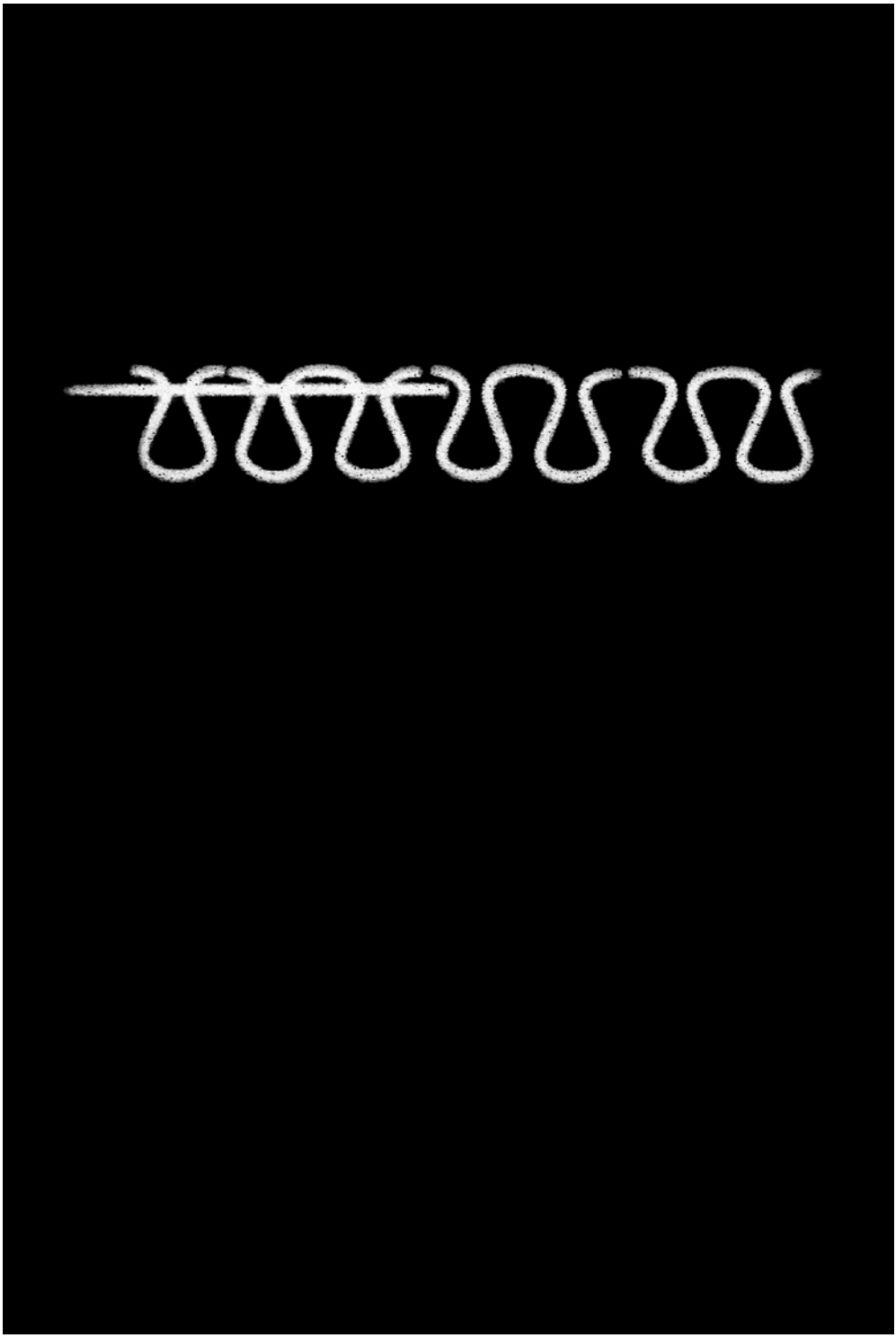

The snippets of text freely woven into this bulletin are, in order of appearance, courtesy of Roland Barthes, Caroline de Gruyter, Gae Aulenti, Hojwiri, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Ineke Sluiter, Plato, Virginia Woolf, Bruno Latour, Jane Jacobs, Charlie Brooker, Peter Kammerer, Robert Bringhurst, John Berger, and Barthes again.

Cover image: Paulina Olowska, *Needle & Thread*, 2003, Neon, Aluminium, 37 x 15 x 200 cm / 14.6 x 6.1 x 78.7 in.

In one of his courses at the Collège de France in the 1970s, Roland Barthes introduced the metaphor of "unthreading" for the act of describing. His aim was to consider the nature of translation from material into language.

To describe = to "unthread" a word … whence the frequent recourse to etymology. Ancient word that can serve as a metaphor: *parfiler* (to unthread): Voltaire, "La Toilette de Mme de Pompadour" : "Newton *a parfilé* (unthreaded) the sun's light, as our ladies *parfilent* (unthread) a cloth of gold.— What is *parfiler*, sir?— Madame, the equivalent of this word is not to be found in Cicero's discourses. It's to unthread a fabric, to unweave it thread by thread to separate out the gold."

To describe, to unthread what? The nuances … Make no mistake: this is not about intellectual sophistication. What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me …

Barthes is pointing out that this particular kind of unthreading is in fact a process of selection, choosing the golden threads and recollecting them, seeing only what you want to see. You can conceive of this a visual lesson, too, in the sense that following the track of the thread enables you to focus on the structure, the composition of this particular material. In this way you will learn it *by heart,* to the point of being able to translate it into the most appropriate words; words that properly accommodate your thoughts as a single continuous thread. This brings to mind another French expression drawn from the world of textiles and recently transferred to that of economics: *détricoter*.

European currency functions because all Euro countries largely apply the same rules for the financial sector, in order that banks don't discriminate against each other and capital can flow through the Eurozone without obstacles. The flight of capital from north to south damages this tissue. The financial integration of Europe is going backwards for the first time since the early eighties, says Ignazio Angeloni, advisor of the European Central Bank. The French have had a wonderful word for this phenomenon: *détricotage*. Like a knitted fabric that you unravel. Banks

retreat behind borders: to be stronger in one country they give another country a few more loans … The symbolism of this is ominous: it shows that the system is powered up (under tension) and that some participants are rejecting the rules.

Détricotage might be useful shorthand for economists, but I wonder if the disintegration of the Eurozone can truly be compared to an "unknitting" or "unraveling" process. We're all familiar with the act of a mother or sister unraveling a sweater in order to start knitting a new one for a younger sibling. (It's generally an unwelcome gift, as the recipient suddenly discovers himself to be merely a copy of another family member.) If the word *détricotage* alludes to disintegration but the actual unraveling is the beginning of what is essentially more a *recycling,* you can start to see how big the gaps between actual material practice and the abstract transposition of its terms into different domains can be. Promiscuous words can stir up consciousness usefully, but when the elements break down and concepts fall apart, inevitably the outcome is altogether something else — with its own new inflections and implications.

Under the vast blanket of textile parlance, strange things occur. Politicians appropriate the language of binding techniques and contrive to weave new alliances, while "architects are operating not as planners or visionaries, but as weavers and tailors of the fabric of communities, spinning the threads of conversations into well-fitted garments for their bodies politic," or building "hand-sewn buildings" in which "the posts of the structure look like colored yarns stretched on a loom." Frank Lloyd Wright has been called a "weaver of utopian, never-ending spirals; from the very core of the earth up to the azimuth." Meanwhile, Frank Gehry contrives structures whose surfaces look like bedding and ribbons.

He has long sculpted buildings of metal, a pliant material suited to the challenge of bending over and around the tangle of streets. Here, he wanted to roll out his metal in a quilted pattern, to crinkle the light bouncing off the building and so soften its enormous mass.

When Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim museum opened in 1997, the editors of fashion magazines were quick to arrange photoshoots with models in outfits assembled from a complex double-layered, stitched fabric that was

intended to echo the building's facade. If you contrive to inscribe an object with a particular value — like the effect of "quilting" on a building — it seems reasonable to assume that this value could be heightened by juxtaposing the original reference. But the presence of these garments had the opposite effect: they made the building look flat. The value might seem contagious, but when applied as a backdrop "based on a construction of titanium alloy sheets, rolled out in a quilted pattern," the effect of Gehry's building was visibly diminished. Where the fabric is clearly stitched, its metal counterpart is revealed as synthetic, merely *alluding* to the same technique. The quilted garment is an object, while the so-called quilted building is what we might call an "image-object."

The same thing happened with patchwork and religion. Patchy dress styles were originally a practical outcome of poverty, but later reappeared as emblems of humbleness — an early instance of dressing down. Both the Sufis and the followers of St. Francis of Assisi, for example, wore patchwork robes in order to express humility.

By reliable account, Jesus, son of Mary, had a patchwork cloak, which he wore when he ascended into heaven. One of the masters of the Path once said that he had seen him in a dream, wearing that same old patchy woollen cloak, and that beams of light shone from every patch. He explained, "I cried, 'O Christ, how come these beams of light from your dress?' And he replied, 'These are the rays of my misery. Every rip and tear which I had to mend, the Good Lord turned to light, representing all the pangs of suffering which have stung my heart.'"

Patchwork nowadays involves prefabricated squares or octagons ordered in bulk to be sewn together, but consider the conditions under which such garments were made by colonists in the 19th century, when the technique involved assembling a crazy amalgam of second- or third-hand off-cuts. Deleuze and Guattari took this quality of fabric distribution as a prime example of what they called "smooth" as opposed to "striated" space — felt or patchwork as opposed to woven fabric. In *Mille Plateau* (1980) they transformed this pragmatic textile technique into a philosophical strategy: "An amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways."

The first settlers of the 17th century brought with them plain quilts, embroidered and striated spaces of extreme beauty. But toward the end of the century patchwork technique was developed more and more, at first due to the scarcity of textiles (leftover fabric, pieces salvaged from used clothes, remnants taken from the "scrap bag"), and later due to the popularity of Indian chintz.

Deleuze and Guattari studied the technology of weaving from scratch, drawing in particular on descriptions by archaeologist and anthropologist Leroi Gourhan, who studied and mapped the production of "supple solids" all over the world. Fundamentally, weaving consists in an over/under, under/over process. Gourhan saw this as an archetypal "semi-closed" system, comprising fixed and mobile parts in equal measure. The warp expands endlessly while the weft is limited by the size of the particular loom—a spatial logic derived from a binding technique. Deleuze and Guattari also refer to Plato's metaphor of weaving as a "royal science," a paradigmatic pattern for state government in which the statesman is conceived as a weaver who works towards assembling a perfect fabric from the heterogeneous community of "warp" and "weft" citizens.

What Plato said about the statesman is interesting for the comparison with people's characters, because the warp threads are in fact the only ones that have tension on them, right? Those are the fiery people, the courageous people and so forth. And the relaxed ones that you interweave with them, those are the moderate people. And that's how you get a well-mixed society. Plato really takes into account the character of the different parts of the loom.

A "Stranger" introduces the metaphor.

All things which we make or acquire are either creative or preventive; of the preventive class are antidotes, divine and human, and also defenses; and defenses are either military weapons or protections; and protections are veils, and also shields against heat and cold, and shields against heat and cold are shelters and coverings; and coverings are blankets and garments; and garments are some of them in one piece, and others of them are made in several parts; and of these latter some are stitched, others are fastened and not stitched; and of the not stitched, some are

made of the sinews of plants, and some of hair; and of these, again, some are cemented with water and earth, and others are fastened together by themselves.

A pause,

And these last defenses and coverings which are fastened together by themselves are called clothes, and the art which superintends them we may call, from the nature of the operation, the art of clothing, just as before the art of the Statesman was derived from the State; and may we not say that the art of weaving, at least that largest portion of it which was concerned with the making of clothes, differs only in name from this art of clothing, in the same way that, in the previous case, the royal science differed from the political?

During his conversation with Young Socrates, the Stranger apologizes for the fact he introduced such a "boring" metaphor, thus anticipating a number of more recent adverse connotations. In the 1970s, for example, craft techniques were frequently adopted as metaphors for slowness and clumsiness, disparaged for being emphatically vernacular and particularly feminine. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, held the concept of literary weaving in high esteem, considering it the ideal structure on which to model her diary.

Something loose-knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful, that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art.

Woolf wants a format that will allow her to stitch together those scattered notes into a new whole, a tangible work of art, a "real" text. Yet expressions based on fabric and networks are more commonly developed and communicated on a purely virtual level, as a kind of cocktail party talk barely tethered to actual circumstances. They can help us understand how

people behave or how society operates, from telegraphy and railways to GSM and Skype, but these concepts always have material consequences.

I take the word network not simply to designate things in the world that have the shape of a net … but mainly to designate a *mode of inquiry* that learns to list, at the occasion of a trial, the unexpected beings necessary for any entity to exist. A network, in this second meaning of the word, is more like what you record through a Geiger counter that clicks every time a new element, invisible before, has been made visible to the inquirer.

Why are these nouns in particular, "fabric" and "network," so ubiquitous today? In countless fashion articles, political speeches and urban development meetings, these two cosmopolitan concepts are in perpetual flight through different domains, refusing to settle in any one. In the last couple of years, "fabric" has also frequently been qualified by the adverb "social." Addressing the urgency of this so-called social fabric, politicians, urban developers and sociologists express their concern for coherence, to those alliances apparently forsaken in the 20th century (the "century of the self"). The social fabric of the city is torn, they say; irreparably destroyed, even. Yet none of these delicate souls seem to have much of an idea as to where the real repercussions of this desperate state of affairs might be, nor even what this pattern *looks like.*

For some sociologists, social fabric means the intrinsic dynamics of a local neighborhood or network, a form of "bonding capital that emphasizes the social networks among individuals who agree to a certain value." When textile metaphors are used to map hard-to-grasp social issues, the imagination is let loose, but this doesn't necessarily help us perceive the situation any better. Since metaphorical fabric has no physical appearance, we still need to discover exactly what components are being combined, and how the whole is composed.

Because the image-object of "fabric" implies something almost invisible and severely compressed, it's easy to draw an analogy with the present-day abstraction of globalization. This suggests, however, that the construction is couture, that matter is somehow deliberately entwined within globalization's intangible blur. It's hardly surprising that binding is

a virtue in politics and management, because the idea of fabric as a "dazzling multiplicity" implies it has been reassuringly *made*—and so too that it might be appropriately *fixed.*

Although the vocabulary of textiles may tap into a collective memory of connected matter, ideally this knotted network offers ways of thinking that are more flatly pragmatic. How to convincingly and consistently grasp the material consequences of textile metaphors? In language we pretend to execute a material act; in reality we execute a technological instruction. Somewhere between fabricated language and real fabric there's a tear, a hole; yet this "distressed" gap is actually desirable. The gap, in fact, is a perfect place for testing the consequences of literary and concrete matter. The gap is the very essence of weaving.

Far from being a smooth operation, a fabric or weave requires tension, for without some kind of inherent adherence, the material will come apart and our clothing fall off. The journalist and broadcaster Charlie Brooker thinks these terms don't make sense at all.

As the very fabric of life breaks down around us, even language itself seems unreliable. When you see the word "trust," can you even trust that? Why? It's just shapes! Right now all our faith has poured out of the old institutions, and there's nowhere left to put it. We need new institutions to believe in, and fast. Doesn't matter what they're made of. Knit them out of string, wool, anything. Quickly, quickly. Before we start worshipping insects.

Words are easily projected, but their outcome not so easily predicted. As the structure of a given fabric is usually not immediately visible, so it's useful to seek out the conditions under which it has been produced. Knitting or weaving is easy enough in theory, but it's a lot easier to assume you're knitting than to sit down and actually knit. Or is it the other way round? Responsible production means taking care of the final product, and in the case of textiles this means anchoring or knotting the threads, understanding how the fabric holds together; testing the tolerance of its bonding. The fabrication of textiles and textile vocabularies are useful exercises in iteration, because they can both be productively undone.

Social theorist Richard Sennett considers the term *theoria*, which shares a Greek root with *theatron*, a theater — literally a "place for seeing," while sociologist Peter Kammerer, a close friend and translator of Pier Paolo Pasolini, has warned against paying too much attention to this textual weave, lest its message escape the reader.

Pasolini has a message he wants to communicate. But he says and doesn't say it — he remains ambiguous because the message is monstrous and no reader at the time would have believed it. The key sentences of his announcements are linked with each other by a textual weave — what Barthes calls the catalyses of narrative. Here we find political considerations, but also words without meaning — pure sound play. Poetry is always an interplay of sounds, associations, and analogies that determine the choice of words.

In 2007, John Berger wrote a story called "The Red Tenda of Bologna," about "three meters of fabric hiding the secrets of the city" that the locals traditionally hang in front of their doors and windows in summer.

After 1945 and free elections Bologna became a communist city. And the city council remained communist, election following election, during fifty years. It was here that Management was obliged to accept Workers' Control committees in the running of their factories. Another consequence (so easy to forget how political practice often operates like a loom, weaving in two directions, the expected and the unexpected) was that Bologna became the best-conserved city in Italy, famous for its small luxuries, refinements and calm — and Europe's favorite host-city for trade fairs (sports installations, fashion knitwear, agricultural machinery, children's books, etc.)

When part of Berger's story was excerpted in *The Drawbridge*, it was accompanied by a scan of a piece of the cloth: text and textile equalized in ink. This is an image-object consonant with the ancient Latin notion of "text" (*textus*), which can variously mean "the weave," "woven fabric," "patterned material," "tapestry," or " tableau." But it was Aristotle, in fact, who first to used this metaphor in his *Poetics* to mean all those physical elements of language that particularly affect the sense of hearing, namely words and their combinations, phrases, melody and rhythm.

Thought is a thread and the raconteur is the spinner of yarns, but the true storyteller, the poet, is the weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After long practice, their work took on such an even flexible texture that they call the written page a textus, which means cloth.

Textus was known as "the spider's strategy" — to spin an intrigue. As a resident spider in the web of words, you can begin to consider how to connect these loose elements in order to appropriately fashion a text. Back to Barthes:

***Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue — this texture — the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.**

We can take this as a warning: by all means create a structure, but take care not to become entangled in it yourself. Speaking of ready-mades, remember Duchamp's radical construction work *Sixteen Miles of String*, at the 1942 exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism"? A mesh of string threaded throughout the building, obscuring the show's paintings just enough to attract the curious visitor, while at the same time maintaining an awkward distance.

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