**Warp and Woof: some remarks on Maria Varela’s *Rugs of Life***

In her poem “Weaving”, 19th century poet, abolitionist and teacher Lucy Larcom describes how the act of weaving does not simply create *a* world but rather assists the poet/weaver in navigating the binaries that make up the material world we live in:

[...]

But ever as I weave,” saith she,

“The world of women haunteth me.

“The river glides along, one thread

In nature’s mesh, so beautiful!

The stars are woven in; the red

Of sunrise; and the rain-cloud dull.

[...]

*Rugs of Life*, the ongoing project of Greek visual artist Maria Varela, is an intensive exploration and mapping of modes of sense production across times and cultures. *Rugs of Life* uses the traditional art of weaving to investigate how collaboration might give rise to new combinatory plays of techniques and practices. The project on a surface level might appear to investigate the traditions of weaving across cultures or the different techniques employed. However, the ambition and scope of the project is much wider and much more radical than a mere taxonomy of traditional weaving techniques. *Rugs of Life* abstracts the pliable plane of threads interlaced in a rectangular pattern that is the cloth being woven and meditates on the production of sense. The work attempts to think past the singular weaver onto a tapestry where weavers and weaving patterns and motifs bleed into one another. The world of women weavers in Varela’s work is ever present and it seeks to destabilise the factory of archetypes that style and patterns can be.

Indeed, Varela’s project undertakes the task of unstitching traditional motifs and the binary capitalist practices of attribution and authentication until tradition becomes once again a site of affect, rather than simply a site of haunted, repeating motifs. Rugs of Life even eschews traditional ways of thinking about motifs, judging their aesthetic or cultural value. Knotting, coiling, twining and braiding are not just techniques or descriptors of muscle movement whose end product is a rug: these techniques are now paired with non-human processes in the form of algorithms aiming at the generation of new motifs that are hinting at new vistas of sense and expression. Varela in this work traces not just styles but also *enunciations*, that is to say new possibilities of aesthetic sensations, and consequentially, new possibilities of sense.

If living in the anthropocene means we live in a time when we experience longing for a future that never came to pass, as the late theorist Mark Fisher opined, the artworks produced in this project come to disrupt and upturn these feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. Varela’s project questions what it means to approach tradition as an echo chamber and cultural factory wherein motifs and artifacts come to be excluded, disqualified or even violently normatised according to rules, concepts and ideas which largely persist much like viruses do: by replicating themselves with minor changes in every generation. In the project at hand, the stakes are much higher. If the development of weaving has been dependent upon the development of textile fibers, spinning and dyeing (Albers, 21), the works produced for this project are dependent on processes which accelerate the development of these technologies by borrowing freely from other practices and technologies.

Varela’s interdisciplinary practice is informed by the digital and postdigital; indeed, her work in its entirety, not just *Rugs of Life*, repeatedly, persistently, stubbornly asks what it means to have a body, and a female body at that, in the face of ever increasing abstraction. McKenzie Wark in *A Hacker Manifesto* posits the following: “We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds”. While Wark’s polemic is ebullient in its embracing of the abstract, Varela’s approach in her work is more skeptical and considered: her work is parsing patterns and bringing out the connectivity and ubiquity of traditional motifs. Works like *Rugs of Life* take into account the accumulated data of tradition, work with it and hold a mirror up to it. Indeed, the handling of raw data as fed to machine intelligence by Varela is also a way of looking at ourselves as what we always were: temporary adopters of fleeting patterns and modes of expression and life.

The project *Rugs of Life* asks us to think about the spaces and areas where tradition stops looking like itself; the spaces where tradition refuses to be controlled by business and even refuses business to take the place of culture. The project picks up the traces of tradition and deploys non-human agents to make it new. *Rugs of Life* locates intensive spaces of affect and manages those singularities: this is where the dynamical systems, those imaginary but real technologies of weaving as conceived by Varela, manifest their emergent properties and become much larger than the sum of their individual parts. The dialectic between tradition and novelty, digital and analogue, machine and human, textile and idea, Varela and her collaborators in Morocco unfold in time, working sometimes at odds, sometimes in conjunctions but always creating a pliable surface of sense. The works that emerge out of this process are a patchwork of practices and agents, a retrofitting with a firm view to the future, making use of fragmented pieces of data and echoes of ideas and practices that the dominant culture considers to be its sole owner.

Yet, what *Rugs of Life* does is to respectfully but wilfully disrupt cultural codes, break conceptual and geographical boundaries in order to make visible the unexpected encounters of the quotidian. Indeed, Varela in *Rugs of Life* goes one step further and questions how memory and the processes of memorialisation occur. The project asks in a playful manner: how do we come to remember the things our consciousness and identity are allegedly made of? Is there only one way to remember the past? Varela’s work retools the classic Ship of Theseus thought experiment for the postdigital era and asks what it means to remember, what it means to endure and how these functions make us who we are. *Rugs of Life* opens up new domains of sense and meaning; these domains of artistic practice probe the collective and the unconscious, constrained as they are by the empirical reality of rug production. Yet at the same time, given the fact that they do not have a starting, transcendental point but rather key sites of aesthetic and political engagement, these domains refuse to normalise the process of the production of these rugs and their adjacent set of meanings.

Varela proposes collaboration as a different way of coming into knowledge: the project favours the machine (i.e. the collaboration between different agents) over the structure that produces rugs with predetermined patterns. The project thus come to become an archive with no addressee, creating its own past as it promotes an abstracted and thus looser correlation between meaning and context. This cubist approach to tradition and its conventions is more akin to a microsculpting of the original data. The artist and the collaborating weavers now come to infuse the new patterns as supplied by Varela with their preexisting muscle memory: they work these new motifs and patterns into their own bodies taking their own liberties. In this manner, the unique patterns generated by the algorithm are slowly inserted and mediated into a different tradition of weaving. Walter Benjamin asks us to consider that “[...] technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record.” While Benjamin frets about the effect of technical reproduction on personal and collective history, the artifacts produced for this project do not act as narrative prostheses for a forgotten History but rather as indirect, narrative retellings of a history that has been abstracted beyond all recognition and sense. Varela’s project asks us to question how we understand the process of knowledge production.

The exchange, assimilation and production of knowledge through digital processes and bodily labour in *Rugs of Life* recreate the original into a copy that in turns replaces the original. It is in a very material sense a reimagining of the world, a negotiation with what is outside language and different to oneself. The resulting physical objects are stylistic gestures with a relational value to the asignifying elements that they distribute systematically, that is to say these physical objects are an attempt to shift the terms of the debate regarding identity, tradition and History. These objects are the physical manifestation of a conceptual mapping process: the abstracted patterns invite inchoate perspectives. The stylistic gesture that is these physical object is in itself the expression of the impersonal mode of being in the world. The rugs are articulating narratives but they do so in the third person singular.

Varela’s work in *Rugs of Life* reexamines the right to a non-barbaric life as defined by Benjamin: she asks how we can come to know ourselves as cartographies of intertwined and interwoven complexities. The complexities in Varela’s work are waxing and waning as they take in, add, subtract and abstract tradition and the indigenous knowledge and craft. The resultant work is inscribed on the body, inscribed by the body and made part of the world as it covers other bodies and worlds. The physical labour of the project is an acceptance of the physical labour that the female body engages in and in trying to do that, the work engages with difficult realities, other cultures and other bodies. Indeed, Varela asks us to understand the female body as a site of production stretching out across different cultures and practices. Weaving thus becomes not just a mode of creating, it becomes a mode of creating in an anti-neocolonial mode (as per poet/translator Don Mee Choi): Varela employs in *Rugs of Life* algorithms as a way to untrain and decondition our way of algorithmically-modulated lives. We know what we know of the world because we belong to the inbetween zones of inclusion and exclusion, redaction and reduction, writing and weaving, stitching and unravelling. The project creates a community out of those spaces and ways of living in and with the world where meaning stares into its own entropic futurity and dares to ask questions about community beyond subjectivities as we know them. In this manner, *Rugs of Life* is *cutting a rug*, as the slang expression goes: Varela and her project invite us to rethink how we know our traditions, we are being invited to understand how we work and move with our bodies in these unknown times and to dance in these inbetween states.

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