



THE USE OF HANDS

On the Work of Hannah Ryggen

The morning after I fucked a man for the first time, I spent three hours looking at tapestries.

I lay awake in the dark before the winter sun rose. A tram rumbled past, from one grey edge of the city to the other. Maybe that tram was the same tram I had heard an hour before, returning along the cold rails. Back and forth, the passengers' eyes shut against the familiar ennui of their commute. The man awoke and made coffee, and then he shaved, and contentment steamed through the open door of the cubicle. I washed my body and put on yesterday's clothes over my clean skin. We flung on heavy coats and walked away from the room together with a mixture of reluctance and relief. It was possible we might kiss on the threshold. We did not.

I had hours to kill before my train. I didn't know the city, nor did I have a destination in mind. Back and forth went the trams, the passengers in heavy coats, locked in the familiar ennui of their commute. I walked. I walked across a heavy stone bridge, and found myself standing in front of a tower with an atrium constructed entirely out of glass. On the billboard outside, an exhibition poster depicted a man and a woman naked in paradise, and I wondered why a modern textile artist might

decide against twisting her thread into the reticent world of abstraction as many of her peers had done. Thoughts can be *traced back to the event of the thread*, wrote Anni Albers in *On Weaving*. But this poster showed threads as records of deeds. It showed bodies like the bodies in the room I had left behind.

My body felt as though my body had been left behind in his room.

The limbs of the people in paradise on the poster were angular, constrained by the warp and weft – as if they were formed entirely of prosthetics (although they lacked that waxen perfection). God knows, bodies differ, but the proportions seemed unusual. The fallen man and woman stood tense and pink under the chaotic woven firmament that crowned their existence

I wanted to go back to bed, either with the man or without him. My longing for him was now inseparable from a deep need for rest. I was spun thin with emotion. The ragged reverse of my skin was turned to public view; surely anyone could see the criss-crossing colours of my arteries and veins, everything that held the slipshod pattern of life together.

I knew the galleries would not offer me a corner to curl up in, so I sat for an hour in the atrium cafe and drank two cups of coffee, which heightened the feeling of being unbodied. I wrapped my hands around the white ceramic. Where my fingers met, they were perplexingly familiar.

Please, he had said, with desperate and disarming politeness.

I paid ten euros to see the exhibition. The elegant cashier treated me as if there were nothing unusual about my being there.

I had come to that city almost explicitly to have sex. That is to say, my intuition that I would sleep with this man had been gathering momentum for weeks and our presence on the same day in the same place had been difficult to arrange discreetly. Still, at dinner we pretended it was just a friendly, professional meeting.

They say there's a weaver's 'handshake', the impulse to reach out and touch another's garment, to assess weight and texture. Without hesitation, an expert rubs the fabric between thumb and forefinger and gauges its strength, its quality.

It was late when we left the restaurant. He offered me a safe place to stop the night but let slip that there was only one bed. The invitation

was a trick wrapped up in a warning, or perhaps a warning concealed in a trick. I found this unnecessary dissemblance endearing. I had booked a room in a cheap hotel, knowing I would not need it.

I knew the cool shock of running my hands down a new lover's crotch and discovering the calm weight of a silicone packer. I knew dildos slipped into rings, harness straps buckled round hips quick as a flash with practised fingers. A firm base that, mounted right, presses on the clitoris. Toys found in basements in Manhattan, London, Amsterdam. Each dildo weighed in the hand, carefully selected as a souvenir of future fucks. Monica had one for every day of the week – she stored them in a row on top of the bathroom cabinet. Kate's confection of purple marbled silicone, a curious discovery in the bedroom of an eighteenth-century art historian.

Sometimes there were no prosthetics, only hands, and hands, between you and me, are what I prefer. Lucia used her fist and I loved to watch her slowly pull off her rings.

Please, he said. I was already breathing him in.

The tapestries were vast. Life-size, maybe larger. They stretched from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, and the exhibition occupied several rooms. I was disoriented to find the walls of all the galleries were straight despite the building's external curve.

There were no dolphins or daisies or pomegranates in delicately dyed silk threads. No lions or lutes or sickle moons. No tournaments with chargers rearing, no grooms in caparisons, no turrets and pennants displayed under the dim lighting. No kestrel, no hunt. No virgin petting the unicorn against a backdrop of millefleur.

Nothing had ever felt so queer.

Wool is a tricky material to conserve, but these tapestries from the last century – with one exception – were still unharmed by time. They were woven by a woman living through a war, through a genocide, and they were about the experience of living through a war, through genocide. They witnessed the pattern of daily existence during harsh times, and the vulnerability of flesh.

In 1924 – said the brochure – Hannah Ryggen moved to the north of Norway where she and her husband lived without water or electricity. Her husband Hans built her a loom and she taught herself to weave. She used materials found close to home: wool shorn from her own flocks, carded and then twisted on a spindle (I thought of her hands stroking the slub as the spindle spun, coarse strands becoming fine between her fingers). The yarn was dyed with lichen and berries and the most intimate and communal of colours ‘pot blue’, made from the fermented urine of guests who visited the studio.

How does the action of running a thread between other threads, under and over, differ from the work of a painter? Ryggen was trained in dabbing pigment upon a canvas with a sable brush only to scrape it with a spatula away. Now she could no longer begin in the middle of things and work spontaneously out to the edges. A weaver does not dither. She taught herself to form a strong image from the floor to the ceiling and from wall to wall. Over and over she did this, without any preparatory sketches. She felt her way.

Ryggen made work about the people she loved, by which I mean her family. In one tapestry she depicts daily life on her farm. In another, she is in a boat with her husband and daughter, embarking on a long voyage. The sea is rough; the boat is full of roses. I want to weep.

Ryggen responded to immediate events using a medium that could not be rushed. She depicted the harm humans do and the love they inflict on each other. Each tapestry took her a year. She had to believe the message of protest would still be understood once the cloth was severed from the loom. At the moment of completion, a fringe of threads remains. Her last action is to tuck them carefully away.

I stood in front of a tapestry and let the minutes pass. I needed to remember how to stand when I was not curled into another’s body. Other people entered the gallery and moved around me. They were as real as he was. *My lover*, I will call him, since we made love. I had an impulse to reach out and touch them but restrained myself, knowing it would cause alarm.

Instead, I placed a hand gently on my abdomen. I could still feel a pulse, a pain. A tickle, a lack. A rupture. A phantom fuck by an absent cock. This was a cruel torment, since I was sure I would not meet this man again. Yet I tried to give the artworks as much attention as I had given him, as I would give any brave new thing I had paid ten euros for.

In this work – said the label – the artist appears as herself weaving a scene that depicts the absence of her husband. He resists the rise of fascism, he is imprisoned. He is forced to paint warning signs for the enemy. He paints skulls, hundreds of skulls. He has a number, he is alone, he is in chains. Many of the people in these tapestries are in chains. Imagine the artist's hours of isolation and sorrow. What a furious work she made on her loom out of her loneliness during those long nights when the one she loved was gone.

Where is he? the tapestry asks. What is the beloved's body when it is elsewhere, when it is being used violently by others? How to express the agony of such an amputation? The artist resurrects the abject man – but by weaving him in chains does she doubly enchain him, even as she sets him free?

While the Queen of Ithaca waited for her husband Ulysses to return from war, she wove a shroud. Suitors, believing Ulysses dead and aspiring to take his place, congregated in the palace. But Penelope would accept another lover only when the shroud was done. Every day she wove a little more of the shroud, and each night she removed the same stitches. She let the minutes pass. Her unpicking, her undoing, was the real work of her waiting.

I will disappear, he told me, with a longing to be seen.

How would I describe him now, in his absence – his fine hair, the skin soft in tough places, the broad desolation of his chest, the dense precision of his ribs, his difference, his impossible energy, his weight and his lightness, his near impenetrability, his vulnerability, his mutability and, yes, his cock. His desire for enchainment and his longing to disappear.

I intended to write about tapestries and I am distracted by bodies.

The crude colours of the threads vibrated in my tired eyes. I looked with the same gaze I had turned upon his body, the same gaze a weaver must turn upon the loom as she guides the yarn through the narrow

reeds and warps the heddles, all the while forming a vision in her mind of the finished work. The skip of a shuttle across the loom, under and over, the clatter of treadles. The weft pressed down tight on the taut warp by the batten, a stroke that falls over and over on its own ghost. Beneath the bright weft the warp is a continuous grey chain. The needle blistering her skin, picking up stitch after stitch. Threads as action, and decline – curves form by diminishing a distance, line by line.

There are no loose ends on these tapestries, for the artist worked them in, believing the front and back should look the same. The back identical to the front but reversed, as in a mirror – and yet not like any mirror, for the mirror's mercury reverse is very dark.

The man has three buttons on his brown coat and the buttons are the same size as the muzzle of the rifle that conceals his crotch. His uniform is a single seam of colour, the same sepia as his weapon. Does this colour suggest the past. His body lacks dimension, as if he is already disappearing. Cherubic wings explode from his shoulders. The title of this tapestry translates as *The Use of Hands*. The man's hands are not gripping the gun; his hands have no agency. They are limp as gloves. A woman wearing a pale blue dress stretches out her hand towards the man yet seems to be walking away. The woman's body is depicted in more detail than the man's. Ryggen chose wools dyed a deeper blue to evoke shadows on the folds of her long dress where it falls between her thighs, the indelicate, one might almost say cartoonish, lucky-horseshoe shape in the shadow of her breasts. The woman's other hand controls the reins of two yellow horses, and she holds something ablaze, a lamp with a blue filament that is a visual echo of the pattern on the man's wings. The woman extends a hand, grasps his hand, is pulling him towards the pair of yellow horses, towards the light.

The cramped figures are jagged, their facial expressions awkward and the joints of their limbs not soft, not flowing, which gives them a contorted look, as if they are in pain. Are the two humans trying to escape the warp that holds them together. Why is there no comfort in the deep blue shadows. Some show their love by enchaining people, others by letting them disappear.

Many people around the artist kept their eyes closed, their hands idle. They were living through a war. A foreshortened hand reaches out as if through the cloth, the only white hand in the tapestry, and it is connected to no body, a weird white hand that rests on the soldier's arm as if to say, *stop*. Who is behind the cloth, saying stop? Who is speaking from the dark side of the mirror?

The artist felt a compulsion to weave texts into her work, quotations from the great poets. Even these letters are distorted and illegible as runes. I was going to write more words, the words we used, but I thought better of it.

Our overnight affinity was tempered by morning dignity. I had pulled on my black socks, aligning the heel and toe more carefully than usual, and laced up my shoes – and my masculine clothes made our passing intimacy seem implausible.

I recognised Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein from their caricatures. The artist was not concerned with portraiture but satire: not flattery, but ugliness. She disguised these men by revealing the ugliness they tried to keep hidden. Into one tapestry she wove the emperor Haile Selassie, and Mussolini's head impaled on a spear. This tapestry was first shown to the public at the Paris World's Fair in 1937 – seen and yet not seen, for the work was censored, folded over along the warp so that the controversial figures faced the wall. Only the abstract border was visible. The back should be as the front, but sometimes the back is far too dark.

The tapestry I had seen on the poster hung at the end of the last gallery, a room in which I spend little time because I can no longer pretend; I acknowledge my weariness. I wish only to reach the exit. And I remember, I must catch a train—

Utopian – said the label. One of the artist's largest works, and her most archetypal. It depicts a universe with a sun and crescent moon, and below, inside a central lozenge, stands the couple, hand in hand. I look again. Not hand in hand. Their hands reach out to each other, and they each have an arm around the other's shoulders. Their hands are

not yet touching but they are in a process of union, tense yet tender, as if the mystery of such a meeting could be delayed forever, avoiding what comes after. Simone Weil writes of *this tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union*; she listens as it *echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony*. The tapestry depicts paradise, which grows not fruit trees but our infinitely distant selves. There are blue hands. There are simple faces with eyes that are not closed but open and staring. The eyes and the hands are not joined to any bodies, they blast apart into separate cells, forming a honeycomb of pot-blue ghosts, and maybe they are indeed ghosts, or ancestors (are the man and the woman standing on the past?). They are the millefleur, the moon, these forms, these nights, and they also show how bodies like our bodies might shatter into a million parts at a moment of supreme love.

We Are Living on a Star was commissioned by the Norwegian government in 1958 for the modernist building that houses the prime minister's office in Oslo. The protest the artist usually worked into her designs was not evident until the far-right terrorist Anders Breivik – who would commit a mass shooting at a youth camp on the island of Utøya hours later – detonated a car bomb outside the building on 22 July 2011, killing eight people. The textile, which seems to depict crystalline forms moving at speed through the cosmos, was punctured by fragments of glass and bone moving at speed through the cosmos and coated in infinitesimal dust particles. Intricate restoration work was carried out but one tiny rift in the weft is still visible. The absence draws our thoughts to the back of the tapestry.

The perfect reverse is rarely seen. We walked away from the room together. I stepped onto the train.

NOTES: Works by Ryggen referenced in this essay are: *Grini* (Grini, 1945); *Etiopia* (Ethiopia, 1935); *Henders Bruk* (The use of hands, 1949), and *Vi lever på en stjerne* (We are living on a star, 1958). With thanks to Susie Campbell for her attention to medieval millefleur in *Enclosures* (Osmosis Press, 2022) and invaluable advice while writing this essay.