



## Elemental Embroidered Lines

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The body of work in the exhibition *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?*<sup>1</sup> (What Were You Thinking About, the Past or the Future?) forms a system of spatial, compositional, geometric, and collaborative relationships mediated by basic textiles: cotton fabrics embroidered with cotton yarn. In each series, the artist incorporates work made collaboratively with communities, where the transfer of forms of knowledge and the revitalization of identities unfolds in multiple temporalities and levels of meaning. This text explores the different formal and conceptual elements present in the production of the curtains in this exhibition by Felipe Mujica.

Working both systematically and intuitively, Mujica emphasizes fundamental codes that emerge from drawing, geometry, and a textile practice that, in turn, contains another chain of signifiers. Translating them creates a language that enables the opening of a space for the creation of new forms of knowledge. The earliest form of writing appeared more than five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia and is considered the beginning of human history. The beginning is a sign, a gesture, a visual code.

Abstraction offers us the possibility of glimpsing other realities. We can fathom some basic ideas: for example, in a curtain, four right triangles frame a quadripartite rhombus. There is a declaration of equilibrium in complementarity: an equilibrium formed by equal parts, which nevertheless exists as a whole; a plane of binary relations where the black is formed by another layer of cotton fabric featuring honeycomb stitch, a traditional technique employed by the embroiderers of Huechuraba. These zigzag stripes sometimes, when superimposed, create rhombuses, a minimal unit present in diverse textile traditions, whose intermittent stitches evoke a honeycomb. On some of the surfaces, the artist experiments with stripes of colored embroidery, contrasted against the solid black and then the natural white of the cotton background. These are exercises that, through precise variations, deconstruct the textile plane with simple embroidered lines. They are open relationships—seams structured in rhythms associated with domestic pleating.

While Mujica's previous works examine the interaction between color and light in space, the present series focuses on the line as an element that is at once autonomous, mobile, choreographic, and enveloping. These qualities are those that the

artist also extrapolates to the polygons that form these lines. Moreover, as a sometimes continuous and sometimes discontinuous succession of points, the line is a creator of textures. Using a limited but expressive vocabulary, Mujica composes this series of curtains that also embody the influence of David Alfaro Siqueiros's polyangularity, which Mujica learned about during a residency at *La Tallera* in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Polyangularity, characterized by a perspective from different and simultaneous points of view within the same composition, is a possible metaphor of a social body that imagines itself collectively while embracing difference.

Mujica's art is always bound to space as a site of encounter and circulation where shared and universal languages are connected. The works of *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?* convene and converse with one another—with both the space and the bodies in it. The artist articulates these relationships according to reciprocal geometric principles: "I always base the drawings of the curtains on both a predetermined grid and a work method," he says. The artist transforms the grid into a virtual support that contains and allows for different modular variations in relation to a central axis and to the diverse possibilities of installation provided by each space. Spatial gestures intertwine in a series of patterns derived from empirical methods of observation and composition—a process that Mujica defines throughout the surfaces.

His numerous sketchbooks reveal a repetitive method of exploring possibilities and account for a multiplicity of grids. The logic of the grid, rooted in the work of Paul Klee and his matrix studies, which he taught at the Bauhaus, supports elementary and integrated works as a way of uniting the parts to a whole. Two of Klee's principles are present throughout this series: multiplication and polyphony. Any unit can be multiplied by horizontal or vertical rotation or repetition, through disruption, displacement, or intermittent repetition. According to Mujica, "the use of color and geometric abstraction in each instance is particular and at the same time universal. Every textile has a narrative and a function that is practical, decorative, and ceremonial. Thus, to collaborate with artisans from Indigenous communities is an attempt to reverse a historical imbalance. Although this gesture may be modest, it represents a very human desire to interact one on one, to learn and incorporate while hopefully teaching something, to open ways of

1. This exhibition was on display at the Museo de Artes Visuales in Santiago de Chile from August to November 2022.

seeing, understanding, and conversing. For me, this is what the curtains do: they are spaces of dialogue between two parallel stories that until now never engaged with or even acknowledged one another.”

Even so, converging in the composition is a series of precepts that limit the articulation of the image; the first is symmetry. Stylized after pre-Hispanic visual compositions from the Southern Cone, Mujica creates planes of symmetrical bodies or units to explore the different possibilities of this principle, whether through axial symmetry, rotation, movement, or abatement. In one curtain, a rhombus fragments around its horizontal axis, forming four pairs of differently colored polygons. In another, a magenta rhombus contains a green rhombus, and both are contained in the trace of a blue rhombus that overflows, fragments, and becomes four loose diagonals. There is an implied depth based on geometric principles of perspective.

In one curtain, there are two triangles mirrored by rotation and displacement. In their fragmentation, they form a central black column. The pleating highlights the distinct luminous qualities of the material, creating a profuse, coarse texture that intensifies the surfaces of the embroidery. In another curtain, two acute triangles face each other and form a cross in the center where all their legs meet. Long, identical forms embroidered with an orange honeycomb stripe produce a contrasting light and texture. Outside, on the white background, two orange lines emphasize the hypotenuses, giving them movement.

One plane contains only diagonal lines whose central part is mirrored in its horizontal axis, creating tension between direction and motion. Another contains two of the diagonals within a rhombus. In other curtains, alternating clear and solid triangles face each other, producing rhythms. Various shapes are interrelated in different combinations and subordinated to the overall composition. They complete themselves, establishing at once a series of relationships and an installation body. The vertically suspended curtains rearticulate the space and leave us installed—as bodies, as observers—within the three-dimensional composition of planes and lines in the space.

The work of Mujica is geometrically abstract and temporally autonomous, and can be ancestral or futuristic. The drawings are concise visual codes, which also distill over twenty years of the artist's

research of Latin American magazines and posters from the 1970s, diverse modernist prints, or Japanese graphic design, among other references that share a universal and geometric graphic language.

The references to Russian Constructivism and to Bauhaus are not only formal but are anchored in the democratization of art, the encounter between art and function, the cradle of artifacts, contemplation, and domestic use. The work redefines the curtain, proposing reflections on the domestic, as well as its relationship to architecture, the exhibition space, and the viewer. The curtains are planes—impermanant walls that intervene in the relationship between light and the space and the viewers' circulation through it.

The European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, specifically the Bauhaus, sought to distance themselves from traditional, historicist forms. This interest in abstraction was characterized by the fundamental, irreducible, essential, foundational, and original. In this return to origin, they hoped to discover the lost unity of the arts. The legacy of this method is a commitment to identifying a visual language: a code of abstract forms whose perception is immediate and biological, before it is decoded by the cultured and conditioned intellect.

While in the modern avant-garde this autonomous language was linked to the Second Industrial Revolution, in South America geometric abstraction is rooted in the art of Indigenous communities, present in all dimensions of life and inseparable from its contemplative, utilitarian, or decorative functions. Ancestral Amerindian art was transversal in both the sacred and the mundane. Some of the principles present in Mujica's body of work, such as duality and complementarity, correspond to the visual expressions of the Andean cosmovision. The minimal unity of patterns and symbols is integrated by duality, containing two indissoluble parts, like two strands of thread, like heaven and earth, like day and night. Complementarity is introduced as a ubiquitous formal principle, present in architecture, textiles, music, and funeral practices, among other expressions. The principle of indivisibility is materialized in complex symmetries, giving rise to the optical art of *Diaguita*, *Wari*, or *Mapuche* patterns, to name a few.

An expert in shamanic and visual arts, the Chilean archaeologist Paola González has written that within pre-Hispanic graphics there are “designs that manage a complex symmetry to define the motifs, registering

three or more symmetrical principles operating jointly, and with a reiterated emphasis on mirror reflection.”<sup>2</sup> Based on her observation of *Diaguíta* art, as well as of other styles of ethnographic South American visual art, such as that of the Amazonian *Shipibo-Conibo* community, González highlights another characteristic common to this abstract art: “[the] endless continuation or self-generating power of the designs that endows them with a rhythmic quality.”<sup>3</sup> As in Mujica’s sketchbooks, symmetry, as well as the ambivalence of positive and negative, give way to a pattern that, in turn, bestows a rhythmic quality in its repetition.

The ancestral Andean textile tradition still maintains principles of symmetry in its contemporary manifestations. A thousand years later, the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz-Diez proposes the aesthetic experience of the moment, modified in a continuum of perspectives and luminous situations. The work functions as a support for daily occurrences, because everything happens in the continuous present.

Part of the series exhibited here is embroidered in chain stitch.<sup>4</sup> When we look at it up close and in detail, the continuity of units, a pair that forms the line, becomes evident. Each stitch is a gesture, a small collaborative act for the joint work of a larger textile. The other part adopts the honeycomb stitch, the trademark technique of the *Conchalí* embroiderers. The production of this series in an embroidery workshop in a northern neighborhood of Santiago was organized by Mujica together with Myriam Luz Díaz, an embroiderer from Huechuraba—a neighborhood offshoot of the *Conchalí* embroiderers—whose family has been embroidering and making traditional dresses since 1980.

This textile practice was based on profuse pleating and delicate stretching that created sculptural patterns on the upper part of the garments. With the 1973 coup d’état, the economic system in Chile was abruptly deformed. The dictatorship not only brought about oppression but also the loss of jobs, the impoverishment of many families, and the disappearance of numerous social and political organizations. In this context, women began to gather locally in groups to create different types of textiles, and these included the dresses of the *Conchalí* embroiderers. Initially, the main objective was to generate economic income from the sale of

embroidered honeycomb dresses. The characteristics of the material and the authors’ context of production of this series of works allow them to return to pleating, which generates textures and emphasizes their three-dimensional quality. Mujica has been collaborating with Díaz since 2006, and part of the work of this series was realized at her home with the help of her sisters Ximena and Ana María.

The collaborative nature of this body of work grants continuity and artistic identity to a traditional craft. Similarly, Mujica has worked in Florida (US) with Khadijah Cypress, a Miccosukee textile weaver, to create motifs and compositions through patchwork, and in Mexico with Mireya Salazar and the Hueyapan weavers of the SOAME collective. On this occasion, emphasis was placed on the duality of the natural color of the fibers—black and white—which were traditionally woven on backstrap looms to juxtapose them with the pedal loom weaving of Beto Ruiz and Oaxaca’s *Tallercho8*.

For Mujica, “working collectively is also related to personal history; community is something that one values very highly when living outside of Chile, far from one’s extended family. Abroad, the community becomes the family that helps build a life—for example, that of my son Salvador.” Thus, his production processes investigate aesthetic and semiotic concerns through different approaches, making textile practice an act that connects the popular with references to artisanship, while establishing a dialogue with the specific historical circumstances of its production. In this sense, Mujica’s curtains blur the boundaries between utilitarian and aesthetic function, rather acting as domestic artifacts that mediate between public and private space through the intensity of light and color.

2. Paola González Carvajal, *Arte y cultura diaguíta chilena: simetría, simbolismo e identidad* (Santiago de Chile: Ucajali Editores, 2013), 34.

3. *Ibid.*

4. The chain stitch is a universal embroidery stitch formed when the line is knotted into itself, making a loop below the needlepoint.