



**Nesa Gschwend**

# **Living Fabrics**

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A Dialogue through Textiles

When threads and fibers are interlaced, the result is a strong fabric – a totality that is more than the sum of its parts. This image occupies an exceptionally broad space in human consciousness, since it represents our interconnectedness. We talk about «the fabric of life, the social fabric, the fabric of human relations». All humans are tied into a web of interdependence. (Beverly Gordon)

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## A Dialogue through Textiles

Janine Schmutz in conversation with Nesa Gschwend

Under the title Living Fabrics, visual artist Nesa Gschwend has developed a long-term art project that centres on and engages with used textiles. Living Fabrics thereby creates a network that goes beyond personal, social, national and cultural borders.

How did the Living Fabrics project come about?

Textile materials are the primary form of expression in my artistic practice. For a long time I concentrated on fabrics from four generations of my own family. This then led me to start thinking about working with used clothing of people I'm not personally connected with. We perceive textiles as something private, but at the same time they are present everywhere and are something we all have our own relationship with.

For years now, I've been collecting discarded clothes, which I use to create objects with. In the beginning I worked with them on my own in the studio. At some point I decided I wanted to incorporate not just the clothes, but also the people who had worn them. The result was a concept in which as many persons as possible create something together out of used textiles.

What, for you, is the key thing about working with textiles?

As a cultural technique, textiles unite craftsmanship, expression and a way of thinking. Textile media are of great importance for human development even today. Knotting, interweaving, tying, winding, braiding and interlacing are basic textile techniques that we also apply to other areas of life, and through them we try to understand not just human society but also nature. Textiles are something that shape our human existence at deep levels.

The dialogue of the two hands with one another, as well as with the thread, becomes a central means of appropriating the world in my artistic work.

What do discarded textiles have to tell?

Used textiles carry traces and stories within them. They save and store our human existence; in the form of clothes, bags and shelters, they are our protective covers and containers.

We are born into textiles, we take them with us on our journeys, and at the end we are once again wrapped in a sheet. There is barely a single moment in our lives when we are not surrounded by textiles and touched by them. Through clothes we define our identity and our belonging to communities.

In what ways are other people involved in the project?

Living fabric is based on a direct exchange in the community. I lay out textile materials, thread, needles and scissors on a carpet object and invite people to participate. Some bring with them clothes they no longer need, others play with the colours and patterns and start sewing new sections, and others have a look at what has already been done. Children cut out small pieces of fabric and give them to their mothers to sew on; women

remember stitches they learned in the past. Some just want to be present, to watch and talk. The used fabrics thereby take on a new value, not just at the haptic, material level but also as repositories for life stories.

Conversations usually start up, on subjects that concern people all over the world. I travel with this project from place to place and integrate as many people as possible from different age groups, social classes and cultures.

What role does the video recording play in the project?

Through the accompanying video, the people and places that come together in this project also become visible. In Tamil Nadu (India) I travelled for three months with social workers into villages and slums. Other parts in the video are based on tours through Switzerland, Austria and Georgia. The work process in the studio is also shown, where everything is brought together and the carpet objects are created.

What significance do carpets have as objects and cultural heritage in Living Fabrics?

Carpets were originally created as nomadic objects that can be put down anywhere and which define a personal space. The culture of carpets that extends from North Africa to India encompasses not only many different cultures, ethnic groups and religions, but also countless textile, handicraft and artistic techniques. Carpets have other functions depending on size: there are large carpets for gatherings, small prayer mats, rugs and runners.

After each meeting, I look closely at what has been made. Some of the newly begun parts migrate to other places and some I take out and develop them further. In this way, the carpet objects are created in a time-consuming process.

Each object is unique and has its own history through the participants, the places, the used clothes and the creation of the objects. For me, the combination of these levels is also a sign of connectedness.

How will the Living Fabrics project continue to evolve?

Since I've been travelling with Living Fabrics, many participatory meetings have taken place with people from over 50 nations. The journey will continue and will weave together new places, people, textiles and stories into living fabrics.



Carpet object / Austria 2018 (280 x 113 cm)



Carpet object / Austria 2018 (200 x 75 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland, Austria / 2018 (190 x 77 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland, 2018 (224 x 92 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland / 2018 (227 x 72 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland / 2018 (270 x 82 cm)



Carpet object / Georgia / 2018 (338 x 122 cm)

Rolled, carried, unfolded again, originally the carpet is a nomadic object and creates a personal space everywhere.

As a companion on a trip, as a warming cover, as a room divider, as a prayer spot, as the red carpet, as a rug or bridge - connects not only people and rooms together but as a huge cultural asset it also brings the East and the West, South and North together.



Carpet object / Georgia / 2018 (308 x 156 cm)



Interweavings / 2019 (each 200 x 65 cm / 230 x 140 cm)



Interweavings / 2019 (Installation / Size variable)



Gathering objects / 2016 (70 x 45 x 35 cm)



Interweaving / 2019 (200 x 80 cm)



Gathering / 2018 (size variable)



Gathering / 2017 (Installation Marzilli Berne / Switzerland)



Living Fabrics / 2017 (Installation Rhine bridge)



Carpet object / India 2017 (700 x 310 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland /2015- 16 (420 x 310 cm)



Carpet object / Switzerland / 2015-16 (315 x 205 cm)



Carpet object / India / 2017 (290 x 165 cm)



Carpet object / India / 2017 (310 x 200 cm)

The walk to the different places and countries  
The textiles with their colours, patterns, folds, forms  
Embroideries, stitches, threads, the hands and the handling  
The meetings with people from different generation and cultures  
The narratives during the working process  
The creation of the objects  
Together they form a Living Fabric - a Dialogue through Textiles



**Living Fabrics** 2018

Switzerland - India - Austria - Georgia

51.50 Minutes / HD Video

About 1200 people from all age groups, different cultural backgrounds and over 50 nations attended these participatory meetings in Switzerland, India, Austria and Georgia.

Used clothes were collected, cut up, joined, stitched together and swapped. A look into the studio also shows the labour-intensive process of realising the carpet objects.

Textiles are fundamental for every person. They are full of personal experiences. There is no person or culture without a relationship to textiles.

The participants - the textiles - the exchanges - the places all this creates Living Fabrics.







**Voices of Textiles 2018**

Indonesia / Italy / Spain / India  
21.30 Minutes / HD Video

In Voices of Textiles, we see snapshot of textiles in everyday contexts.  
Jute bags are passed from one hand to the next. Lifejackets announce a seaside location.  
Women attach personal scraps of fabric to a tree dedicated to the goddess.  
On a tree in the city, someone has created their own space with clothing and blankets.  
A derelict building protected by sheeting becomes a dwelling not just for crows.





## Nesa Gschwend

Born and raised in the Rhine Valley, Switzerland  
School of Textile in St.Gallen  
Theatre School in Bologna, Italy  
Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)

### Art awards / Artist in Residence

Artist in Residence Cité Paris  
Art award Metron Architekten  
Artist in Residence Varanasi, India  
Artist in Residence Bangalore, India  
Artist in Residence Pro Helvetia, Prag  
Art award Kanton Aargau  
Art award Kanton St. Gallen

### Solo exhibitions (Selection) / (C) = Catalogue

Kunsthalle Ziegelhütte Appenzell (C)  
Johanniterkirche Feldkirch, Austria (C)  
Sankturbanhof Sursee (C)  
Mezzanin, Stiftung für Kunst, Schaan  
Visual Arts Gallery, New Delhi, India (C)  
Kunsthalle Wil (C)  
Kunstraum Engländerbau, Vaduz (C)

### Group exhibitions (Selection)

Frauenmuseum Fürth (C)  
Frauenmuseum Hittisau  
Kunstmuseum Appenzell (C)  
Kunsthaus Zofingen  
Schloss Werdenberg  
Imago mundi Helvetia, Venezia, Italy) (C)  
Kaskadenkondensator, Basel  
Museum Bickel, Walenstadt  
E-Werk Freiburg, Germany  
Helmhaus, Zürich  
Kunsthaus Aarau  
Colombo Art Biennale, Sri Lanka (C)  
India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India  
Maison Turberg, Porrentruy

### Installations (Selection)

TwingiLandArt Wallis (C)  
Artur017 Rheintal (C)  
JetztKunst, Marzilli Bern  
Espace d'une sculpture, Lausanne  
Biennale Skulpturen. Winterthur (C)  
Tollwoodfestival München, Germany  
Kunstsommer Meran, Italy (C)  
Nadace Lemberg, Czech Republic  
Film/Kunstfest Schwerin, Germany (C)

### Participatory art projects (Selection)

Treffpunkt Kleinhüningen Basel  
Int. Women's Cultural Interaction  
Batumi Georgia  
Centre for Socio-Cultural Interaction,  
Mayagram, India  
Psychiatrische Klinik Wil  
artlink Bern  
Alice project Sarnath, India  
Chitrakala Parishad, Bangalore, India  
MusE Switzerland

### Performances / Screenings (Selection)

Alpines Museum Bern  
Gasträume Zürich  
Videofestival Kunsthaus Glarus (Jurypreis)  
Kunstexpander Aarau  
Frauenkulturtage Saarbrücken, Germany  
Fri- Scene, Fribourg  
Liechtensteiner Almanach, Schaan  
Technisches Museum Wien, Austria  
Ernst Osthaus Museum Hagen, Germany  
Kunstmuseum Bochum, Germany



## List of Illustrations

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**Carpet-object Georgia / 2018**  
308 x 156 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 13  
**Carpet-object / Austria / 2018**  
280 x 113 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 14  
**Carpet-object Ida / Austria / 2018**  
200 x 75 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 15  
**Carpet-object / Switzerland-  
Austria / 2018**  
190 x 77 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 16  
**Carpet-object / Switzerland / 2018**  
224 x 92 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 17  
**Carpet-object / Switzerland / 2018**  
227 x 72 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 18- 19  
**Carpet-object / Switzerland  
2018**  
270 x 82 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 20- 21  
**Carpet-object Georgia / 2018**  
338 x 122 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 23  
**Carpet-object Georgia / 2018**  
308 x 156 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
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**Carpet-object / Switzerland / 2017**  
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- 34- 35  
**Carpet-object / India / 2017**  
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**Carpet-object / Switzerland 2015-16**  
420 x 310 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 37  
**Carpet-object / Switzerland 2015-16**  
315 x 205 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 38  
**Carpet-object / India / 2017**  
290 x 165 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish
- 39  
**Carpet-object / India / 2017**  
310 x 200 cm  
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220 x 160 cm / 220 x 106 cm  
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300 x 148 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wax, varnish

### Textile objects

- 24- 25  
**Interweavings / 2019**  
each 200 x 65 cm / 230 x 140 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, robe,  
bamboo, rod, varnish
- 26- 27  
**Interweavings / 2019**  
Installation size variable  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, robe,  
bamboo, rod, varnish
- 28  
**Gathering objects 2+3 / 2016**  
each 70 x 45 x 35 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, bamboo,  
wire, varnish
- 29  
**Interweavings / 2019**  
200 x 80 cm  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, robe,  
bamboo, rod, varnish
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**Gathering / 2018**  
Installation / size variable  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wire, varnish
- 32- 33  
**Gathering / 2017**  
Installation / size variable  
Used clothes, cotton, yarn, wire, robe,  
bamboo, rod, varnish

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**Living Fabrics 2018**  
Switzerland - India - Austria - Georgia  
HD Video / 51.50 Minutes
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**Voices of Textiles 2018**  
Indonesia - Italy - Spain- India  
HD Video / 21.30 Minutes

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#### Georgia

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#### Austria / Germany

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