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Restless Threads: The Tapestries of Annette Cords

SEPTEMBER 16, 2021 BY [JILL CONNER](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Reviewed by Jill Conner

at Project:ARTspace, New York City

When *Shape/Shifters* opened on January 7, 2020 at Project:ARTspace in Manhattan, no one was remotely ready for something as dramatic as the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the reports that had been circulating out of China. The opening reception was packed and stood as a strong validation of Cords' new Jacquard tapestries, which simultaneously embraced and reflected the fast-paced nature of New York City. Even though this curatorial collaboration between myself and the artist closed on February 20, 2020, the unexpected shutdown that occurred nearly two weeks later, ceased all

potential conversations about this innovative project. The walkable city had been brought to an abrupt halt, and the regular conduits of communication were distorted. And yet, despite the new era of lockdowns and self-quarantine, her work remains key to an objective, city-based adaptation.

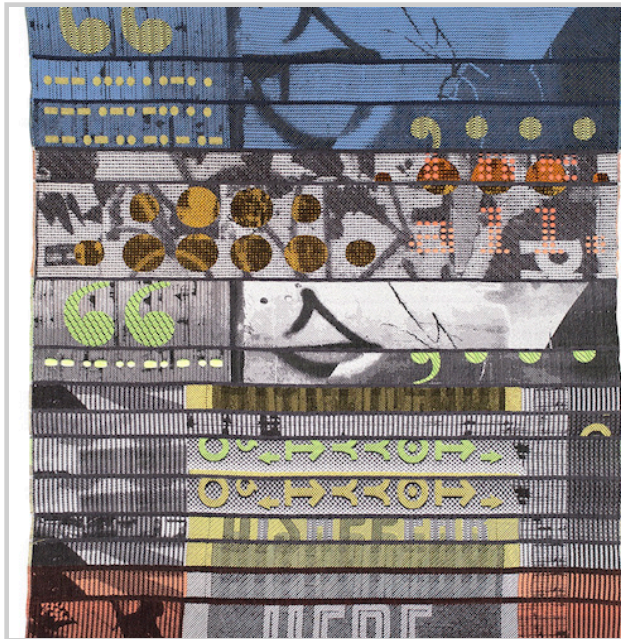


The studio of Annette Cords

All images courtesy of Jill Connor

In looking back on *Shape/Shifters*, a selection of emails and studio visits were followed with a close focus on the ways that symbols and metaphors function across different media. Cords presented a reconsideration of Josef Albers seminal text of 1963 titled *The Interaction of Color*. While teaching at the Bauhaus during the 1920s, Albers had suggested color was merely a visual detail that was defined by its own movement. Cords extended Albers main argument past the painterly surface and into the realm of woven tapestries.

“Weaving,” Annette explained, “was marginalized in the Bauhaus because the male artists did not maintain it as a topic of conversation within the mainstream of Bauhaus instruction.” T’ai Smith, a scholar of textiles, also observed that even though Anni Albers had joined the Jacquard workshop under the guidance of Hannes Meyer, the Bauhaus continued to extend a contrast between the individual artist and the process of mechanical reproduction. As a painter, Annette Cords used to build up textured surfaces that showed pigments as they layered over one another, in a cross-hatch fashion. When she stepped away from painting in 2007, the artist was intent on discovering more about color itself as well as the nature of its shifting substance. In the medium of Jacquard tapestry, the intersection of weave and weft is the most significant, because it is the point where different threads overlap to create new colors, illusions, symbols and sources of meaning.



InBetween #1 (2019)



InBetween #2 (2019)

The compositions that appeared in the *Shape/Shifters* show consisted of a black-and-white background featuring a kind of fragmentation that could only be described as a cinematic stutter. When I first visited in the Summer of 2020, the large-scale weavings, that had made their debut months earlier, covered the studio walls.

“InBetween #1” (2019) and “InBetween #2” (2019) aligned the traditional form of weaving with urban street art, while also revealing the artist’s close observation of street writing as a form of gestural abstraction. Motifs of street graffiti were offset by traces of vibrant signage although the surface of each piece was really an introduction that not only eschewed the medium of paint but also took viewers on a deep dive within reams of different colors.

“Signal” made two years earlier, nearly overwhelmed the gallery’s exhibition space but presented an exponential number of pictorial cut-ups. While each work is densely layered with countless threads that reflect an array of images and forms, text fragments emerge from a sphere of commands and requests. *Shape/Shifters* explored the interrelationship between color, perception and movement. According to Albers, everyone sees color differently since it is a matter of perception, and also functions as a daily metaphor. Yet due to its physical character within the realm of textiles, color becomes an ambiguous object.



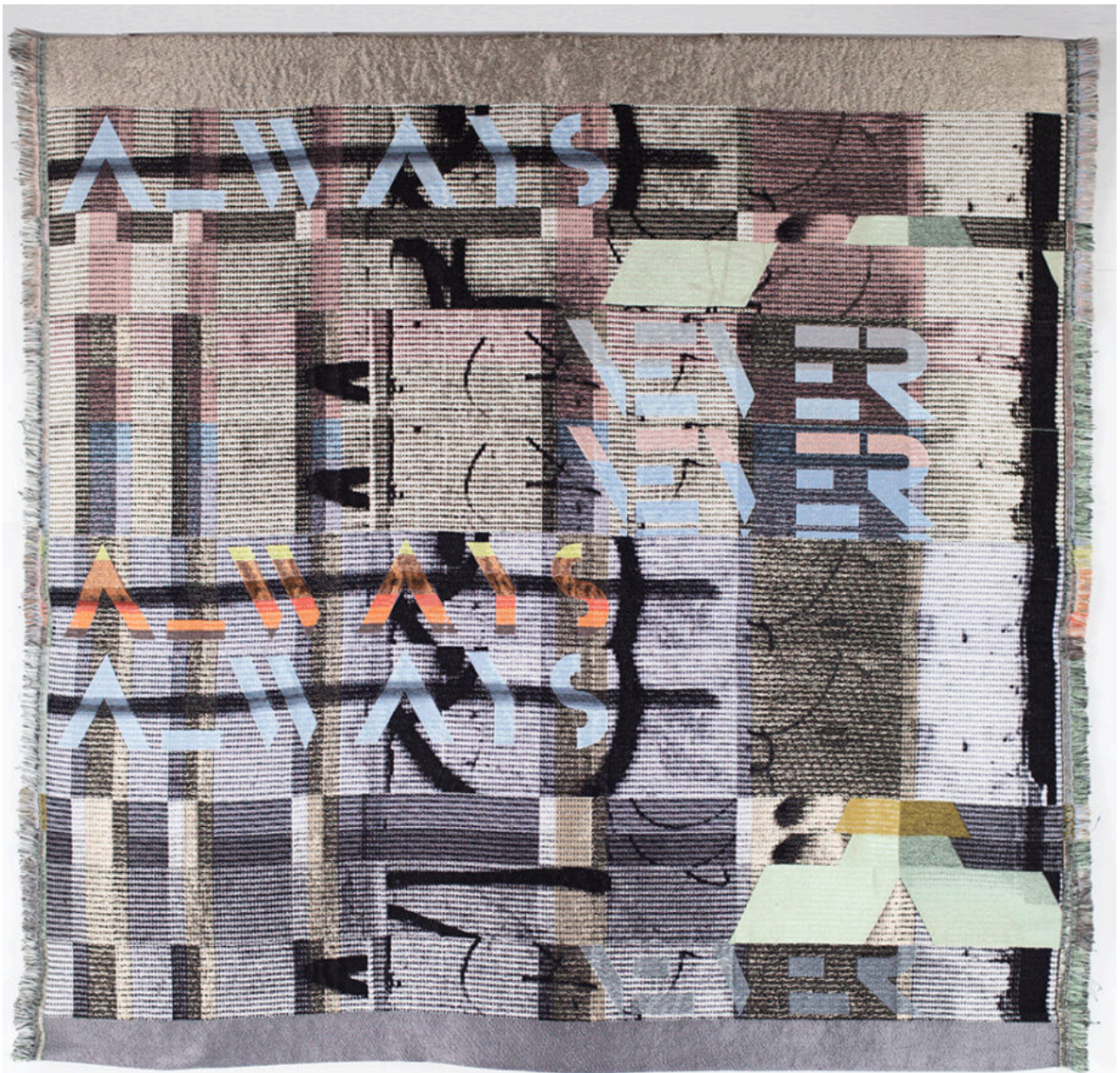
Signal (2017)

By aligning the traditional form of weaving with contemporary art, Cords' work provides a complimentary contrast to architectural forms while continuing to bridge with them. The insertion of a curved line upon a piece of Jacquard fabric, for instance, is considered a form of disruption within the restrictions of grid logic. However the presence of architectural structure is required in order for her process to take shape. Weaving, then, is a fertile ground that creates connections while expanding on its

technology and methods. The sweeping changes caused by the rapid spread of Covid-19 brought so many details of debate to the fore. The uncanny mix of an aggressive virus with political protests and nature's erosion tore through the basis of daily life.

On a visit in 2021, all of the art that had debuted in the previous year had been removed from the studio walls and replaced with brand new works as the artist was preparing for two upcoming exhibitions, at PS 122 Gallery in the East Village and at InLiquid Gallery in Philadelphia. Located within the old industrial core of Greenpoint, Brooklyn the white-walled studio of Annette Cords is neatly arranged within a neighborhood that is most known for its volume of concrete, iron and steel production. Once inside, a threaded loom of wood appears in one corner of the room while two large tapestries occupy the juxtaposing walls.

“Not Yet/Already” (2020) and “Always/Never” (2020) appeared in August 2021 at PS 122 and revealed a similar repetition of forms. Bright neon shades of orange, yellow and green seen in the earlier works were replaced by soft tones of lavender and gray. The cinematic, black borders moreover also no longer appeared. The overall depth across each surface is more free-floating and unified while “InBetween #3” appeared only as a vestige. As long-time city residents continued to flee the city, Cords decided to keep moving forward and designed new tapestries, glyphs and fonts with the aim of restoring the notion of social fabric to the ruptured city of New York. The artist's ongoing engagement with daily patterns and ephemeral structures kept pushing at the limits of an otherwise rigid medium.



Always/Never (2020)

Since Annette Cords' interests are deeply anchored in Bauhaus theory, specifically at the intersection of art and weaving, her work focuses strongly on the grid and its relationship to the development of contextual form. Her work comes easily to mind when looking at the complex installations of Hanne Darboven, the paintings of Taryn Simon or the serial photographs of Zoe Leonard. And yet Cords' work responds to the neglect of Josef Albers' mention of color weaving. Although Albers did discuss the theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul, a chemist from 19th-century France who had studied the range of color and its ability to change perceptions, the absence of the

words “color weaving” from Albers’ text consequently defined the Bauhaus weavers as artists who made craft. In Cords’ point of view, this is a total undermining of Bauhaus theory and its nature.

During this time of unprecedented change the significance of the cultural grid, located in urban centers around the world, has been called into question. Culture, like structure, relies on interlocking layers to evolve. Similar to the medium of textiles, and the process of weaving, structures need a firm background that highlights the details and textures of the immediate context. “You always start with emptiness, not fullness,” said Renzo Piano to Peter Schneider in *The Passenger: Berlin*. “It’s the voids in a city that determine its structure.” A shared social fabric, moreover, evolves through layers that have been built up over time. As society continues to fracture through the crush of isolation, Annette Cords’ tapestries provide a momentary solution to an isolationist world.

Cords is not alone in her desire to create material layers that closely examine the basis of society’s layers. It is clear, moreover, that her tapestries continue to provide a viable path to endure both ongoing change and regeneration. *The Passenger: Berlin* (2021) was published in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemic. It is a journal in book-form that presents a picture of contemporary Berlin, one that is now beyond its impoverished Postwar history. Instead the city and its citizens are moving into the future of the tech-heavy, digital West as seen in the co-working function of the building once known as the Templehof Airport. Unlike cities that brush up their appearance through strong public relations, Berlin does the opposite. As the primary center between East and West, the city does not go out of its way to appear spectacular. Rather it is what people bring to it – the city – and that is all.

Jill Conner is an art critic based in New York City with a focus on Modern and Contemporary Art. Since 1997 Conner has contributed to publications such as Afterimage, Art in America, Art Papers, Interview Magazine, New Art Examiner, Performance Art Journal, Sculpture and Whitehot Magazine.

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