

**Henriette Noermark**

# **In a Slow Manner (2021)**

**Jessica Hemmings**

# **Factors We Will Need for Times to Come (2021)**

**Le Bicolore**

**Maison du  
Danemark**



# In a Slow Manner

Henriette Noermark, 2021

Preface

**Almost all textiles today are products of machine looms. They are turned out in great quantities, at high speed. Quantity and speed reflect on the design. In general, we think today of more and more, of faster and faster, and only then of better and better. In this situation the attempt to deal with textiles on a small scale, in a slow manner, with quality mainly in mind, may seem rather futile.**

**Anni Albers, Textile Work at Black Mountain College, *The Weaver* 6:1, Jan-Feb 1941**

In this day and age, perhaps more than ever, we long for physical, tactile experiences, and a slower pace. Time to reflect; to let the mind wander abstractly toward inspiration, returning to the fundamental elements that matter. For *In A Slow Manner*, ten artists - spanning a vast range of generations, intentions and iterations - have been invited to exhibit sculpture in two and three dimensions, wall tapestries and light objects, thus showcasing various approaches to textile art today.

Sweeping questions manifest: How does a draped surface of Saturn look? Can you classify colours through a mathematical formula? What happens when you erase colours from fabric – or dip textile sculptures into porcelain? Does a draped fabric lose its three-dimensional shape if you photograph it and present it on a flat surface? How long does it take for folded cotton to fade once exposed to sunlight? Is a daybed less functional if the sitting surface is made of 203 foam balls, each covered with exquisite mohair fabric?

And then there is the question of colour.

Whether it is the quest to find the autonomous colour - the “middle mixture” as teacher, painter and color theorist Josef Albers called it - through traditional processes, or the vibrant light reflections of Tokyo Bay rendered in digital jacquard weavings -

the presented works share a penchant for defined palettes. “There are as many colours as there are crests of waves,” says Margrethe Odgaard, whose shades of silk organza are mirrored by other works in the exhibition. What happens when our gaze is altered so that we lose the perception of weight and transparency? A delicate intervention of a silk sculpture, embodying complex ideas of form, time, and space appears alongside a poetic and sensorial light installation reminiscent of a never-ending rainbow. The exhibition considers textile art’s potential, while serving as an ode to Anni Albers’ thirst for quality above quantity. We are urged to remember that like textiles, life is to be experienced thoughtfully, attentively, with deep intent.

# Factors We Will Need for Times to Come

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Digital exhibitions offer accessibility during our time of curtailed movement; but inevitably also flatten and even erase some of the most moving (sometimes literally) moments of textile viewing. This writing attempts to offer a bridge between the material, first-hand exhibition experience, which for many viewers may not be possible with pandemic travel restrictions, and online viewing. It is hard to know what Anni Albers would make of the digital exhibitions solutions we use today. While much of her thinking celebrated the importance of materials, she also lived in a very real world that saw creative problem solving as fundamental. Rereading Anni Albers in 2021 is a humbling reminder of the extent of upheaval and loss she lived through, while producing work we continue to use as a touch stone today.

The practical challenges of production and use are often blamed for pulling the imagination back down to solid ground. But Anni Albers saw “demands set by the practical use” as a useful creative trigger for finding “a certain direction, unthought of before the problem came up, as to construction, choice of material, color and form.” Ditte Hammerstrøm’s daybed is a good case in point. Born out of the enlargement of one familiar upholstery element, the originality of Hammerstrøm’s solution finds a new form by staying close to the familiar. Tove Storch shares with Hammerstrøm an approach that begins close to the demands of use, but instead draws on our expectations of how cloth and metal should perform to set familiar materials under intentionally uncomfortable tension.

The textile often appears in seating as an outer layer to wrap, and conceal, construction. Ditte Ham-

merstrøm’s *Side by Side/Low Mohair* (2014) offers what she describes as a “more honest way to see construction and upholstery”. Instead of the textile acting as a cover, Hammerstrøm focused on how a familiar detail – in this case the buttons that typically secure upholstery – could become the furniture.

After hundreds of hands-on material tests, a high quality Mohair that responds to light in a way similar to animal skin or velvet was sourced. Two hundred and three individually twisted ‘buttons’ squeeze into hexagons pressed against each other. Each is created from the same size square of fabric, filled with firm stuffing foam and pulled through holes drilled into an Ash wood board. The buttons are then secured underneath by hammering in place a cork stopper that leaves individual ‘tails’ dangling below the platform.

“Alive” is how Hammerstrøm describes the experience of being near *Low Mohair*. Photographs capture many different shades of grey, but the variations are deceptive. The same fabric is used throughout. Differing degrees of light reflection, dependent on the direction the short dense hairs are brushed, are responsible for the visible range of shades. Production required extensive material sampling followed by sourcing craftspeople willing to use their knowledge in unconventional ways. “To develop new things takes time,” Hammerstrøm warns, “I never learnt to work fast”.

Tove Storch’s *Untitled* (2019) is a precarious fabric display case holding equally precarious fabric contents. A cabinet of curiosities comes to mind. But where convention would expect the exterior shell of a museum case to protect interior treasures, here the cabinet itself is the treasure, the curiosities it contains a continuation of the same material world.

Storch works with layers of dyed silk organza – “the thinnest possible fabric I could find” – testing the limits of the material’s strength by stretching the fabric over spindly metal armatures. The result is not comfortable. Under considerable tension, the fabric feels stretched to the limit. The metal frames suggest further material limits: tipping, titling, and tugged inwards. Even the seductive colour is not stable – shifting in hue as the viewer’s vantage point moves.

Stereotypical associations that relate metal with strength and cloth with delicacy are turned into a fragile moment of equality. The ultra-feminine pink organza, at least for now, holds its own; the metal frame looks closer to defeat as the fabric’s strength bends and distorts away from the rational grid. Both materials, she points out, are rectilinear products of industrial production. Storch acknowledges her interest in “the potential of collapse” and invites the viewer to wonder just how long each structure may survive.

Textiles often make use of repeat patterns. Visual rhythm can be pleasing to the eye, but fabric made in repeat also reflects practical production demands. Until recently, the prospect of infinite change in structure or pattern was often physically impractical, particularly for large scale work. When Albers expressed her dismay at the lack of innovation she saw in weaving she called for “approved repetition... to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring”. Astrid Krogh answers this call not structurally, but materially by harnessing light in place of textile dye, allowing the typical relationship between the woven structure and pattern to diverge. In contrast, Grethe Sørensen uses her extensive knowledge of woven structures to harness the possibilities of infinite, rather than repeating, structures that digital design tools now make possible.

The traditional ikat weaving technique Astrid Krogh references requires threads to be carefully measured and dyed in advance of weaving. Slight variations in the transition between colours create patterns with soft, feathered edges for which ikat is known. But as Krogh acknowledges, “ikat is about inaccuracy, as well as accuracy.”

“I use an old weave – nothing has changed – this puts me into a long story that goes back years.” But Krogh’s ikat involves one big difference: “I use light as dye.” In works such as *Ikat III* (2011) optic fibres channel light that gradually changes colour. The incremental shift of colours meeting each other creates the same feathered effect found on ikat dyed cloth. But working with light allows for an extremely long repeat controlled by a mechanical colour wheel intentionally set to shift a small increment with each cycle.

“When do you call something a pattern? An exact repeat? The same unit, but slightly different? Is it a pattern when it is recognised, or when it is exact? How does a pattern become alive?” In contrast to textile techniques such as printing or embroidery, weaving offers a place where structure creates pattern. By harnessing light, Krogh explores an alternative to pattern making. “The weaving is very there,” she credits, but it is “combined with a pattern that goes away from the structure of the weave.”

Ideally, *Ikat III* is seen in a dark room where viewers can experience the “flow of colour around you”. The work’s literal aura is functional, but also emotional and aesthetic. To understand the material reality of the work, remember that if the textile were seen when the light generator is turned off, the only visible colour would be white from the paper weft and translucent optic fibres. When illuminated, viewers are exposed to a flood of colour, an “aesthetics that is non-material.”

When working from photographic images, Grethe Sørensen builds the woven textile’s entire design on the computer and then uses an industrial loom to weave a one-off Jacquard fabric. Creating one-off Jacquard weavings is a relatively recent possibility. Prior to digitization, Jacquard looms were controlled by punch cards that necessitated patterns designed in repeat. Sørensen describes the tools of digital design and production available today as “wonderful possibilities” that now allow the “industrial loom character to be unique”.

A photograph of light from street lamps in a suburban industrial area, reflected on the surface of water, inspired Sørensen’s *Tokyo Bay II* (Water Mirror) (2016). Where handweaving typically

requires a considerable time investment, the industrial looms she works with at the TextielLab in the Netherlands need very little weaving time. Instead, time is invested in the preparation of samples produced in her home studio and the digital files which determine the fabric. “The final weaving,” she admits, “is a fast process!”

Sørensen’s weavings use a density of 100 picks per centimetre – a fineness that would make handweaving both economically and physically impractical for large-scale works. Industrial looms controlled by digital data solve this problem. While production no longer requires Sørensen’s hand, her engagement with materials remains intimate: “I decide every thread on the loom; I’m still doing the essential part myself.”

A sincere commitment to material-led investigations offers one way to arrive in new territory. Albers offered the observation: “The form emerges as the work progresses.” The statement is deceptive in its simplicity. For preconceptions to be set aside familiar patterns of thinking have to be bought into doubt. But the ability to question the familiar can be an extraordinarily difficult mindset to find. Margrethe Odgaard typifies this ability through her careful efforts to reposition colour as a primary, rather than secondary, reaction to the material world around us. Valerie Collart and Justin Morin share an interest in what we may hold in our collective memories – Collart in familiar forms from art history and Morin through colours drawn from popular culture. All three share an avoidance of imposing predetermined responses to their work. For Odgaard and Collart, deception is also at play; colour so vibrant that they suggest an artificial illumination or disconcerting shifts in scale between the material investigation and the photograph. But where Collart is interested in the possibility of fixing the viewer’s gaze, Morin leaves installation decisions until the final moment resulting in fabrics that can feel, much like Hammerstrøm’s daybed and Krogh’s weaving, more than a little bit alive.

“In our culture, colour does not have the same value as form,” observes Margrethe Odgaard who instead sees colour treated as a “superficial value

added to something else of value”. Odgaard’s approach works to “broaden the concept of colour to knowledge and intention” and away from “attitudes of colour as something feminine and superficial”. This requires the cultivation of curiosity that takes time to re-examine the familiar. “To understand colour, we need to think of colour as light. The sensation of colour happens when light meets a surface.”

Odgaard finds inspiration in minds such as the Scottish mathematical physicist James Clerk Maxwell who is considered the founder of today’s field of electrical engineering. But *Electric Field* (2020) is far more low-tech than the title may suggest. Four layers of crisp, translucent silk organza blend into a centre fold that seems to be illuminated by electricity. The vibrancy is in fact light moving through relatively sheer textiles. A palette of white, yellow, red, and black draws on the extreme ends of the colour spectrum: white contains all colours; black, their absence; plus, light waves moving from yellow to shorter red light waves. The moiré effect (a shimmer created between similar but not identical patterns) is an optical, rather than physical, phenomenon.

Recently, Odgaard has looked for ways to “move colour to the logic part of the brain, the part connected to sense, order, mathematics, the ‘masculine’”. Could a mathematical formula capture the presence of colour as the fourth dimension (after height, depth and width) of a cube? The series *With Some Defined Measure* (2020) displays a machine stitched formula suggested by a mathematics professor in collaboration with Odgaard. The title borrows the last words of the formula, a sentiment Odgaard acknowledges “punctuates the whole formula”. “But this makes it a true statement,” she offers of work that is an “exercise to try and think of colour as rational”.

Valerie Collart works with fabric dipped in plaster or raw porcelain to create enigmatic vignettes that conceal forms beneath a textile skin. Attention to the thickness and weight of the textile influence the cloth’s final drape. She cites the drapery depicted in marble sculptures and baroque paintings as primary interests. Man Ray’s *L’Enigme d’Isidore Ducasse* (1920, remade 1972), a sculpture



of a sewing machine bundled in a blanket and visibly tied with string is another important point of reference. “Concealment is a source of mystery, fantasy and frustration,” Collart offers, “that creates inside of us a form of desire.”

The unapologetically fecund marble sculpture *Cumul I* (1968) by Louise Bourgeois also comes to mind – but Collart’s construction is entirely different. Rather than trigger an established association, these are works intended to “resist interpretation and understanding”. In the photographs Collart creates of her sculptures the suggested scale is often far larger than the original. The photographs freeze time and allow her to “cancel all other possibilities to look”. Little is given away that would tie image or sculpture to the real world. “I like them to be a bit worrying,” she admits, “melancholic”.

“We have a false interpretation of Greek sculpture as a canon of whiteness,” Collart warns. Pigments have simply disappeared with time. For those familiar with black and white images from art history, her creations consciously insert themselves into the aesthetic of this continuum. The result is not easy to place as either contemporary or historical, but instead asks us to “dig into our collective visual memory”.

Positioned between the worlds of art, interior design and fashion, Justin Morin is not interested in value judgements that position one above another. Instead, he works in a “confluence of references” that share the question of where beauty and decoration belong today. The draperies which have become a signature in his work have sustained a decade-long investigation. The reasons are creative, but also extremely practical. What else would allow huge exhibitions to be shipped in a FedEx tube?

Viewing Morin’s work through still images conceals the slight movement of silk experienced as the viewer approaches the work. “In person the silk is always moving, sensual, the whole body is engaged.” Morin cites the minimal vocabulary of Donald Judd as influential. But he is quick to admit that before working with silk his attempts to achieve “squared industrial perfect forms” lacked “the quality of the artists I was admiring”. The lightness of silk has, by his own admission, met his

quest for perfection far more satisfactorily.

Palettes are often drawn from open source images with a protocol for each work’s title offering the interested viewer clues. Each begins with the phrase *How to Drape*, followed by a reference to the source image, for example *the surface of Saturn* (2018). Other abstracted image references are drawn from cinema, art, tourism – everyday visual culture logged in many of our memories.

When the silk arrives in Morin’s Paris studio from Italy where it is printed, he accepts the outcome as final. Unlike the calibration of magazine printing on paper (another genre in which he works), unanticipated vibrancy or paleness are accepted as they come. Suspended from the rigid delineation of steel, drapery is left until the final moment of installation.

The expectations we hold for textiles are often gathered from experiences of daily life. We expect a raincoat to be waterproof, a dishcloth absorbent. Seeing material failure as positive is an uneasy demand on our imaginations. But Albers advised attention return “to the fundamental principles” not as a way to get stuck in repetition but the opposite, to “open the field again for invention, imaginative use of intellectually recognized facts.” Anne Fabricius Møller celebrates the vulnerability of certain dyes to fade when exposed to light and employs this fact as a slow technique to pattern cloth. Sofie Genz works within the parameters of what the plain weave structure provides, but then takes these fundamental principles into three-dimensions by moving check patterned cloth onto the cube. Finally, Vibeke Rohland works from a starting point of admiration and respect for the stories pre-existing cloth carry. Rohland’s quest for recipes that remove colour is not about denial of the original but an imaginative unworking that draws more attention to the original than it takes away.

Fugitive colours are those most vulnerable to change. As a result, they tend to be treated as something negative, prudent risks to avoid. Anne Fabricius Møller disagrees. “I am fed up with the idea that strong and good are the most important parameters of the design process.” Her poetic

investigations of cloth are patterned by exposure to natural light over long periods of time.

Fabricius Møller has noticed how the fading of curtains in summer houses or spare bedrooms is often something we overlook. "Fading is not a disaster!" Her first fade-designed textiles were exhibited in 2006. Initially, the work was not well understood. "Maybe it was my cryptic titles," she laughs. First named *In My Window* or *In Your Window* (the latter a necessary strategy when she ran out of space in her own home and started asking to borrow friends window sills), from 2013 *Faded* was inserted into each title and understanding of the work improved.

Experiments to find dyes receptive to fading began, ironically, with some false starts. "I started with indigo but it was too good and did not fade! Other plant dyes can fade too much; violet and pink chemical dyes are responsive to fading. Some dyes fade too quickly, some dyes so slowly the material cannot handle it. Silk could not cope; the colours are lovely but the fabric too fragile."

Today she mainly works with cotton and linen, admitting she has not selected a speedy way of working. "It takes seven or eight years – I forget about them when I am busy – or put one back on the roof because it needs more time." She chuckles that the process is slow enough that even a small exhibition could take twenty years to prepare. Collectors willing to invest in these works-in-progress have been limited. After folding, the pinned and stitched fabric is placed in an acrylic box (protection from dust rather than light) and collectors decide for themselves when to unfold the textile.

"People forget how concentrated and bright the colour was. After twenty years you will have a striped fabric." But the gestation period can depend on your location. A collector in Tromsø may need to wait thirty years, Malaga ten. The first collector acquired their work in 2006 making it soon ready, if they were to choose, to open the box and unfold the now striped fabric. "It is more an idea," Fabricius Møller admits. "Time has come with me and has been positive for me. My approach has not changed, but reception over time has."

The three cubes of woven linen that form *Mixed Up* (2020) represent Sofie Genz's latest

investigations in colour. Working with plain weave and a striped warp, Genz weaves fabrics that form a check pattern. The original colours of the warp and weft become new combinations within the simple pattern. Linen does not lend itself to saturated colours and Genz carefully selects a palette that shares similar dusty hues.

Washing after weaving enhances the natural softness and shine of linen, but the 10% natural shrinkage is a crucial calculation for the accuracy of the 50 cm square steel cube frames the fabric is eventually wrapped around. Stretched tight like a drum skin (rather than padded like a pillow) the warp and weft of each fabric are just thick enough to be visible as individual threads to the naked eye. When viewed in natural light the structure casts small shadows with enough translucency that through one side of the cube patterns from the back side emerge. No two sides of any cube are the same.

Genz makes decisions to change the rhythm and colour of the stripe at the loom, rather than working from a template calculated in advance. She estimates: "Two days to set up the loom, then weaving one day to make one metre of cloth, and the three cubes require nine metres of cloth." "But I like that it takes time and that I have time to think. I like the whole process. The three cubes each have their own individuality... they are a little different but together."

For the past three years Vibeke Rohland has "erased colour made by the textile industry". She describes her fascination with the recipes needed for the removal of colour as a form of "reclaiming fabric" that works back into pre-made woven cloth. Since the 1980s her work has been decidedly hands-on: "I work on the fabric or object directly. If I find along the way this is not working, I find another way."

Initially, Rohland printed onto cloth which she then erased until she faced her own question: "Why remove my own colour? I know what I will find." Missing the lack of chance and uncomfortable with the volume of waste water she was generating, she refocused on erasing colour from pre-existing fabrics. "Robert Rauschenberg did not erase his own drawing!" she offers – a reference to the American artist's work *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). While the work was exe-



cuted through erasure, it was crucial to Rauschenberg that he used a work of art that he and others admired and respected.

Rohland works with a small silk screen frame, squeegee and brush – letting instinct rather than measurements determine placement. “You never know 100% what you are doing working with discharge paste,” she admits. Discharge paste remains chemically stable for only a few hours at a time and the unpredictable results only visible after further steps of steaming and cold-water rinsing. Only several steps later will it be accurately visible. Mistakes – if they can even be called that - are all saved as future starting points for new works.

“By removing colour, I have spaces,” she explains – the inverse magic of the photographic dark room. The original fabric remains crucial to the final outcome, “an acknowledgement of what has been done”. No textiles – not even her own designs – are safe from Rohland’s erasure. Ironically, she found the fabric a challenge because of the quality of original production. For *In a Slow Manner* Rohland has worked on a velvet with deep, brilliant colours; a seductive fabric used since 2000 BC as a symbol of strength and wealth.

Writing about textile materials, Albers highlighted the importance of flexibility as “one of the factors we will need in times to come”. Her writing about textiles is often admired for its timelessness, but it may also deserve credit for its prescience. The course of both Anni and Josef Albers lives were dramatically altered by the rise to power of the Third Reich. Anni Albers immigration to the United States was possible, at least in part, because of her textile knowledge. (A patent application for acoustic panels Anni Albers designed as a student at the Bauhaus was cited in the immigration application that granted her safe transit to the United States in 1933.) Life in America demanded a new language and she is acknowledged to have spoken English with a strong German accent her entire life. Some have even suggested that challenges in communicating through spoken English prompted Anni Albers to seek expression through the written word. If true, this is a strange twist of fate for which we all continue to benefit today.

All Anni Albers quotes from “Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College” first published in *The Weaver* 6:1, Jan-Feb 1941.

All quotes from exhibiting artists from online interviews with the author January 2021.

“A patent application for acoustic panels...” *Anni Albers* Tate Modern London exhibition wall text (11 October 2018 – 27 January 2019).

# Le Bicolore



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