

Activism Through Textiles: An Evaluation of the Exhibition Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art

Nazan Oskay / Assoc. Prof. Dr. 

Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Faculty of Fine Arts
nazanoskay14@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, held at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, in terms of the role of textiles as a medium for political expression and critique in contemporary art. The works featured in the exhibition demonstrate the potential of textiles to generate political discourse through critical approaches developed across diverse themes, including gender, ecology, queer theory, economics, ethnicity, HIV, and colonialism. By analyzing selected case studies from the exhibition, this article discusses how textiles, despite being a “soft” material, effectively communicate powerful social and political messages. This research relies on a review of relevant academic literature, as well as a visual analysis and

conceptual evaluation of the artworks displayed in the museum exhibition. Data collection employed literature review and visual document analysis methods. Through purposive sampling, the research sample comprises works by seven contemporary textile artists selected from among the exhibition participants. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretive techniques.

Keywords: Activism, Contemporary Art, Textile Art, Stedelijk Museum, Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art.

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1. Introduction

Art has historically functioned as a powerful medium for social and political commentary, enabling artists to respond to, interrogate, and critically engage with the world around them. Throughout history, art has served as a vital expressive arena that initiates and visualizes debates on issues such as inequality, war, race, identity, and the environment. Particularly in the postmodern era, the changing expressive forms of materials and their evolving role in art have contributed to making the issues addressed by art more intelligible. Among the new generation of material possibilities, textiles have been particularly favored by artists. As an essential extension of the human body, the expressive modes and functions of textile materials in art have undergone a transformation; this shift has allowed the social, political, and cultural issues addressed by art to come to the fore and be communicated in a comprehensible manner.

Although textiles are one of the oldest fields of production in human history, they have long been regarded as a secondary material and production practice in art-historical writing; particularly because of their association with “women’s labor” and “craft”, textiles have been relegated behind disciplines such as painting and sculpture, which are traditionally categorized as “high art”. On the other hand, contemporary artists’ focus on the material, technical and conceptual possibilities of textiles, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, has led to their repositioning not merely as a functional or decorative element, but as a critical space in which social and political issues such as identity, gender, migration, colonialism, inequality, violence, and collective memory are discussed. The exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, held at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, provides a valuable framework for examining how artists from diverse cultural and geographical contexts mobilize the political and social potential of textiles within a shared curatorial setting. Accordingly, the study aims to examine the role of textiles not merely as an artistic material and means of production but also as a form of activist expression through which social, political, and cultural issues are rendered visible. Within this framework, the research is structured around three key questions:

1. How are the historical associations of textiles with everyday life, domestic labor, and craft transformed into modes of political and activist expression in the works presented in the *Unravel* exhibition?
2. What common and divergent activist strategies do artists from different cultural, social, and political contexts employ through textiles to address issues such as gender, ecology, queer theory, economics, ethnicity, HIV, and colonialism?
3. How do the material qualities, techniques, and

production processes specific to textiles contribute to the construction of activist discourse and the critical articulation of social issues in the works examined?

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically employing document analysis and visual analysis. Qualitative research is an investigative approach that employs data collection methods, such as observation, interviewing, and document analysis, aiming to examine phenomena and events holistically and realistically within their natural settings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). The study focuses on the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, organized by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and the textile-based works of the featured artists. The exhibition catalog, museum publications, artist statements, academic sources, and current literature on the subject constitute the primary and secondary data sources of the research.

Initially, the concept of activism and its forms of expression and discourse in contemporary art are outlined theoretically; subsequently, the concept of “craftivism,” derived from the combination of the words “craft” and “activism”, is examined in terms of its historical development and the relationship between craft-based production and political action. Following the theoretical framework, the historical development of textiles, their transformation within contemporary art, and their relationship with activist art practices have been assessed in light of national and international literature. Thus, by structuring the conceptual background of the research around the relationships among activism, craftivism, and textile art, a theoretical basis is proposed for the analysis of selected works featured in the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*.

This study does not encompass every work in the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* which brings together more than 100 works by forty-five international artists from diverse cultures and regions. In line with this purpose, the study is limited to works by seven artists who were selected through purposive sampling and who use textiles as a form of social, political, and cultural critique and activist expression.

The findings obtained in this context are limited to the works of the selected artists and the activist discourses associated with these works within the exhibition. This method is adopted to focus on examples that best represent the critical and political use of textiles in line with the research objectives. The exhibition comprises works by seven contemporary textile artists who have developed critical approaches to multidimensional social issues such as gender, ecology, queer theory, economics, ethnicity, HIV, and colonialism, whose works are discussed in natio-

nal and international art literature, and whose practices help address the research questions. Based on the sample selected in line with the research aim, an in-depth analysis was conducted to explore how activism is structured in contemporary textile art and the role textile materials play in this process.

In this study, determining whether a work is activist requires more than its capacity to represent a political or social issue. Instead, the key criteria adopted were that the works should take a critical stance toward the issue in question and transform textile materials, techniques, and production practices into a medium of intervention aimed at fostering awareness, participation, solidarity, or social transformation. In line with these criteria, seven artists from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds including Mounira Al Solh (b. 1978), Feliciano Centurión (1962-1996), Sanford Biggers (b. 1970), José Leonilson (1957-1993), Mercedes Azpilicueta (b. 1981), Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín (b. 1982), and Margarita Cabrera (b. 1973) were comparatively analysed in terms of material, technique, form, iconography, and conceptual content. The aim is to highlight the similarities and differences between the ways in which textiles generate political discourse, collective memory, identity, and resistance across different cultural contexts.

3. Activism in Contemporary Art

Art is an expressive domain that aesthetically represents and interprets particular aspects of reality. Society, in turn, constitutes an inseparable part of this process of production. Nourished by culture, art draws on social experiences while being directly shaped by the political, cultural, and economic dynamics of the period in which it is produced. In this context, moving beyond a mere sphere of aesthetic production, art transforms into an effective medium of expression and intervention that addresses, interrogates, and brings social and political issues into public debate from a critical perspective.

Indeed, the New Left movement, which played a major role in shaping postmodern culture, significantly influenced the political and cultural life of Europe, the United States, and the Balkans during the second half of the 1960s; in this process, it also contributed to the transformation of the conceptual and aesthetic orientations of contemporary art (Güçhan, 2008, p. 54). Values adopted by the New Left, such as democracy, human rights, anti-war sentiment, feminism, and social equality, laid the groundwork for repositioning art beyond the perception of it as a purely aesthetic field and establishing it as an effective tool for social critique and political intervention. With this transformation, art acquired an activist quality that directly intervenes in social issues, and activist art emerged as a potent form of expression aimed at generating social awareness,

fostering critical thinking, and mobilizing viewers toward social or political action.

Activism is fundamentally a form of conscious and planned action aimed at creating social or political change; in Turkish, it is commonly translated as ‘etkincilik.’ Modern individuals expect organizations to demonstrate awareness, adopt an explicit stance, and take concrete action on emerging social, political, economic, and environmental issues (Sarıoğlu & Aydınlioğlu, 2022).

The term “aktivizm” has become established in everyday Turkish usage. Its dictionary definition refers to carrying out specific activities to bring about social or political change and to draw attention to particular issues (TDK Dictionary, 2026). Individuals who engage in such actions are referred to as “activists” (aktivist) or, alternatively, as *etkinci* (Yorulmaz, 2023, p. 948). Activists tend to view organizational operations with scepticism and criticize their actions due to underlying commercial motives (Aydınlioğlu & Susur, 2021).

In the nineteenth century, Francisco Goya’s (1746-1828) works addressing the destructiveness of war and Gustave Courbet’s (1819-1877) social realist approach were considered early examples of politically engaged art. By the 20th century, the Dada movement, which emerged amidst the devastation wrought by the First World War, mounted a radical rebellion against the traditional understanding of art. Poets and artists such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Hannah Höch (1889-1978), and Tristan Tzara (1896-1963) strengthened the critical dimension of art through their anti-war rhetoric. Particularly during the period when Expressionism was rising in Germany under the influence of the war, artists did not remain silent in the face of social and political events; they adopted a critical stance toward war, destruction, and social injustices, transforming their works into a kind of activist medium of expression. In this context, Otto Dix (1891-1969), both a volunteer soldier and an artist, produced expressionist works that exposed the full reality of war. Although different stylistic periods can be observed in Dix’s artistic career, Expressionism remained his fundamental style (Ercivan Zencirci, 2013, p. 39).

Dix addressed the harsh realities of war most extensively in his fifty-print series *Der Krieg* (1924) (Figure 1), portraying the devastation of the battlefield, the psychological condition of soldiers, and the impact of war on everyday life with striking realism (Ercivan Zencirci, 2013, p. 33). His statement regarding his experience of war—“I had to see with my own eyes the most dreadful aspects of life; that is why I went to war, and that is why I volunteered”—further reflects this approach (Wolf, 2005, p. 36). Works such as *Die Skatspieler Schützengraben* likewise constitute significant examples that render visible the enduring effects of war on the human body and society (Ercivan Zencirci, 2013, p. 33).



Figure 1. Otto Dix, *Der Krieg*, Etching, 1924
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/761880> (Date of Access: 09.09.2026)

Activist art movements, which initially developed under the influence of Dadaist and Expressionist artists, acquired an increasingly critical orientation toward conventional understandings of politics and dominant artistic practices amid the political and social transformations of the 1960s (Tunç, 2023, p. 127; Yorulmaz, 2023, p. 948). During this period, political, social, ecological, philosophical, and sociological concerns became direct subjects of artistic production, accompanied by an increasing diversification of materials and modes of expression (Engin & Eroğlu, 2023, p. 306–307).

As a key figure in this transformation, Joseph Beuys conceived of art as an instrument of social and political change. His statement, “The human being, through thought, sensitivity, and will, is a sculpture” (DeSimenci, 2021, p. 96), reflects an approach that positions the individual as an active agent of social transformation. For Beuys, thought enables the questioning of existing structures, sensitivity fosters ethical and political awareness, and will allows this awareness to be translated into action. This approach moves art beyond the realm of passive representation and connects it to individual responsibility, participation, and social transformation. Beuys’s understanding of responsibility for the existing state of the world as a collective responsibility of humanity, together with his call to mobilize the “forces of resistance and creativity,” further reveals the collective dimension of this perspective (Beykal, 2005, p. 60–71).

In Beuys’s practice, art is not merely a domain for the production of aesthetic value but a transformative force that encourages individuals to think, question, and act. His use of materials, performances, and pedagogical activities formed integral components of this approach, which aimed to foster social awareness and participation. The paradigm that became increasingly prominent during the 1960s thus contributed to the emergence of participatory and action-oriented practices that established a more direct relationship between art and life while actively enga-

ging with social, political, and cultural issues.

Activist art challenges traditional conceptions of the autonomous aesthetic object by focusing on the process of generating implications and messages rather than the creative process itself (Tunç, 2023, p. 127). Activist and art theorist Gregory Sholette opens his book *The Art of Activism and The Activism of Art* with a striking observation: “The exceptional desire of artists to turn their work into a high-profile protest movement is today often the most visible, and puzzling, component of contemporary art” (2022, p. 7). Sholette argues that the current explosion in art activism ironically realizes a plan that the 20th-century avant-garde failed to fulfill. According to him, “by fusing the avant-garde with neoliberal capitalism, the conflation of art and life has finally been achieved” (2022, p. 11). The interaction between art and activism is also expressed by Aisha Annet Kakembo as follows:

Art has long sustained its presence as a fundamental part of social movements, functioning as a powerful tool for communication and activism. By fostering empathy and raising awareness of social injustices, it engages audiences and allows individuals to envision the struggles experienced by others. A strong reciprocal relationship exists between art and social movements, as both involve collective actions carried out toward common goals. Throughout history, artists have expressed their political and social concerns through their artistic production. Following the Second World War, anti-nuclear activism gained momentum; in this process, artists participated in demonstrations and produced protest posters. A significant portion of these posters was destroyed by authorities (2025, p. 16-17).

Because activist art fundamentally employs a critical language, it has often been rejected by political and social authorities. For this reason, artists have frequently faced censorship, marginalization, or restrictions, which have limited the impact of their work and their capacity to generate social change. However,

despite all interventions, artists have consistently found new platforms through which they can express themselves and reach audiences. Particularly as digital technologies, mass media, and social media have developed, artists have been able to reach audiences on a global scale. As Thompson notes, “for activists, holding open-ended discussions at a time when action is imperative is too comfortable and irrelevant” (2018, p. 39).

Joseph Beuys’s actions during the 1960s, together with the artistic practices of Dadaist artists, made significant contributions to the development of activist approaches in contemporary art. Today, the increasingly blurred boundaries between art and activism have extended the role of the artist beyond aesthetic production, positioning the artist as an active agent engaged in social processes. A contemporary example of this approach is Theaster Gates (b. 1973), who channels income generated through his artistic practice into community-based projects

on Chicago’s South Side, thereby strengthening the relationship between artistic production and social intervention.

Another prominent contemporary figure in activist art, Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), places political and social issues such as censorship, freedom of expression, human rights, and displacement at the center of his artistic practice. Comprising millions of handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds, *Sunflower Seeds* (Figure 2) explores the relationship between the individual and the collective through components that appear identical at first glance yet are individually crafted. The work also references propaganda imagery from the period of China’s Cultural Revolution, in which Mao Zedong was represented as the sun and citizens as sunflowers turning toward him, thereby foregrounding the tensions among conformity, individuality, and political authority (Avci & Uslu, 2019, p. 25).



Figure 2. Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, October 12, 2010–May 2, 2011, Tate Modern Art Gallery, London, UK
<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/unilever-series/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds> (Date of Access: 10.08.2026)

Ai Weiwei’s activist approach is manifested not only through his artistic practice but also through his participation in political protests and advocacy for freedom of expression. In this respect, he has become a prominent figure in demonstrating the role of art in advancing social justice, human rights, and public awareness.

By addressing social, political, and cultural issues through diverse materials, techniques, and modes of expression, activist art has gradually assumed an interdisciplinary character. Within this evolving framework, textile art has emerged as a significant field of expression for critical and action-oriented artistic practices.

Traditionally associated with craftsmanship and everyday life, textiles have, since the second half of the 20th century, become one of the key forms of expression in contemporary art; they have evolved into a powerful vehicle for political discourse, collective memory, debates on identity, and social re-

sistance. Textile-based production techniques such as weaving, knitting, embroidery, and sewing have come to serve as vehicles of critical expression and intervention that help make issues such as social justice, feminism, migration, war, the ecological crisis, and human rights visible by going far beyond the creation of aesthetic surfaces. The intersection of textile production practices rooted in craft traditions with social and political activism has given rise to a new field of study within the context of “craftivism”. Craftivism, a combination of the concepts “craft” and “activism”, positions hand-based production not merely as an aesthetic activity but as a form of action that sheds light on social issues, challenges dominant discourses, and aims to raise awareness in favour of change. In this context, textile art creates a unique sphere for expression within contemporary activist art practices by bringing together the cultural memory of the material, the historical associations of manual labor, and the political language of collective resistance.

4. Craftivism: The Intersection of Craft and Activism

The concept of “craftivism”, stemming from the combination of the English words “craft” and “activism”, defines a field of action in which production practices based on manual labor intersect with social and political activism. The concept highlights the potential of craft production to transcend its aesthetic and functional boundaries in order to address social issues, develop a political discourse, and contribute to positive social change (Ritch et al., 2023).

Betsy Greer, who coined the term, conceptualizes craftivism as an approach involving craft-based practices undertaken with social or political activist motivations (2014, p. 7-8).

In this respect, production practices such as weaving, knitting, embroidery, and sewing, conventionally associated with everyday life and craft, are moving beyond their aesthetic and functional qualities to become mediums that highlight social injustices and form political discourse. Moreover, the use of craft as a medium of political expression and resistance has a historical background that considerably predates the emergence of “craftivism” (Wheeler, 2012). Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s (1869–1948) decision in the 1930s to spin yarn by hand for use in producing his traditional garments as a sign of his rejection of Western culture and the colonial order is one of the key examples of how craftsmanship can be transformed into a strategy of political resistance (Brown & Fee, 2008).

Similarly, the Freedom Quilting Bee, founded in the mid-1960s in the Rehoboth region of Alabama, played a crucial role in helping African American women gain economic independence through textile production and participate in the civil rights struggle (Callahan, 2008). Among other prominent examples in this context are the *apilleras* created under the regime of Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006) in the 1980s, in which women in Chile used appliqué and embroidery techniques to document daily life during the military dictatorship and the stories of those who went missing. Likewise, political and commemorative textiles produced in West Africa have enabled citizens to share their interpretations of contemporary historical developments and to document these developments on the surfaces of textiles (Willard, 2004).

Begun in 1987 and still ongoing, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is a remarkable example of how craft has become an instrument of public expression and solidarity in the context of collective memory, grief, and social visibility (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 4). Consequently, craftivism is not only a new conceptual framework but also an approach that rooted in historical practices of resistance; it brings toget-

her the meanings of craft as they relate to labor, solidarity, collective memory, and everyday life with the goals of social change pursued by contemporary activism, and transforms textile-based production into one of the instruments of political expression, visibility, and social intervention.

5. The Fabric of Social Critique: Textile Art from Women’s Labor to Global Discourse

The historical role of craft as a means of political expression, social solidarity, and resistance provides an important foundation for understanding the place of textiles in contemporary activist art. Traditionally situated at the intersection of art and craft, textile art constitutes a multilayered field of expression encompassing diverse techniques, materials, and modes of production. As an integral part of everyday life throughout history and a form of production largely associated with women’s labor, textile art were long relegated to a secondary position within dominant artistic hierarchies through their classification as craft. Auther (2010) examines the position of textile-based practices within modern art through the historically constructed hierarchical distinction between art and craft, demonstrating that the association of textiles with the decorative arts, craft, and “women’s work,” in particular, has been a significant factor in determining their status within the fine arts. Nevertheless, the increasing incorporation of materials such as thread, felt, and fabric into artistic practice, particularly from the 1960s and 1970s onward, contributed to challenging this hierarchical distinction and paved the way for a reassessment of the position of textiles within contemporary art (Parker, 1984).

Pop Art’s approach, which drew from billboards, consumer culture, and popular iconography, alongside the Feminist Art Movement’s critical discourse that brought women’s labor and traditional handicrafts to the center of art, laid the groundwork for reappraising textiles as an independent and conceptual art practice. During this period, artists such as Anni Albers (1899-1994), Fred Sandback (1943-2003), Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), and Judith Scott (1943-2005) utilized textiles as an effective medium of expression that expanded the conceptual and aesthetic possibilities of contemporary art, pioneering the recognition of textile art as a field within contemporary art (Delagrangé, 2024). Thus, the transformation that began in the 1960s paved the way for textiles to become a powerful means of expression both within the discipline itself and across other fields of artistic practice. This development enabled textiles to move beyond their aesthetic and functional qualities and emerge as an effective form of activist expression capable of rendering social and political issues

visible. In this context, Bryan-Wilson (2017) does not locate the political significance of textiles solely in their formal and material qualities; rather, she considers their political dimensions through their relationships with processes of production, labor, gender, identity, and collective action.

Textile art and activism intersect through the concept commonly termed “craftivism” or “craft activism,” merging traditional handicrafts such as embroidery, weaving, patchwork, and knitting with practices of social and political protest. While interrogating entrenched stereotypes regarding domestic production and gender roles, this approach offers a powerful mode of expression that brings the experiences of individuals and communities marginalized or excluded from the public sphere into public debate (Greer, 2014; Parker, 1984).

Accordingly, the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, held between September 14, 2024, and January 5, 2025, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, serves as the primary case study for this research. Organized in collaboration between the Stedelijk Museum and the Barbican Centre in London, the exhibition was curated by Amanda Pinatih (Stedelijk Museum), Lotte Johnson, and Wells Fray-Smith (Barbican Centre).

The exhibition challenges the long-standing categorization of textiles as merely “craft,” transforming this material into a powerful vehicle for social, cultural, and political critique. Each participating artist expands the aesthetic, conceptual, and critical possibilities of textiles by transcending established approaches to materials and techniques. The works reinterpret multilayered subjects such as gender, labor, value, ecology, cultural heritage, and ancestral knowledge, together with histories of exploitation, oppression, and trade, through the material and cultural history of textiles.

Rather than tracing the chronological development of fiber art, the exhibition brings together artists from different generations and geographies within a framework of thematic relationships, revealing the critical potential of textiles to interrogate power relations. While some artists carry out their production processes through individual and almost meditative handcraft, others focus on practices of collaboration, solidarity, and collective production. Ranging from small-scale works based on hand labor to monumental installations that extend into space, these works uncover the historical, cultural, and political layers carried by fiber and thread, constructing multidimensional narratives regarding lived experiences (Barbican Centre, 2024).

In this respect, while inviting visitors to re-evaluate the meaning-making role of materials in artistic production, the exhibition also opens a discussion of how textiles function within activist practices as powerful instruments of expression for resistance, solidarity, and social transformation. A striking example of this approach can be found in the work of Mounira Al Solh. The Lebanese artist’s work *Paper Speakers* (Figure 3) addresses, through an artistic narrative, the protest process triggered by the deepening economic crisis in Lebanon in 2015, which evolved into a mass popular uprising in 2019. Through the assemblage of diverse textile fragments, the artist depicts a female figure speaking through an improvised megaphone; through this figure, she conveys the collective voice of tens of thousands of protesters opposing corruption and demanding social change. The phrases “Get out!” and “Who am I? Who are they? Who are we?” featured in the work reflect not only a political objection but also a critical interrogation of identity, belonging, and collective consciousness.



Figure 3. Mounira Al Solh, *Paper Speakers*, Ink and Embroidery on Fabric, 2020–2021
<https://www.rivieraloisirs.com/en/events/musee-picasso-expo/> (Date of Access: 25.05.2026)

The artist draws attention to the decisive role assumed by women in the revolutionary process in Lebanon, emphasizing their struggle for gender equality and their efforts to step outside the domestic roles traditionally ascribed to them. Drawing upon the tradition of embroidery through which women in Lebanese culture have contributed to household economies, the artist subverts the traditional meanings associated with this craft, transforming embroidery into a powerful tool of social opposition, solidarity, and resistance. Thus, embroidery ceases to be merely a production practice that provides economic support and becomes a vehicle for collective solidarity, political resistance, and activist discourse (Barbican Centre, 2024, p. 6).

Among the artists participating in the exhibition, Paraguayan artist Feliciano Centurión, much like Mounira Al Solh, developed a protest artistic language in the face of the political conditions and ideological oppression of his time. The artist's works bear the traces of the anti-elitist and democratic understanding of art developed in opposition to the oppressive political environment created by right-wing military dictatorships that exerted long-standing influence in Argentina and Paraguay during the 1990s. By combining inexpensive fabrics, mass-produced blankets, and everyday items obtained from local markets with embroidery, the artist transforms ordinary materials into central elements of an artistic narrative. In this context, the simple aesthetic approach he consciously adopts can be interpreted as a political stance criticizing the elitist structure of art. Due to the censorship and oppression imposed by

military regimes, Centurión, like many artists and writers of the period, developed a symbolic and poetic visual language instead of expressing his thoughts directly. The texts and embroidered elements in the artist's works subtly address personal and social issues, such as queer identity, religion, death, and his deteriorating health following his HIV diagnosis in 1993.

Queer theory is a critical theoretical approach based on the view that gender and sexuality are not biologically determined, fixed categories; rather, they are constructed within social, cultural, and discursive processes (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Interrogating the heteronormative order and binary gender categories such as male/female, this approach emphasizes the fluid, plural, and performative nature of identities.

Within the context of contemporary art, queer theory enables a re-examination of the politics of the body, identity, belonging, and representation from a critical perspective. Although textile art is a field of production historically identified with women's labor and craft, queer artists have expanded textile practices beyond these traditional associations, transforming them into a medium of expression that generates critical discourses against normative gender roles, identity politics, and forms of social exclusion (Butler, 1990; Jones, 2012). In this context, Centurión's artistic practice can be read as an effort to reclaim, through artistic production, the "feminized world" from which he was excluded and denied access as a queer individual in Paraguay, where he spent his childhood (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Feliciano Centurión, From the *La Mirada* Series, Ñandutí Lace and Acrylic on Blanket, 1994
<https://almeidaedale.com.br/en/noticias/feliciano-centurion-participa-de-unravel-the-power-and-politics-of-textiles-in-art/> (Date of Access: 25.05.2026)

¹Ñandutí is a lace-making technique that constitutes a significant element of Paraguay's traditional textile culture and is closely associated with Guaraní cultural heritage. Its name derives from ñandutí, a word meaning "spider web" in Guaraní, one of Paraguay's official languages. For detailed information, see Plá (2024, p. 110).

The artist's conscious transposition of embroidery traditionally identified with women's labor and domestic production into the context of fine arts not only questions the hierarchical distinctions between craft and art but also constitutes a critical intervention against gender regimes that subordinate women and define masculinity within rigid, normative frameworks. In this respect, Centurión transforms textiles into a practice of political resistance positioned at the intersection of identity and belonging, making art the bearer of an activist discourse aimed at transforming gender norms. Indeed, the eight different works featured in the exhibition highlight the discourse of resistance developed by the artist against gender norms and exclusionary social structures.

Although the works of the examined artists focus on

different themes, they frequently adopt social, cultural, and political problems that they have personally experienced or that have become part of collective memory as the starting point of their artistic output. In this regard, American artist Sanford Biggers's work in the exhibition (Figure 5) draws upon the controversial historical narrative stating that quilts were used as codes (ciphers) along the routes of the Underground Railroad, which was utilized by enslaved African Americans seeking to gain their freedom in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. The artist does not use this narrative merely as a historical reference; he also reinterprets the quilt as a carrier of collective memory, resistance, and cultural transmission, establishing a critical link between the past and contemporary debates on social justice.



Figure 5. Sanford Biggers, *Sweven*, Antique Quilt, Assorted Textiles, and Acrylic Paint, 2022
<https://www.textile-forum-blog.org/2025/01/unravel-the-power-and-politics-of-textiles-in-art/> (Date of Access: 09.09.2026)

It has been suggested that the colors and patterns on quilts conveyed signs indicating which directions to take and which places were safe or dangerous. Biggers views the pre-existing quilt patterns as the first layer of code, while defining his own interventions as *"another layer of code to be deciphered one day in the future"* (Barbican Centre, 2024, p. 20). This work was produced on an antique quilt featuring a "bricklayer" pattern, similar to those used by Petway. The stitched, cut, and painted patterns overlap

to create an optical illusion. The deceptive intervention of conflicting signs and patterns suggests that codes are continuously written and rewritten in an ever-shifting present.

Among the examined artists, a prominent figure is Brazilian artist José Leonilson, who, despite having received his training in painting, concentrated his artistic production largely on textile materials and techniques, particularly after being diagnosed with HIV in 1991.



Figure 6. José Leonilson, *Where Can I Find One Bay to Rest My Head?*, Embroidery on Rustic Silk Fabric, 1990
<https://artishockrevista.com/2024/07/11/unravel-el-poder-y-la-politica-de-los-textiles-en-el-arte/> (Date of Access: 26.05.2026)

Leonilson uses textiles not merely as materials but as conceptual narrative tools that enables the expression of bodily fragility, identity formation, and the experience of illness. The artist's turn toward textiles following his HIV diagnosis marks a distinct shift in his production practice, in which the manual, intimate, and body-adjacent nature of embroidery transforms the physical and psychological vulnerability caused by the illness into a powerful form of expression.

In the work titled *Where Can I Find One Bay to Rest My Head?* (Figure 6), the embroidered representations of New York, Jerusalem, and Rio function not simply as records of the artist's geographical mobility but can be read as symbolic stations in a quest for emancipation shaped along the axes of artistic production, economic independence, and sexual identity. Representing diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts, these cities become metaphorical spaces that foreground Leonilson's explorations of belonging, identity, and a sense of place. Within this framework, New York signifies the artist's pursuit of artistic production and economic independence; Jerusalem, as a historical city held sacred by the three Abrahamic religions, evokes references to Leonilson's spiritual world; and Rio de Janeiro points to the geography where the artist was born and raised,

serving as a metaphor for a sense of belonging and origins. In this case, geographical references do not merely define specific locations but transform into a conceptual narrative element reflecting the artist's search for identity, memory, and liberation.

Mercedes Azpilicueta, another artist featured in the exhibition, frequently reclaims the format of the monumental tapestry traditionally used to convey "grand" patriarchal narratives, thereby deconstructing rigid and often colonial historical accounts. In her work *Lady's Dreams or Stop Right There Gentlemen!* (Figure 7), the artist pays homage to an interpretation that reworks the colonial myth of Lucía Miranda, a white woman captured by indigenous people in the lands known today as Argentina, through a proto-feminist lens.

Argentine writer Eduarda Mansilla re-examined this widespread legend in her novel *Lucía Miranda* (1860)², published in 1860, depicting both the character of Lucía and the indigenous people as individuals endowed with agency who establish connections and exchange knowledge with one another (Mansilla de García, 2007). This approach by Mansilla, who challenged social norms through her identities as a traveler, translator, and educator, forms the intellectual backdrop of the artwork.



Figure 7. Mercedes Azpilicueta, *Lady's Dreams or Stop Right There Gentlemen!*, 2019
<https://artreview.com/in-pictures-busan-biennale/> (Date of Access: 10.06.2026)

²For detailed information, see Mansilla de García, E. (2007).

Constructing herself, Lucía, and Mansilla in an imaginary dialogue, Azpilicueta depicts a panoramic landscape populated by women who challenge gender stereotypes and seek “alternative ways of living”. The digitally designed composition was produced on an industrial Jacquard loom in the Netherlands (Barbican Centre, 2024, p. 67). Through its surreal atmosphere, the work references the tradition of magical realism in Latin American literature, while the female figures that appear to “disappear” in the upper section of the tapestry symbolize the systematic rendering of women invisible throughout history. In this respect, the work utilizes textiles not merely as a surface but as a critical narrative medium that questions historical accounts and reconstructs alternative forms of memory.

In terms of its panoramic composition and narrati-

ve language that conveys a plot across a continuous surface, Azpilicueta’s work reinterprets the historical narrative tradition of the Bayeux Tapestry, one of the most significant narrative textiles of the Middle Ages, from a contemporary perspective. However, instead of transmitting narratives of heroism and conquest, the artist transforms this tradition to highlight the history of women relegated to the background of historiography and to foreground alternative narratives of memory.

One work that points to the ontological relationship between humans and nature, as well as the idea that textiles are inseparable from human life, is the performative work titled *Cordón Umbilical* (Umbilical Cord) by Guatemalan artist Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín, featured in the exhibition (Figures 8-9).



Figures 8-9. Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín, *Cordón Umbilical* (Video and Three-Dimensional Work), Thread and Wood, 2023

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/antonio-pichilla-quiacaín-elizabeth-xi-bauer-2662895> (Date of Access: 26.05.2026)

<https://elizabethxibauer.com/elizabeth-xi-bauer-announces-representation-of-antonio-pichilla-quiacaín/> (Date of Access: 26.05.2026)

The artist approaches textiles not merely as a production technique but as a performative medium of expression that invites a re-examination of the reciprocal link between humans, nature, and culture. By fastening the opposite end of the backstrap loom, which is attached to his body, to a tree, the artist transforms the act of weaving into a metaphor for the symbiotic relationship established between bodily labor and the natural environment. Within this framework, textiles assume the function of an “umbilical cord” symbolizing continuity between humans and nature, emphasizing that nature and culture cannot be conceived apart from one another. Consequently, moving beyond merely drawing attention to ecological awareness, the piece reinterprets the indigenous Mayan weaving tradition and the holistic relationship established with nature, developing a critical stance against the distance that modernization, colonialism, and the capitalist understanding of production insert between nature and humanity. Therefore, while Pichillá Quiacaín’s performance turns textiles into a vehicle for ecological and decolonial activism, it can be read as an artistic practice of resistance aimed at preserving

indigenous knowledge systems and advocating for cultural continuity.

The works of the artists working across diverse thematic concerns in the exhibition offer a critical perspective on social, political, cultural, and ecological problems that have historical roots yet retain their contemporary relevance. In this context, Margarita Cabrera’s *Space in Between* series transforms textiles into an activist medium of expression centered on the axes of migration, border politics, and cultural identity. The artist’s transformation of used US Border Patrol uniforms into cactus-shaped soft sculptures constitutes a critical intervention against the discourse of power through the functional repurposing of objects representing state authority and border security.

The fact that the works were produced in collaboration with immigrant communities and that participants transferred their personal migration experiences onto the textile surface using a traditional embroidery technique unique to the Otomí³ (Hñāhñu) people of central Mexico, transforms artistic production into a participatory practice that contributes to the construction of collective memory and brings social testimony into the public sphere.

³For detailed information on Otomí embroidery and Mexican embroidered textiles, see Devaney, R. (2018).



Figure 10. Margarita Cabrera, *Space in Between*, Fabric, Copper Wire, PVC Pipe, Foam, Thread, and Terracotta, 2016
<https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=14594> (Date of Access: 26.05.2026).

Expressing a state of transition and “being in-between,” the Aztec-derived concept of *nepantla* suggests that borders are not merely geographical divisions but threshold spaces where identity, belonging, and cultural memory are renegotiated (Keating, 2006, p. 8). In Cabrera’s *Space in Between* series, this concept functions as a core conceptual framework explaining the processes of uncertainty, resilience, and re-establishing belonging within the immigrant experience.

6. Discussion

When the works of the seven artists selected from the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* are considered collectively, textiles emerge not merely as materials representing social

and political issues but as active agents in the construction of critical discourse through their material qualities, techniques, labor, and processes of production. The practices of Mounira Al Solh, Feliciano Centurión, Sanford Biggers, José Leonilson, Mercedes Azpilicueta, Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín, and Margarita Cabrera, each rooted in distinct cultural and geographical contexts, demonstrate the capacity of textiles to constitute a multilayered field of expression through which issues such as gender, ecology, queer theory, economics, ethnicity, HIV, and colonialism can be critically addressed. The convergences and divergences among the issues addressed by these artists, the textile techniques they employ, and the activist strategies they develop are presented comparatively in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Synthesis of the Selected Artists’ Practices

Artist	Key Issue(s)	Technique	Activist Strategy
Mounira Al Solh	Economic crisis, social change	Ink and embroidery on fabric	Rendering individual experiences visible; creating space for solidarity
Feliciano Centurión	Identity, the body, gender, vulnerability	Ñandutí lace and acrylic on blankets	Politicizing the intimate
Sanford Biggers	Ethnicity, slavery, historical memory	Mixed media on an antique quilt	Reinterpreting historical narratives
José Leonilson	Identity, the body, vulnerability (HIV)	Embroidery on fabric	Bringing autobiographical narratives into the political sphere
Mercedes Azpilicueta	Gender	Digital design and industrial Jacquard weaving	Challenging dominant historical narratives
Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín	Indigenous identity, Maya culture, colonialism	Performative practice based on traditional weaving techniques	Reactivating ancestral knowledge
Margarita Cabrera	Migration, borders, inequality	Mixed media	Rendering migrant experiences visible

The comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite working within diverse cultural, geographical, and social contexts, the artists share a common approach by mobilizing textiles' historical associations with everyday life, the body, labor, and personal experience as a means of constructing critical and political discourse.

At the same time, significant differences emerge in the social and political issues that form the focus of their activist discourses. Mounira Al Solh's work reveals how the deepening economic crisis in Lebanon extends beyond individual lives to intersect with social discontent, collective protest, and demands for change. Rather than addressing this process solely through the representation of political events, the artist brings the voices and everyday experiences of individuals who have lived through this transformation onto the textile surface. Her transformation of embroidery, traditionally associated with domestic labor and women's work, is particularly significant, as it enables the technique to become a vehicle for solidarity and resistance. Through textiles, individual experience is thus translated into a collective field of expression.

Centurión brings issues of identity, the body, gender, and vulnerability into the political sphere through intimate experience, while a comparable form of personal narrative in Leonilson's work is shaped through experiences of HIV, the body, and vulnerability. These two examples demonstrate that activist textile practice does not necessarily manifest itself through direct protest or collective action; making personal and intimate experiences visible can itself become a form of political intervention. In particular, the use of traditional textile practices such as embroidery and lace—which have developed distinctive repertoires of techniques, motifs, and meanings across different cultural contexts—to articulate identity and body politics underscores the capacity of these forms of production to generate political meaning.

Azpilicueta, who similarly engages with questions of gender, differs technically from Centurión and Leonilson. Her use of digital design and industrial Jacquard weaving demonstrates that political discourse is not constructed exclusively through handwork or traditional craft practices. A comparison of these three artists therefore indicates that the activist potential of textile art is not inherent in any particular technique or mode of production; rather, it is shaped by the conceptual relationship established among material, technique, and the social issue being addressed. In this respect, the technical distinction between traditional handcraft and digital or industrial production does not constrain political discourse but instead expands the possibilities of textile art as a medium of activist expression in contemporary art.

Biggers's transformation of antique quilts opens the relationship among ethnicity, slavery, and historical memory to reinterpretation through objects of material culture. The choice of the quilt is particularly significant in this context. In addition to belonging to the intimate sphere of everyday life, the quilt can be understood as a portable repository for individual and collective memory in contexts of migration, displacement, and forced mobility. From this perspective, Biggers's reuse of historical quilts brings material traces of the past into a contemporary artistic context, enabling experiences of slavery, ethnicity, and displacement to be remembered and reconsidered. The quilt thus functions in his practice not merely as a textile surface subject to artistic intervention but as a symbolic medium that connects past and present while carrying historical memory.

Another artist whose practice engages with a related set of concerns is Margarita Cabrera. In Cabrera's cactus-shaped work, produced through textile materials and mixed-media techniques, the color of the fabric and the use of embroidery contribute to rendering experiences of migration and borders visible. The cactus's symbolic association with border landscapes, combined with the cultural associations embedded in textiles, creates a multilayered narrative through which migrants' experiences of displacement, belonging, and borders can be interpreted. In particular, the repositioning of traditional embroidery within the production of a contemporary artwork demonstrates that cultural memory is transmitted not only through what is represented but also through the technique of production itself. In this respect, Cabrera's approach intersects with Biggers's reinterpretation of historical textile objects: both artists transform textiles into carriers of migration, displacement, and collective memory.

Pichillá Quiacáin's performative approach, grounded in traditional Maya weaving knowledge, enables Indigenous forms of knowledge and production marginalized through colonial processes to be reactivated within the field of contemporary art. By incorporating traditional weaving practices not merely as representations of cultural heritage but as integral components of the production process itself, the artist foregrounds the role of manual labor and ancestral knowledge in the production of political meaning. Weaving thus moves beyond the preservation of a tradition inherited from the past alone and becomes a critical practice through which cultural continuity is sustained and colonial narratives are challenged. Accordingly, in Pichillá Quiacáin's approach, the activist strategy lies not only in rendering Indigenous identity visible but also in reclaiming, through the act of making, cultural knowledge that has been devalued by colonial processes.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how textiles function as a means of political and activist expression in contemporary art through the works of selected artists featured in the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*. The findings demonstrate that the historical associations of textiles with everyday life, craft, and manual labor have been reinterpreted within contemporary artistic practices, with materials, techniques, and production processes playing an active role in articulating social and political concerns. In this context, the political significance of textiles derives not only from the issues addressed by the artworks but also from the incorporation of the historical, cultural, and social associations of materials and techniques into artistic discourse.

The works examined demonstrate that, although textile-based activist art practices share a common critical orientation, they generate diverse political languages that varies according to specific historical, cultural, and social conditions. While solidarity, identity, visibility, memory, and the questioning of dominant narratives constitute common ground among the artists, these concerns are articulated across diverse contexts, ranging from economic crisis and social change to queer identity and experiences of HIV, and from slavery and African American historical memory to gender, and from Maya cultural memory and colonialism to migration and border politics. The findings therefore suggest that textile-based activism should not be understood as a universal or homogeneous model of resistance but rather as a pluralistic practice that generates distinct political meanings and forms of intervention in response to the specific conditions in which it is produced.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that activist potential is not inherent in any particular textile technique. Alongside labor-intensive practices such as embroidery, lace, and traditional weaving, diverse approaches—including the reuse of antique textiles, digital design, industrial Jacquard weaving, and performative modes of production—also contribute to the construction of political discourse. This finding indicates that the activist potential of textiles does not derive solely from their association with traditional craft; rather, it emerges through the relationships established among material, technique, social context, and critical strategy. From this perspective, the study proposes that textile-based activism should be understood not through specific techniques alone but through the relationship between the cultural memory embedded in textile materials and the artists' political and conceptual approaches.

In this respect, *Unravel* provides a significant framework within which the political discourses developed through textiles by artists from diverse ge-

ographical and cultural contexts can be examined comparatively. Within the exhibition, textile art emerge not merely as an alternative artistic practice but as a critical field of expression that connects individual experience with collective memory, renders marginalized experiences visible, challenges dominant historical narratives, and facilitates the reactivation of cultural knowledge. The principal contribution of this study therefore lies in locating the political power of textile art not solely in the social issues it represents but in the relationships established among the cultural and historical meanings of the material, modes of production, and activist strategies.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to the works of seven artists selected through purposive sampling from the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the full range of contemporary textile-based activist art practices. However, by comparatively examining textile-based artistic practices produced within diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts through a shared framework of activism, the study provides a basis for further research in this field. Future studies could extend this inquiry by comparing textile-based activist art practices across different geographical contexts, conducting qualitative research incorporating interviews with artists and audiences, and examining the social impact of participatory or collectively produced textile practices. Such approaches may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of multidimensional relationship between textile art and activism.

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