

Drawing – Text – Textile. Rudolf Englert X Chloe Bensahel

Sequences, lines and dots connecting with each other, creating a structure on paper and in space.

The work of Rudolf Englert (1921-1989) and Chloe Bensahel (*1991) shares numerous points of reference. Independent of their different time and media, the works possess a visual proximity, based on the principle of sequencing; moreover, the reference to writing and music are fundamental elements in the work of both artists.

From the early 1960s, Rudolf Englert creates his innovative series of drawings in black ink. Despite all the discipline, the series have a free, individual expression and point the way for his future work. Experimenting with the combination of the basic graphic elements of lines and dots, the drawings relate to those of artists like Frieder Nake (*1938), and the ZERO artist, who around the same time start to combine art and technology. Englert's works, however, remain highly independent. The lines and dots bear the human touch, resembling marks rather than geometric shapes.

Similarly, Bensahel describes weaving as an essentially free technique: though bound to the weaving structure in form of horizontal and vertical threads, the design may be followed in a free, even spontaneous way. The artist emphasizes the origins of modern computer systems in those of the mechanical loom: two sets of threads, one passing over and under the other equaling positive and negative, 1 and 0. Her works *Ada I* and *Ada II* (both 2020) reflect upon this history by containing passages by Ada Lovelace (1815-1852), the female mathematician who worked on the first computer. Their visual appearance creates an interesting dialogue with the drawings of Englert, strangely oscillating between an analogue practice and a digital design.

From 1970s, the written character and the echoes of musical notation, which emerged early on in Englert's work, become clearer. Leading art historians recognise Englert's special position within the international avant-garde movements and against the background of the re-evaluation of the image and the medium of paper in the 1970s. His series *Georges Brassens* (1980), in particular, recalls written notes, an abstract language, meticulous exercises on paper and the sign.

Language in form of the letter also forms an essential element in Bensahel's practice. Her *Text Tapestries* (2016 – ongoing) explore the connection between text and textiles. The artist writes on handmade paper, which she tears and twists into a thread. She then weaves this thread together with other materials, mostly hemp or wool, to create a carpet. The practice is based on a traditional Japanese technique for repairing old textiles by tearing apart old manuscripts. For Bensahel, it is the perfect embodiment of text becoming textile. The written word remains present in the art work as an abstract concept, illegible and yet essential to the structure of the work.

Bensahel's *Interactive Tapestries* (2019 – ongoing) continue this idea. In reference to the meaning of the text in Hebrew religion, where the text, written exclusively in consonants, only becomes complete through the vowels spoken by the readers, the viewer forms an integral part of the works. By weaving in conductive threads, sound or light sequences are activated once the carpets are touched; the tapestries become performative resonating bodies. Emerging from the artist's collaboration with Jacquard and the Google Arts & Culture Residency (2019), the group of work aims to establish touch as an independent form of cognition, in contrast to a primarily visual or cognitive reception.

The conceptual approach to textile art applied by Bensahel was developed during the 1970s, when artists like Sheila Hicks (*1934) and Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) expanded the medium towards installation and conceptual art. Just as Englert liberated the practice of drawing, these artists liberated textiles from their housewife, house-size existence to an expressive medium. The

sensual quality of the textiles enabled a combination of the sensual with the cognitive, an analytical message in a sensitive physical form.

Similarly, Englert's drawings address both the mind and senses. While the eye traces the graphic signs, the body is moved by the dynamic rhythm of the lines. Their freedom and movement create a strong plasticity; the lines seem to come out of the paper. The approach is both reflective and poetic, transmitting a similar effect upon the viewer.

Bensahel's works *are* objects in space. The textile medium immediately appeals to the body and invites the hand to reach out and touch. The *Interactive Tapestries*, in particular, manifest the combination of the physical and thought process. The design of the works and the numerous references to text, in turn transmit a graphic quality which is emphasized by their presentation in a frame, approaching an image-character.

While Rudolf Englert, thus, significantly expands the concept of drawing, Chloe Bensahel's works achieve a departure from a restrictive concept of textile art. Their historical and conceptual references reinforce their immediate visual relationship; the juxtaposition emphasises the simultaneously analytical and playful approach of both artists and enables a new way of perceiving their works.

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This essay accompanies the exhibition *Rudolf Englert x Chloe Bensahel*, Galerie Dittmar, Auguststraße 22, 10117 Berlin, January 25 – March 4, 2024.