thereby by no means «autonomous.»

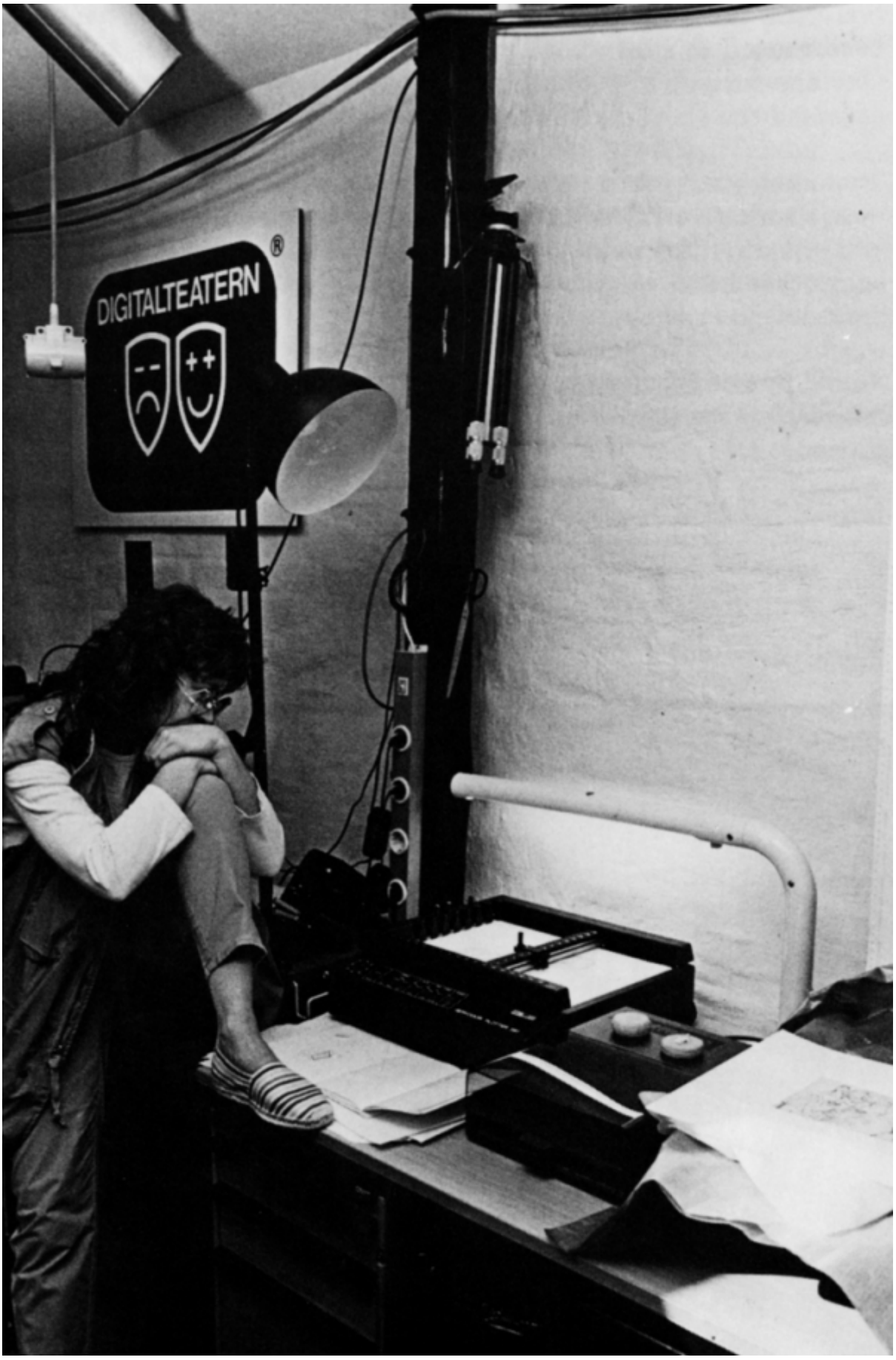
VII

Hence, the more radical discourses of activist practices connected to textile and computer media – the feminist ‹craftism› movement or the hacker culture –too seem an unsuitable framework for situating Johannesson's work. Unlike the anarcho-primitivism and heroic subjectivism embodied by DIY ideologues of the tool-time variant or some of its politized derivatives which rely on a strong sense of (subjective, political) autonomy, a contrary tendency is at work in Johannesson's practice: the undoing of subjectivity through a mechanized production process and its social implications. One could say that the undoing of the subject that Johannesson's work performs is synonymous with the recognition of its dependence on social as well as technological abstractions.

One detail of her 1970s weavings strikes me as particularly significant for revealing the extent to which her work can be read as a critique of the notion of autonomy in both art and social

subjectivity. On some of her tapestries, her social security number is placed on the margin of the image, in a position one would expect to find, were it a painting, the artist's signature. Perfectly ironizing the handwritten signature as signifier of a painting's authenticity, originality, and authorship by turning it into a reproducible pixeled pattern in thread, it also denotes the individual producer as a numerical abstraction – one that not only points to the cold logic of bureaucratic administration, but also to her dependency on the critical infrastructure of social systems and the feminized labor employed to their reproduction.

There is yet another sense in which the abstract machines of loom and computer help unmake the autonomous subject, closely related to the complexities of these machines itself and their interference with the creative process. In an article on the role of cybernetics in Black radical aesthetics, Mercedes Bunz has observed that whereas technophobic affects can often be attributed to the wounded ego of the white male subject position, Black and feminist radical politics often embraced technology as a «weapon against the mainstream figure of the universal subject.» [13] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b13] Drawing on Ramon Amaro's discussion of Jack Whitten's introduction of tools in the painting process, Bunz writes that «a collaboration with technology» replaces «a self-determined subject expressing itself.» [14] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b14] Technology is not seen here as an extension of the subject's cognitive apparatus or subjective freedom and intentionality, but as an objectification which restricts creative choice.



Charlotte Johannesson watching her plotter produce a piece of digital graphics at the Digital Theatre, 1983. Photo: Birgitta Olsson

It is presumably this restrictive character of the machine that led Johannesson to embrace digital technology – and to abandon it again when too many options became available through

the introduction of graphic software. Such a dialectic of subjective freedom and technological objectification has a parallel in Marx's account of the transformation of labor in the industrial revolution. In the *Grundrisse* Marx forwards the speculative proposition according to which «the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself» as a result of the increasing objectification of the labor process in fixed capital (machines). We can see this proposition beautifully illustrated in one of the photographs of Johannesson working at her home. Here the artist is sitting next to the plotter, watching the single ink pen materializing the zeros and ones in color on the paper, layer after layer, a process that could take up to twenty hours per image. She «steps to the side of the production process.» [15] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b15] There is something liberatory, it seems, about letting the machine do the work, contemplatively monitoring its process. Shifting between the different media of loom and computer, Johannesson registers a structural homology, situates her work within the changing developments of technology and actively puts these machines and their enabling restrictions to use for her creative choices.

Johannesson's works are records of the contemplative temporality of a production process enabled by the changing «organic composition» (Marx) of technologically mediated artistic labor. To be clear, even if this form of automated production could be considered a model for postcapitalist labor, it cannot be directly programmatic. Quite the opposite, the collective potentiality it harbors is here bound to its negativity and asociality as individual domestic production, its refusal to conform to normative forms of subjectivation through late-bourgeois art and labor. In this sense, the mode of criticality of Johannesson's work is intricately linked to the countercultural framework established from the mid-1960s onwards and which eventually transpierced into art discourse too. In the words of art historian Peter Gorsen, who witnessed this constellation at its historical moment, forms of «mixed media, psychedelic art, computer art, the cybernetic principle, techniques of reproduction», among other tendencies, pointed towards a «socially non-conforming artificial consciousness» [16] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#b16] that could only dialectically be linked to the rationality of political struggle. In its specific historical and contextual framework defined by 1960s and 1970s counterculture, feminism, and computer technology, Johannesson's digital = textile work aspires to such an obstinate consciousness. It embodies abstractions, put to the service not of art, production, or activism, but of contemplative life, of which her images are the records. Save as art? Yes!

[1] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a1] Ada Lovelace, quoted in *Charlotte Johannesson – Take Me to Another World*, exh.cat. Madrid, Museo Reina Sofía, April 7 – August 16, 2021, edited by Museo Reina Sofia, 2011, p. 42.
[2] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a2] See Birgit Schneider, «Digitality,» in: *Textile Terms: A Glossary*, edited by Anika Reineke et al., Emsdetten: Edition Imorde, 2017, pp. 71–75.
[3] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a3] Charlotte Johannesson, quoted in exh. cat. Madrid, p. 100.
[/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a4][4] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a4] Interview with Charlotte Johannesson in the tabloid *Kvällsposten*, March 1980.
[5] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a5] See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, eds., *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013.
[6] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a6] Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the*

New Technoculture, London: Fourth Estate, 1998, p. 189.
[7] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a7] Ibid., p. 42.
[8] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a8] T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 57.
[9] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a9] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1 (trans. Ben Fowkes), London: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 1044.
[10] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a10] https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2024/weaving-abstraction
[11] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a11] Lynne Cooke, «Modernist Histories: Braided, Interlaced, and Aligned,» in: *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2023, p. 31.
[12] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a12] Lu Märten, «Artistic Aspects of Labor in Old and New Times [1903]» (trans. Timothy Grundy), in: *October*, 178, 2021, p. 19.
[13] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a13] Mercedes Bunz, «Cybernetics as a Way Out of This World,» in: *Cybernetics of the Poor*, ed. Oier Etxeberria and Diedrich Diederichsen, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020, p. 296.
[14] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a14] Ibid., p. 297.
[15] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a15] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (trans. Martin Nicolaus), London: Penguin Books 1993, p. 705.
[16] [/b-n-l/weaving-abstraction/pdf#a16] Peter Gorsen, «Marxismus und Kunstanalyse in der Gegenwart [1971],» in: *Transformierte Alltäglichkeit oder Transzendenz der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1981, p. 235.

TOBIAS ERTL

Tobias Ertl is an art historian and writer currently based in Basel. His work is situated at the intersections of the history of contemporary art, social theory, and materialist philosophy. Currently he is a postdoctoral researcher in the SNSF-project «Real Abstractions. Reconsidering Realism’s Role for the Present» at Fribourg University.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13947487