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Entanglements – Cracks – Interweaving

Textile art as a medium of inclusion and sustainability

The social impact of the AFAR residency program

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General Statement: *In times of increasing geopolitical conflict and societal division, textile art has emerged as a compelling medium for fostering inclusion, sustainability, and cultural exchange. The Artists for Artists Residency Network (AFAR) exemplifies this potential. Through its residencies and exhibitions across Europe, AFAR has demonstrated how traditional crafts like weaving, embroidery, and tapestry can intersect with contemporary art to address critical issues such as gender equality, minority inclusion, and environmental sustainability. By prioritising international collaboration and amplifying marginalized voices particularly those of women and artists from Eastern Europe AFAR bridges the divides between tradition and modernity, East and West, urban and rural contexts. It fosters what can be described as emotional sustainability a concept embodying the enduring cultural connections formed through shared artistic practices.*

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1. Introduction: Textile Art as a Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity

Statement 1: *Once dismissed as women’s craft textile art is experiencing a revival. Its tactile and visually rich qualities make it uniquely suited to explore contemporary issues. From exhibitions at the Venice Biennale to thematic features in art journals exploring Textile Revivals’,ⁱ textile art has emerged as a genre that seamlessly intertwines deep-rooted tradition with contemporary innovation.*

1.1 A new interest in textile art

Textile art has attracted an unexpectedly high level of attention in recent years and has a considerable and often underestimated ‘innovative potential [...] for contemporary art production’.ⁱⁱ This has been represented in magazines, exhibitions, and at major events in the past few years. Two consecutive issues of the well-known German art magazine *Kunstforum* were dedicated to textile art in 2024: *Textile Revivals. Picking up the Thread Again (issue 297)* and *Fashion Art. Interweaving Art and Fashion (issue 298)*. Sabine Maria Schmitt, the editor of the volume *Textile Revivals*, states: “we are seeing a striking number of thematic and monographic exhibitions in this area, not only in galleries but also at major events, such as ARCO Madrid or the Venice Biennale.”

Where is this sudden interest in textile art – and its interdisciplinary combination with ceramics, wood, and photography, Sabine Maria Schmitt explains, “working with textile materials as an artist is ‘in’. And has been for almost two decades. [...] As a universal cultural technique, not only traditional textile art but also contemporary art with textile materials enables global connections and at the same time reflects regional identities.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Textile art is an enormously productive field today, one that particularly invites experimentation as “it allows artists to discover ‘material materialities’; they revitalise old techniques or significantly develop proven arts and crafts approaches to embroidery, weaving, knotting, and sewing”.^{iv} Additionally, plays an important role in the contexts of both collective memory and production and consumption, given its potential for criticism of social and gender-related injustices and capitalist exploitation.^v



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It is therefore a welcome and surprising development for an artform that has traditionally been at the bottom of the artistic genre hierarchy. For centuries, it was primarily associated with ideas of domesticity and femininity and subsequently devalued as typical 'women's art'. Its proximity to arts and crafts has always cast doubt on the artistic value of textile art.

1.2 The AFAR project

The current increase in attention given to textile art, the *Artists for Artists Residency Network* (AFAR) aims to use recent artistic developments in this field to improve the mobility of contemporary visual artists and curators, to network different European regions and to sensitise visitors to the socially relevant issues reflected in textile art. The focus was also on the goal of women with more opportunities for success in the arts. The project took place in five European countries Romania, Germany, France, Croatia, and Austria, included twelve artistic residencies in Zagreb (HR), Mulhouse (FR), Bucharest (RO), and Săcel, Maramureș (RO), four curatorial residencies in Zagreb and Bucharest, and twelve conferences in Zagreb, Bucharest and Vienna. The project concluded with three international exhibitions in Vienna, Zagreb and Bucharest.

The project was initiated by the Romanian Association for Contemporary Art founded in 2012 to promote contemporary Romanian art at the local and international levels through residencies, exhibitions, and publications. In 2015, ARAC established one of Romania's first international artist residencies, to provide sustainable support and develop the independent contemporary art scene in Romania. ARAC currently organises regular thematic residencies in Bucharest for emerging and established artists to promote artistic experimentation and long-term connections with the local art scene.

In cooperation with the Croatian Association of Fine Artists (HRVATSKO DRUSTVO LIKOVNIH UMJETNIKA, HDLU), the Goethe-Institut (Germany), and the Künstlerhaus Wien (Austria), ARAC developed the AFAR program to promote the artistic work of women in the four European partner regions and support their mobility. In addition to these partners, local partnerships were established

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with universities, academies, and NGOs in the partner countries. The Centre d'Art Contemporain de Mulhouse (La Kunsthalle) in France also became an associated partner.

The geographical focus was on the emerging art scene in Eastern Europe, still severely underrepresented in the international context. For example, artists and curators from Eastern Europe are rarely included in long-term collaborations and international exhibitions. Furthermore, international exchange projects and transcultural dialogue programs, in countries such as Croatia and Romania are currently limited and very poorly funded.

An important principle of the AFAR program was combining traditional textile practises and related art forms such as woodwork or ceramics with important current cultural and social issues, including ecology and inclusion.

An intensive dialogue with new target groups over a one and a half year period, public talks by artists and curators, and shared workspaces proved to be especially productive. This helped to stimulate an exchange of knowledge among partners, encouraging the available resources and experiences from other European initiatives to develop innovative models for residency programs. A strategy the mobility of artists and curators in order to support sustainable local cultural policy changes in Croatia and Romania. As well as this, the program's broad appeal has raised awareness of the importance of adaptability in the cultural field, particularly with regard to the sense of European belonging in contemporary visual arts.

The *Artists for Artists Residency* (AFAR) project has not only produced new artworks but has also opened up and promoted the artistic, cultural, and academic community of Zagreb to curators and artists from Northern, Eastern, and Southern Europe. The project, designed as a horizontal platform for the creation and exchange of new artistic and literary works, went one step further by developing new formats for workshops, artistic research, and lived experiences.

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1.3 Discussion

18 months following the AFAR project, results continued to confirm that although textile art is still often undervalued, in reality it has a significant social importance. It was found that particularly in the Eastern European context, textile art is likely to sensitise a broad audience to problems such as gender discrimination, the representation of minorities, sustainability, and intercultural exchange. The material qualities, methods and phenomena also prove to be an extremely rich metaphorical reservoir. Cracks, seams and transitions, entanglements, interweavings and interrelationships are just a few examples of textile-related phenomena whose metaphorical power can also be activated in the context of artist residencies, in dialogical and participatory art forms. Textile art has a valuable mediating function. Exhibitions and artist talks on textile art, conservative visitors. Who tend to focus on the traditional role of these to modern, future-oriented perspectives in art. Although some may view it as problematic, we consider such an 'instrumentalization' of art to be necessary for the reasons outlined below.

Projects such as the AFAR program offer low-threshold access to current trends and important social issues to a broader audience unfamiliar with or even hostile to modern art. In rural areas, an ideal opportunity into dialogue with the local rural population who often have little or no experience with contemporary art. But such residency programs in Eastern European cities and rural areas have also proven to be extremely fruitful for the artists themselves. In contrast to exhibitions and residencies in large Western cities, rural programs enable stronger networking connections between artists

These projects support a form of slow art, as they do not rely on a rapid succession of many events but take the time to arrive in a new environment, to perceive it and to engage in dialogue with the local population, a long-term exchange and sustainable connections. The inherent character of textiles, permanently intertwined and interwoven, seems paradigmatic for this form of artistic expression and it does not seem an exaggeration to speak of forms of emotional sustainability here.

1.4 Argumentation and structure of the paper



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This paper serves to support our goals in the project and to extend its reach. To explain this thesis and support our arguments, the historical development of textile art and its current issues and future challenges central aspects of the works created by the artists involved in the AFAR project in the following chapters to arrive at a final assessment. The common thread is formed by the theses formulated in the preceding statements.

First, we provide a brief insight into the history of textile art, reasons for the devaluation of textiles in the artistic field as a female craft. We aim to fundamentally reverse this negative assessment and explain why textile art fulfils all the criteria to be recognised as an exceptionally productive, inclusive, and international network promoting European integration. It will be illustrated using outstanding historical examples depicting how various textile artists managed to overcome the undermining of their art from the end of the 19th century onwards. how the process initiated by these pioneers accelerated in the 1960s and 70s. It will be shown that textile art, its proximity to the practical and the real, has always focused on socially topics such as gender equality, inclusion, and sustainability. We will conclude by explaining how the artistic potential of textile art can be better utilised and more effectively disseminated within European societies, which can be achieved through specific artist residencies such as the AFAR project.

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2 Cracks: Tradition Meets Transformation

Statement 2: *The historical categorisation of textile art as a female-dominated craft is both a curse and a blessing. To the marginalisation of textile art, it also creates a 'safe space' where women and members of vulnerable groups can explore politically charged topics largely undisturbed.*

2.1 A New Era for Textile Art

Assessments of textile art have a centuries-old tradition with systemic causes. A fundamental re-evaluation and change in perspective are, therefore, not to implement and realise. One possible reason for the diminished status of textile art is the focus on practicality; the creative process transforms fibres from plants, animals, insects, or synthetic fibres into fabrics to serve a purpose. Textile art has, therefore, traditionally been classified as a craft rather than a form of art within, leading to a long-term undermining of its status in the art world. This, combined with gender-specific prejudices where art forms associated with women are generally considered inferior, further contributes to its artistic devaluation. A third reason is that as textile art is based on tradition, it had fundamental problems establishing a role in the concept of avant-garde European art from the end of the 19th century.

2.2 Reappraisal by the Arts & Crafts Movement and Bauhaus

The first reassessment of textile art can be seen in the context of the Arts and Crafts movement in the second half of the 19th century and the Bauhaus movement at the beginning of the 20th century. This was an important first step towards recognition, based primarily on the questioning of sharp boundaries between art and craft and the artistic re-evaluation of craft. Influenced by the negative consequences of the Industrial Revolution, the Century Guild concentrated on a new approach to decorative art and design, focusing on handmade metalwork, textiles, and furniture.^{vi}



Two prominent representatives of textile art, May Morris and Theodosia Middlemore, fundamentally rejected industrially manufactured mass-produced products and focused on handmade individual pieces, accentuating their position as artists. From 1885, May Morris ran the embroidery department of Morris & Company and created her own designs. 'Honeysuckle' and 'Horn Poppy,' which, significantly, were often wrongly attributed to her father.^{vii} Her career further developed when in 1899 she was appointed head of the embroidery department at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. She was a social activist campaigning for better working conditions and fair pay, but above all, she strove to professionalise women's work.^{viii} Relatedly, there were also many female designers at the Glasgow School of Art specialising in textiles and embroidery. Among them were Jessie King, an illustrator whose designs were sold at the Liberty department store in London, and Jessie Newbery, who produced embroidery and taught at the school.^{ix}

Outstanding pioneer in textile art along with her husband, Robert Delaunay. The comfortable, colourful clothing she designed for women was stylistically notable as it expressed a forward-looking, active and modern lifestyle, a connection to the textile tradition of her Ukrainian homeland. In addition to creating colourful quilts, curtains, and garments, she also experimented with contrasting colours and collages, playing with forms that were distinctly removed from the functionality of the fabric. Their focus on the relationships between different colour tones led to the development of 'simultaneity.'^x

This is further echoed in textile art created in The Bauhaus movement (1919-1933). Formed in the Weimar Republic, the movement is significant as improved legal equality for women in Germany in this period meant that the art school opened their doors to female students. However they were mostly relegated to certain classes such as the weaving class, once again affirming that textile art was women's art.

For some time now, art scholars have agreed that the supposedly gender-equal admission procedures at the Bauhaus, as envisaged in the first program of the State Bauhaus in Weimar, were a myth. The all-male master craftsmen were critical of equal access to Bauhaus studies. Above all, the founder and first director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, fundamentally rejected the admission of women to the



architecture class or other, more male-oriented craft classes. On the one hand, it was considered that women would have little prospect of asserting themselves in these areas in the labour market later on, and on the other hand, the school wanted to ensure that the coveted places went to male applicants.^{xi} Although, as mentioned, the weaving class was opened for women in 1920, the career prospects were bleak due to Industrialisation as weaving as a craft was no longer profitable.^{xii} This is exemplified by expensive individual pieces that could not be marketed despite emphasising the artistic over the artisanal.^{xiii}

Further preventing professionalisation of female students was the fact that unlike in the other departments, it was not possible to be awarded certificate of apprenticeship in the weaving class. The fact that weaving was the only class to which women had unrestricted access reinforced the concept of the artistic undermining of textile art. The Bauhaus weaving department was at the bottom of the hierarchy; a differentiated perspective on the artistic dimension of textile art was not encouraged. The development of the Bauhaus weaving class can be seen as symptomatic of the development of textile art as a whole.

Nevertheless, the class continued to develop considerably in both artistic and technical terms. Two years after the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, Gunta Stölzl was appointed the first young master at the school and in 1929, Anni Albers took over as deputy head of the class. Experimenting with unconventional new materials and abstract designs solidified both Stölzl's and Albers' position as pioneers in the development of textile art and significantly revived the weaving workshop.^{xiv} Stölzl's innovative approaches focusing on modern industrial design rather than individual works and a renewed interest in technical teaching, lead to the weaving workshop being described as "one of the most economically successful workshops at the Weimar Bauhaus."^{xv} In 1932, Lilly Reich took over the management of the department, which she also helped to raise artistically through her collaboration with Mies van der Rohe. Among other things, she designed the first monochrome carpet. However, due to her early death, her work went unnoticed for a long time. The works of Gunta Stölzel are world-famous today but are primarily categorised as belonging to the Bauhaus collective.



“Today, it is above all the abstract carpet designs by numerous female artists such as Anni Albers, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Paul Klee, Lilly Reich, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp that are appreciated. As an artistic and craft challenge, carpet design was considered an important area of design at the Bauhaus. When moving to Dessau, many samples were to be made as copies and brought along – at Walter Gropius’ request. Thus, important pieces such as the children’s room carpet by Benita Koch-Otte were rewoven in Helene Börner’s Weimar workshop [...]). Contemporary copies were already being made at that time, although the term does not precisely capture the fact that they can be less a faithful reproduction of the original in terms of detail and more an independent piece of hand-woven work based on the original.”^{xvi}

2.3 Trends after the Second World War: *Weaving as Metaphor*

Despite the innovative and simultaneously productive concepts of the Bauhaus weaving class, this still did not result in fundamental paradigm shift. It was only after the Second World War that the time was ripe for a gradual rethinking in Europe, linked to the emergence of social movements such as the 1968 revolt and the rise of feminism. The *Fiber Art Movement* of the 1950s, using both natural and synthetic fibres to explicitly emphasise the aesthetic value of the works, represented a first step in this direction. The focus was now being placed on the utility of textile art productions as an important feature of their classification. Although this was not a radical departure from the functional, this new perspective favoured the integration of *Fiber art* into art.^{xvii} One notable artist of this context was the American Lenore Tawney. It seems symptomatic, however, that Tawney’s work – “three-dimensional textile works with ceiling suspension and monumental dimensions” – with which she “freed herself from traditional constraints” in the 1960s, initially went unnoticed and “only gained recognition at the end of the 20th century”.^{xviii}

Antonín Kybal (1901–1971) emerged as a particularly significant textile artist in Eastern Europe. Working at the interface between art and design and artisanal and industrial production, he was able to combine tradition and modernity in a remarkable way. He is considered one of the leading figures in



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the Czechoslovakian arts and crafts movement of the post-war period. Despite being obliged to follow the precepts of socialist realism under the communist regime as head of the textile studio at the School of Applied Arts in Prague, he still managed to transmit personal and critical accents. In the 1950s, he created a series of outstanding textile designs many of which adorned prominent buildings, including, the Old Town Hall in Prague, the Czechoslovak cultural centres in Warsaw and Berlin, and the Czechoslovak Embassy in Moscow. Another notable project was a collective tapestry depicting a map of Czechoslovakia with images of historical monuments, the Czech pavilion at Expo 58 in Brussels. He also made the tapestry *Česká píseň* (Czechoslovak Song) for the United Nations building in New York and designed the exhibition *Inspirace* (Inspiration) for the Czechoslovak pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, where the traditional Czechoslovakian crafts were presented in a visually and spatially impressive installation made of textile fibres.^{xix}

Similarly to works produced in the Bauhaus, Kybal's textile works integrated into architecture and dismissed as works of art in their own right. Due to the high quality of the concepts, textile art should have in principle, been given a higher value, but ultimately remained considered as decoration. As a useful and functional accessory it did not experience any completely new perspective and was ultimately subject to the ideas of architecture without any claim to an autonomy of its own. However, this connection opened up new connections in other areas: "Textiles not only define architecture in the case of the yurt or the tent. Our clothing, for example, is our first real 'home'. And [...] tapestries transform draughty castles into much more pleasant places to live. Both envelop the body – textiles in an intimate, personal way and architecture at a slightly greater distance."^{xx} Despite the appreciation of textiles by big names in architecture such as Le Corbusier, it continued to remain a design element to achieve a means to an end; to create atmosphere or improve functionality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, new concepts emerged that went far beyond such cross-border collaborations between architecture and design, concepts that abandoned the traditional path of craftsmanship with its feminine association's. These new perspectives were supported by the general spirit of the times as

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seen in various social changes and movements. As previously mentioned, there a significant increase in attention to social issues, feminist movements , and responsibility for cultural heritage in the visual arts. The strengthening of feminism had a positive influence, along with the associated political protests of 1968 and the related environmental dissents. As the editors of the magazine *Textile Forum* (1982-2013) explain, “textiles are becoming a key medium in contemporary art. Influenced by the social and political changes of the post-war period, artists used textiles to explore issues such as identity and culture.”^{xxi} Specialised exhibitions such as the *Lausanne Biennale* and the *Lodz Triennale* made a lasting contribution to improving the prestige of textile art and the artistic recognition of its key figures, as well as publicising its innovative potential.^{xxii} The geographical location of the two major exhibitions also suggests that interest in textile art in the East and West was a connecting link between the two politically separate blocs, even during the Cold War.

Came from women artists bridging America and Europe, such as the German-American sculptor Kiki Smith (b. 1954) and the US artist Sheila Hicks (b.1934), who lives in Paris. Hicks started with an analysis of indigenous weaving practices around the world and used these in a wide variety of ways in her work. Her book *Weaving as Metaphor* (2007) establishes a direct relationship between the ideas and images associated with textiles and her artistic work. Similarly, Kiki Smith, who is equally interested in ecological and postcolonial issues, shows in her exhibition *Entangled Worlds* (2024) how the imagery inherent in textile art can be used as an aesthetic strategy.

Mike Kelley (1954–2012), among others, had a strong influence on the innovative development of textile art that differed from design emerging from the 1980s onwards. He became known for his ‘sculptures made of worn plush and crochet goods’^{xxiii} such as *Dialogue #1 (An Excerpt from ‘Theory, Garbage, Stuffed Animals, Christ’)* (1991). Kelley ‘put[s] philosophical reflections on the relationship between body, voice, and authority into the mouths of the stuffed animals via a played cassette recording.’^{xxiv} During his studies at CalArts in Valencia (LA) in the 1970s, drew inspiration from a wide range of sources varying from spiritualism to punk and psychoanalysis to various subcultures. It is said that he was “fascinated by the intertwining of ‘authentic’ and fictional identities’ second-hand material,



also in the figurative sense of second-hand memories. Self is not master in its own bed, and perhaps that is why the beds (and bed memories) of others seem so attractive to dress oneself in them.”^{xxv}

2.4 New Tendencies: *Radical Textiles*

Kelly can certainly be considered one of the most important pioneers of current trends in textile art. Contemporary reclamation strategies of female and queer artists differ fundamentally from the early approaches of the 1920s to 1960s, where the focus was on recognising arts and crafts as valid artforms. The key themes represented in Kelly’s Second-Hand methods, such as memory and sustainability, are taken up, clarified, expanded, and, in some cases, radically radicalised. The exhibition *Queer Lives and Art: Radical Textiles* in June 2022 in London exemplifies this, as it examined queer forms of expression through textile art. It was no coincidence that the period in which the exhibition was on display coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Pride Parade in London. It included pieces that used life stories to demonstrate the narrative potential of textiles and, importantly, used collaborative formats – a connection reflecting the solidarity within LGBTQ+ communities. The exhibition also included participatory workshops aiming to involve a larger audience in designing a quilt under the buzzwords of inclusivity and identity.^{xxvi}

It should also be emphasised that female artists from Eastern Europe have also been able to successfully position themselves in these developments, which originally had strong Western roots. This can be seen in the development of textile art in Turkey, for which the opening of the carpet studio, *Halı Atölyesi* at the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts in the late 1960s, played an important role.^{xxvii} As Necmi Sönmez explains, the use of textile materials in contemporary art practice was considered something of a taboo for Turkish artists^{xxviii} who affirmed the difference between art and craftsmanship. “With the opening of the *Halı Atölyesi*, this changed fundamentally, [because] the academy director Asım Mutlu also introduced the subject of *Tekstil Sanatlar* (textile arts)”.^{xxix} Interestingly, today, “many [n] Turkish art historians [...] as the birthplace of the new Turkish, and also political, art that emerged in the 1990s, particularly in Germany”^{xxx}, which also deals with controversial topics such as death, exploitation, and



domestic violence. As a niche, *Halı Atölyesi* offers a kind of *safe space*, as it functions as an open space for production and discussion, thus enabling the development of modern textile art at the interface of political art and queer fiction.^{xxxii} In terms of the specific methods and materials, it is figuratively about breaks, interfaces and transitions in the individual biographies of artists and their collectively experienced history. A new narrative is emerging, one that tells of the liberation struggles of women and LGBTQ+ people and that offers a transgenerational account of the traumas and effects of macho dominance in the Turkish art world.^{xxxiii}

One example of this movement is the artist Gülsün Karamustafa (b. 1946), who was arrested during the Turkish military coup in 1980 and has processed this experience in her art in the form of “ironic reflections, bitter narratives, and experimental image creation” whereby her works constitute a “dialogue between seemingly industrial mass production and the appearance of individual”.^{xxxiiii} Necmi Sönmez cites another example *Halı Atölyesi* student Güneş Terkol (b. 1981) a member of the *hazavuzu* artists’ collective, and deals in her political art with incisive emotional experiences such as violence, loss, pain, horror, and traumatic memories. Since her first exhibition, Terkol has been using textile materials (velvet, fine cotton threads, sequins, linen) experimentally.^{xxxv}

Güneş Terkol’s works confirm Nihan Akdemir’s assumption that the growing interest in gender issues in art in general in the second half of the 20th century played a decisive role in the further development of textile art. Particularly with regard to difficult topics such as violence against women, , textile art has shown great potential for conveying political statements to a very broad audience that is not necessarily sensitised to such issues.^{xxxvi}

2.5 Interim Conclusion

Overall, it can be said that textile art has played an ambiguous role in strengthening the role of women in art throughout history. On the one hand, textile art was, and in some cases still is, devalued as ‘women’s art’. On the other hand, its niche character started to open up a safe space for female artists,



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allowing them to address politically relevant issues in their work dictatorships and autocracies. As key players in textile production, women were sometimes even able to achieve economic independence.

For other artists, textile art can clearly have a subversive potential that both and male members of the LGBTQ+ community use to express themselves freely often under the radar of the public. independent narratives without the need for justification, and to strengthen solidarity among the oppressed and marginalised, whilst finding their own artistic self-understanding.

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3 Interweaving: textile art as an intercultural and intracultural mediator

Statement 3: *Textile art plays a central role as an intercultural and intracultural mediator. It strengthens social cohesion within country by successfully including minorities through the recognition of their traditions. Furthermore, it can be used as a representative piece of evidence for uniting cultural diversity and as a tool at the international and intercultural level to effectively reduce tensions and asymmetrical relationships between East and West in the European context.*

3.1 Inclusion of minorities through recognition of their participation in cultural heritage

Textile art is rooted in the traditions of a country or specific ethnic group. With its pronounced regional variations, textile art also reflects the rich diversity within a country or a state, mirroring European ideas of unity in diversity to celebrate both individuality and interconnectedness. One example that reflects this is differences between traditional costumes which can have both an excluding and an including moment. Seen in the regional variations of the Romanian blouse, region and connected ethnic group in Romania has its own blouse tradition. To the trained eye, a German Transylvanian blouse from Sibiu is clearly different to a Romanian blouse originating from Wallachia. Visible within the country and at the same time help form the basis of regional pride, however they are not widely recognised outside Romania. At the international level, the ‘Romanian blouse,’ added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2022, thus acts as an inclusive and integrating factor for the country.

The example demonstrates the inclusive character that can emanate from different traditions of textile art within a country. Building on this, textile art can be used by a minority to represent themselves and protect against exclusion or discrimination. already been recognised in some countries, outstanding example in this context of the Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas (b. 1978) who comes from the Roma minority “has become known worldwide in just a few years with her textile narratives on the history of the Roma as a pro-European minority”^{xxxvi}. In her work, she uses recycled clothing and – like Louise



Bourgeois – the needle with its ‘magical’ power to repair the damage^{xxxvii} which could be interpreted as a method of processing collective traumas. Given the history of systematic discrimination against Roma in Poland and wider Europe, it is absolutely remarkable that she was commissioned in 2022 to design the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale as the country’s representative:

The project by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas is inspired by the Renaissance Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara; it expands the European iconosphere and art history with representations of Roma culture, which is often overlooked. The interior of the Polish pavilion consists of an installation: twelve panels covered with depictions of the twelve months of the year in large-format textiles, which draw from the Renaissance astrological frescos from Palazzo Schifanoia. The symbols of the palace, including zodiac signs, the decan system, the time cycles, and the migration of images across time and continents, stand as visual and ideological points of reference, which the artist inscribes in a Polish–Roma identity and the vernacular historical experience, building the affirmative iconography of the largest European minority.^{xxxviii}

The state’s recognition of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’ artistic achievements exemplifies how textile art can help to overcome internal cultural conflicts and collective traumas in the long term through mutual interest. Because of the intersectional entanglement of the traditional discrimination against female artists like Mirga-Tas as female members of a minority, the potential of art in general and textile art, in particular, is also reflected here in the development of strategies for the self-empowerment of women.

3.2 Textile art as an intercultural mediator between East and West

The technique of weaving or knotting reveals its making. It requires not only manual dexterity but also unconditional solidity. Some terms used to characterise good artistic work are characteristically borrowed from textile art when one speaks comparatively of the closeness and density of a painting or of the way its elements are linked. In an artistic technique that is so closely tied to the fundamentals of craftsmanship, every deviation from tradition must be justified by the rules of the trade. (Heinz Fuchs).^{xxxix}

Textile art promotes intercultural exchange and intracultural dialogue with minorities, as well as a cross-border network of artists. As mentioned, the successes of the *Lausanne Biennale* and the *Lodz Triennale* where female Eastern European artists were successfully featured, points to the great inclusive potential of textile art. . In the occasionally problematic European East-West context, textile art as a genre unfolds the possibility of cooperation



on equal terms, whereby the international transfer movements of textile art have traditionally extended far beyond the borders of Europe.

As early as 1971, for example, the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994) designed a tapestry showing national territories in their geopolitical affiliation as a world map. The tapestry was made by women in Afghanistan over many months with the Eastern Bloc represented by a huge, uniformly coloured red area. Between 1971 and 1977, Boetti further developed the project in Kabul with the women and following the Soviet invasion, production was moved to Pakistan where they had found refuge.^{xi} Boetti's project exemplifies the possible international and intercultural 'interweavings' that textile art facilitates or sometimes even demands, in connection with the image. It also reflects the potential of textile art for long-term projects and sustainable collaborations that display remarkable resilience even in times of crisis.

Curator and art historian Iwona Dorota Bigos argues that traditional textiles can be excellently combined with the themes and perspectives of contemporary artistic practice. In the exhibition *Splendor tkaniny / The splendor of textiles*, shown at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2013, the exhibition's curator, Michał Jachufa, presented 'textile art in a broadly defined context of artistic genres, including painting, photography and object art.'^{xii} Two works Magdalena Abakanowicz were shown here.^{xiii} Beginning her career in the 1960s "with woven objects' has since been 'rediscovered' in recent years with major solo exhibitions for an international art audience".^{xiii} Furthermore, Abakanowicz's "innovative approach to textile material set in motion a long-term process of its rehabilitation and appreciation, which also had a lasting influence on contemporary art. For the young Abakanowicz, as for many other artists from the Eastern Bloc countries growing up in the 1950s, the use of weaving was an extension of painting, a way to escape two-dimensionality and at the same time to devote herself to abstraction."^{xiv} Textile art functioned as a particular niche in that it provided a *safer space*, in the 1950s as unlike in painting or sculpture, it was not required to follow the guidelines of socialist realism.^{xiv}

A little later in that period, the notable work *Armoire* (1971) was created by the Romanian-born textile artist couple Ritzi (1941-2022) and Peter Jacobi (b. 1935). It consists of an installation made of steel uprights with jacket-like objects woven from goat and horsehair which was hugely influential on the tapestry movement. As Bigos "For Ritzi Jacobi, who had moved to Germany after participating in the 1970 Venice Biennale, *Armoire* a reaction to the flood of colourful and cheap textiles in the Western world and a reminiscence of the traditional culture in Romania, where jackets and other folk textiles were still woven from goat hair in villages in northern



Transylvania. [...] The work shown broke all the conventions previously ascribed to textile art and caused a minor sensation at the Biennale at the time.”^{xlvi}

Despite all the similarities, Bigos emphasises that this work differs significantly from Abakanowicz in terms of the methods and techniques used in its production. Whilst the Polish artist ‘worked very spontaneously, the Romanian (Ritzi Jacobi) created fabric drawings that she only later translated into highly complex textile constructions.’ These large-format preparatory works created by Jacobi on rice paper, are artworks in their own right. As Bigos states, “looking at the work *Environment*, 1969, which Ritzi Jacobi presented together with her then-husband Peter at the Venice Biennale in 1970, it is easy to see the conceptual process of combining newly defined objects with the characteristic fabric cables and woven objects with other materials that she would later use so frequently.”^{xlvii}

The works of AFAR artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin show that textile art emerging from a local context can also be used to connect the community, history, and environment. Kamruzzaman Shadhin, is a versatile artist whose work includes installations, performances, videos, and interventions in public spaces with a highly participatory approach. The central themes of his work are migration, the environment, and history, which he discusses in close collaboration with the local population; with the results flowing directly into his work. These interactions are combined with community processes with an intensive examination of the materials he uses. His main interest lies in the traditions of the Bengali communities, which he connects to current geopolitical, ecological, and colonial historical issues in the form of art-based research. He is the founder of the *Gidree Bawlee Foundation of Arts*, an organisation based in the village of Balia that embeds art in local contexts as a means of exchange and transformation. This approach, connects cultural heritage with contemporary and global challenges, making it tangible for people with little previous experience of modern art. It is ideal as a method of transferring art to other areas and an exemplary way to connect past, present and future productively.

3.3 Interim Conclusion

This section has shown that by creating an inclusive environment for minority groups to flourish, textile art can be an intercultural and intracultural mediator. It can symbolise cultural diversity and act as an instrument for



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social cohesion, as exemplified by the Romanian blouse or the works of Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, where Roma culture is confidently presented as an integral part of European history.

Furthermore, textile art supports an intercultural exchange between East and West in a particularly effective way by building bridges between a variety of cultural and historical traditions. The works of Alighiero Boetti, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Ritzi and Peter Jacobi show how textile art can be used as an intercultural form of expression to artistically reflect political and cultural realities while strengthening artistic networking and dialogue.

As the Romanian artist Otilia Boeru cautions, extremely important to strengthen current individual approaches to Romanian textile art through international encounters:

As a result of interacting with artists from other countries, I noticed common concerns, similar searches, but also differences in perspective given the different premises of textile art development. Thus, I began to look more closely at the recent past of local art, at the dynamics and social interactions that inevitably affected Romanian art. The sudden interruption of a local craft activity the transformation of the creative potential of craft practices into sterile mass production controlled by the state, broke the vital energy of the craft and stopped its development. Moreover, Romanian textile art was imposed a forced path, alienated from local resources. It is no wonder that it is now adrift, lacking identity and leaving no clear mark in the contemporary art space.^{xlviii}

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4. Interweaving: The sustainable combination of traditional techniques with modern themes

Statement 4: *In textile art, tradition and modernity are united in a vivid and easily understandable way. As an important basis of European cultural heritage, it allows even the inexperienced viewer to experience the depth of dimension of the often- invisible interweaving of this heritage with all their senses.*

4.1 Tradition and Modernity

Many artists have turned to this possibility of combining tradition and modernity at a very early stage, and thus indirectly influenced the renewal of textile art. One example is the French artist Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) considered a key figure in modern tapestry who was known for his interest in innovative techniques as well as social and political issues of his time.

As Sabine Maria Schmidt explains, an outstanding example of this dimension of textile art is manifested by the development in tools used for creating works. She provides an example of the constantly evolving and now computer-controlled Jacquard loom, which offers endless possibilities for design.' many companies initially aimed to reproduce historical models as business models, today, they are developing new technologies – often in close cooperation with designers and artists. A substantial and highly creative market has emerged here.^{xlix}

Numerous artists have also rediscovered the creative potential of monumental wall designs, especially in the first two decades of the 21st century.ⁱ For example, Polish artist Goshka Macuga (b. 1967) presented two large-format woven photomontages, *Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that is not*, in the oval of the Fridericianum at documenta (13) in 2012. The production of the panorama carpets was associated with various actions in Kabul and Kassel.ⁱⁱ



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The combination of tradition and high tech can be seen as a novel , extremely productive, and multifaceted trend in textile art, opening-up new and innovative possibilities for artistic expression. the same time there is a self-referential dimension in that the medium used by the artists is implicitly critically questioned in the works.

Otilia Boeru, is an artist and lecturer at the Textile Art & Design department at the University of Bucharest who has written about the relationship between traditions and modernity in Romanian textile art. In a recent interview, she explained the importance of the relationship between her work and traditional forms of textile art which emphasize the historical and regional context of Romanian textile traditions.^{lii} She notes that while textiles have been an integral part of everyday life since ancient times, Romanian textile art as an exhibition-worthy genre evolved not from grassroots traditions but from the influence of the French classical tapestry school introduced at Bucharest's Academy of Fine Arts. This marked a significant transition from traditional, craft-based utilitarian textiles to large-scale artistic tapestries, supported by the state. Traditional Romanian textile produce such as wool rugs and embroidery, remained categorised as craft; celebrated primarily in ethnographic or utilitarian contexts without being elevated to the status of art. Therefore, top-down state commissions and support drove the adoption of tapestry as an art form, often linked to political and economic agendas. Over time, artists incorporated traditional local motifs and techniques, bridging the gap between imported styles and Romanian tradition, as seen in works like those of the Jacobi couple and Cela Neamțu.^{liii}

Once again the role of art in interconnecting these different traditions, which are considered as craft, is demonstrated by the intertwining of contrasting textile art traditions in Europe. On a personal level, Otila Boeru describes their journey into textile arts as similarly influenced from the top-down through education rather than familial traditions. Despite hearing family stories about textile work, they lacked a direct, hands-on connection to crafts. Instead, their engagement with textiles began during university, viewing the medium as a space for women's expression and a way to channel their heritage.

The artist also highlights the disconnect between traditional tools and modern textile practices in Romania, noting that equipment such as looms must often be imported. As a teacher, they strive to

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narrow the gap by exposing students to Romania's ethnographic heritage through museum visits, encouraging connections between classical convention and contemporary realities.

4.2 Ecology

The idea of combining tradition and modernity also has an ecological dimension as Sabine Maria Schmidt explains:

The revival of handmade textiles is not just a trend, but an international movement that is also associated with a deep respect for cultural heritage, craftsmanship, local traditions, and sustainable fashion. [...] While the long-established global textile trade is increasingly reaching its limits both economically and ecologically, ecological sustainability and economic fairness are being recognised worldwide as important parameters of this future-oriented universal economy.^{liv}

Production as an essential factor in 19th century industrialisation is still directly associated with devastating and destructive ecological and social consequences today. The development of industrial weaving production initially plunged millions of people into poverty, and even today textile production in developing countries is often associated with exploitation and child labour. The catastrophic environmental consequences of dyeing and bleaching has also caused contaminated rivers and lakes.

From today's perspective, however, textiles are 'per se [considered] *slow objects*, objects whose manufacturing process remains visible at best. We can see how something was crocheted, knitted, woven and processed, what materials it is made of, which is often still the case even with industrially produced goods.^{lv}

explicitly responded to the negative environmental impact of textile production in their work by and/or explicitly expressing using environmentally friendly methods and sustainable processes. This is partly done by resorting to traditional techniques such as weaving and embroidery – some of which have gone



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out of fashion or largely been forgotten. sustainable solutions which also influences the fashion and textile industry.

This tendency is fully confirmed by Otilia Boeru, who, as we have already mentioned, did not participate in the AFAR project. Her work resembles a synthesis of all these significant points in the context of textiles and other forms of art. In our interview with her, she explained that she places a high value on ecological considerations in both the choice of materials and approaches to the exhibition. In her art practice, this is realised when making decisions about materials, such as sourcing, costs, and the impact on sustainability which are integral to creating artworks. Meanwhile, in her classes she magnifies a synergy between ecological awareness, economic conditions, and aesthetic expression. An example of this is exploring reusing non-biodegradable plastic to transform waste into valuable artistic works, highlighting the material's durability and accessibility for young creatives. Currently, she also embraces a zero-waste philosophy, preserving leftover threads and textile scraps and repurposing unconventional materials like electrical cables, which are integrated naturally into their projects. Recently, she has begun exploring natural dyes extracted from plants grown in a countryside garden, using these on locally sourced natural materials. Her commitment to sustainability extends to inspiring others around her to contribute to this practice. Recently, she has started to explore natural dyes extracted from plants grown in a countryside garden, using these on locally sourced natural materials. Although still in its early stages, it reflects the artist's evolving dedication to ecological practices in their art.

4.3 Interim conclusion

Textile art combines tradition and modernity and inspires artists to find innovative forms of expression. Pioneers such as Jean Lurçat paved the way for today's modern technologies such as the computer-controlled Jacquard loom have played a major role in opening up a new creative space for large-format, sophisticated designs.

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The ecological dimension also plays a central role today possibly in response to the problematic social and ecological factors has historically provoked to date. Nowadays, artists and designers are focusing on sustainable practices and a return to traditional techniques which are environmentally friendly. This reflects a worldwide trend towards 'slow fashion' and strengthens awareness of ecological and social responsibility in the textile industry. In addition, the interweaving of European traditions can be perceived through examining the influence of tapestry, from the original French roots to various artisanal traditions in Romania and the rest of Europe.

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5 Theory and practice – form and content: the AFAR concept as a reflection of textile interweaving

Statement 5: *The formal interplay of the AFAR residencies, exhibitions, and artist talks mirrors the evolution of textile art itself. Metaphors ingrained in textile craftsmanship—such as interweaving, tearing, and linking, the concept of the project demonstrates the creative potential of these aesthetic methods for issues like gender equality, promoting intracultural and intercultural exchange, and encouraging sustainability.*

5.1 Residency Programs: Catalysts for Cultural Exchange and Artistic Innovation

Residency programs are a vital cornerstone of cultural and artistic development, offering unique opportunities for creative exchange, collaboration, and reflection. These programs allow artists to immerse themselves in local traditions while addressing contemporary themes, exploring new materials, and pushing the boundaries of their practices. The AFAR project exemplifies how residencies can serve as platforms for bridging divides between tradition and modernity, rural and urban spaces, and local and global identities. With residencies in Maramureș (Romania) and Mulhouse (France), as well as exhibitions in Vienna, Bucharest, and Zagreb, AFAR creates spaces where craftsmanship, contemporary art, and pressing societal issues coincide foster meaningful cultural exchange and shared artistic legacies.

In Maramureș, the residency program embodies the synergy between traditional crafts and modern artistic innovation. This region, rich in its heritage of weaving, dyeing, and ceramics, provides artists with an ideal environment to delve deeply into its cultural and historical traditions while integrating them with contemporary ideas. Artists like Tanja Boukal, for instance, experimented with natural dyes under the guidance of Florica Zaharia, creating pieces that honoured local ecological practices while reinterpreting traditional techniques through a modern lens. Similarly, Željko Beljan collaborated with local woodworkers to produce site-specific installations, including a macramé football goal net that



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became a centrepiece of a community gathering. These works reflect the transformative potential of residencies to connect artists and communities, breathing new life into traditional practices while fostering cross-generational engagement.

The residency also inspired artists to explore broader social and ecological themes. Yana Bachynska's use of upcycled textiles, metals, and plastics illustrated how traditional craftsmanship could address urgent environmental concerns, while her proximity to the Ukrainian border added a layer of geopolitical reflection. Kamruzzaman Shadhin's *Săcel Stories*, an installation inspired by the flow of the Iza River and local architecture, beautifully merged daily life with symbolic storytelling. Other artists, such as Mihaela Moldovan and Anetta Mona Chisa, emphasized sustainability and material transformation in ceramics. Using salvaged materials and exploring molecular processes they created that focused on the interconnectedness of tradition, ecology, and innovation. Collectively, these projects demonstrate how residencies in rural settings can act as incubators for reinterpreting heritage, in that resonate on a global scale.

Mulhouse, the residency program centred on the rich industrial textile heritage of the city, transforming this historical legacy into a foundation for contemporary exploration. Artists in Mulhouse drew inspiration from its archival and material history, with a particular emphasis on the interplay between industrial processes and traditional crafts. Aurora Kiraly, for example, explored the city's textile archives, incorporating found historical techniques and patterns into her work while reflecting on themes of sustainability and cultural preservation. These projects underscore the potential of residencies to recontextualize historical narratives, demonstrating how they can inspire fresh artistic perspectives and innovative approaches to ecological and cultural sustainability.

Urban residencies in Vienna, Bucharest, and Zagreb complement these rural and industrial programs by addressing critical social and cultural issues through contemporary art. In Bucharest, residencies provided a platform for exploring identity, memory, and material culture. Yasmina Assbane's feminist-inspired works collaborated with local seamstresses to interrogate the material realities of women's lives, by creating polyester fiber silhouettes that captured themes of plasticity and balance. Meanwhile,

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Zoya Laktionova's *Unheritage* project reconstructed archives destroyed in Mariupol, addressing themes of loss, memory, and resilience. Using a vintage Zenit camera, her black-and-white photographs offered a haunting reflection on the fragility of cultural legacies in times of conflict. These projects illustrate how urban residencies can amplify marginalized voices, foster critical dialogues, and contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

In Zagreb, the emphasis shifted to ecological sustainability and textile traditions. Artists included Larisa Crunțeanu and Megan Dominescu who engaged in collaborative workshops exploring the intersection of traditional crafts and contemporary ecological concerns. Larisa Crunțeanu's focus on materiality and collaboration highlighted how traditional techniques could inform innovative solutions to modern challenges, while Megan Dominescu's work reflected the deep interrelationship between textile heritage and the environment. Additionally, Iza Tarasewicz and Sarah McNulty added further dimensions to the program, exploring interdisciplinary approaches and the dynamics of collaborative artistic spaces. McNulty specifically praised Zagreb's vibrant art scene for fostering intergenerational dialogue and collaboration, while also calling attention to the need for more accessible studio spaces for female artists. These examples demonstrate how urban residencies can connect local communities with global issues, inspiring creative responses to critical societal issues.

The broader impact of residency programs extends far beyond the output of the artists themselves. Serving as vital platforms for fostering cross-cultural exchange, residencies can strengthen community bonds and reimagine cultural heritage in innovative ways. Facilitating artists to have direct contact with local traditions and communities, residencies create opportunities for mutual learning and exchanging dialogue. For the communities involved, these programs offer a renewed sense of pride in their heritage and an opportunity to see their traditions reinterpreted through a fresh artistic lens. For artists, residencies provide a space to reflect, experiment, and grow, offering new insights to be forward into their broader practices.

Residency programs such as those offered by AFAR underscore the transformative power of art to connect people, preserve traditions, and address contemporary challenges. By prioritizing accessibility,

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cultural exchange, and sustainability, these programs not only nurture artistic innovation but also contribute to the broader goal of creating inclusive and resilient cultural ecosystems. They remind us that art, at its core, is not just a reflection of the world but a means of shaping it – a tool for fostering empathy, understanding, and lasting connections across cultural and geographical boundaries. Residency programs are not only vital for the artistic community but also play an indispensable role in enriching the cultural and social fabric of society as a whole.

5.2 Weaving Connections: How Exhibitions and Artist Talks Enhance the Transformative Impact of AFAR Residencies

Residency programs, like those developed by the AFAR project, are powerful engines of cultural exchange and artistic innovation. Their full impact is however only realized through complementary activities such as exhibitions and artist talks, which expand their audience and foster deeper engagement with their themes. Exhibitions as part of the AFAR project, including *DE/CODING TEXTILE* and *The Line of the Valley – Part II* and accompanying artist talks in Vienna, Zagreb, and Bucharest not only showcase the works cultivated in the residencies but also provide a platform for critical dialogue, reflection, and networking. These elements together form an interconnected ecosystem that magnifies the cultural and social relevance of the residencies, ensuring their legacy extends beyond the immediate artistic outcomes.

The exhibition *DE/CODING TEXTILE*, presented in Vienna, Zagreb, and Bucharest, exemplifies this dynamic. It explores the intersection of textile craftsmanship, contemporary art, and socio-political critique. Participating artists used textiles as both a material and a metaphor to address urgent topics such as gender, feminism, cultural heritage, and globalization. In a time when traditional craftsmanship often struggles for recognition in the broader artistic canon, this exhibition reframes textile art as a powerful medium for tackling political, social, and cultural issues. By contextualizing the works created during the residencies, the exhibition highlights the diversity of contemporary textile art in connection with broader societal narratives, drawing audiences into a conversation about its enduring relevance.

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Complementing these exhibitions, the AFAR artist talks provide an essential theoretical framework for understanding and expanding upon the themes of the project. These discussions, held in Vienna, Zagreb, and Bucharest, bring together artists, curators, and the public to explore the conceptual underpinnings of created during the residencies. The talks serve three core functions: thematic expansion, professional networking, and knowledge preservation.

First, they allow for thematic expansion by connecting the central themes of the residencies – ecology, sustainability, gender equity, and cultural heritage – with broader social issues such as systemic violence and social injustice. This intersection enriches the understanding of the artworks and positions textile art as a lens through which to examine pressing global concerns. For example, topics like the undervaluation of textile craftsmanship and its historical association with gendered labour are explored alongside contemporary debates on climate change and minority representation, making the artist talks a bridge between artistic practices and socio-political discourses.

Second, the artist talks facilitate professional networking by creating spaces where different target groups—artists, curators, academics, and the general public—can engage in meaningful dialogue. This inclusive approach not only enhances the visibility of the artists but also strengthens cross-disciplinary collaborations at national and international levels. The Vienna Textile Talks, for instance, act as a counterbalance to the rural residencies, attracting urban audiences and professional stakeholders to discuss the intersections of art, tradition, and socio-political relevance. By connecting these audiences, the talks help build a sustainable network of practitioners and scholars committed to elevating textile art as a critical cultural practice.

Third, the talks contribute to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, ensuring that the insights and innovations generated by the AFAR residencies become part of a lasting cultural heritage. Discussions about the legacy of textile art and its ability to address contemporary issues offer a counter-narrative to the historical marginalization of this medium. Through these dialogues, textile art is repositioned not just as a craft but as a vital form of cultural expression capable of addressing global challenges.

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This multifaceted approach is exemplified by the participation of the previously mentioned artist and art scholar Larisa Crunțeanu, whose interdisciplinary practice embodies the AFAR project's core values. Crunțeanu's work often merges reality and fiction, fostering collaboration and storytelling that tie together the personal and the collective. During her residency, she engaged deeply with the local art scene through studio visits and workshops, while also producing works addressing sustainability, ecology, and textile heritage. Her collaboration with Croatian artist Nikolina Knežević Hrgović in a student workshop at the Academy of Fine Arts, as well as her participation in an artist talk at Putolovac Gallery, illustrates how these events not only expand the reach of the residencies but also inspire new generations of artists and thinkers. Through blending theory and practice, Crunțeanu exemplifies how residencies, exhibitions, and talks collectively enhance the AFAR project's impact.

Similarly, the exhibition *The Line of the Valley – Part II*, held at the Anca Poterasu Gallery in Bucharest, builds on the themes and works developed during the residencies in Maramureș. Curated by Marie Maertens and featuring 15 international artists, the exhibition focuses on connecting traditional crafts, ecological practices, and contemporary art. It invites audiences to reflect on the intersections of heritage, feminism, and sustainability, creating an environment for past and present to converge. How casing works that merge traditional techniques with modern innovation, the exhibition not only cultural legacies yet also reimagines them for future generations. As part of the broader AFAR mission, it demonstrates the transformative potential of residencies to inspire artforms that are both deeply rooted in tradition and forward-looking.

The AFAR project presents a holistic approach to artistic and cultural engagement through these exhibitions and artist talks. They act to complement the residencies by providing a public-facing dimension fostering dialogue, reflection, and connection. Together they form a cohesive narrative that reframes textile art as a critical medium for addressing global issues, bridging cultural divides, and preserving heritage. By integrating tradition with contemporary themes, AFAR not only elevates textile art but also creates a sustainable framework for its continued relevance in the cultural and artistic landscape.

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5.3 Interim conclusion: Women's Art and International Exchange: Building Bridges Across Europe Through Residencies, Exhibitions, and Artist Talks

The AFAR project demonstrates the transformative power of integrating artist residencies, exhibitions, and artistic talks into a cohesive framework for cultural exchange and societal impact. This combination is so effective because it unites creation, public engagement, and critical discourse, amplifying marginalized voices, fostering dialogue, and preserving cultural heritage while addressing contemporary global challenges.

Residencies are at the heart of this approach, providing spaces for collaboration and innovation while preserving traditional practices. By prioritising women's art and international exchange, AFAR residencies invite artists to engage deeply with local crafts and histories, reinterpreting them through the lens of sustainability, identity, and social equity. These works bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring that intangible heritage evolves in ways that remain inclusive and relevant. Exhibitions like *DE/CODING TEXTILE* and *The Line of the Valley – Part II* expand the impact of residencies by presenting resulting works to diverse audiences across Europe. Textile art, with its materiality and ties to cultural heritage, becomes a vehicle for addressing issues such as gender equity, ecology, and social justice. These exhibitions foster emotional connections between viewers and the works, making textile art accessible and engaging while drawing attention to its role in European heritage and broader societal conversations. Artist talks complete this framework by offering platforms for reflection and networking. They connect artists, curators, scholars, and the public, facilitating the exchange of ideas and expanding on themes explored in the residencies and exhibitions. By addressing global challenges such as intercultural dialogue and ecological sustainability, the talks ensure the knowledge generated by the project is disseminated and preserved, strengthening its long-term societal impact.

The combination of residencies, exhibitions, and talks are particularly effective in creating synergies that amplify the strengths of each component. Residencies provide the foundation for creative exploration, exhibitions engage the public, and talks deepen understanding and foster collaboration.

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Together, they exemplify the concept of ‘emotional sustainability’, creating lasting connections between new audiences and cultural heritage. Textile art’s material functions resonates deeply to enable even those unfamiliar with the medium to relate to the works and their themes.

This integrated approach mirrors historical movements like Bauhaus, which connected craftsmanship, art, and innovation to create enduring societal impact. Similarly, AFAR demonstrates how blending tradition with contemporary themes can foster awareness, collaboration, and sustainability. The project establishes connections between urban and rural contexts, East and West, and past and present, through the unifying potential of art. Ultimately, AFAR empowers marginalized voices, preserves cultural heritage, and addresses global challenges. By connecting tradition with innovation and local heritage with international themes, it positions textile art as a critical medium for cultural exchange and societal progress. This holistic approach leaves a lasting legacy, transforming art into a tool for connection, reflection, and transformation.

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6 Discussion: Textile art as a trigger for social cohesion

Statement 6: *On closer inspection, the AFAR project and its results have emerged as an effective awareness-raising tool for key societal issues such as gender equality and the inclusion of minorities. It has so far had an important impact on intercultural and cross-border art exchange and the emotional sustainability of the art pieces, strengthens social cohesion within the country and in the European context.*

6.1 Craft tradition and current controversial issues

As has been shown, textile art has developed over the 20th century into an artistic genre that increases sensitivity to gender discrimination, ecological sustainability, and the exclusion of minorities. Artists in the AFAR project, Megan Dominescu and Aurora Király, amplify these themes in a particularly illustrative way. How the tension between tradition and current controversy, often inherent in contemporary textile art, can be productively complemented.

Megan Dominescu is certainly one of the most outstanding new representatives of contemporary textile art as her work combines the majority of the features discussed. Using the tension between expectations of carpet art with its traditional and feminine connotations she provokes often witty and ironic, but sometimes also disturbing attacks against the social mainstream. Focusing on social and ecological challenges particularly criticising the consumer behaviour of mainstream society, she highlights modern-day obsessions such as the banal clichés used by social media influencers in their brand fetishism. The trained painter uses a striking, sometimes intrusively trashy pop aesthetic in her works, confronting the viewer with a nightmarish reality. In this context, her comic-like representations create not only tensions but also a double alienation effect. Questions the relationship between tradition and modernity on the one hand and focuses on feminist topics on the other hand. Feminist issues appear in works that examine the representation of women in the media, the relationship



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between women and Christianity, and gender relations in the age of porn. A young couple, lost in love, gazing up at the heavens of happiness, where the young man sees only a penis as a sex symbol.

Given the recurring environmental theme in her work and her keen interest in dogs she ironically owns a fashion label for dogs herself, she can also be described as a representative of the contemporary trend for nature and animal art. She convincingly succeeds in this field by combining traditional and modern doubts about these topics in a highly explosive form. For example, when she confronts people with the perversion of their idea of a civilised, domesticated pet culture in a role reversal. As with many other contemporary textile artists, the choice of materials is also part of the system critique that she addresses in her works: Megan Dominescu uses fibres made up of a wide range of materials, from recycled fabric strips to off-cuts from second-hand sweaters. She works with strong contrasts; both in terms of the bright colours and the textures she uses and the softness of the materials which contrast starkly with drastic imagery and challenging content.

The aesthetic strategies of Romanian artist Aurora Király, whose works are situated at the intersection of photographic narration, textile art, and installation, differ greatly from Dominescu, yet are no less impressive. Király avoids dramatic stylisations and colour excesses, instead approaching the topics with cleverly applied subtlety. Her works have meditative quality that questions the relationship between artistic form and social function. Király uses textiles not only as an artistic material but also as a medium for reflecting on history, feminism, and the social role of women. In *Woman at Work*, she combines woven textiles with photographic elements to address the issue of female labour in industrial textile production. This work is not only a tribute to the women who work in this often-overlooked field but also a critical examination of their conditions. The textile realisation of photographic motifs generates a double reflection on the visual and material levels. Király's works illustrate the power of textile interventions to document social and historical processes while also creating new spaces of meaning. Her feminist approach is evident in the way she embeds everyday experiences and personal memories into a wider social context.

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6.2 Craft and gender issues

As stated in Chapter 2, textile art has historically played a contradictory role in the empowerment of women in art. On the one hand, it has been devalued as ‘women’s art’; on the other hand, its niche character has offered both freedom and a *safe space*. Textile art clearly has a subversive potential empowering women, men and the LGBTQ+ community to craft independent narratives and to cultivate their own artistic self-understanding.

This subversive potential of textile art has successfully been recognised as part of the AFAR project. Focusing on the equality offered by a feminist perspective can integrate various non-patriarchal factors whilst also including male perspectives. This inherently open form aligns with current trends in textile art. Women who, as artists, deal with the ‘material’ aspects and elements of art often do so only implicitly in a feminist way, without placing themselves in a direct relationship to this question. Irina Petroviciu, who was involved in the AFAR project as an artist, comments:

I never considered people I work with according to their gender. I have very good collaborations with both men and women. I agree textile art is often performed by women; it used to be connected with the so-called homemade industry in a time when tasks were specific for men and women. It may also be a question of sensitivity, taste for colour, and patience that women are more involved in textile art. But I do not see it as a disadvantage.^{lvi}

Similarly, Aurora Kiraly emphasises that there are also new, undiscovered areas that can be further exploited by textile art:

I am interested in the long history of women doing textile arts & crafts, but I noticed that nowadays, there are also men who discover textile arts & crafts promoted by social media accounts as a therapeutic way to quiet the mind, reduce anxiety, and with a positive impact on the mental health.^{lvii}

Artist and university professor Otilia Boeru acknowledges the challenges and opportunities inherent in textile art’s traditional association with women. She warns of the risk of the field becoming insular and limited to a small circle of practitioners familiar with textile techniques. To counter this, she advocates for exhibitions that embrace diverse aesthetic and conceptual approaches, fostering dialogue that transcends technical expertise.



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Boeru also highlights persistent inequities in the valuation of women's work in Romania, where domestic responsibilities disproportionately burden women alongside their professional roles. Textile practices, historically linked to the domestic sphere, have been undervalued and often relegated to obscurity. She notes that primarily male artists gained greater prominence in textile art during the monumental tapestry era (1960s–1980s), while the actual weaving was typically performed by anonymous female artisans.

Despite these disadvantages, Boeru sees resilience as a strength of women artists. She believes the lack of immediate recognition often drives perseverance and dedication among those passionate about their craft. Women who view their art as integral to their identity continue to create, regardless of external validation. Boeru emphasizes the vital role of curators, gallery owners, and cultural mediators in recognizing and showcasing the contributions of women artists, ensuring their work receives the attention and appreciation it deserves.

Austrian artist Tanja Boukal, known for her work that combines traditional craft techniques with feminist themes, uses craft as a vehicle for feminist critique. Boukal engages with people who are often overlooked – especially women. Her works serve to represent those living in the shadows of society and highlight the importance of resistance and persistence:

My starting point is human dignity. I often place extraordinary people at the centre of my work. I do not want to depict them as individual characters but rather as representatives of people who are willing to walk long distances to achieve their goals. I give certain calls to people who usually stay out of sight. Very often, women are most worthy of attention. I am working partly in traditional handcraft techniques, which establish a relation to the person and/or situation. Handicraft – known for thousands of years as the art of ordinary men and women, represents human creativity and the joy of life to me. They aspire to remain in memory, to create something significant. These techniques help me to emphasise the importance of the portrayed people.

A particularly vivid example of this approach is Boukal's work *If You Don't Like It...* (2024). It is an embroidered, crocheted, and hand-woven towel that is a reimagining of the traditional Romanian *ștergar*, a towel decorated with intricate hand-embroidered patterns. The embroidered sentence 'If you don't like it, you can go home!' challenges this tradition whilst also using it as a reference. Without the viewer noticing at first glance, it is a *mise en abyme* that questions the traditional function and symbolic purpose of the *ștergar*. The towel, a symbol of

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domestic comfort and cultural identity, becomes a catalyst for a subtle critical examination of gender roles and social power.

Boukal's works show that forms of expression using textiles can have not only an aesthetic but also a political dimension. The interplay of traditional craftsmanship and modern criticism allows her to develop complex narratives that can be accessed by an audience with little experience of modern art. Her works also invite discussion of the social conditions that shape the stories implicitly told in her works.

6.3 Technology and modernity, ecology and sustainability

Many artists involved in the AFAR project have delivered critical insights, traditional, often forgotten techniques with modern innovations that address global challenges. The works by Iza Tarasewicz, who often uses hemp fibres processed using natural dyeing methods, are an example of this:

“Her sculptural installations take the form of modular, flexible, mobile and reconfigurable display systems that combine a raw and modest functionalism with the formal logic found in nature, in scientific experiments and graphs and diagrams – figures of thought and relationship diagrams that systematise knowledge and data and describe the interaction of phenomena in abstract terms. The artist draws inspiration for her work from the atomism of classical Greek philosophy and from the explanations of quantum physics and the chaos theory of the 20th century. Her statues and object assemblages, which can be combined into installations, are formed into energetic systems consisting of barely identifiable organic and inorganic materials.”^{lviii}

context, the artist Aurora Kiraly, involved in the AFAR project, also unlocks new perspectives in this sense^{lix} Her more recent works focus on sustainability and the exploration of traditional techniques, which she combines with modern aesthetics.

I am interested in the traditional forms of textile art; they either act as a trigger for how I can relate to them from today's perspective, or they inspire me to do an art piece or project. I consider that there is so much craft history and knowledge among the rural communities that it has to be shared with the newer generations and revitalised.^{lx}

Kiraly's exhibitions, workshops, and collaborations reflect her work to promote textile art as part of a commitment to the community.



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I try to remain honest about my artistic ideas and projects. This means that if my approach is authentic, I also touch on socially relevant topics. Besides this, anytime I am interested in a situation and can contribute to a project that can have a social impact, I get involved and try to generate a contribution/participation.^{lxi}

Željko Beljan uses a similar aesthetic strategy, blending tradition with contemporary critique. His work deeply explores the role of craftsmanship within the context of modern art. Particularly noteworthy is Beljan's ability to remove the craft from its functional context and redefine it as an artistic medium. This dislocation allows him to challenge stereotypical concepts of manual labour – particularly its association with traditional feminine roles – while bridging the gap between everyday responsibilities and artistic creation.

His installations, which are based on traditional techniques such as weaving, knotting, and embroidery, present both finished and unfinished forms. Deliberately disclosing the creative process highlights the often-hidden complexity of the craft and invites viewers to engage with the unknown dimensions of art production. Beljan's works are strongly influenced by improvisation and, at the same time a focus on the artistic process – both in terms of the production and the reception of an artwork. Grounded in traditional techniques, his works are created through spontaneous processes that address the nature of the materials used. This method allows him to combine his art with theoretical research and reflection. Each of his works thus represents a dialogue between past and present, and tradition and innovation.

For Irina Petroviciu, a chemist researcher with expertise in natural dyes and their identification in historical textiles, is the principal curator of the exhibition *Natural Dyes. "From scientific research to contemporary art* at the National Museum of Romanian History. Natural dyes in traditional Romanian textiles are one of my main topics. I am also connected with people working to revitalise traditional costumes, including the use of natural dyes. As a 'museum person,' I used to document traditional dyeing recipes and put them about my studies."^{lxii}

We can take it one step further. Technological development can be triggered by the processes involved in the individual projects of the artists, their impact also reaches far beyond technological breakthroughs. As Florica Zaharia explains:

We are mainly working with historic textiles made by following a traditional technological process, which could be of use to our current society. For example, knowledge related to the production of traditional fibres – wool, hemp, flax, etc.^{lxiii}

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Textile art combines traditional techniques, forms, and materials with contemporary topics and modern practices. As an art form that is easily accessible to a wide audience, it can improve civil society interaction, raise awareness of cultural heritage, and also, conversely, increase the willingness of the viewer to engage with current pressing social issues.

Textile art also offers the possibility of valuable teaching opportunities to the fashion industry. In the areas of ecology and sustainability, in particular, the two fields can complement each other fruitfully. As Aurora Kiraly explains, there are many possibilities and projects for overcoming these boundaries:

‘For example, elements from textile art can be a starting point for a new collection. Any artwork can trigger new ideas; either you can recognise some elements in the fashion items to be created, or it works only as an inspiration source. When we visit museums, there are many works which can inspire you and give you new ideas. I think it’s the same with textile art or with old ethnographic textiles.’^{lxiv}

The recycling of used materials in current exhibition practice. Florica Zaharia highlights this:

Ecological aspects in relation to museum work: exhibitions, storage, and conservation work are always considered important. We prefer materials with multiple functions and repurposed materials.^{lxv}

As a resource, recycled materials become an invaluable feature of the project itself by innovatively combining form and content. Aurora Kiraly explains:

I often choose for my artistic works to use old materials, mainly due to the history they bring into discussion and also due to ecology. The materials I recycle connect my work to photographic archives (e.g., cardboard from packages/boxes used to deliver the products ordered online), to women’s histories in communities (e.g., old textiles, materials of domestic use which I try to save, and re-use), too fragile objects and stories (e.g., the paper from packages or shoe boxes), etc.^{lxvi}

6.4 Emotional sustainability in the light of intra- and intercultural conflicts

Textile art creates emotional sustainability by establishing narrative and cultural connections as well as the material. Due to its artisanal and tactile nature, it offers an immediate sensory experience that evokes deeper emotional connections than other art forms. Textile art is more than just a medium; it is a repository for stories, traditions, and identities, brought to life and made visible and tangible through the artistic process. Uniting tradition and modernity not only create aesthetic output, it also fosters long-term reflection and a sense of belonging.



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The emotional sustainability textile art arises from its ability to address topics such as belonging, community, and identity. The cultural diversity that is often expressed in the materials, techniques, or motifs becomes a key to promoting empathy and social cohesion. An emphasis on handicraft and meticulous perseverance – qualities that are often lost in a world characterised by speed and digitalisation – conveys values such as patience, mindfulness, and appreciation of slower activities. By processing collective traumas and transforming them into artistic narratives, textile art helps to overcome social divides and create a space for an understanding dialogue.

On an international level, textile art can establish connections between cultures. Projects such as Kamruzzaman Shadhin's participatory work in Bangladesh illustrate how textile art not only strengthens local communities but also addresses global issues such as environmental deterioration and migration. These works connect historical traditions with current challenges, enabling an awareness of the interconnections between the past, present, and future. Such projects are not one-off events but transformative processes that have a lasting impact on both artists *and viewers*.

Another is collaboration between artists from different countries. Residency programs and international projects, such as those organised by initiatives like AFAR, promote artistic exchange and also help to balance cultural asymmetries between Eastern and Western Europe. Textile art provides a safe space to ease intercultural tensions and foster mutual understanding through equal cooperation, avoiding paternalistic or colonial dynamics.

The social component of the emotional sustainability of textile art celebrates cultural differences and creates platforms for inclusion and mutual respect. This strengthens social cohesion and provides an opportunity for new perspectives on a shared cultural heritage. The ability of textile art to link memories, traditions, and current discourses makes it a unique medium aesthetic appeal and a social and emotional impact. Connecting tradition and modernity, and regions and cultures, it actively fosters sustainable social change and encourages a deeper understanding of diversity.

As Otilia Boeru explains, these opportunities for exchange are essential for the development of young female artists:

Communication with other artists trained in different socio-cultural conditions, but especially collaboration in common projects, can only stimulate creativity and the desire for artistic expression, and

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in the end, you come out more confident. Such interactions test your ability to adapt to communicate and provide an opportunity to verify your own working methodologies. I believe it is beneficial for us artists to seek opportunities to extend our relationships beyond the borders of a state. The more you interact, the more you feel that you belong to a professional community, exchange ideas and seek support for future projects.^{lxvii}

Aurora Kiraly also emphasises the particular importance of intensive cooperation with other artists at national and international levels.

It is very important to meet other artists with whom you can share your ideas and discuss your process. And it is great when you find like-minded minds, and you can collaborate or learn from other artists. This happens usually during artistic residencies or during the time you prepare a collaborative project or an exhibition. It is important to create a frame where artists have time to open, discuss, and reflect on topics they are interested in.^{lxviii}

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7 Summary of key points and recommendations

Conclusion: *Textile art offers a variety of approaches to addressing social, political, and cultural issues. With stronger support, institutions, galleries, and political actors can not only enrich the art landscape but can also contribute to a more sustainable, inclusive, and culturally connected Europe.*

By continuing with the rewarding contributions to the cultural heritage of Europe as we have presented, the connection of the exhibitions with artist residencies and artistic talks has a direct positive influence on social cohesion. art becomes a platform for an inclusive, cross-generational discussion concerning gender issues, the ecologically sustainable treatment of nature, and socially acceptable production conditions. As has been shown, artist residencies also help to overcome the urban-rural divide in the art world, promoting intercultural exchange and the inclusion of minorities.

This is echoed by Aurora Kiraly, it would be extremely desirable to use all the knowledge created by this project for further collaborations in the future. has created an extremely varied cross-border network of artists, professionals, and institutions while also connecting diverse social groups within the countries involved in the project. “When a project is valuable, I think it is important to go into depth and also develop ideas on vertical, not to always search for new concepts.”^{lxix}

art has evolved into a powerful medium, through social movements, feminist perspectives, and intercultural projects. It combines tradition and modernity, questions gender roles, and addresses political, ecological, and social issues. Pioneering works and modern approaches such as ‘Radical Textiles’ show how textiles can serve as a *safe space* for marginalised groups to address issues such as identity, trauma, and cultural marginalisation.

Through its ability to make cultural heritage visible and to address contemporary such as sustainability and social justice, textile art serves to bridge cultural gaps and connect diverse perspectives. Examples such as Kamruzzaman Shadhin’s project in Bangladesh tie local communities to global challenges, while modern technologies such as the jacquard loom create new artistic possibilities. Their role ranges from promoting social cohesion and the inclusion of minorities to supporting sustainable cultural change.



Recommendations for stakeholders

For art institutions and museums:

1. **Promote thematic diversity:** Develop programs and exhibitions that highlight the role of textile art as a medium for social and political reflection.
2. **Incorporate marginalised perspectives:** on artists from minority groups and under-represented regions, particularly from the Global South and Eastern Europe.
3. **Combine tradition and modernity:** Show works that combine traditional techniques with modern topics such as sustainability and technology.
4. **Encourage participation:** Offer interactive formats such as workshops or community-based projects to strengthen the connection between art and everyday life.

For galleries:

1. **Promote young talent:** Support emerging textile artists, especially those taking innovative and intersectional approaches.
2. **Expand international collaborations:** Initiate collaborations with galleries and artists from different cultures to strengthen intercultural dialogue.
3. **Emphasise sustainability:** Showcase artists who engage with ecological issues and the revival of traditional techniques.

For the European Commission:

1. **Expand Residency Programs:** Fund new residency initiatives that focus on integrating traditional crafts with contemporary art practices across Europe.
2. **Strengthen cultural networks and invest in East-West Dialogue:** Create platforms for dialogue between Eastern and Western Europe to reduce cultural.
3. **Promote sustainability and Inclusion:** Fund initiatives that strengthen ecological practices in the art and design industry and use textile art as a tool for educating about environmental issues.



4. **Facilitate mobility:** Provide residencies and grants to promote the international exchange textile artists and art professionals.

For Local Governments and NGOs:

1. **Promote Accessibility:** Host exhibitions and workshops in rural areas to engage new audiences with contemporary art.
2. **Encourage Local Artisans:** Partner with craftspeople to preserve traditional techniques and integrate them into contemporary artistic practices.

ⁱ Sabine Maria Schmidt: Textile Revivals, in: Kunstforum 297 (2024).

ⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Cf. <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/94/survey-significance-of-textiles/>.

^{vi} Cf. <https://www.thecollector.com/introduction-arts-and-crafts-movement/>.

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^{viii} Cf. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/textile-art/>; cf. Also Women art workers and the Arts and Crafts movement - Manchester University Press, 2020 - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11g95mh>.

^{ix} Cf. <https://fashionheritage.eu/fashion-and-the-arts-and-crafts-movement/> and <https://www.theglasgowstyle.co.uk/copy-of-margaret-gilmour-3>.

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^{xi} Anja Baumhoff: Frauen am Bauhaus – ein Mythos der Emanzipation, in: Bauhaus, hrsg. von Jeannine Fiedler und Peter Feierabend, Köln: Könemann 1999, p. 96.

^{xii} Cf. Gerhart Hauptmann: Die Weber (1894).

^{xiii} Anja Baumhoff: Die Webereiwerkstatt, in: Bauhaus, hrsg. von Jeannine Fiedler und Peter Feierabend, Köln: Könemann 1999, p. 466.

^{xiv} <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/textile-art/>.

^{xv} <https://www.guntastolzl.org/> and <https://www.moma.org/artists/5675>.

^{xvi} Sabine Maria Schmidt: Den Faden wieder aufnehmen. Von der Universalität des Textilien, in: Kunstforum 297 (2024), p. 46.

^{xvii} <https://www.wikiart.org/en/artists-by-art-movement/fiber-art#!#resultType:masonry>.

^{xviii} Cf. <https://lenoretawney.org/> and Monica Seiceanu: La réception des “formes tissées“ de Lenore Tawney et la place des textiles dans l’art new-yorkais de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle [Master’s Thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2023].



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Interviews

- Interview with Aurora Kiraly in Bucharest, November 2024.
- Interview with Otilia Boeru in Bucharest, November 2024.
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