

Ruth Scheuing
METAMORPHOSES #11 SPIDER

Ruth Scheuing: Spider
BY BETTINA MATZKUHN

Artist's Statement (1992)
RUTH SCHEUING



Ruth Scheuing: *Spider*
by Bettina Matzkuhn, 2007

To the soft, comforting world of textiles, Ruth Scheuing brings her sharply analytical mind. Scheuing came to Canada with a diploma in Chemistry from her native Switzerland and worked for years at various labs working on cancer research at the University of British Columbia. She became increasingly dissatisfied with the emphasis on the quantitative and turned to art as a way to both examine and shape ideas. While she made a career switch, she continues to bring a scientific sense of rigour to her practice.

Ruth Scheuing
Metamorphoses #11 spider, 1993

fabric and interfacing
(172.7 x 162 cm)
SAG 1996.07.01

Acquired with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts
Acquisition Assistance program/Oeuvre acquis avec l'aide du
programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada

Photographs by Cameron Heryet



Ruth Scheuing, *Metamorphoses #11 spider*, 1993, fabric and interfacing (172.7 x 1623 cm) SAG 1996.07.01
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Oeuvre acquis avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

In the early 1980's, when Scheuing pursued her BFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, many artists working in fibre were fixated on the process and formal elements of texture and colour. Grand sculptural pieces featuring draped threads or weaving textures blown up to a heroic scale were about fibre, the way modernist paintings were often simply about paint. Scheuing felt this work missed an opportunity to raise deeper issues. Having learned the technical aspects of weaving, she was ready to tackle the conceptual ones. While attending the college, she could see a tailor's workshop across the street and was drawn to the precision of the garments' construction as well as the details of pattern in their fabric. The ever-present rebellious teenager within her soon found her exploiting both aspects: meddling with the patterns and ripping open seams.

Scheuing is keenly interested in Greek mythology for its many powerful female characters such as Arachne, Penelope and Philomela who "...used weaving as a language to communicate - in each situation, weaving is more strongly connected to storytelling than it is to domestic needs."¹ Penelope (whose husband was Odysseus) used the process of weaving - both making and unraveling - as a tactic to exercise her own power against the many men seeking to force her hand. Scheuing's exhibit *Penelope* (1991) featured men's suits that had altered patterns, projections of Penelope from ancient Greek images, and a soundtrack of Scheuing in conversation with Penelope. In another reference to classical literature, she has incorporated the strategy from the Roman poet Ovid's epic work *The Metamorphoses* in her own series of that title, as he describes history through stories of transformation.

Scheuing's other ongoing interest is in issues of nature and culture - how femininity and technology

seem separate in Western thinking. She has created works celebrating mathematician Ada Lovelace and her role as the great-grandmother of computing language, which began through the process of Jacquard weaving. In her more recent work, Scheuing uses a computer assisted Jacquard loom to make richly patterned weavings that include imagery of forest fires, hurricanes, global positioning data and flowers. These juxtapositions pointedly question our notions of gender and technology.

Scheuing has also worked as an assistant coordinator for the Nova Scotia Crafts Council, fronted an artist-run centre in New Brunswick and has studied Arts Administration at the Banff Centre. She went on to work there for two years as Assistant Head in charge of textiles. Since 1992, she has been an instructor with the Textile Arts Program at Capilano College in North Vancouver, coordinating the program until 2004. Here she introduces students to weaving techniques, but also provides a range of options for entering the visual arts world. Projects ranging from small, purely decorative objects to large, conceptual installations are her strategy to "...let students decide where on the spectrum they want to be, but with an understanding of WHY they want to be there." Her work as a juror, writer, curator, board member and mentor in the visual arts community was recognized when she received the Jean A. Chalmers National Crafts award in 1996. Scheuing used the honorarium to develop a website on textiles and to co-edit the book *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* (1998).²

Scheuing's work owes much to earlier feminist art. Laura Cottingham describes the groundwork:

"The movement refused a formalist imperative, insisted on the importance of content, contested the absoluteness

of history...asserted a place for the autobiographical, reclaimed craft, emphasized process and performance, and, perhaps most radically, refuted the idea that art is neutral, universal, or the property of men only.”³

Scheuing has an acute understanding of the associations textiles carry both in terms of material and process, and of how textile and language are connected. Expressions such as “to have a bias” or be a “closely knit community” abound in the English language and she plays on both our familiarity and assumptions around textiles’ role in daily speech. Her work recognizes French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s ideas of “deconstruction” - not destruction, but a way of picking apart how meaning is formed - which occurs for him through examining text, and for Scheuing through concerted material exploration.

German artist Joseph Beuys stressed the importance of materials and how their presence allows what he refers to as a “convergence of concepts.” By combining materials and processes one is not accustomed to finding together, new concepts emerge. Beuys “...never ceased denouncing the loss of meaning and the withering of the senses.”⁴ His *Felt Suit* (1970) is made of cloth transformed through a textile process - felting - and evokes not only warmth and protection for the body but also for the soul. Scheuing’s deconstructed suits continue this emphasis on material transformation fusing idea and process, touch and thought.

Magdalena Abakanowicz, from Poland, created a series in fibre called *Black Garments* (1969). These were monumental and featured exaggerated texture, but they also exploited the way a garment always implies the human body. While Abakanowicz’s

garments were ungendered, Scheuing’s altered suits evoke gender clearly - through the masculinity of the suits and the feminine associations with weaving. Many feminist artists used textile specifically for its associations with the feminine, but Scheuing nudges textiles farther along the conceptual clothesline: by taking a suit - a male costume that has been around for decades - and altering it, she takes on all the pre-conceived ideas that we have about this particular item of clothing. She stresses she is not making work ‘against men’ but rather investigating the structure of power - how it can be invisible, how it can be taken apart, and even eventually altered.

Canadian artist Barbara Todd, Scheuing’s contemporary, created a set of *Security Blankets* (circa 1998), quilts that featured stealth bombers and missiles. Todd illuminates Beuys’ concept as we are presented with the comfort of cloth and the menacing imagery of weapons. Similarly, African American artist Faith Ringgold’s series using the American flag challenges what it represents. *American People Series #18 The Flag is Bleeding* (1967) depicts people who are imprisoned by the horizontal stripes of the flag. *Her Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) features this dire threat worked subtly into the familiar pattern of stars and stripes. Textiles in the 1980’s and 1990’s became a rich vein of metaphor and meaning.

In accordance, Scheuing became interested in how, by removing even one thread from the finely woven suiting, the structure of the garment changes. But she also realized that in the fabric, a black thread combined with a white one optically merges to make grey. By removing one colour, she points out that the other will become dominant. By this seemingly insignificant intervention, she interrupts the serious dignity of the business suit - a costume that men wear for its prestige, formality and aura of authority.

By disassembling the jacket entirely, our concept of the suit is jarred again. Carefully cutting the seams that bind each piece together, Scheuing explodes the front, back and sleeve pieces onto the wall so that they become larger than an average person's



Ruth Scheuing, *Metamorphoses #11 spider*, detail

height or arm-span. She affixes them discreetly to the wall with hidden Velcro® tabs. The monolithic male torso presented by the suit jacket has vanished; the pieces remain suit-like only through the quality of the fabric. The familiar forms of shoulders and arms are flattened into two-dimensions and are revealed as elegantly curved shapes. Not content with altering materials, she gives the new forms romantic titles such as *Butterfly* (1992), *Fish* (1992), and *Hound* (1993) which loosely relate to either the patterns made by the arrangement of suit pieces, or to new surface patterns Scheuing has made by removing threads in the fabric itself. In *Spider* (1993), closely aligned pinstripes are removed so that they appear gradually less dense. The darts (tucks in the cloth which allow it to conform to the body) have been

taken out leaving slits in some of the larger pieces that evoke the markings on the underside of a spider or crab - mysterious, slightly threatening orifices one sees in the macro photography of natural history books. The edges of the disassembled suit pieces are neatly turned under and the points on what were the underarms of sleeves become sharp, fang-like. In a devious contrast to all her undoing, Scheuing allows buttons, buttonholes and pocket-flaps to remain delightfully intact. The mind's eye tries to reconcile all these elements with the familiar jacket form - a mental puzzle full of pieces that do not lock easily together.

While undoubtedly playful, Scheuing relentlessly analyses structure, both of the hierarchies of power in the world at large and also in the art world. Weaving is inherently about structure, about pattern and rhythm. By interrupting these she allows us to imagine changes in patterns of thinking. In these calculated shifts, Scheuing acts as a revolutionary - not of the 'mob and guillotine' variety but one who uses a steady, conscious persistence. Her work constantly underscores the power of gradual change.

1 Scheuing, Ruth. "The Unravelling of History: Penelope and Other Stories" in Bachmann, Ingrid and Ruth Scheuing, eds. *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998. p201. (available on line at <http://ffar.concordia.ca/readings/reading6/ffar6.html> (accessed November 8, 2007))

2 Bachmann, Ingrid and Ruth Scheuing, eds. *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998.

3 Cottingham, Laura "The Feminist Continuum: Art after 1970" in Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Ltd., 1994, page 276.

4 Borer, Alain. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, page 14.

Artist's Statement

I am interested in clothing as skin, which project outwards as well as inwards. By taking apart the male business suit I try to discover or analyze the "pattern" on which it is constructed. At the same time the *Metamorphoses* are an evolution of the suits into something else. As the notion of a metamorphosis suggests: they happen either through nature taking its course or through magic or art; I like the mixture/confusion of all these aspects.

By taking the suit apart, graphic contours of the patterns become visible as a language or logical structure of the suit. The pattern for an arm is always similar and recognizable to any pattern maker, tailor or seamstress. I ask myself: what is the difference or connection between the flat pattern, the sleeve, the visible arm and the arm underneath the skin? How do they influence or define each other? There are other ways to make clothing. Big complex ideas are held together apparently seamless or invisible. But in fact, there are seems, which can be undone.

The flattening out of the suits interests me also in relation with the woven fabric, which is layered onto the body of the person. Woven materials are grids and usually repeated endlessly in industrially produced fabrics. Men's suiting fabrics are complex combinations of different coloured threads, which produce interesting visual effects, but without drawing attention. Initially, I was mainly concerned with rupturing the structures themselves, but it evolved into an overlaying of new patterns onto the old ones, destroying the old ones in the process.

My "alterations" respond both to the grid structure of the woven fabric and to the suit as an object. A fabric is a logically structured 2-dimensional grid, as compared to the body, which is an unstructured 3-dimensional shape. By using the former to cover the

latter, tensions occur. At connection points, such as shoulders, darts and lapels, this tension is most visible. And my "alterations" focus on these points.



Ruth Scheuing, *Metamorphoses #11 spider*, detail

I am also thinking about my work in relation to Naomi Schor's book entitled *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1987). By focusing on apparent arbitrary aspects or insignificant details, the rule of "good" design is defied. By concentrating on the process and examining the suit thread by thread, I try to force myself, and the viewer, to consider minute and apparently irrelevant details. As a result, a complete overview over what is significant and what is not hopefully becomes blurred and new patterns can evolve, which are not yet fixed with clear messages. By forgetting the whole picture and looking at the detail, threads, the pattern, the hidden grammar of both fabric and the cutting pattern of the suit, I expect a different picture to emerge – a metamorphosis! My work does take time and this is very apparent.

On a different level the idea of “metamorphoses” comes from Ovid’s stories, which are held together by the thread of metamorphoses, which occur in each. Many of these stories present aspects of weaving: the story of Arachne, Philomela, and the daughters of Minyas, Penelope and Ariadne, who all challenge and gain a voice through their weaving, spinning or thread. The telling tales and weaving as a woman’s voice has been pointed out by others as well in recent feminist literary criticism, such as “The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours” by Janis Joplin Klindienst and “Arachnology” by Nancy Miller, both published in *Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[Also look for my essay “Penelope or the Unraveling of History” in *material matters: the Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles* (Toronto: YYZ, 1999)]

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