

Textile Fenestra and Spiracles: Mattering the swatch

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This is a nested exploration of rectangles of cloth. Swatches, bounded by architectonic framing, are permeable spaces within spaces. I propose that textiles offer sensorial fenestrations that facilitate the spiracular.

MATTERING

It is important to establish at the outset that textile swatches are designs. They commonly come forth from devices that afford them a rectangular shape—frames for making—whether looms, silk-screens, grids, sheets of paper, repeat units, computational screens, or windows. I begin by mattering the textile swatch or sample, considering this rectangular form through the architectonics of edges, surfaces, framing, and fenestration. Swatches tend to come in two forms. Firstly, as a designed thing in itself; in this case a swatch is a representation of possibility. Swatching and sampling is still the key commercial method used by creative textile studios and how most students learn textile design today. The second form of the swatch is one that has been detached from a large amount of existing material during or for the purposes of trading or communicating. These swatches are representations of plenty, as well as possibility curtailed, truncated, and controlled through the rectangular form. They are literally a “sample,” a “taster.” They exist and perform in rectangular formats in trade shows, material libraries, studios, workshops, factories, shops, and homes.

Rails upon rails, piles upon piles, rectangles of designs ready and waiting to take up their predestined role as one choice out of many. Multiplicitous in their compositions of colors, motifs, textures, fibers, and weights, they promise sensory delight in plentiful supply.



Fig. 1
Textile sample book from
1843. The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Gift of the
Estate of Benjamin E. Marks,
1967.



In mattering the swatch, I underline the foundational, yet liminal position textiles hold in the chain of design. Designed as rectangular things, their shape changes in an entanglement with other designed things, from swatch or sample to dress, cushion, sofa, or drapes. Drawing on Henri Bergson, I am defining textiles as matter, viewed as an aggregate of images with an understanding that images have an existence halfway between a thing and a representation.¹ For me, this aptly describes the liminality of the textile swatch as the outcome of textile design. I believe that tacit framing practices feed back into the way we are designing textiles and designing with textiles. I do not here directly address textiles applied within architectural spaces, nor will I be concerned with structures of weaving. Instead, I will focus on what textiles can do once entangled with other designed outcomes or applied within a space involving aesthetics, tactility and function. Moving from edges, to surfaces, to framing and windows, to the affordance that a metaphoric window or fenestration provides, explored through notions of the virtual and spiracular, I will use architectonic constructs to understand the arguably hylomorphic nature of textiles.

EDGES

The edge of a swatch or sample of cloth is cut or self-edged / self-edged in the act of weaving or knitting. Edges of cloth are most usually hidden from view, stapled down, hemmed, concealed. The edges are the site where the liminality of textiles as design is activated. It is at the edges of cloth that we are reminded that they are a meshwork of lines; yarns, filaments and fibers that either turn back on themselves or are cut and perhaps fraying.

In my previous research I have addressed aspects of textile designing as translation. I use Gayatri Spivak's notion of *frayage*,² which means "facilitation," to understand the liminal positioning of the textile design. The fraying or undoing that, once cut, happens at the edge of a textile is an offering; a surrendering into a facilitation. That facilitation occurs in its application or in being worked into other designed things. The literal meshwork of the textile relies on this act of facilitation to continue to exist. Its facilitatory role is its key aim. As an assemblage, the structure delivers and surrenders

Zone [1908]1988), 9.

¹ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York:

² G. Spivak, "The politics of translation," in *Outside In The Teaching Machine* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 179-200, here 180.

Fig. 3
The “active” edge illustrated in work by Erena Torizuka and Guy Genney from 2018, which combines woven Chirimen silk with computational sensors.



Fig. 4
The edge of a piece of Anni Albers' work (2017).

to facilitation, and this is aggregated by its aesthetic, sensory, and functional properties. And so, the significance and role of edges as framing devices for textile designing as the threshold between both the material and immaterial constituent parts must be explored. The movement between material and immaterial through the swatch operates apparition-like: it is not always clearly visible, particularly once a fabric has been further cut, sewn, digitally rendered, stapled, glued, and applied within the making and designing of other objects. Thus it is important to explore the transferable qualities of textiles before they are cut and sewn, and entangled in situ.³

3 A. Lottersberger, "Design, Innovation and Competitiveness in the Textile Industry: Upstream Design Innovation" (PhD diss., Politecnico di Milano, 2012), 46.

Ezio Manzini prompts us to begin a “rethinking of the role of a surface that emphasizes its character of autonomy from the rest of the object as well as the dynamic qualities that are concentrated in the surface.”⁴ He goes on to assert that the idea of static borders or edges of matter, in this context the edges of a piece of cut cloth, are replaced by the idea of the surface as an interface enabling an exchange of energy and information between the substances/media put into contact. He cites architect Andrea Branzi, who writes: “Unlike the surface of a painting ... a decorative surface implies infinite borders, and contains in each of its smallest parts the sum total of information in the entire system, since it contains the individual sign that is then repeated *ad infinitum*.”⁵

Manzini also recognizes that repeated signs can create a rhythm.⁶ Repetition and rhythm indeed remain one of the characteristic features of surfaces, whether the repetition of a weave or knit structure or in applied patterns. The various framing devices through which the activity of textile design and making happens, with their repetitious actions—spinning, weaving, stitching, knitting, printing, pasting, coding—translate creative processes into these rhythmic textures, motifs, and compositions that “go off the edge”. These repetitious aspects serve as signifier of the creative action of the maker, as well as of the material-immaterial tension within textiles. Transgressing surfaces and edges challenges notions of framing and opens fenestrations.

FRAMING, WINDOWS, AND FENESTRATION

In *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg quotes from Leon Battista Alberti’s Renaissance treatise on painting and perspective, seeing the window as an aperture, opening and closing, separating the spaces of here and there. The window is also a membrane, “where surface meets depth.”⁷ Friedberg sees screens as “virtual windows” that change notions of materiality, space, and time. The screen is the latest rectangle to carry textile design activity to *frayage*. *Emancipath* is a collaboration between Zeitguised, a multi-disciplinary digital studio specializing in the creation of “exquisite realities,” and Danish interior fabric manufacturer Kvadrat.⁸ In these moving images, canvas becomes fluid, stretchy and bubbles, playing with our understanding of how textiles are. Textures are tiled and move across geometric shapes, intentionally exposing the work as a digital construct. The selvages are moved to the center of the frame in an act of folding.⁹ The capabilities of this immaterial cloth, though recognizable through a woven structure, are unknowable, unpredictable, and unreal. Post-digitality forces us to question known rules for dealing with tangible textiles, fabric grains running—literally moving and flowing—in opposing directions, cutting woven cloth to fit around 3D and moving shapes, weave structures that should not stretch, but do. In *Emancipath*, the edges instantiate these questions, becoming a *mise en abyme* of material and immaterial frames, edges, surfaces and windows.

MA: MIT Press, 1989), 183.

4 E. Manzini, *The Material of Invention: Materials and Design* (Cambridge,

5 Branzi 1984 cited in Manzini 1989, 196.

6 Manzini 1989, 192.

7 Alberti cited in A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1.

8 Zeitguised, *Emancipath* (2017), <https://zeitguised.com/emancipath>.

9 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

(London: Continuum [1980] 2004).

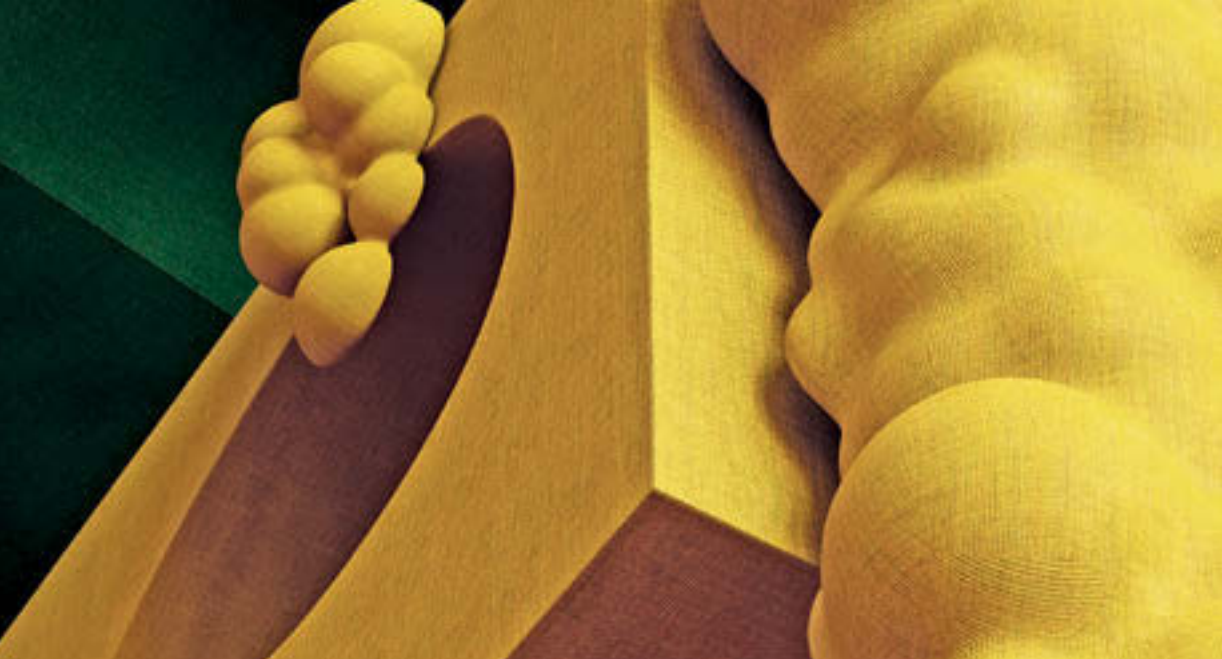


Fig. 5
Film still of *Emancipath*
by Zeitguised, 2017.

VIRTUALITY

Returning to Alberti, the window is not a transparent window on the world but a “windowed elsewhere” – a virtual space that exists on the virtual plane of representation¹⁰ – being understood by its classical root in the Latin *virtus*¹¹ meaning strength or power. In exploring virtuality, Friedberg reminds us that the virtual possesses a power of acting without the aid of matter: “[a]n immaterial proxy for the material.”¹² In this sense, virtual imagery or representation, such like textiles being caught between thing and representation, has a “second-order materiality”¹³ and a liminal immateriality. Friedberg uses the word “virtual” in Deleuzian terms, describing the virtual window as both a metaphoric window and an actual window with a virtual view held in place, the metaphor functioning as the point of

- 10 Alberti cited in Friedberg 2006, 243.
11 *Ibid.*, 8.
12 *Ibid.*
13 *Ibid.*, 11.



Fig. 6
Film still showing textile and
digital film works by Elena
Gučas, 2021.

transference into the virtual.¹⁴ The virtual window, a framed surface with depth, becomes an opening, a *fenestra*, a portal to elsewhere. A textile swatch, just a small piece of cloth, performs as a virtual window with the power of acting as a proxy for the immaterial. Elena Gučas's work shown in Fig. 6 captures the nested action of framing, an action that crosses the threshold of virtuality. Here we see a textile swatch, suspended within a physical frame—framed in a filmic sense whilst juxtaposed by architectural framing devices of windows and doors. Gučas's montage of virtual windows facilitates, portal-like into an elsewhere of her lived experience.

SPIRACLES

The etymology of “swatch” in English uncovers a shift in meaning. Once the tally or tag attached to a piece of cloth to be dyed, it evolved to mean the detached sample piece of cloth itself. This linguistic link means that a swatch can be considered to have a counterpart elsewhere: it is a representative. Swatch and the term *swathe*, connoting



Fig. 7
Fabric token, chintz, 1759.
A swatch left to identify a child at the Foundling Hospital in London, UK, which continues as the children's charity, Coram. The fabric was either provided by the mother or cut from the child's clothing by the Hospital's nurses. The swatches were attached to record books as proof of identity. Should the mother ever be able to return to their child, they would provide the counterpart to prove a match.

plentifulness, are both related to the noun *swath*. This is a space covered by the single cut of a scythe—a strip-like length—and subsequently highlights that space as a trace or vestige of an activity. It is at once an action, a thing and a space. This is poetically reminiscent of Simone Weil's “tear in a surface.” A tear, brought about by the action of tearing, produces both a “thing” and a space. Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just* talks about beautiful things that act like “small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space.”¹⁵ Absence here connotes possibilities and the

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Ibid, 12.

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S. Weil cited in E. Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just,” The Tanner Lectures on

spectral presence of immanent, elsewhere counterparts. Thinking of textiles as fenestra, our visual and sensorial perception implicitly manifests the apparition of the immanent counterpart building this vaster space.

These portal-like concepts draw me to the notion of the *spiraculum eternitatis*, developed in the sixteenth century by alchemist Gerhard Dorn.¹⁶ *Spiracle* is a biological term, a breathing hole in the anatomy of certain life forms. For Dorn, the *spiraculum eternitatis* is “a breathing hole into eternity.” Just like “small tears,” Dorn’s spiracle is a window-like space into other realms. It is a threshold to alternative knowledge that can be manifested through functions of translation and art-making within tangible existence¹⁷ – an effort to “translate that which is untranslatable.” Translation, as mentioned earlier in reference to Spivak, can be understood as a function of designing.¹⁸ Textile designers subjectively translate a narrative or mood through the selection and combination of materials, forms, symbols, colors, context, and function. The textile fenestra becomes a spiracle for a two-way translatory and communicative act between designer and viewer.

This is the operation of “textasis”¹⁹ – the tension of “textility.”²⁰ Textasis suggests an oscillation. Through the virtuality of the textile fenestra or spiracle the material element is in stasis – unmoving, subordinated, framed – while the immaterial is in ekstasis – plentiful, insubordinate, transgressing boundaries of edges and surfaces. The textile swatch is, then, a material-immaterial continuum occurring in “the flows of the currents of the lifeworld.”²¹ In this sense the rectangular swatch or sample of a textile can be understood as a framing device for translatory communication of embodied, enacted information. Textiles, even entangled in other designed things and spaces, hold us in spiracular textasis, a manifestation of an immanent elsewhere that we are invited to access.

- 16 D. Fremont, “The Spiracle in Alchemy and Art,” *ARAS Connections: Image and Archetypes*, 3 (2017), 2, <https://aras.org/sites/default/files/docs/00119Fremont.pdf> 2.
- 17 von Franz cited in Fremont 2017, 2.
- 18 G. Baule and E. Caratti, *Design is Translation: The Translation Paradigm for the Culture of Design* (Milan: Franco Angeli Edizioni, 2017), 15.
- 19 E. Igoe, *Textile Design Theory in the Making* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 192.
- 20 V. Mitchell, “Textiles, Text, Techne” (1997), in *The Textile Reader*, ed. J. Hemmings (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 5–13; T. Ingold, “The Textility of Making,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (2010): 91–102.
- 21 T. Ingold, “Materials Against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1–16, here 1.

Note: This text is based on “Where surface meets depth: virtuality in textile and material design,” in *Surface Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface*, ed. Yeseung Lee (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).