

## **MATERIALIZED MEMORIES: A Humorous, Melancholy Practice of Remembering**

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### **Introduction**

John K. Raustein (b. 1972) has distinguished himself in the field of textile art. Since his debut in 1998, he has explored the textile tradition and craft's possibilities, using materials, techniques and concepts to create associative objects that function as social commentary. His artistic practice is driven by an urge to explore the possibilities of textiles in combination with delving deeper into questions about identity and memory. His experiences of current events also play an important role in his art. There is great breadth in his production. This is an artist who frolics in the possibilities that knowledge about textiles brings. This knowledge he began accruing in childhood, then deepened through schooling.

Raustein's understanding of materials and knowledge of handicraft are characteristic for the traditional field of craft. He was in fact awarded Scheibler's Talent Prize for craft in 2011. But the three-dimensional and conceptual character of his textile sculptures and installations has made it challenging to read his production within a narrow understanding of the field. It places him just as clearly in the field of so-called fine art, something to which his CV testifies. He exhibits equally often in art museums as in galleries specializing in textiles or craft. His works have been included in Norway's annual, juried Autumn Exhibition several times (2004, 2010, 2014 and 2015), and he has become a member of the Norwegian Visual Artists Association (*Norske billedkunstnere*) as well as the Norwegian Textile Artists Association (*Norske tekstilkunstnere*) and the Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts (*Norske kunsthåndverkerne*). This type of boundary-crossing practice, which has become increasingly common in the artworld, has partly to do with the tremendous attention paid to material-based art in recent years. Qualities linked to craft, texture and physical presence are being valued more and more, and interest in Modernism is renewed. It is springtime for the type of art that takes time to make, for history and tradition, for techniques and material knowledge.

One area where we have seen tremendous innovation and interesting development is in the field of textiles, both nationally and internationally. In Norway, museums have held large textile exhibitions such as 'A Thousand Threads' (2013), 'Eye of the Needle: Contemporary Embroidery' (2005), and 'Soft Monuments' (2015). One major international event is 'Fibre: Sculpture 1960–Present' (2015). All these exhibitions examine the history of textiles up to the

present day. In Norway, there are a number of contemporary artists who allow the potential of textiles to lay the premises for their work; Hanne Friis, Gunvor Nervold Antonsen, Aurora Passero and, for that matter, conceptual artists such as Ann Cathrin November Høiby alternate between exhibiting in galleries devoted to textile expressions and in venues for the wider field of art. Older textile artists are being brought back into the spotlight, for instance Frida Hansen and Hannah Ryggen, and textile-based art is being shown in a range of exhibitionary contexts. Raustein is part of this wave of material-based art, but his interest in textiles has been constant since childhood.

### **Father and Mother at Grandmother's House**

The interest in handicrafts was instilled early in life. Raustein grew up with a mother and aunts who organized weekly clubs where tatting, embroidery and knitting were practiced. At the handicraft school Rogaland fylkeshusflidskole, he received a basic introduction to embroidery and sewing, and at the secondary school Forus Videregående, he learned to translate feelings and ideas into form. Here he took the first step towards rooting his textile expression conceptually, also developing the ability to shape a work through dialogue with a physical space. He began to think of a textile work as part of a larger context.

It seems like a natural extension of the impulses he received in childhood and in his formative schooling that he, in 1995, enrolled in the National College of Art and Design in Bergen, Institute for Textile Art.<sup>i</sup> Here he earned a *hovedfag* degree in textiles in 2000.<sup>ii</sup> While enrolled at the school, he also spent one semester at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts / Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation. The textile institute in Bergen emphasized the importance of mastering techniques rooted in traditional crafting knowledge. Hence coursework entailed gathering and systematizing technical knowledge. Neither conceptual grounding nor contextualization of student's own artistic practice were stressed, despite the fact that the 1990s was a decade when art theory was dominated by Poststructuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jaques Lacan, and where interdisciplinarity, borrowing, appropriation and transgression were watchwords in the artworld. Nevertheless, Raustein immersed himself in the field of textiles, the techniques and traditions, and developed strong professional competence. This knowledge is a reservoir he can dip into as needed, and it gives him flexibility and the freedom to use whatever

materials and techniques are required to shape a given expression. It therefore seems ironic that the first works he exhibited were acetone prints.

Raustein makes his debut with two works in the exhibition 'Fast Forward' (1998). His work *Father and Mother at Grandmother's House / Far og mor hos farmor* (1998) is a typical family album photo of his parents drinking coffee at a family get-together; it was transferred to one of his grandmother's old tablecloths with the help of a copy-machine, acetone and hand-rubbing. In the second work, *Grandmother / Farmor* (1998), we see a collage of photographic excerpts from his grandmother's living room: her lamps, pillows, rugs – all trimmed with fringe – are combined in a way that reminds us of patchwork quilts, but also of Andy Warhol's screen-prints (whether intentionally or not). Combined as fragments of pictures in his memory, the collage reflects a child's fascination for objects and shows how it is possible to remember people through objects and glimpses of interiors.

Even at the start of his career, Raustein uses his own biography and life experiences as resources. In the acetone prints, we sense the germ of what will be a driving force for his practice, namely, the exploration of his identity. But he has not yet formulated his personal expression, and the works blend elegantly into one of the strongest trends of the 1990s, referred to as 'Biographism'.<sup>iii</sup> The so-called Biographical Turn came about as an attempt to re-establish the human being as a unified subject; it was a reaction to the Post-Modern idea of the self as a fragmented, unstable entity. These artists wanted to present what is universally human through their own personal history, thus re-establishing their integrity or wholeness as individuals. Characteristic for these artists was to explore personal history – their own or that of their family – in order to shed light on what a human life is and how one becomes who one is. To this end, they use authentic or construed family photos because the photograph *per se*, by virtue of its indexical character, can trigger latent memories and document a life. A photograph is a trace, a residue of lived life.

The decision to combine photography with (used) textiles testifies to Raustein's need to root the content of a work in more than the technical-formal practices that were emphasized at school. It also shows how he, right from the start of his career, has used everyday materials and readymades. The choice of acetone printing also has a pragmatic aspect; for an art student, it is cheaper and more practically manageable than using a loom. Neither photography nor embroidery – techniques he begins using – are taught at the textile institute,

but they are flexibility and useful for an artist who wants to present visual critical commentary. With the installation *I'm Trying to be a Handyman* (2000), Raustein completes his *hovedfag* degree. This is an ironic, humorous reflection over his situation as a male textile artist. Here objects and textiles from the home environment are embellished with embroidered images of tools and machine parts, and on an ironing board, we see an electric sander. Ironingman is underway.

### **I'm Trying to be a Handyman – Ironingman**

The *Handyman* projects form a series of surprising images juxtaposing tools and machine parts rendered in embroidery and pearls. These images are on ironing boards, pillows, kitchen towels and wall-hangings. The embroideries are made in a comic-strip idiom dating back at least to Pop Art's treatment of mass-culture and readymades. The humour which emerges says something about how the objects and symbols are grounded in a stereotypical, polarized understanding of gender roles, and, not least, how entrenched this polarization is. It is as 'beautiful as the unexpected encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table'. This quote from the lyricist Comte de Lautrémont could also be a characterization of the *Handyman* projects. No matter how surprising the surreal compositions are, they simply underscore our abiding habit of perceiving certain objects and activities as gender markers; textile activities and housework have historically been seen as belonging to the domain of women, while machine parts, tools and carpentry are seen as part of the masculine domain. Textiles have been linked to utility and function, and in the field of art, evaluated according to their decorative qualities. Embroidery and other ways of working with textiles, at least for contemporary viewers, also hold connotations to amateurism, and this accounts for the relatively low status textile art has had. Even though such status has changed parallel to the increased interest in the traditions, materials and techniques of crafts, some attitudes seem to last forever. Raustein's *Handyman* wall-hangings and iconic ironing boards show an analytical approach to the textile tradition and the functional context for textiles. He puts prejudice at risk.

Having said this, the *Handyman* projects are not solely socio-critical comments; they also stem from Raustein's encounter with the field of textiles. He was one of only two men who studied at the textile institute in Bergen in the 1990s. Women have dominated the field of textiles – both applied art and textile-based art. Their dominant position was further

entrenched by textile artists in the 1960s, who loaded their works with feminist ideas. Some of these pioneers have presented powerful, feministic vaginal symbols. A paradigmatic example would be Magdalena Abakanowicz, but there are many others. These artists politicized textiles by using them as independent media for art. The perception of textile art as a woman's activity endures, even though an increasing number of men have used textile materials and techniques in recent years. In the Norwegian context, one male artist concentrating exclusively on textile expressions is Hans Hamid Rasmussen, who makes figurative embroideries and experiments with painted textile objects; another is Franz Petter Schmidt, who makes quasi-cultural-historical installations themed on the Norwegian textile industry and industrial history. A third is Eirik Bruvik, who creates geometric-abstract double weavings based on complicated mathematical formulas. We also find an increased use of textile readymades, examples being works by Marius Engh, Anders Smeby, Anders Dahl Monsen, Jørund Aase Falkenberg and Tobias Alexander Danielsson.<sup>iv</sup>

The *Handyman* projects can be read as an attempt to formulate the challenges inherent in being both a man and a textile artist. Raustein revisits the theme in a later work (*Ugga Bugga*) *Still Life / Stilleben D37.1011* (2011), which consists of Indian sarongs for men (*thalapathi*), embroidery and *rouleau* tubes. In India, it is men who embroider, and this demonstrates the relativity of gender markers. In his subsequent practice, Raustein does not give up embroidery or gender-related issues, yet he does develop new forms for expression.

But as stated, at the very beginning of his artistic practice, we can see the germ of what will become a driving force in his oeuvre: the exploration of his identity. Up to 2008, Raustein works with variations on the *Handyman* theme. Given the concept's popularity, he could continue pursuing it, but eventually he experiences the format as limiting. What is more, the 'stipend pot' runs dry. Raustein puts his artistic practice on the shelf, and for a two-year period joins the regular workforce. Meanwhile, the *Handyman* projects live their own life, circulating without Raustein putting effort into them. But the desire to work with art continues. An important incentive to stake out a new direction is his collaboration with the textile artist Synnøve Øyen (b. 1974).

## **ØyStein**

From 2009 to 2014, Raustein and Øyen present a series of joint exhibition projects: 'Interaction' / 'I samspill' (Galleri RAM, Oslo 2011); 'Interaction II' / 'I samspill II' (Hå gamle prestegård, Jæren 2012); 'Three' / 'Tre/tri' (House of Foundation, Moss 2013); 'By the Law of Change' / 'Under forvandlingens lov' (Østfold kunstsenter, Fredrikstad 2014); and 'ØyStein's Method' / 'ØySteins metode' (Prosektrom Carl Berner, Oslo 2014). Already in the second exhibition project, their collaboration manifests itself in a new name and a work-method that differs from each artist's individual practice. This is through the alter ego ØyStein, who creates joint works of art and functions as a curator for the exhibition 'By the Law of Change'.

The collaboration gives Raustein and Øyen the opportunity to explore aspects of their artistic practice which would otherwise remain unexamined. It gives them courage to continue doing research on their own projects, and it gives direction and breaks boundaries for their respective activities. More specifically, the collaboration results in several joint works consisting of sky-blue Ikea pillows in different variations. But perhaps the most important result of ØyStein is the process itself, the artistic interference arising from the encounters between the two. Lonely work in a studio is replaced by an arena where two sparring partners test out ideas on each other, where each person's artistic standpoint is respected, yet where they share a will to experiment with the material, an interest in constructing spaces and in transforming everyday objects and materials. This experience promotes an experimental attitude that Raustein has inculcated in his later works. The collaboration is also fruitful for Øyen. From having worked with handwoven linen in an almost white colour, with the aim of eliminating colour contrasts as much as possible, she begins experimenting with roughly-embroidered stitches on canvas. Through these conceptually-oriented works, she explores the boundaries between abstract painting and textile art. This stands in stark contrast to her earlier works. For both artists, the interaction and experimentation with textile techniques inspires them to move in new directions.

## **Monumental Works**

The first significant shift in Raustein's artistic practice comes about through works that are more monumental, expressive and sculptural. His collaboration with Øyen seems to have been catalytic in this respect. The monumental works *Åkle abh-852915-Hh* (2009), *Collapse /*

*Kollaps* (2010) and *Tetrapode 960.560.11* (2011) signify a liberating leap from the painstaking embroideries. These are the first works where the controlled and figurative aspects are toned down to the advantage of an abstract expression. Formal experimentation will now be central, with Raustein's particular interest placed on surfaces and volumes. These are themes used in his contribution to a grant-exhibition in 2010, which results in a three-year work grant. The awarding of the grant, the sale of *Tetrapode* to the National Museum, and (as mentioned) the winning of the Scheibler Talent Prize, all in 2011, enable him to launch into a longer period of research without having to think of sales. Who thinks starvation is a creative boost?

The formation of *Åkle* and *Tetrapode* illustrates how Raustein no longer treats the textile material as a canvas; he has started exploring materiality itself, the material's inherent qualities – how it falls, its weight and stiffness. *Åkle* is made with meter-upon-meter of simple unbleached cotton canvas, folded and sewn together to create volume. In-between the folds are thousands of roughly embroidered stitches, as if to suggest the handyman's last muscular effort. Raustein's *Åkle* is sculptural and without function, and on account of its title – it refers to a type of historical, geometrically-patterned Norwegian weaving used as a bedspread or insulating wall-hanging – it appears as a humorous quip. The combination of numbers and letters holds connotations to serial numbers (commercial mass-production) and museum catalogue numbers, but the artist's private references are to people and specific points in time.

In *Tetrapode* we also find a banal, second-sorting of fabric transformed into something overwhelmingly sensory, like the frills of a vast amount of nineteenth-century bloomers. This monumental work is a pale, pink-beige cascade of gossamer folds, united with something massive – a cotton canvas cut in strips, folded in different breadths and sewn to pieces of backing that are fastened to each other and draped in one enormous piece. It is beautiful but also uncannily seductive – like vertigo while standing above a raging waterfall. Raustein balances between control and chaos and allows the fragile and massive qualities to clash. The titular word 'tetrapode' refers, among other things, to the elements constituting a breakwater. Such structures protect coastlines and thus people from the force of incoming waves, analogous to the way a blanket surrounds and protects.

While Raustein is making *Tetrapode* for the exhibition 'Interaction' at Galleri RAM, the work he has sent to the jury for the Autumn Exhibition is accepted: *Collapse* represents the ultimate

breach with handmade embroidery. It must have been innervating to order the fabric for this work; the only sewn parts are the ties used for hanging it up. Thus the title, *Collapse*, can be interpreted as ground zero, not only in a metaphorical sense relating to tradition, but also to the material itself. This is a 70 m<sup>2</sup> piece of cotton canvas, at the threshold of what the given size can tolerate to be hung before collapsing. The art critic and professor of art history Øivind Storm Bjerke compares the work with Robert Morris's conceptual felt works from the 1960s; these were left to the law of gravity and imbued with conceptual content.<sup>v</sup> Raustein's work also represents hard-core conceptualism. In principle, *Collapse* is about the material itself: what happens to this immense piece of crumpled fabric? Will it collapse? The mounting at the Autumn Exhibition shows the opposite to be the case. The crumpled material smooths out and becomes undulating drapery. *Collapse* is a manifestation of the possibility of using untreated meters of fabric – completely devoid of printing or sewing – and marks the artist's final liberation from the textile institute's ideology.

Raustein mounts the immense textile anew at Hå gamle prestegard (an old vicarage, now art-and-culture centre) in 2012, this time giving it a title written in the local Jærsk dialect: *Hvis ikkje greinå me side på gir ikke så forstår eg ingenting, ingenting / If the branch we're sitting on doesn't break, then I understand nothing, nothing*. The work's shape changes in relation to the exhibition site. Now there is something 'old master' about it, as art critic Sigrun Hodne points out: There is a grand simplicity about the work, but it is far from Minimalistic. It has gained a sacred, spiritual and ornate character, '(...) as if [Raustein] has led himself to believe that it should be possible to transform an old hayloft into a Baroque cathedral'.<sup>vi</sup> This is a textile, but it holds associations to marble, to all the drapery in art history, to Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–1499). The history of textiles still reverberates in the work, but with the remounting at the old vicarage, the references change.

The change to *Collapse* can illustrate how Raustein adapts his works to the exhibition site. In a stored state, the work is 'dead'; it is recreated and re-materialized with new content when re-mounted. In other words, Raustein's works, like his artistic practice as a whole, is always undergoing transformation. The works 'mature' while in storage, and their form is affected by life's changes. Their abstract character gives them great flexibility.

The monumental and elaborate works *Åkle*, *Collapse* and *Tetrapode* prepare the ground for a number of formal experiments, all of which involve the repetition of a single element.<sup>vii</sup> The



free-hanging sculptural work *Swarm / Sverm* (2011) consists of an incomprehensible number of pieces of sewn *rouleau* tubes: 10,000 strips of fabric are torn, sewn and turned inside-out, then tied into bows. The result is both massive and fluffy but also changeable and temporal. The accumulation of form reminds us of the structure and volume in *Åkle* and *Tetrapode*, and the process of creating the work is repetitive and meditative. The will to do formal experiments and to explore the associative potential of textiles comes ever more clearly to expression when he gives the next series of works stronger autobiographical grounding.

### **Everyday Experiences and the Textile Room of Remembrance**

The formal experiments enable Raustein to give feelings and experiences symbolic and expressive visual form. Up to this point it has seemed sufficient to do technical-formal experiments and to limit colour to the nuances and light and shadow effects in off-white cotton canvas. However, a rediscovery of the Spanish textile artist Josep Grau-Garriga incites him to test colour's associative possibilities. The first result is *Untitled (Afterimage) / Uten tittel (Etterbilde)* from 2011. This starts out as an attempt to visualize the transition between night and day, with the blue in the black representing an 'afterimage' of day. While working on the sculpture, the catastrophic terror of 22 July 2011 is perpetrated in Oslo and at the island of Utøya. The coloured *rouleau* tubes then become a network hung between untreated wooden beams, perhaps like a crucifixion, with ruching spreading out on the floor. The net is an ambiguous image. It can be a security net or something one gets caught in. A greater seriousness enters the works, eventually also a trace of nostalgia.

In addition to grim undertones, *Afterimage* demonstrates how Raustein is indebted to pioneering international fibre artists of the 1960s. The experiments of artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney, Claire Zeisler, Elsi Giauque and Jagoda Buić turn textiles from being seen solely as a functional materials into sculptural artistic media. The weaving is lifted out of the loom and turned into a three-dimensional, abstract sculpture utilizing all the possibilities gravity affords. It is built from the basic components of textiles: fibre, thread and felt. The variety and breadth of techniques and materials available to Raustein have been made possible primarily by pioneering artists in the 1960s.

*Untitled (The Rose Garden's Second Moon) / Uten tittel (Rosehagens andre måne)* (2011) is made at the same time as *Afterimage* and refers more explicitly to the history of textile art. Its title pays homage to Frida Hansen's monumental tapestry *In the Rose Garden / I Rosenhaven* (1904). In the Norwegian context, Hansen represents the point when the anonymous textile producer became a named artist. Hansen drew her own patterns, dyed her own yarn, wove magnificent *art nouveau* tapestries and portières and enjoyed great success internationally. In contrast to her 'woven painting', however, Raustein's *Rose Garden* is an abstract sculpture testifying to the changes in textile art since 1900. The colours are 'quoted' from Hansen's tapestry – somewhat faded colours intersected by a white 'rope' of fringe. It might remind one of running through the woods as a child, seeing a glimpse of light falling diagonally through foliage, but then today's reality imposes itself on the childhood memory, striking like lightning. Suddenly the work metamorphoses into an image of a memorial rose garden, the sort arising spontaneously at the scene of a tragedy. In this way, Raustein lets contemporary life sift into the work.

A far less expressive sculpture, yet also relating explicitly to the textile tradition, is *Herbarium* (1998–2012). It consists only of readymades: embroidered tablecloths, table-napkins and the like that are manipulated and inserted through holes in a screen. Some of these readymades are hand-sewn; others are machine-embroidered in China. Raustein was given some as gifts, others he has bought. But there is something sandwiched in-between all the anonymously flowered textiles: an unmistakably Rausteinian embroidery of a spanner (wrench). Inasmuch as this complex work contains only one 'original' object created by the artist, it stands in contrast to the handicraft tradition's emphasis on authenticity and on the trace of the hand as an important mark of quality. Raustein's 'herbarium' bears witness to social get-togethers and gift exchanges, but also to the lost status of handiwork and the crafting tradition. Learning to embroider is no longer part of ideal female education and formation (*Bildung*), and only in recent years has it gained attention as a medium for art. The question that arises when standing vis-à-vis this mass of tablecloths is why people have gotten rid of them. Is it because of a rip or coffee stain, or it is due to our throw-away society's mentality and changing fashions? Raustein resuscitates banal, everyday objects and gives them new life.

Reflections on textile traditions and women's handicraft are also given visual form in the installation *Untitled (Jewel #1–5) / Uten tittel (Juvel#1–5)* (2013), a work that springs from

Raustein's 'room of remembrance'. What we could call 'the jewels' are like a child's materialized memories of crouching under a living-room table, observing the sewing club's ruching, fringes and crocheted edges, all accompanied by the clicking of knitting needles, stringing of pearls and hum of voices. What could have been a dress is now reduced to a remnant, only a hint of a woman, a memory from childhood. Like a way of paying homage to the women in his life, and to female mentors in art, the 'jewels' stand out with different characters and personalities. Common to them all is an excess of ruching, fringe, embroidery, *rouleau* tubes and pearls. The textile remnants are only kept under control by a wooden frame, like jewels in their mounts, but prosaically enough, the type of frame used to move chandeliers. So valuable yet fragmented can memories be.

Comparing *Jewel #1–5* with the acetone prints *Father and Mother at Grandmother's House* (1998) and *Grandmother* (1998), we recognize how Raustein's artistic practice has undergone a process of abstraction, and how, through experimentation, he has come up with a personal, expressive visual language marked by a powerful ability to create associations. Memories of a grandmother's predilection for objects edged with fringe, embroidery and ruffles, as visualized in the acetone prints, now gain material expression.

The experimentation that went into *Tetrapode*, *Åkle* and *Collapse*, also the findings from these experiments, pave the way for a wealth of expressions and techniques. After making these works, Raustein launches into a creative, inspired period of exploring the possibilities that materials and techniques enable, through colour and voluminous structures in combination with contrasting materials such as wood, metal and diverse readymades. His approach to textiles becomes more rough and reckless as it becomes more rooted in personal history.

### **A Place as a Portal to the Past**

The exhibition 'Interaction II' (2012) at Hå gamle prestegard gives Raustein the initial opportunity to try to come to terms with his childhood and formative years. He is back in the district where he grew up, but what used to be familiar is now foreign. He gains a strong awareness of the distance between a *then* and a *now*. This provides the prelude to a theme that will become increasingly important: recollection and memories. Childhood is re-actualized through works spawned from memories, for instance *Broken Promises / Brutte løfter* (2012) and *Flames in the Valley of Peace / Flammer i fredens dal* (2012). As a child, Raustein would

daily pass the thick chains mooring supertankers at Dusavik (harbour) in Stavanger. He watched them gradually erode. A broken promise can be a private experience, but it can just as easily be a rupture in the social contract: the formerly so-very-promising oil industry is now eroding. *Flames (...)* / *Flammer (...)* is a nostalgic visualization of a lost universe, of comics about the Native American figure Silver Arrow, his blood-brother Pekka Kenttä, the Native American girl Moonbeam and the puma Tinka.

The impulse to explore his personal biography is strengthened by the fact that the exhibition coincides with mourning over the terror of 22 July 2011. It is a reminder of how fragile and unplanned life can be. And while Raustein mounts the exhibition 'Portraits, Soft Jewels and other Devilishness / Portretter, bløte juveler og annet fandenskap' (Akershus kunstsenter, 2013), he receives word that his foster-mother is sick. Both socially and emotionally, she has been functioned as his mother throughout his whole life. Nothing can be the same again. What we have already mentioned, about the fragmentation of the individual Raustein, redoubles his need to face up to his childhood. This becomes a rudder turning his artistic practice in a deeply personal direction. All the good memories and all the big existential questions become more urgent – and with them, reflections on belonging, biological origin and the conditions forming his identity.

### **The Art of Memory**

Both courage and maturity are needed to share an autobiographical story, in addition to an adequate visual language. Not until the exhibition 'Secrets with no Connection / Hemmeligheter uten sammenheng' (SOFT galleri, 2014) does his art adopt a confessional character. Each work in the exhibition appears as part of an installation revolving around one theme: a status report on how Raustein's life is going and the things that have helped form who he is. His textile sculptures function splendidly as independent associative objects, but our full access to them is contingent on knowledge of his biography. In 'Secrets with no Connection', he shares his biography as conveyed through a gallery attendant, allowing the stories to be supplemented by visitors' own associations while encountering the works. The stories are orally retold for those who want to hear them, hence, in addition to its visual dimension, the exhibition gains a relational dimension. Giving the public access to his life history in this way is a declaration of trust.

As stated, to fully understand Raustein's symbolism, we are dependent on knowledge of his personal history. This we find in many confessional, biographically-oriented artists, for instance the French artist Louise Bourgeois and the British artist Tracy Emin, the latter of whom Raustein incidentally exhibited with in the international traveling exhibition 'Flexible 4' (2004). Like Bourgeois, Raustein lets objects function as symbolic expressions for experiences in his childhood and youth, for instance, vulnerability, loneliness and the feeling of being excluded from a community. He uses the associative potential of textiles and wood to appeal to viewers' own experiences. On the whole, the exhibition seems to be about processing memories of the past; a touch of sadness and loss is manifest in several wall-works that combine textiles with untreated wood, for instance *Tulip Season Just Gets Longer and Longer / Tulipansesongen blir bare lengre og lengre* (2013), *What We Don't Talk About / Det vi ikke prater om...* (2013) and *Unknown Origin / Ukjent opphav* (2013). These works point in one way or another to Raustein's family background.

The large textile *Tulip Season (...)* recalls a stage curtain. The heavy blue drapery also has green passages, yet without any obvious connection to the season when tulips bloom. The title and the artist's biography give us a hint. The tulip, in Raustein's private, symbolic 'filing system' is related to sorrow and loss – this flower was used at his foster father's funeral when he was ten years old. In more recent years the flower has represented financial loss; as a salaried employee, Raustein works in a flower shop. Long warm days result in wilted flowers and lost profit. Another work we can read as a processing of grief is *Notes to Self: 30 Days in July / 30 dager i juli* (2013). Raustein's foster mother dies on 7 July, and the ensuing days seem devoid of meaning. Fabric samples and remnants are combined and nailed to the wall, like notes written day by day, each one containing its own story. The nail is a residue of the handyman, a masculine symbol, but also an expression of suffering. Both *Tulip Season (...)* and *Notes (...)* exemplify how Raustein uses art as a means for processing feelings and dealing with grief.

Up until his foster mother dies, family relations have been unproblematic. Who Raustein is, his place in his foster family – the only family he has ever known – is suddenly unclear; the foster child who had been an obvious member of a group of three siblings becomes an outsider. Now his identity is uncertain. His role and position – what are they? Bit by bit, he must build himself anew. *What We Don't Talk About...* (2013) is a symbolic expression for getting the pieces of one's life to cohere, and viewed as a patchwork quilt, it is a formal

answer to an artistic challenge we have seen before in his oeuvre; how to create something big by using a small detail, like a patch, a bit of ruching or a *rouleau* tube tied in a bow.

What origin means, in both a biological and a metaphorical sense, is a theme in *Unknown Origin*, but the title also points to intuitive aspects of a creation process. What is the starting point for the artistic choices one makes? From where do the colours and forms come? Such origins could be the details of a house where one grew up, or the insignia of his grade school (Goa barneskole), classroom curtains – or an inspiration from Anna Eva Bergmann, one of his most important artistic mentors, in addition to Robert Rauschenberg. Raustein works intuitively, on the basis of experience and the textile ‘room of remembrance’. This room contains not only memories of textiles from his childhood, the sewing club and his formative schooling, but also art-historical sources of inspiration. The memories function as sounding boards rather than as direct quotes and references. Paul Klee, in addition to the aforementioned Bergmann, Rauschenberg and Grau-Garriga, or for that matter Bourgeois, are artists who have been important for Raustein since the start of his career, yet their influence cannot be directly traced in his works.

A work broaching on another side of his identity, more specifically, his professional affiliation, is *Home Craft Trap and Other Traps / Husflidsfellen og andre feller* (2014). The work is a tartly humorous response to art historian Arnt Fredheim’s criticism of the exhibition ‘Tendencies 2011’ / ‘Tendenser 2011’. Fredheim’s criticism is presented in an article entitled (in translation) ‘Tendencies 2011 in the home craft trap. An exhibition with potential but which lands in the home craft trap’.<sup>viii</sup> Raustein’s stacked materials are readymades, all of which have carried textiles: everything from the Torshov marching band’s 17<sup>th</sup> of May banner to pieces of wood formerly used for textiles in the National Museum’s storage facility. The textile elements in this installation consist of *rouleau* tubes, ruching, patchwork and remnants that are cut into strips, sewn together, then wrapped around the pieces of wood. In this way, Raustein reflects on the challenges of working in a liminal zone between craft and visual art, for textile art will always also hold connotations to functionality, home craft and commerciality. The challenge inherent in the category ‘handicraft’ is certainly not new: when Abakanowicz gave up weaving in the 1970s, in an attempt to avoid what she called ‘the craft ghetto’, she argued that ‘Fiber was for many critics simply too rooted in technique to be taken seriously as an “attitude”’.<sup>ix</sup> We are surrounded by textiles and textile traditions related to the home, handicraft, décor and amateurism. The venue in which the artists exhibits a work –

whether in a traditional craft arena or an art museum – sets conditions for the work's reception; how the mass media, the public and the institution encounter the art is steered by the institutional framework. The connotations of a material and a technique pose a challenge, but they also contain creative potential which Raustein knows how to exploit.

The exhibition 'Secrets with no Connection' demonstrates how memory-triggering materials, over time, have become increasingly important catalysts for his works. It is as if memories have slowly floated to the surface. The way vague memories are given physical expression is a theme he continues to pursue in the exhibition 'The Sound of Breathing Out' / 'Lyden av utpust' (Galleri FORMAT, 2015).

## **Breathing Out**

Breathing links the body and soul; it indicates something about our emotional and mental state. It happens automatically, and the alternation of inhalation and exhalation happens in more or less even increments. If we hold our breath, the resumption of breathing will be like a gasp of relief. For the exhibition at Galleri FORMAT, Raustein seeks to lay hold of the physical roots of memories. What triggers memories? Raustein searches for such triggers: an internalized image, a glimpse of something, a sound, a smell, a place? He tries visualizing a bodily feeling, an existential disquiet. Intuition, the so-called gut-feeling, is the opposite of fully cognizant decision making, but it is just as fully based on experience. The works are now given physical-emotional anchoring. Repeating a form is like an artistic mantra, and the action comes as an extension of the bodily pulse – it is like an inner tension finally vented in the artwork. The artwork, for Raustein, is thus a kind of *breathing out*.

The Impressionists taught us that shadows always have colour; they are never black. With the title *Coloured Shadows / Fargelagte skygger* (2015), Raustein intimates that there are also colour nuances in memories. He loads the colour with private symbolism. The mother's favourite colour was pale green. Green symbolizes spring, hope and relief, but here the colour has murky passages because it is also mixed with sadness and disquiet. After the terror of 22 July 2011, panelling in this colour was set up around Oslo's government quarter, thus adding other unpleasant associations. *Coloured Shadows* has a 'bodily', weighted-down form, in contrast to, for example, *Unknown Origin*, *What We Don't Talk About* and *Tulip Season*, all

of which trigger associations to functional textiles such as banners, stage curtains or patchwork quilts. *Coloured Shadows* also represents a leap away from the pink-beige ruffles of *Tetrapode*. It has a more organic, ponderous form that poofs limply onto the floor. The material is painted and dipped in colour, like a distant echo of Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955), embellished with glued-on bits of fabric and loose-hanging *rouleau* tubes. It is as if undercurrents of memory have materialized.

*The Register of Imitations / Imitasjonens register* (2015) also shows the bodily relation and weight which Raustein has given his recent works, thus also shedding light on the masculine sphere in textile art in a new and surprising way. Raustein worked with this theme in the *Handyman* projects and in *Untitled (Ugga Bugga)*. *Register of Imitations* emerges as a hybrid between *Tulip Season* and *It's the middle of the day, it's dark in the house (We act as if everything's fine) / Det er midt på dagen, det er mørkt i huset. (Vi later som om alt er bra)* (2015), but it has a more sack-like form rendered in dirty earthy colours, like a 'heavy pouch' covered with oval 'buffers'. The form's origin is the idea of the protective fender. But it is tempting to interpret the work in light of what Glen Adamson (director of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York) claims is an under-recognized tendency in Western art history, namely, the iconography of the 'soft penis'.<sup>x</sup> Adamson humorously draws a parallel between 1960s fibre art's use of pendulous, saggy textile shapes and the flaccid penis. As a symbolic form, it challenges the idea of the phallic authority associated with the male artist's creativity, described as a rigid, proud, monolithic structure. The antithesis would be something non-hard, with a plural form, and, according to Adamson, an image of vulnerability, sensitivity and the transgression of monolithic, hierarchical form. If we read *Register of Imitations* and other voluminous, saggy, paunchy shapes in Raustein's art from this perspective, it seems like they have displaced the wrench and chains as symbols of masculinity. This would be fully in line with the abstract character of Raustein's recent works.

Considered together, the sculptures in 'The Sound of Breathing Out' and the draping along the gallery walls create an installation that gives the visitor a physical experience. It visualizes the insistent, unpleasant character of memories. The palette has changed: the colours have become muddy, brownish and 'dirty', in contrast to the clear colours we saw in 'Secrets with no Connection'. Melancholy is a physical experience that lodges itself in the body and gains formal expression. What is unspoken is visualized.



## The Art of Respite

Raustein's creative urge is closely connected to his need to understand his own life. His artistic practice is therefore complex, constantly changing and undergoing a process of maturation. Since placing greater emphasis on his life experiences and autobiography, his works have become more abstract and expressive. Textile materials are well suited for this purpose because they have a unique ability to convey stories and memories. We surround ourselves with functional textiles in all sorts of contexts. This is why textiles are so symbolically loaded; they act as a backdrop for our activities and bear witness to past events. Raustein has tacit knowledge that gives him the confidence and will to explore textiles and discover their associative potential. The history of art and textiles is a reservoir he dips into to transform memories and experiences. The knowledge consists of both informal and formal competence and is a resource built since childhood, through his enduring interest in textiles.

His artistic practice is an unfolding process, but the themes remain the same: his autobiography, identity and the history of art and textiles. His inclusion of autobiographical material has led to increased abstraction in his sculptures. Parallel to the works becoming increasingly 'confessional', they seem to have become more expressive, yet always with a disarming mixture of humour and wistful nostalgia. The challenge to artists who use their own life as artistic material is to lift the work out of the exclusive, personal sphere into an expression for interpersonal, general experience. Only then can a work affect viewers in the way Raustein's works manage to do. The aim of connecting the past and the present is, for many artists who use experiences and memories as raw material, to repair something they see as damaged. Raustein creates works that instigate reflection. He formulates what is difficult to name.

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<sup>i</sup> This institute is now part of Bergen Academy of Art and Design.

<sup>ii</sup> The Norwegian *hovedfag* degree is not equivalent to a Master's degree but is somewhat comparable. It was discontinued in 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> The Danish literary scholar and photo historian Mette Sandby, professor of art and cultural science at the University of Copenhagen, discusses the tendency in, among other works, *Mindesmærker. Tid og erindring i fotografiet*, Copenhagen 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> Line Halvorsen discusses the entrance of men in the field of textile art in: Utne, Janeke Meyer (ed.): *Tusen tråder. En historiefortelling i tekstil*, Oslo 2011, 19–20.

<sup>v</sup> Bjerke's review of the exhibition «Samspill» at Galleri RAM in the newspaper *Klassekampen* 19 January 2011, entitled 'Tekstile trender'.

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- <sup>vi</sup> Sigrun Hodne: 'Synnøve Øyen & John K. Raustein «I samspill II». Storslått enkelhet' <https://kritikker.wordpress.com/2012/05/22/synnove-oyen-john-k-raustein-i-samspill-ii/> 22 May 2012.
- <sup>vii</sup> See also works such as *Jälki (21013-875) I* (2012) and *The White Mountain (Fairy Tale in the North) / Det hvite fjellet (Eventyret i nord)* 10/89 (2012).
- <sup>viii</sup> Arnt Fredheim, 'Tendenser 2011 i husflid-fellen. En utstilling med potensiale som går i husflid-fellen', published 05 April 2011, 11:03am, *Moss avis* (<http://www.moss-avis.no/kultur/kunstanmeldelser/kultur/tendenser-2011-i-husflid-fellen/s/2-2.2643-1.6151749>).
- <sup>ix</sup> Jenelle Porter (ed.): *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-present*, Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2015, 174.
- <sup>x</sup> Glenn Adamson, 'Soft Power', in: Porter, Jenelle (ed.): *Fiber: Sculpture 1960-present*, 2015, 143.