

Vanessa Joan Müller, "Interlacing Systems," *Willem de Rooij: About*, exh. cat. (New York: Petzel, 2015), pp. 5-11.

Interlacing Systems Vanessa Joan Müller

A textile is the manual or machine-made outcome of the process of weaving: a plane consisting of at least two systems of threads crossing each other at right angles. Willem de Rooij's "weavings," with their shimmering threads and iridescent colors, are textiles whose meaning ensues from just such systems of threads. In discussions of these works, the notion of abstraction often comes up—the kind of abstraction that arises when there are no identifiable references as such and when a work is above all what it is, that is to say, in this case, a textile attached to a stretcher.

But of course this is not just some ready-made fabric. These works are specially manufactured commissions, made according to specific instructions, where the interplay of warp and weft, the weave, the tension, the materiality and thickness of the threads, their colors and textures, are all of crucial importance. They are partly crucial because the weavings are not merely monochrome textiles, but have a polychrome appearance, which endows them with an unusual presence when they are presented against a wall. The fact that they are hung on walls in this way makes it hard to categorize them: textile compositions or pictorial objects? Is the woven fabric the work in itself, or is its function that of an artistic medium? The weavings are virtually impossible to reproduce in photographs, because they need a space with light and a

viewer to come fully into their own. They thrive on their own coming-into-view, which turns them into "events" with subtly vibrating colors.

It is tempting to assign them to the discourse on abstract painting, since their format and the fact that a flat surface is attached to a stretcher, which is itself hung on a wall, are immediately reminiscent of painting. Thoughts of Blinky Palermo's fabric pictures may come to mind, which so decidedly refer to the history of modern abstraction. However, Palermo's monochromes go hand in hand with a particular emphasis on color relations and on the clear definition of the stripe. Moreover, the fabrics used by Palermo came from department stores; in a sense he was working with ready-made colors, which he used to create contrasts. At the same time, in view of the weavings' refusal to make illusionistic references to reality, one might be tempted to consider them in the context of a metaphysical color-world. But bearing in mind the traditional, gender-specific classification of textiles, the preference for the tactile rather than the optical, and the divide between discursivity and craft skills, they clearly come down on the side of the visual arts. Yet however rich these connections with the genealogy of Western painting, ultimately they may induce us to forget that these are not "pictures" in the true sense, even if they have surfaces, whose complexity and density are equal to that of

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classic abstract painting. This similarity to painting clearly serves as a "trigger" to avoid the notion of reference¹ as an intentional generator of meaning. Perhaps it is also a subtle allusion to the fact that there can be no more autonomous pictorial worlds of the kind that we associate with the autonomy of a modern, abstract, avant-garde aesthetic in the West. That is to say, as Adorno has shown, art that puts itself at the disposal of its beholder's projections is at odds with autonomous art, which does not put itself at the viewing subject's disposal, but has within it something akin to a subjectivity of its own. Works such as the weavings assign a distinctly constitutive function to the viewer and his or her projections and seem determined to put themselves at the latter's disposal.² Viewing them corresponds to an experience wherein the viewer has to rely on his or her own production or projection of meaning. And the weavings provide enough hooks for that: from the similarity to fine art and the applied arts to their bewilderingly evocative, anagrammatic titles, which refer to owners, exhibition venues, and the like yet sound entirely narrative.

Silver to Gold (2009), the first work in this group, consists of five weavings (all the same size), whose shimmering gold and silver hues present various juxtapositions and combinations of these two colors, which cannot be mixed because of their metallic fibers. These works were machine-made at the Van Maele Linen Mill near Brussels. The warp is unbleached Belgian linen; the weft is made up of silver- and gold-colored polyester threads. What starts as an almost monochrome silver work gradually transitions to gold, and as such does exactly as the title suggests. Nevertheless, minimal irregularities in the surface of the woven fabric and its fascinatingly iridescent tones disturb the initial impression of monochromaticism. Abstraction is seen here as a stable yet indecisive cipher that itself fluctuates between pure immanence and subtle referentiality—particularly since the various weavings created by De Rooij in recent years are them-

selves interconnected by a dense web of references. They are restricted to a narrow range of colors and there are only five format sizes. There are also variations on *Silver to Gold*: the work reappears as *Vertigo's Doll* (2010), a picture-object in a panorama format, where the transition from silver to gold is seen without the caesura of a serial sequence of individual works, and as *Diglot Lovers* (2014). Both titles are anagrams of "silver to gold," and in both works the weft consists of ten strands of silver- and gold-colored metal thread in different mixtures, while the warp is again made from unbleached linen. *Diglot Lovers* is hung on the wall at a rotation of forty-five degrees, and its rhomboid shape calls to mind Piet Mondrian's last work, *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944), which, for its part—and despite its abstraction—has an associative richness that goes far beyond what is in fact visible within it.

After this the color spectrum expands, as we see in *Mechanize Her Jenny* (2011), the first work to include pale pink. It is in the same format as the individual works in the group *Silver to Gold*, but now the polyester threads are a mixture of pink and silver. Like all these works, except the original *Silver to Gold*, it was developed in close collaboration with Ulla Schünemann, the owner of the Henni Jaensch-Zeymer hand-weaving mill in Geltow, and mingles different shades of thread in the same way that pigments are mixed to create different hues. The anagrammatic title of the work is derived from the name of the founder of the company, Henni Jaensch-Zeymer, a

- 1 Over the years, Willem de Rooij has given a number of lectures with the title "About," in which he has critically engaged with the question of referentiality as a burden for a work, weighing it down with external "interests" that are not visible within it but nevertheless attach to it.
- 2 Juliane Rebentisch, "Die Liebe zur Kunst und deren Verknennung. Adornos Modernismus," in *Texte zur Kunst* 52 (2003): pp. 79–85, especially p. 79.

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Bauhaus student. This is followed by variations with more intense pinks, but also black and dark-brown works, such as *Black to Brown* (2011), *Black to Black* (2012), and *Blacks* (2012): subtle color modulations from brown to black, or from matte black to glossy black, made on a two-hundred-year-old handloom. And then there are works made for exhibition purposes, where all the colors of the works on display come together, as though in a retrospective: *Margana* (2012) is a brownish, almost monochrome composition that combines all the colors that appeared in the exhibition *Untilted* at Kunstverein München; *Taping Precognitive Tribes* (2012) displays the same tones, now in the form of a color spectrum, and adds the color blue, which would play an important part in the weavings made in the following year. At six meters, this is the widest work of this kind so far.

It is striking that the works based on shades of the same color or on two very similar colors have soberly descriptive titles, whereas other titles are highly associative anagrams. But the logic of this system of titles cannot be discovered solely on the evidence of individual works. Taken as a whole, the titles constitute a self-referential grammar of letters and words. Similarly, the limited number of formats (which is primarily a consequence of the sizes of the looms) seems to imply a connection between color and size, which has to be left as a speculation. In the extended horizontal format the colors call to mind panoramas and abstract landscapes; by contrast, in the compressed square the conceptual nature of the works comes more noticeably to the fore. At most one might say that there is a family resemblance between certain works, not unlike certain terms that cannot be adequately ordered using a taxonomic classification because they have blurred, indistinct edges—and yet form a coherent group.³

Looking at the weavings as a whole and with their numerous cross references, it becomes clear that through just the interplay of warp

and weft they address questions of similarity and difference or contrast, but also individuality and collectivity, as Willem de Rooij has himself said.⁴ Their argumentation is formal, yet they imbue the appearances that arise from specific color and format choices with connotations that go far beyond what is visible in individual compositions. This arises above all from the fact that De Rooij's oeuvre consists of highly diverse yet intensely interconnected works, where the choice of subject matter, of color, etc. is not only entirely intentional but relates to fundamental questions of representation.

In the case of the weavings it may initially seem that the wealth of references is secondary to the wealth of impressions that ensue in the moment of actual observation. But the weavings are contextualized by the artist's previous works and mark a change of medium within a logically evolving aesthetic focused on the question of pictoriality. These are De Rooij's first "pictures" in an oeuvre that has hitherto consisted of filmic, photographic, and object-based works.

In the year 2000 I published an essay on the work of Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij, who worked collaboratively from 1994 to 2006, in which I specifically discussed their "picture-oriented" filmic practice and the way that these films were presented within a minimalist scenario of the "here and now."⁵ It seems

³ Wittgenstein suggests that the strength of certain concepts lies in the "overlapping of many fibres," like threads. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 36.

⁴ E-mail to the author. Similarly, in the various *Bouquets* by De Rooij, an important part is played by the generation of meaning on the basis of simple parameters.

⁵ Vanessa Joan Müller, "Non Fiction," in *After the Hunt*, ed. Veit Loers, Nicolaus Schafhausen, and Caroline Schneider (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2000).

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to me that a critical rereading of that essay against the backdrop of the weavings could be an effective means of approaching a group of works whose apparent similarity with other textile pictures (to use this rather inadequate term) can be somewhat misleading. And the lack of referentiality in these works, as De Rooij himself has described it, should be read as a pointer to the fact that these works have not arisen from a particular interest—in textiles or craft skills, for instance—but are in reality tied into a complex system of references, which connects if anything with De Rooij's own early works, with their numerous, sometimes even excessive, explicit external references. Is it therefore really so absurd to compare individual works with an illuminated section of celluloid film that only reveals itself in the light of the projector?

The limited color spectrum of the weavings—blue, pink, gold and silver, black and its many hues—and a reassessment of the work *Orange*, made in collaboration with Jeroen de Rijke, raises serious doubts as to whether the supposed "interestlessness"⁶ of these iridescently colored textile textures is really intentional, or whether it does not in fact redirect the viewer's attention to the difference between external interests (which steer the production of a work) and the themes and ideas evoked by the work itself. (Perhaps we should replace "interest" with "context".)

In *Orange*, a slide projection made in 2000, the color is denatured and turned into a semiotic system that is both derived from its existing functions and located within them. *Orange* consists of a sequence of monochromatic slides, which illustrate shades of orange. Orange is the hardest color to reproduce. It is the color of royalty in the Netherlands, of the overalls of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, of sunsets in Kodachrome. Above all, orange plays a crucial part in the representation of "white" skin tones in analog photography and film. If we consider *Orange* in light of *Blue to Black* (2012), a wax print

commissioned by De Rooij from the GTP Factory in Tema, Ghana, this connection between color and skin color resonates on both a metaphoric and a cultural level. When the Netherlands was still a colonial power, the techniques needed for making batiks in effect migrated from Java to contemporary Ghana, where they reached a high point in conjunction with the local knowledge of indigo dyes. *Orange* and *Blue to Black* are thus firmly embedded in historical and ideological contexts that infiltrate their monochromaticism. Furthermore, the title *Blue to Black* not only describes the physical appearance of the work. It can also be read as an allusion to Dutch colonialists' practice of referring to Indonesians as "blue" and West Africans as "black," on the basis of their perception of the skin colors of these peoples.

In its reduction to pure color, *Orange* does not exactly set its connotations free. If anything, the accompanying text by the artist, which lists these connotations, directs the viewer's perception. The color is no longer a neutral one, but rather part of a slide show, where individual images suddenly mutely insist on telling another story, not just the story of monochromaticism. This game with external references—not visible in the image itself, but introduced into it—unsettles our view of the weavings, whose colors (pink, black, brown, and yellow) can now, in light of *Orange* and *Blue to Black*, be read as stereotypical classifications of skin tones, before the veil of self-sufficiency once again overlays them. The presence of intentional reference systems in one work contaminates the absence

⁶ See Tom Holert, 'Das interessiert mich ...' *Interesse und Intuition im Kunstdiskurs*, lecture presented on the occasion of *Figurations of Knowledge*, 5th Biannual European Conference of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts, Berlin. A German translation of the English lecture was published online by Kunstverein München on the occasion of Willem de Rooij's exhibition *Untilted*.

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of any such systems in the other, as soon as the latter take up their place in the wider system of cross references within this oeuvre. It looms into view, then recedes again in the face of the immanence of the work's appearance.

This materialization and evaporation of meaning is already apparent in early films by De Rijke / De Rooij, especially *I'm Coming Home in Forty Days* (1997), where one shot in particular could be read as a moment of reflection on the ideas that would later unfold in the weavings. At the end of this film about an iceberg off the coast of Greenland there is a shot that looks like a monochrome blue image. This image explicitly alludes to the fact that it is only in an image that the legibility of a sign is directly tied to its visibility alone. What plays out in the film as a matter of visibility is, however, the result of a structural intervention in the real. The closing shot of *I'm Coming Home in Forty Days* sees the materiality of the object yield to the momentariness of its actual appearance. The monochrome blue surface looks like a still, but is in fact taken with the camera directly facing the water over the ice, so that the water looks like a flat, impenetrable surface. This level of abstraction seemingly relieves the viewer of the need to search for external references. In addition, the tableau-esque shot evokes an utterly reduced topography of the visible, which is reflected in the painting-like phenomenology of the ice, which provokes an ongoing process of perceiving anew. On closer observation, however, a current is just visible under the smooth blue surface of the water and, as a barely perceptible reflection, interrupts the stasis of the image. Through this element of minimal movement the monochrome picture plane becomes a legible space; that is to say, reality enters, and it can be ascribed to an object.⁷ During this last, monochrome shot there is no sound track, which otherwise has consisted of original noises, filtered and recorded on location and reduced to minimal sounds. As a contrapuntal union of all sounds in silence, it

directs the viewer's attention solely to what cannot be explained beyond its own visibility.

De Rijke / De Rooij have used a still of the blue plane in various publications, and it has been reproduced in magazines in connection with articles on the film. At the exhibition *Together* at Magazin 4 in Bregenz (2005), De Rijke / De Rooij presented a display of the blue tones arising from various print techniques, which are marginally different from one another and from the original image,⁸ as though even the process of mechanical reproduction had responded subjectively in its perception of the original image. At the time, De Rijke / De Rooij already talked about their idea concerning the function of images in the face of fatigue. When they selected the objects, their main focus was on the way we deal with monochrome sheets and abstract impressions, on the exact status of every image (independence, documentation, suitability, reiteration), its context (catalogue, artist's book, magazine, newspaper), and its conceptual cross references (anthropological, sociopolitical, formal, aesthetic).⁹ This can be read as a pointer to a mode of perception that changes according to the context, in both a literal and a metaphoric sense. However, the presentation of diverse reproductions also attests to a fundamental interest in the production and circulation of images, in what images stand for in different contexts, and in what shifts this implies.

Images—particularly abstract images—are ideal projection surfaces, possibly also ideologically charged. In an institutional context this openness to multiple imputations is more obvious than in an everyday setting. With regard to the weavings, the "no" to a referential

7 Müller, "Non Fiction," p. 162.

8 In 2008, this presentation was also included in their exhibition at K21 in Düsseldorf and at the Museum of Modern Art of Bologna.

9 Press release from Magazin4, Bregenz.

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charge of external meaning that is not visible within the picture itself, in order to allow a "yes" to the impact of the work *an sich*,¹⁰ can thus be read as a plea to the viewer to become aware of the meaning-producing context. The supposed affinity with abstract painting would then be the product of a particular, informed perspective that is itself open to question.

If we consider the first work by De Rijke / De Rooij where a textile played a central role, that is to say, their film *The Point of Departure* (2002), it is clear that the artists took as their subject a topic that has become a crossroads both for diverse discourses on abstraction, function, and meaning with an explicitly Western perspective and for a mode of observation that focuses on this perspective. *The Point of Departure* is a filmic exploration of a knotted carpet from Azerbaijan, with a pattern that interprets the principle of abstraction in a non-Western manner. Extreme close-ups of individual threads successively yield to ever more distant shots of the carpet in warm red hues; the carpet ultimately disappears in the blackness of endless film-worlds like Stanley Kubrick's fossilized bones in outer space. From time to time golden threads appear and instigate a brief chromatic sensation. Reddish woolen threads emerge, then the blurred, colored surface of the Caucasian carpet, and only then the lines and geometric shapes of the knotted design. The macro-world of the carpet appears exotic, only to become gradually more familiar as it takes on a more human perspective. The slow zooms combine aspects of photography, painting, and film and create connections with tapestries and oil paintings. The timeless, locationless void of the space in which the carpet floats resists any more precise contextualization of this object, which is as alien as it is familiar.

At the same time, *The Point of Departure* is embedded in a wider context, where antique Caucasian carpets and their ornamentation are seen as items charged with meaning and

significance on multiple levels. The title of this work refers to a point of departure with neither beginning nor end, for there is no hierarchy in the pattern, in the sense that mathematically calculated geometrics and organic-floral elements are united in a colored design with countless components.

Of course an encounter with a real, textile object, a woven surface whose colors change according to the way the light falls, is very different from watching a film on the subject of a textile work. But behind this possibly banal-sounding statement is an insistence on a mode of presentness that determines the medium of film as a trace of the past, which is activated in the light of the projector¹¹ but also affects the appearance of the weavings, which is similarly dependent on modulations of light. Films by De Rijke / De Rooij are only ever screened in precisely defined conditions and at fixed times. They are not freely available. A particular setting is created for the viewer. They require concentrated observation, which evolves over time and leaves us with an afterimage and a memory of what we have seen.

The *Light Studies* (2005) are materializations of just such afterimages. The abstract color planes in *Mandarin Ducks* (2005), which serve as placeholders for views from the film studio, which is set up like a domestic interior, have an autonomous existence as photo-prints (independent of the film). The reduced interior of *Mandarin Ducks*, reminiscent of a stage set with overcoded props, has neither windows nor an outdoors. While, on a narrative level, a

10 Press release from Kunstverein München.

11 De Rijke / De Rooij's collaborative work exclusively takes the form of 16-mm and 35-mm films, which as it were visually materialize during particular screening slots. This avoidance of digital film may seem trivial, but it has consequences that are not at all trivial.

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nonlinear action driven by quotes from politicians and artist friends unfolds, the visual level is demonstratively artificial-looking and underlines the entanglement of aesthetic issues with politics and social conventions. *Mandarin Ducks* could be described as the highpoint and endpoint of De Rijke / De Rooij's engagement with the tyranny of referentiality, with external meaning that is not legible within the picture itself. But the colors of the *Light Studies* significantly return again in the color spectrum of the weavings, which variously present an array of abstract references to a nonvisible exterior. They are also reminiscent of the colors in *Bantar Gebang* (2000), De Rijke / De Rooij's film of a sunrise over an Indonesian slum, where sobering reality comes into view little by little and the implications of this scene (reminiscent of a Dutch genre painting) come into view as well, although the scene's complexity cannot fully be understood by means of this film footage alone. The film opens in semidarkness, but within the first ten minutes dawn has fully broken and the picturesque opening shot has radically changed. Apart from a few figures who run through the field of vision, there is no action, just a distanced view of the entrance to a slum at the intersection of a number of roads. The viewer has ample time to study the structure and details of this static shot and to become familiar with the motif. The questions that *Bantar Gebang* raises are primarily political: to what extent can a work of art make a socially and politically relevant statement? And which external references influence the viewer's perception of the work?

It is not only here that orders of visibility bind the determination of the visual into the system of classical image production, with the rules and aesthetic of static composition transferred into a different medium. Simultaneously, the constructive avoidance of linear, narrative structures investigates the visual, just as one might investigate a semiotically codified, aesthetic text, which always has to be read anew. Against this backdrop, the

weavings constitute yet another attempt to eschew external references in favor of what is visible. However, the presence of the works within a particular situation that influences their coming-into-view also points to the existence of a context without which no picture—of whatever kind—can be viewed. And thus two systems intersect, like warp and weft—that of the process of viewing and that of the concomitant discourse—and in doing so create a stable construct that nevertheless resists any final conclusions, even concerning its colors and their appearance.