

Weavers Discourse No. 10

DAY IN DAY OUT

Sophy Naess
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“A moment of prayer was more likely measured by intensity than by quantifiable time. Hours of prayer: there’s a bit of a paradox because they were a practical means of scheduling daily life, but they also directed the devotee toward eternity, to the escape from time.”

– Gillian Adler

I unfurled the FRATELLI
CONFORTI MADE ME
HARDCORE banner, smoothed it out across my ironing table, let it drape its long train onto the floor. “Big Time Sensuality” popped into my head and I played the song all morning.

I’d been stretching a piece of striped linen across the base fabric before running it under the needle, and as I stretched the cloth the colors of its stripes looked different. It was one of those moments of grace that

you never know when will occur,
that creates a sense of awe, of
amazement at the phenomenal
world.

I suddenly thought:
*maybe the diversity of fabric, of
cloth, in terms of its structure
and appearance, is—of all “man-
made” things—that which most
closely parallels the diversity of
nature’s splendors! The struc-
tures of stones, minerals, crystals,
the vascular structures of
plants, of flowers...fabric is
their equal!* And was full of awe.

I wait for these moments, as during Bachfest, wondering when I will be struck by that feeling of wonder, of amazement at being alive. This past winter I had almost given up, thought I must be too numb and depressed to have my moment with that music (which used to come easier it seemed). But finally towards the end of the week while sitting and binding books as the sun came up, at my living room table with the stereo on, it happened. The amazement.

Trails of scraps on my floor afterwards like the sex scene in shows suitable for TV which I distinctly remember from early childhood: the camera following a trail of clothing strewn on the floor. In the 1980s.

I CAN ONLY GIVE YOU EVERYTHING

I listened to the song on repeat while sewing one night, the MC5 version. And I chewed so much gum while sewing in the late nights and early mornings.

I can't give you more than what I've got.

Can't expect to give what I have not.

I can only give you everything.

Mae visits and says when it comes to making weavings Helena is less interested in metaphor and meaning than in the complexity of the structure.

I'd been talking about my recent interest in weaving *patterns*, and my wariness of this new direction. I understand that on some level the human inclination to create pattern must be rooted in a reverence for nature and its forms –but on the other hand there is a deathly mechanical aspect to it. That to weave pattern feels like

“doom scrolling,” like being totally passive to a machine.

I shared the Bukowski quote
*“As the spirit wanes the form
appears.”*

(In the beginning I had been determined to avoid the monotony of pattern. I wove a giant mess of a sex scene that was commended for its painterliness. Now I was following recipes for houndstooth.)

“I always thought it must be

totally boring to have no structure, though” Mae said. She liked that I was “swimming” in the tension between—not sure what to call it—wonder? and... doom? What to call these ends of a spectrum related to spiritedness? As it pertains to the weaving of pattern. Or operating within structured systems...

But when she said this about Helena I thought *that’s it, it’s a false binary—‘meaning and metaphor’ aren’t any different from ‘the complexity of form’!*

Mae was excited about the giant banner of fabric swatches called FRATELLI CONFORTI MADE ME Hardcore.

She mentioned the time built into it, the time represented by these different pieces of cloth in terms of what decade they referred to, stylistically; where fabric had been produced at different times in history, the labor time of designing and producing it...

This sent me into a kind of reverie, thinking of this thing as a repository of so much history and activity.

I talked about how the abundance of (so much!) waste material in Italy had pushed me into what felt like a radical space where container forms seemed like the only concern—establishing forms that any content could be input into, thinking of everything as part of a book, or, a book.

After Mae took off, I went to the Strand and sold a box of books getting almost \$50 in store credit. I bought a new Žižek book on his Hegelian take on quantum mechanics, probably way out of my depth.

The 2007 Joy Division documentary smartly opens with a quote from Marshall Berman:

“To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.”

The movie goes on to characterize the significance of the indus-

trial backdrop of Manchester for the music of Joy Division and the experience of Ian Curtis. Weaving mills: arguably the beginning of modernity.

Digital: apparently the last song that Curtis sang before taking his life after the show, on May 2 1980 in Birmingham.

*I feel it closing in,
As patterns seem to form
I feel it cold and warm
The shadows start to fall
I feel it closing in,
I feel it closing in,
Day in, day out,
Day in, day out...*

In the documentary, Steve Coogan points out how digital the song really is: the lyrics day in day out day in day out are like zeros and ones.

I measure warps for a “color and weave” scarf for my aunt’s birthday, alternating a really lovely wool from my grandmother—a thick, elastic brown that could have come from my favorite sheep, Mahalia, whose spongy oily fleece I was reminded of as I marveled at this yarn’s springiness. I alternated this brown with a white industrially spun wool I bought in Peter Patchis’s musty old factory warehouse in Providence, Rhode Island.

I liked mixing my grandmother's wool with the leftovers from New England mills partly to extend and conserve my precious stock of her very special yarns which held so many sacred memories for me, but also as a holistic union of vastly different worlds of production.

I listened to Joy Division as I wound the warps, glad to have a connection to a pre-modern variant of this labor and all of the familial stability implicit in such a thing.

While at the same time building
the wool of industrial New
England into the sequence.

I start to think Thomas Bayrle is my man. A weaver, a painter-purveyor of “the stencil-like,” and a gateway to Gottfried Semper. Who described the shared origins of weaving and pattern in grass and plant fibers:

The variety of the blades’ natural colors occasioned their use in alternating order and hence the pattern emerged.

I haven't heard from my dream lover since Christmas Day, almost 3 weeks ago. I still get off to strange, unexpected fantasies about him. Today suddenly, the image of his smiling face came into my head and accelerated the excitement. Instantly my body was a canyon he was entering in search of a connection with ancient human spirits, as though I was just another of those hypogea he'd told me about his interest in, that appealed to him because they made him feel like it was neat to be a human instead of

shameful; that there was a continuum that was not all bad.

I think it was in the evening on
Christmas Day, the last time
I smoked weed—that I sat inside
the loom with a sheet of paper
where I'd gridded out my tie-ups
and had also written:

DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN LONGING
AND HOPE?

Were they not the same thing?
Can one be hopeless and
also full of longing?
Does longing not equal hope?

Freezing days, a string of days spanning at least two weeks maybe even three, consistently below freezing, sometimes as cold as only three or four degrees. I slept over in New Haven before a Friday of Thesis Reviews which I enjoyed. At the reception I drank two glasses of wine, and started to suspect that something has changed in me, in that alcohol now seems to run the risk of bringing out an ugly negativity. This didn't used to be the case; I was just an amorous drunk. Maybe these days more

of an effort to look on the bright side is called for and it breaks down with intoxication.

Over the weekend I tried to relax and come down from the exhausting week, and wove a scarf for Brody for his birthday. There was a massive blizzard. I was having a heavy period. I sat at the loom naked in the warmth of the apartment. I got the news from Raque about Alex Pretti. So it was a weekend of bleeding, weaving, watching the snow swirl around in the air and looking at the news

obsessively. I felt sick and had a very bad headache. I listened to the audiobook of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* read by a cringe-inducingly affected Jefferson Mays whose audiobooks I'll make sure never to buy again. I did like one passage in the book describing the cemeteries of Queens and calling the borough "*necropolitan*." Also when they go to a couples therapist, I liked what the wife says about why she wants to stay together: something along the lines of how she just feels a desire

to see her husband's life through to the end as happily as possible. That's how I feel about my dream lover, maybe because he seems uniquely capable of such a straightforward commitment to his own loved ones.

On the train to school, Vamba tells me about rituals he remembers witnessing as a kid in West Africa. Somewhere outside of town, near a body of water, probably a river.

His eyes got wide as he recounted the otherworldliness of what he'd seen: towering figures in motion in the dark, you couldn't tell if there was a person inside or not. "It wasn't a question of 'was that real or not,' it was more like 'what the fuck was that I just saw?'"

he said. He told me about a film he had recently seen by Manthia Diawara called *AI: African Intelligence*. The film proposes the idea of training AI on the knowledge that is accessed in the type of states Vamba witnessed as a child—other realms that people go into after dancing for days or participating in other forms of elaborate ritual.

We got to talking about how mental health is a construct, how the notion of “being in your right mind” serves a purpose, is about

being able to function in particular ways in a capitalist society. Vamba suggested that if AI could take over various tasks and labor previously performed by humans, maybe we could be freed up to live in other mental states, occupy other states of mind and still be valued members of society. I liked this take on AI and I realized later isn't this analogous to what modernity did for the figure of the artist?

Vamba said the film though had underscored for him that some realms of knowledge should be withheld from AI; that speculate as we might about who would be the conduit between the African intelligence and the Artificial Intelligence, and teach the machine so to speak, it was probably for the better that it didn't happen.

Then we went and taught our weaving class together. We didn't share this conversation with the students. I felt like a privileged colleague.

I continued teaching gestalt theory via Rudolf Arnheim and Wolfgang Metzger to my Visual Thinking students. Bizarrely, swastikas appeared in instruction materials in BOTH of my classes on Thursday. Vamba had shown a piece by Tyrrell Tapaha containing two whirling logs, and in a chapter on shape in Arnheim's Art and Visual Perception it appeared in a diagram about our tendency to subdivide shapes. The swastika was an example of the subdivision of parts of a square.

I showed the students a book of Gee's Bend quilts. They were very excited to see these bold abstract patterns after having been forced to work through so many abstract configurations themselves. It was fun to apply the Arnheim and Metzger theories of how humans see shapes to the ways in which these quilts had been organized. Students wanted to know about the makers' intentions: what were the meaning of these quilts? Were they simply bed covers for keeping warm?

Did they think of them as art?

Over the weekend I watched some documentaries about the quilters that helped answer some of these questions. I felt a tinge of shame at learning that so many people in Gee's Bend share the last name Pettway because that was the name of the plantation there—they had all been owned by Pettway. I had told the students it was a tiny rural community and that many of the quilters shared this name and that I'd met a Pettway

in New Haven and asked him if he knew about the quilts of Gee's Bend and it turned out he was also from there. But I had failed to tell the students this name traced back to the plantation probably because I'd repressed this detail in my own memory, finding it too painful. I hoped the students wouldn't watch the films and think I was trying to cover over the harsh reality of this history. I had said that the community traced its roots back to enslavement, just not made the direct connection

to the plantation when telling them about the name and my anecdote about meeting a Pettway in New Haven.

The quilters in the docs are very poor and very religious. They sing as they sew their quilts. They sing old spirituals. It makes you think about abstraction and music. Rhythm is abstract, a principle that is foundational to, or precedes, representation. You get a feeling from a song even if you don't understand the words.

Seemed important to revisit this idea with the class:

EMBODIED experiences of art. Caitlin had brought this up when we talked on the phone comparing notes on teaching 2DD or Visual Thinking courses and insisting on having the students work with their hands even when so much of the work could hypothetically be done on a computer.

“It’s a political position to not use the computer for this stuff,” Caitlin said. “Because it’s about EMBODIED learning.”

I'd been feeling sick all week even though I made it to school on both days I had to be there and had great conversations and felt pretty energized actually on those days that I had to travel and show up. The other days were online Admissions Zoom meetings and they seemed to make me sick. I didn't feel well, I was in a state of fatigue, couldn't concentrate, had headaches.

At some point I wondered if this was NEURASTHENIA.

I read about “Morita Therapy” and wished I had time for this treatment.

Rock My Religion. Was about the embodied collective experience of spirituality, REELIN AND ROCKIN. The Gees Bend quilters made me think of it. And then I heard from my mom about a new film about the Shakers. The Testament of Ann Lee. Turned out the woman who founded the Shaker sect was from Manchester at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Maybe Dan Graham touched on this and I'd forgotten it but now it brought me back to Ian Curtis and Joy Division.

Ian Curtis apparently was a Shaker. It all makes sense.

I listened to Tessa Hadley read a story by an Irish author I'd never heard of: the Gold Watch by John McGahern, originally published in his 1978 collection of short stories *Getting Through*. I loved Hadley's interpretation of various elements in the story during her convo with Deborah Treisman afterwards. Apparently most of John McGahern's stories are about a cruel father. In this case the father is a farmer and much of the conversation had to do with the impossibility of disavowing ones past including the pastoral as a thing of the past

which nevertheless is still in us.

*“It was a perfect moonlit night,
the empty fields and beech trees
and walls in clear yellow outline.
The night seemed so full of
serenity that it brought the very
ache of longing for all of life
to reflect its moonlit calm.
Yet I knew too well such calm
neither was or could be, but was
a dream of death.”*

The story involves a watch, a time piece, being literally destroyed by poison.

I went to Alex Kwartler and Jacqueline Humphries's conversation at Alex's show. One of the paintings in his show featured a subtractive mark in a monochrome surface, which revealed a glimpse of one of those woven polyester shopping bags apparently adhered to the support underneath. The bit of the weave that was visible actually looked just like the pattern weave stuff I have been exploring: some twill, some houndstooth type of stuff. Alex seemed like a fun, solid person to talk to about the

everyday and pattern as site of both doom and poetry at once.

Later I was looking through my postcard collection as I prepared a Valentine's Day package for my dream lover, which contained silver and gold wrapped chocolate stars, and pansy flowers, and some Russian fondant candies I bought at the new Tashkent grocery store at West 4th that were irresistible to me because they were packaged in golden wrappers printed with swallows, my favorite birds, which to me are

symbols of some kind of faith. I should write my ode to the swallow and also look into whether it is the same thing as a swift. I did find for my dream lover a postcard of the Spring fresco that I had bought on Santorini 15 years ago. This is my favorite ancient artwork.

While searching for the postcard I found a cachet of photos I'd taken on my phone and printed out, of Jacqueline's paintings, maybe 10 years ago. It was a show at Greene Naftali.

Today I think they look very similar to Anni Albers's typewriter weavings, which I had not been aware of at that time. But the reason I'd wanted to have those close-ups of Jaqueline's paintings printed out, at hand, was that they inspired me as weavings. So, "I knew," on some level.

I had a strange sort of unpleasant dream about talking to my dream lover on the phone. The call was accidental, neither of us expected it. I felt nervous and apologetic that we'd ended up in this situation. He said nothing. The silence made me feel very awkward. I became nervous and uncomfortable and ended the call abruptly saying something about how I'd like to know if he welcomes me continuing to write him or not. Like "let me know OK," and then I hung up. I felt like a huge failure because

I'd been too uncomfortable with silence to allow myself to sit with it and see if it could develop into a conversation. I often have this problem with teaching. I feel a sense of responsibility to move the conversation along, and if no one answers when I pose a question to the group, I get nervous and move on where-as I've noticed that Vamba will just awkwardly wait until someone says something and it's great because people finally do have to open up and contribute. It's awkward though.

I had a very unsettling disturbing experience last night related to my beautiful fur hat which my whole family chipped in to buy me at some point in my early 30s. Perhaps it was my 32nd birthday present in 2014. I remember I had gone by myself to the Hall of Gems in the Museum of Natural History earlier that day and I think I met my parents and brother for a drink at Junior's later that afternoon when they presented the hat to me.

The hat is the most glamorous item of clothing I own, it gets me at least one compliment every day that I wear it; sometimes people go into long soliloquies about it and how beautiful I look in it. Often when someone compliments it my response is “It’s very warm,” because I’m a little sheepish that it’s real fur. I tell stories about once when I was wearing it in SoHo, I heard a protest underway and headed in the direction of the chanting only to realize it was a PETA demonstration and

I had to turn on my heels and run away. I also apologize for the extravagance of the hat by telling how my whole family chipped in to get it for me for my birthday years ago and how I've gotten many years of use out of it.

In short, this hat has come to represent to me the idea that I am loved. By my family, and by all the strangers who admire me when I wear it.

Last night as I bundled up and prepared to head home from my studio after a late night of silk painting, a little tuft of fur on the hat gave way, came off in my grasp. I was horrified, I was struck by an intense feeling of mortality and even abandonment. It seemed a harbinger of my own death, but more upsettingly, the death of those who had deemed me worthy of love. I was amazed by the intensity of the anxiety and despair caused by the hint of this hat's dissolution.

I put the tuft of fur into a little plastic sandwich bag and carefully transported it home, telling myself I could and would have the hat repaired; that that was important to focus on.

In the morning I woke up to a text from Raque that said:

“I had a dream that a small black horse that was also a ghost was coming at me and I had to just keep punching its nose. Made me want to do more research into the year of the horse”

“I hope you punched it good,”
I responded, but I was also disturbed by this message as I had been about the hat. A lot of anxiety about death. I don’t think it’s a bad thing to keep the reality of it in mind; I do believe it’s necessary to the understanding and appreciation of beauty and to living ones life fully.

I hope the loving things I send
to my dream lover aren't a waste
and all I mean by that is, I hope
he's touched by them and that
he feels the beauty of longing rather
than just scorning it.

In the library's Special Collections room the librarians have pulled exciting books related to weaving and pattern for Vamba and I and our students. One of the more conceptual is a project by Isabel Nolan, *Some Surfaces on Which Patterns Occur*. Nolan cites as muse the 19th century psychiatric patient Marie Lieb, who tore up her bedsheets and composed ephemeral pattern compositions made of cloth strips, on the floors of the asylum where she lived in Heidelberg.

*...two photographs of Lieb's
arrangements of ripped
cloth, beautiful and inscrutable,
imprinted as a register of
oblique decisions, a chronicle
of specificity with no discernible
purport*

One of the students breathlessly
confides as we head up the
stairs after our library visit that
she too is interested in the
pull of pattern. “It’s something
you recite to keep you sane,”
she suggests.

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