Latin American Textile Art in process by Paulina Ortiz
How can Latin America contribute textile creativity and communicate the potential for furthering its interconnectivity, development and visibility on the global artistic scene?

There is no easy answer to this question if we take Latin America as a whole, with all the different ethnic groups, nationalities, and preferences coexisting among our nations. To understand Latin American participation in globalization circuits, we first have to come to grips with the reality of the contexts in which our artists are evolving—with the concerns, obstacles, and opportunities facing them and the artistic textile dynamics taking place in some of our countries.

For this discussion, I gathered several iconic personages of our textile culture whose professional contributions have shaped the textile aesthetic practices in the area through constant work and perseverance. Contributing our textile creativity and its capacity for communication to the rest of the globalized world implies taking on one of our biggest challenges, while the future of most of our countries fades away amidst unpayable debts, permanent crises, and a lack of systems that might spur clear policies for the sharing of cultural assets. Unfortunately, we must add to this the nonexistence of textile programs in most visual arts schools and, therefore, the almost total nonexistence of specialized curators capable of including contemporary textile art in distribution channels, such as museums, galleries and fairs. This is in addition to heavy duties on exports and imports and poor Internet access in some countries.

In the 20th century, governments invested in the preservation of textiles as objects that should reinforce the people’s sense of identity. Committees and organizations encouraged and endorsed indigenous and popular arts. Museums were created and became one of the few educational institutions for textiles. With rare exceptions, there was a disregard for active education in the materials, conceptualization and techniques of textile expression as a resource for increasing the effectiveness of textile production and creation in art, design and artisanship. An adequate approach and investment, without absurd prejudices, could make textiles an important driver for our cultural industries, creating jobs for thousands of people in a solid and fair working environment. Some of our countries and creative agents had better vision, encouraging more exchange to attain better results. The general trend, however, was a shrinking of opportunities, so only those with mettle found a way to work with almost nothing and to persevere.

The results of joint and solitary efforts started to take shape in the 1960s, when several visual artists began using textile materiality to express themselves. A first generation of artists in Argentina, notably Gracia Cutuli, Joan Wall and other European-educated artists, broke with the structure of tapestry, researching and developing the potential of fiber in the search for new languages. Gracia created El Sol, the first tapestry workshop in Buenos Aires, and later started the El Sol Gallery, a crossover for artists using this medium.

In the 1970s, Graciela Szamrey founded and directed La Rueca, the first textile art school workshop in Cordoba, and Ana Mazzoni founded the Integrated Textile Art Center, also in Cordoba. The Argentine Center for Textile Art (CAAT), an institution of textile artists, helped make Argentina the Spanish-speaking country with the most dynamic and active textile art scene in Latin America. The CAAT is now presided over by Laura Ferrando, accompanied by Silke and Isabel Ditone, stellar figures in Argentinian textile. CAAT edits Tramemos magazine, a forum for information and debate, essential for the development of the country’s textile art.

The first university textile design workshops were also founded in the 1970s, such as the one at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile headed by Inge Dusi, Carmen Gloria Gajardo and Paulina Brugnoni, and the workshop at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Chile with Teresa Riveros. The daughters of this generation include Paola Moreno, artist, researcher and academic at both these universities; and Andrea Fischer, an artist and president of Chile Crea Textil (CCT), the only organization created to foment textile art growth and development in Chile. Paola is currently working on Material Memory, a project on the material qualities of textile—especially its potential for plastically saving a record of its manipulations in a

Gracia Cutuli in 1981 with a group of tapestries from her 1970s series Modifiable and Participatory (cotton warp and wool weft, handwoven on a high-warp loom, dimensions variable). Photo: Alfredo Willinbourg.
“memory of the material.” Andrea is using fiber for displaying and moving into the aesthetic and symbolic dimension of the fabric, connecting it with the earth as the origin and culture as an evolutionary process. Both artists concur that inclusion of textile expressions in the main art circuits and collections has been limited to temporary exhibitions because of a lack of specialized textile art curators.

Fortunately, CCT has been able to reverse this situation to some extent. Today it is possible to appreciate the results of their efforts, seeing the best of Chilean contemporary textile art in an exhibition held for the first time at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 2012 and the Tramando el Diseño (Weaving the Design) exhibition earlier this year at the Centro Cultural Palacio La Moneda. There are also textile art programs at the Provincial School of Fine Arts in Cordoba, the National University Institute of Art in Buenos Aires, and the National University of Rosario. All of these institutions have provided artists and educational resources that have permeated Argentina’s cultural atmosphere.
The results are embodied in the quality of its artistic works, such as those of Leo Chiachio and Daniel Gianonne who have rescued needlework by expressing themselves. They are considered rising stars, exhibiting in fairs, galleries and international museums. Manuel Ameztoy is the first Argentinian artist invited by the Faena Arts Center to present his Pop-up Paradise, a 3,000-foot installation of hand-cut textiles that recreates the emotions triggered in the artist during his stay in the Entre Ríos wetlands, his primary inspiration. Three young emerging artists, Guillermina Baiguera, Noël Loeschbor, and Pablo Peisino, are attracting attention with their meticulous needlework. Guillermina is known for her erotic Japanese stamps, Noël for her ideas about the movement of the body, and Pablo for his world of art from comics.

Fortunately, these crises have sparked a search for solutions in this century. With the depletion of government resources and the arrival of the Internet, many textile agents have involved themselves in major private initiatives that have vitalized the medium, offering new opportunities and a fresh global approach. The World Textile Art Organization (WTA), presided over by its founder Colombian artist Pilar Tobón, is one initiative marking a before and after in Latin American textile art. It began with the millennium change with the WTA promoting and fomenting contemporary textile art in all its expressions by holding three biennials and many other side events at different venues. In 2000 and 2002, biennials were held in Miami, Florida, where Pilar is based. The third in 2004 took place in Valencia, Venezuela.

The Fourth WTA International Biennial was held in Costa Rica in 2006, co-organized with the Costa Rican–North American Cultural Center (CCCN). Workshops, conferences and a tour were added, marking the event’s exponential growth over later years.

As the International Director for this event, I realized that our countries were disconnected with little opportunity for cultural exchange. In response, I proposed the creation of the Ibero-American Textile Network (Redtextilia) with the support of the Spanish Cultural Center, the WTA, the CCCN, and the advisory efforts of the European Textile Network. Redtextilia’s mission is to encourage interconnectivity while promoting knowledge and development of Ibero-American textile culture, primarily among its 64 current members who represent over a dozen countries. Through initiatives in textile creation, education, and heritage, we work together with recognition of the cultural plurality of the Ibero-American community.
Since then, Redtextilia organized its First Encounter conference in Costa Rica in 2010, and the WTA has organized biennials in Argentina (2009), Mexico (2011) and the soon-to-be-held 7th biennial in Medellín, Colombia (2014). Both organizations impact the contexts in which they have evolved in a variety of ways. As a result of these efforts, there has been a growing, active interest in textile materials and dynamics.

The WTA Costa Rican biennial in 2006 brought about the creation of the textile design department at the National University of Costa Rica in 2007, headed by Herberth Bolaños. The creation of Redtextilia inspired the foundation of Chile Crea Textil, presided over by Andrea Fischer. The First Encounter Conference of the Ibero-American Textile Network in 2010 brought together the group of artists and designers who today comprise the Costa Rican Textile Collective, which was invited the following year to represent Costa Rica at the 8th Textile Biennial in Kaunas, Lithuania. The impact of such international exposure has been different every time but these events are definitely drivers of change as they make it possible to materialize textile art for thousands to touch and see, and then demand the changes needed in each country.

The Peruvian Center of Textile Art in Lima was founded two years ago, with artist Mary Deacon as its president. The Center seeks to rescue textiles as an active Peruvian treasure, taking into account the impoverished conditions in which many of Peru’s urban and rural artisan weavers live, and the speed with which their ancestral techniques are being lost. The Center
also communicates how contemporary textile curating in Peru is emerging but still practically nonexistent on the national and international visual arts circuits. Exceptions include Peruvian artists Cristina Colichón, Ella Krepps, and Maximo Laura. Cristina, Peru’s representative at the 2013 Venice Biennale, works Peruvian traditional techniques by reinterpreting the dialog between light and alternative materials, such as nylon, film, and metallic fibers, from a contemporary point of view. With the exception of the recently founded textile design institute in Arequipa, directed by Mariana Masias, fiber-art curriculum is still absent from university-level programs in Peru.

It is with satisfaction that I have confirmed, through conversations with the generous collaborators in this research, that our collective efforts are making a difference. Together we are realizing the sharing and knowledge of Latin America’s creative textile potential. Clearly, the answer to the initial question is to continue to work in solidarity.

The 7th International Biennial of Contemporary Textile Art and Design organized by the World Textile Art Organization (WTA) will take place in Medellín, Colombia, from March 5 to April 5, 2014; www.wta-online.org.

Argentine Center for Textile Art, www.caat.org.ar
Chile Crea Textil www.chilecreates текстил.cl
European Textile Network, www.etn-net.org

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