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Birgitta Nordström is the main author of this chapter and she is writing from a firstperson perspective and from within her artistic process. Camilla Groth has co-authored the chapter by contextualizing and theorizing the processes and their meanings.

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The Role of the Weaver in the Encounter with Life and Death

By Birgitta Nordström and Camilla Groth

I weave ritual textiles for funerals, loss, and sorrow. Weaving in relation to death is a topic in myths, literature, and storytelling, where the weft, woven row by row, resonates with human life lived day by day. So does the ending, cutting the weave off the loom. The craft of weaving thus acts like a symbolic reference and a metaphor for life and time passing. For me, weaving is a way to produce works of art, but it is also a process of reflecting and as such it is a necessary part of my creative process. My weaving is a research practice in which questions of how we deal with death in today's society are concretely performed and tried out in practice where people encounter my textile art.

When somebody asks me if I'm not finished with this "death topic" soon, my response is: death is not a project, it can never be. Awareness of death is the ultimate level of being very alive. I guess it is ultimately about empathy. My heart and

my mind open up when meeting a person in sorrow. Or when I think of a stillborn child. So, then, what role does weaving have in this process? The answer is that it's about the activation that weaving or any crafting allows while reflecting, while being occupied with something meaningful. Having something at hand and "doing" something can be a solution to helplessness, and a way to reach out to others. I guess we all feel, time to time, that words just aren't enough. We try to find them, express them, but they are only an attempt. The weaving, in contrast, is very material, is a matter that can be measured in time, and it can sometimes be a matter of honour. I weave for something that is larger than myself, for someone—even if that person sometimes doesn't weigh more than 600 grams.

To make up a bed, to swathe, and to enshroud are actions that are deeply associated with being human. A blanket becomes a first dwelling for the



Figure 1: Relatives to Britt-Marie Ivarsson are saying farewell by draping a funeral pall over the coffin right before the official act begins. Photograph by Birgitta Nordström.

newly born baby in its first meeting with material life. In acts of play, children might build a fort or a hideout by draping a blanket over a table and crawling into the shielded space inside. Woollen blankets can also allow survival in a crisis situation far from a protective home. In the encounter with death, textiles take on a different, often ritual meaning (see Figure 1). Through my creative practice, I investigate the ritual importance of these textiles and the different textile actions in relation to death.

The two different kinds of ritual textiles I weave are funeral palls and infant wrapping cloths. A funeral pall, shortly described, is a large blanket to

be draped over the coffin in the burial ceremony. Infant wrapping cloths are small blankets, intended for children who have died during birth or in late-term miscarriages or abortions. The act of weaving these textiles has opened doors for me into spaces and contexts that I wouldn't necessarily have experienced otherwise. It has also opened up aspects of how material matters in life, and how making and using a material becomes a way for reflecting on these issues on a societal level.

What I would like to share in this chapter are reflections about the role these textiles play and how craft offers a way to help us comprehend the

incomprehensible. Through reflecting on two different projects—first an artistic commission to weave funeral palls for a hospital viewing room and secondly an artistic research project involving weaving infant wrapping cloths for hospital birth wards—I share my thoughts on the making of the textiles. I also reflect on the different societal values and situations that are intervened through these two processes.

The two projects deal with how cloth is used for wrapping a person who has died, and they relate to existential questions about loss and grieving. Both processes begin with weaving, but they differ in one essential regard: funeral palls are commissioned works of art and the weaving here is part of the art production, while in the study for infant shrouds, the point of the handweaving, aside from creating new blankets, is also to study how they are conceived and received by the users—the nurses and parents. Both processes include reflective practice and artistic research.

I think of these projects as examples of how craft can be a source and mediator of empathy in society. When it comes to the research around infant wrapping cloths, the objective is to find out whether this special textile could improve maternity care in situations of loss. In the process of weaving for this purpose, I need to imagine the parents' trauma and find ways to improve their situation by small means. Similarly, in the weaving of the funeral pall, I need to foresee the experiences of the future viewers of the scenario in which they say their last goodbyes to their loved ones and make this moment as dignified as I possibly can.

In the studio, I work with the design, the materials, and the functional aspects of the cloth, analysing the softness and testing the shrinking percentage of the weft. I conduct all working moments a long time before these blankets are being

draped over a deceased person or swaddled around a stillborn child. The dead body at that point is very abstract, but the reality of the thread and the loom is the opposite—very concrete. Sometimes it feels like working between two poles.

NARRATIVES AS RESEARCH DATA

Narrative reflections give insight into the creative practitioner's motivations and reasons for decision making. The creative process is seldom entirely staked out before manufacturing the artefact, but evolves along the process of handling materials while simultaneously reflecting on issues related to the topic under study (Candy and Edmonds 2018). In this process, thinking is making and making is thinking. The nature and properties of the materials play a vital part in the process, and the creative practitioner learns to sensorily evaluate these and to make choices on how to best use them.

Emotions and feelings related to the topic at hand, as well as rational and functional design requirements, steer the intuitive choice of suitable materials and techniques that best facilitate the desired results. The artefact is thus developed through repetitive trials and errors, through several iterative processes of searching for the right atmosphere or tactile quality until the final result is deemed satisfying. The many test pieces and trials, sketches and notes make up for the visible evidence of this creative process, but the reflective writing and diary notes reveal the reasons for the decision-making processes behind the material outcome (Mäkelä and Nimkulrat 2018). These written notes and narrative stories also give the backdrop to the reasons and motivations for continuing the search for the best possible way of handling the topic and meeting the challenge of turning an idea into an experience that can be conveyed to another person.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS THROUGH WORK STORIES

To better describe the context and situation of the making process and their experienced relevance, I use an autoethnographic and narrative form of writing in this chapter, a method often used in the field of artistic research (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). Magnus Bärtås developed the method of a *work story* in his doctoral study in the field of arts. According to Bärtås (2013, 19), a “work story” can be “a short, dry description of a process, essentially a material specification for painting, or it can be a complex story in literary/essay form,” all depending on what kind of art is being conducted and the role of the text in connection to the art.

A work story resembles a thick description that evolves from the artefact and the process of its conception. I write about the funeral palls I made for Södersjukhuset hospital and the infant wrapping cloth project as narrative work stories; including the situation I was in while making the artefacts, the people I encountered, the material conditions and process, as well as the reflections I made along the way. In contrast to a case description with a reflection *afterwards*, the work story *includes* the reflection within the narrative. This suits the artistic research mode in which the reflection happens during the process of making and in the flow of the whole situation.

THE FIRST PROJECT: FUNERAL PALLS

In this first work story, the process of starting up and conducting the creative process of weaving funeral palls is revisited. As I have many years of experience of similar artistic textile commissions for churches, it was not the first time I had been contacted in relation to the topic of funeral palls. However, the

story is not limited to the making process but also shows how the experience of meeting death and the possibility of taking leave of loved ones is mediated by many circumstances that can be altered by proper attention to details and materials.

Work Story 1

Sometimes a sentence can fill your consciousness, serving as a recurring reminder or encouragement. Throughout the long process of weaving funeral palls for Södersjukhuset hospital, one thought kept repeating itself in my mind like a mantra: 2248 threads and someone is going to die.

2248 threads to warp, prepare for slewing, wind the warp onto the loom's back beam, thread the heddles, sley the reed, tie the warp to the front beam, and tie up the treadles. There is an implacability about the craft of weaving: one step at a time and each one in the right order, returning to each thread in the process, again and again. Only when everything is ready for the actual weaving can the individual threads be transformed into a warp that is ready in the loom.

The funeral palls are meant to be used for many viewings and these deceased people and their loved ones were allowed to imaginatively occupy my studio and my mind, as unknown quantities, through that repeated mantra. There were many metres of fabric to be woven and fourteen different treadles to tramp for the draft, regardless; craft practice can from time to time be very monotonous. I needed that reminder of the people involved to make the task of weaving real and meaningful. Perhaps it was that—the mental repetition of an exact number of threads—which gave me something concrete to hold on to.

This art commission process first began when the artist Johan Ledung called me on the phone to ask whether I was interested in making a proposal

for two funeral palls for viewing rooms that were planned for the reconstruction of the Södersjukhuset hospital. Johan had been selected to submit a sketch proposal for the art and design of the viewing rooms. He had read an article about my artistic research on infant wrapping cloths (Blomberg 2015) and contacted me to ask whether I was interested in collaborating with him. Yes, I was very interested. The function of these funeral palls would be to cover a deceased person in preparation for a viewing. The purpose of the funeral palls I had woven previously had been to drape the textile over coffins during funeral rituals, but never directly over a body as this new project would entail.

The first funeral palls I ever made, almost thirty years ago, were not intended to be used in actual funerals. Instead, I made them as a way of using art to explore and interpret the process of saying goodbye in the event of a death. The coffins I used for display were made of cardboard—a kind of prototype that was never meant to be used either. Now, so many years later, the objective is the opposite: it is in the act itself that the essential happens. The draping of a coffin with a funeral pall by a loved one is symbolically similar to making up a bed—an ordinary everyday gesture we are all familiar with. While there is nothing ordinary about a funeral, the act of draping the pall and symbolically preparing a bed for the departed can help us to come close to and to be present in the situation. It gives us something to act on in a helpless situation.

One day Johan Ledung called again to say that we had been awarded the commission. So, it was finally time for a visit to his studio and to see some of his paintings and sculptures for the hospital: I stood looking down over a wooden model of the rooms at a scale of 1:25. Specifications, sketches, and ideas were noted in pencil directly on the walls and floor of the model. Two viewing rooms, two adjacent waiting rooms, and an entrance. Two bathrooms, one cloakroom. Daylight openings. The first thing I noticed was some hovering dots that were painted

on the transparent walls of glass that link together the waiting room and the viewing room. Wood shimmering in the model. Did he paint the whole thing with tempera? I don't think I've ever seen a finer model. Tiny suggestions of framed paintings hung on the walls, perhaps of trees with branches, or an imaginary landscape. The walls and floor of the model were fitted together with great precision, while the sketchy pencil notations were scrawled directly on the model. There is always a tension between the intimated and the exact. In both viewing rooms there were blocks that, in this context, represented mortuary cots. I've seen gurneys like this before, with big wheels and a metal stretcher that can be slid into a refrigerated storage compartment in the morgue.

We agree that I will make use of lighter tones that correspond to the oak veneer on the walls. "But avoid the colour of a corpse," the staff advises. I ask what that looks like but never get a consistent answer. The dead people I have seen have all had different hues of colour and colourlessness. So, I start sketching out a dark, contrasting colour for the inside/underside of the palls. The pall will be turned down to show the face of the departed, and if I weave brighter tones for the top side then the underside can be a contrasting colour next to the face. I have brought with me a colour swatch Johan gave me from one of the intended painted dots for the glass walls. It is painted with an English red pigment, perhaps mixed with a sienna tone (Figure 2). In the rooms, this red colour together with other intense hues will provide accents to an otherwise subdued colour scheme.

This is how Johan Ledung describes his visions for these spaces: "The materials used should as far as possible show their own authentic character and accommodate traces of life. The different parts speak different languages in order to create a broad, inclusive feeling. The style is organically alive, growing—perhaps even unfinished" (see also the Södersjukhuset art fact sheet 2017).

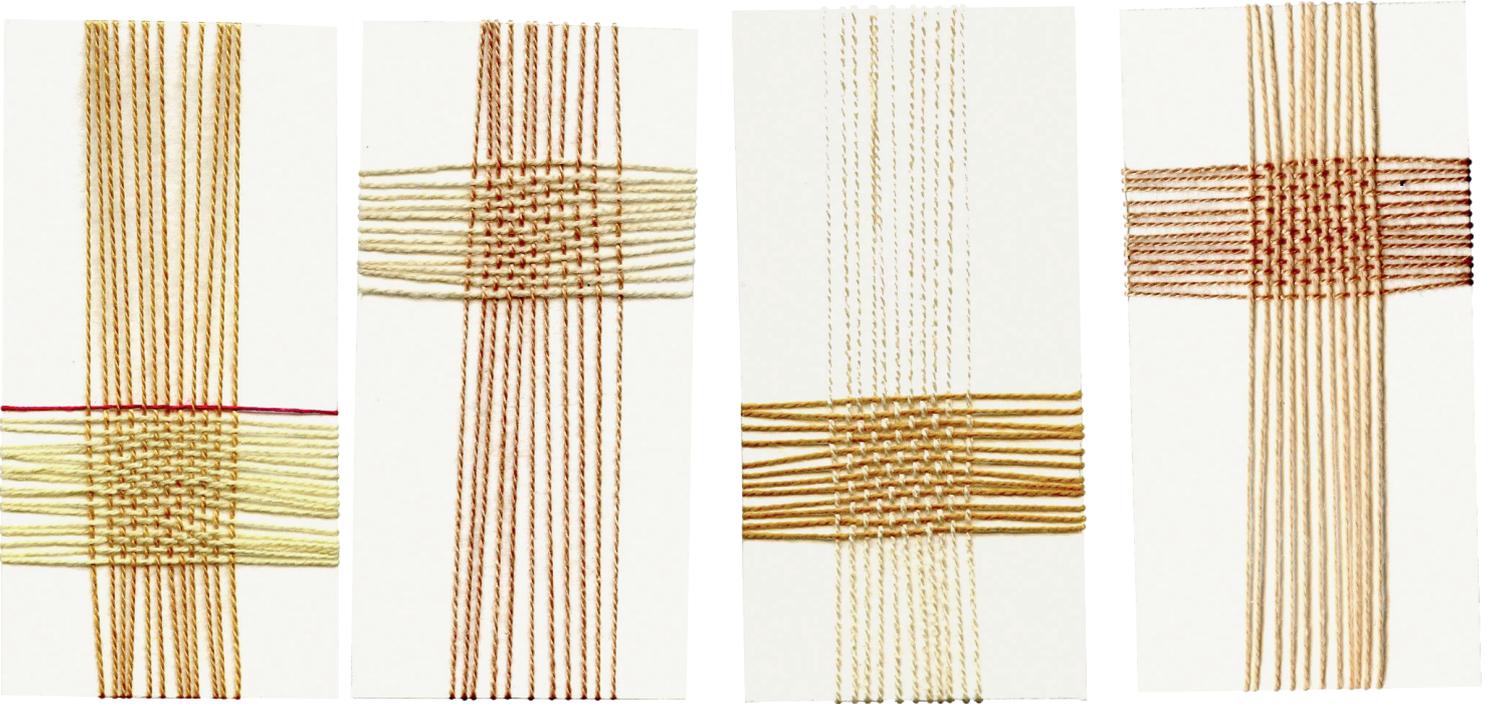


Figure 2: Test pieces for the funeral pall.
Photographs by Birgitta Nordström.

The great challenge in terms of craftsmanship in the work was how I would be able to weave the palls with the texture and lightness of a soft blanket that follows the contours of the body and yet that can tolerate a lot of handling and hot laundering at sixty degrees. The practical handling of these very large cloths, which are to cover mortuary cots, bodies, and possibly also coffins, constitutes an essential problem for the design. I didn't want the pall to seem heavy on the body, either visually for those attending the viewing or for those who prepare the body for the viewing. For earlier funeral palls I have used a double weave technique with one layer of wool and cotton/linen in the other. When the weaving is finished, and after I have cut it down from the loom, it is possible to shrink the wool in the underlying layer by felting it in a washing machine. Working in this way creates a visual movement in the weave that is visible to the eye and a texture that is pliant to the hand. And the resulting pall is also lightweight (Figure 3).

I wanted to use a double weave technique this time too, but using wool would be impossible because of the laundering requirements. Wool would continue to felt and shrink the cloth further every time it was washed. Instead I tried polyester in the top layer and cotton in the bottom layer. By stretching the cotton warp much tighter than the polyester warp, it would shrink much more than the polyester once it was cut down from the loom and laundered. That would allow me to achieve the desired texture.

I use widely spaced binding points to connect the top and bottom warps of the double weave, forming air pockets between the two layers. At these binding points the warp yarns change places—the weft for the top warp also binds a number of warp yarns from the bottom layer, and it can look like a little tacking stitch. Sometimes when I think about the palls and what they do in these spaces and in the circumstance in which they are used, it's also about a kind of binding—a point of contact between the living and the dead. A binding together, tying



Figures 3-5: The process of making and a close up detail of the funeral pall. Photographs by Birgitta Nordström.



Figure 6: The final visualisation in one of the viewing rooms at Södersjukhuset. Photographs by Birgitta Nordström.



Figures 7-9: The entrance to the viewing rooms during construction of the hospital. Photographs by Birgitta Nordström.

down, but also a release of living bonds. A new relationship goes into effect when death comes. It is never so that everything just ends; death is also the beginning of something else—an afterward. The pall is there in the gap between the two.

Four months after the opening of Södersjukhuset hospital's new viewing rooms, I paid it a visit as part of my general site-specific research on the topic. When I have found my way down to the new temporary entrance, I am confronted with a scene of Orwellian dimensions. The hospital is still a construction site, and instead of entering through a garden as the plans intend, a kind of dystopian antechamber has been erected for visitors—I'm directed to go through a grey door and into a shipping container that has been plopped down next to the high façade. A plastic-wrapped sign with the words "rum för avsked" ("viewing room") is mounted to the temporary wall (Figure 4). The details of this sequence are going to be etched into the memory of every person who is shunted into and out of this insensitive passage to get to the viewing room and make their farewells. And I wonder, how many more months is it going to be like this? "It is

abysmal," says the autopsy technician Carina Kroon as she opens the grey door and guides me through.

We talk about bedding, about how she prepares the body for viewing. Carina Kroon says:

"I try to prepare the body as though it were me that was coming to say goodbye. First, I turn down the cover and then fold it back so the border is visible. But there are times when you can't allow the face to be visible. In that case we use a face cloth and instead maybe we can show a hand. That can be enough. The important thing is the recognition."

The funeral pall, which also hides the stainless steel of the stretcher, covers the body in the sense of wrapping it up, but at the same time it uncovers it to display the departed. "It must be dignified and lovely," says Kroon, and through her experiences I understand more about the significance of the bedding. "It shouldn't be like when I said goodbye to a relative at another hospital," she continues. "There they used the county council's orange hospital blanket, which covered the body but not the stainless-steel stretcher and the gurney beneath it. That's what it was like here too when I started



Figures 10-12: One of the funeral palls in place. Warp and a close up detail of the other funeral pall. Photographs 10 and 12 by Per Mannberg, and 11 by Birgitta Nordström.

working here five years ago. I got a little money to have a curtain firm sew up a blue velvet pall. But now we have yours!”

I walk around in the room where Johan’s paintings now hang on the walls. For me they suggest landscapes from some other place. Or do they express a mental state? I sit down on a chair to test it; the materials are wood and leather and it is comfortable to sit on. But it’s missing signs of people. It smells new, it’s cold, there’s no patina yet.

When I visit the meditation room of the hospital church later that day, I observe a little white rocking chair, and it makes me wonder if perhaps there ought to be a children’s corner in the new viewing rooms too? Because of course there will be children saying goodbye too, won’t there? And why will visitors not be allowed to light candles? I know it’s because of safety regulations in new buildings. But candle lighting is perhaps the simplest ritual act we’re able to do in some instances. It holds a lot of meaning.

The last place to visit on this day is a hospital meditation room, which lies adjacent to the Sachs Children’s and Youth Hospital. Here, everything is

well used—candlewax has spotted the floor over many years and the sofa is a bit broken. The room is dimly lit and has no daylight openings. In one way, we might say that pain, sickness, grief, and the need for consolation inhabit the walls of this room. There is also a wicker cradle for use when an infant has died. I stand before it and think about how it is thanks to my research on infant wrapping cloths that I’ve been commissioned to weave funeral palls for this hospital, and that it is the funeral palls I wove even earlier that paved the way for my research. There has been a cross-fertilisation throughout the process.

Provisional spaces, such as a blanket that becomes a fort, a wicker cradle, a coffin, a stainless-steel stretcher, a refrigeration room, an architectural model, a shipping container, a viewing room, a room for saying goodbye, and a hospital chapel—all these form a backdrop for my research process. I make associations, make visits, and think. The rooms and the objects become a meaning-laden chain for both art and research. When I think of the funeral pall we use to cover the coffin, or when we drape the funeral pall over the dead in the viewing room, I

realise that these are actions to create a protective, provisional space. Death needs a space of its own.

And sometimes, I think, death needs a blanket of its own too. In fact, I come close to the essence of my research and my art practice writing this sentence. Not an ordinary sheet to be used, covering the deceased body; instead a textile, handwoven especially for the viewing ritual and the design of the room. Woven with its defined woven edges, weft with variation and traces of the hand, this pall is helping to dignify the room and the ritual. Craft, through its time-consuming and physical practice, makes time visible in this space. It might be pretentious to argue that this is what craft does in this context, but I can't find any better words. But when it comes to the maker, what does this work do? Johan Ledung and I often spoke about it. And we agreed upon one thing—it makes you humble.

THE SECOND PROJECT: INFANT WRAPPING CLOTHS

In the next section, the process of developing artistic research in the hospital environment and in relation to weaving these blankets is presented. The research process involves several stages: first some exploratory weaving to find a tactile expression in cloth by experimenting with weaving techniques and materials. This study led to eighteen handwoven blankets (Nordström and Davidsson 2011) that were shown in exhibitions and seminars. An important precondition was that it should be possible for people to touch and feel the blankets. During this period, important contacts were established with parents who had lost newborn children, and also with healthcare providers and the hospital church clergy. When you're holding an infant wrapping cloth in your hands, there's a lot you can talk about.

In a later study for my licentiate degree, entitled “In a Room of Rites—Cloth Meeting Human,” the work deepened through a new exploratory weaving process, but this time it was aimed at industrial production (Nordström 2016) in order to produce more shrouds for several hospitals that took these in use in their birth wards.

Later, a research team was formed around the topic, with the primary objective of studying the need for infant wrapping cloth for children and foetuses that have died in pregnancy or at birth. The secondary objective was to study the design of the shroud in terms of size and tactility. This was done by trying out handwoven prototypes made by the weaving research group. During the course of the study, a total of five maternity wards and one gynaecological ward participated.

The blankets were distributed to the wards that participated in the study, and it was the midwives who determined when it was appropriate to offer the parents a blanket. The study interacted with the healthcare providers, never directly with the parents, and we never had access to any patient records. For every event in which one or more blankets were used, the staff filled out a questionnaire. The questions dealt with when and how the blankets were used, and whether they helped the staff if there was a need. These were followed by questions about the design of the blankets.

The study on infant wrapping cloths is systematically organised, with a questionnaire, delimitations, and identification of effect variables that lead to clearly observable research data that can be presented in the form of diagrams and tables. It is a long way from the language and knowledge field, methods, or expressions of art. But the clinical study is being conducted in dialogue with an artistic



Figure 13: Examples of the first handwoven wrapping cloths in 2010. Photograph by Peder Hildor.

weaving process in which artistic research questions are being asked and reflected upon. The narrative work story presented next shows some of the processes, emotions, and reflections encountered and lived through in the course of the handweaving.

Work Story 2

The idea of weaving infant wrapping cloths was born after an Arts Health conference in Australia. I was invited to lecture on funeral palls. When a doctor working in neonatal care heard me talk and touched the pall I had brought with me, she expressed a spontaneous desire for a much smaller blanket to use in meetings with parents who go through the trauma of losing a child. As she put it, “words just aren’t enough.” Her wish stayed with me, and when, years later, I had the opportunity to do an artistic development project, this memory became my point of departure.

In the beginning I often felt a great insecurity that I, with my artistic curiosity, would insensitively step into a trauma situation for parents that have experienced losing a child. The solution for me was to frequently open up the process by exhibiting the first weaves in public exhibitions and through this process get feedback from the audience. So, before the blankets finally reached the hospitals, they were being activated and discussed in these exhibition rooms. The response was immediate and very encouraging. These exhibitions contributed to my field studies into loss, memory, and sorrow. More importantly, the response released my insecurity and encouraged me to continue this line of research. I realised that I had come across something really important that could be enlightened and developed by a craft research process. By doing this, I could also bring about and point to the topic on a societal level through the public exhibitions.

Weaving the funeral palls is challenging because of the large size and the special demands of the textile, to be

draped, folded, and unfolded over and over again. The challenge with the infant shroud is also about size—not of the textile, but of the very small body.

The unknown. I weave for a stillborn child or a very small foetus, miscarriage or aborted. I think of the wrapping, the holding, the viewing. I think of the delicacy. I think of all parents that have to greet and part with their child at the very same moment. The first wish from the doctor in Australia has carried me a long way. I keep on answering through weaving.

Telling is about giving and receiving. It is instant. It happens in real time. I told a woman I know about the weaving, the textile, the material itself, the human need to wrap a newborn almost instinctively, otherwise the child might die. The wrapping of the deceased is the same activity, but with a different purpose, I said. And she, in return, told me about an experience she had kept quiet about for many years. She had a miscarriage in an early stage of pregnancy. She saw the very small body in the lavatory and just couldn’t simply flush it away, realising this would be an awful memory. So, she collected the tiny body and laid it upon a bed of unspun cotton that she had made and placed in a large box for matches. She closed the lid and didn’t know what to do next. She went to the hospital and left the box there. “Textile and death are important matters,” she said.

*Wool, cotton, linen, silk.
Blue, red, grey. Or white. Yes, white.*

I can’t think of death in any other colour. I know it is a personal aesthetic preference, but I trust it. Almost white, a neutral blanket visually, but with a tactile texture. An “invisible” textile, supporting the child, supporting the situation. The child is to be remembered, not the blanket.

Later in my research, entitled “In a Room of Rites—Cloth Meeting Human,” this research carried on through a new weaving process (Nordström 2016).



Figure 14: Industrially woven fabric sewn into wrapping cloths. Photograph by Carl Ander.

I wanted the infant shrouds to be tested in hospitals and the exclusivity of handweaving was not a viable road at this time; what was needed now was an industrially made textile material that would make it possible to manufacture a larger number of blankets and which would also be a simple way to make a variety of sizes.

The very first handwoven blankets were made with an intention to weave the most beautiful and tactile blankets I was able to, but the perspective now needed to be broader. Midwives have since guided me on the specific needs that the blanket must satisfy: not too soft, the textile must provide some of the resilience the dead body has lost. They have told me of the very, very fragile skin. That the holding capacity in the textile itself was important, together with the ability to absorb moisture. Wool would

maybe damage the skin of the child even more. The solution was to add a little sheet of the finest cotton satin nearest to the child.

I chose unbleached cotton and wool. Cotton is soft, wool more rigid, and both materials have a good ability to absorb moisture. And wool is warm to the touch—it doesn't warm a dead body, of course, but for the parent holding a cold child in his or her lap, the perception of warmth means a great deal. One memory from the very beginning was when a woman said: "I lost my son seventeen years ago, and I still wonder whether he is freezing, so weave and weave them warm."

After the handweaving and the development of a viable prototype was finished, the industrial manufacturing of the design was done at Ludvig

Svensson's factory in Kinna, Sweden. They wove 300 metres of textile in just over twenty-four hours. The role of the weaver in this situation was turned into watching metre after metre of textiles being woven, with a feeling of wonder, fear, and a sense of being out of control. No hands to touch the material, no fine adjustments allowed. Afterwards it felt like the fabric rolls invaded my studio and I started to cut, unravel the edges, sew, wash and shrink to get the texture. 300 metres was far too much material for the study, but as these blankets were to be shown at exhibitions too, I needed numbers to represent the loss of many children.

Slowly but surely the format of the study took shape and everything was documented in a study protocol. The primary objective was to study, in a hospital setting, the need for infant wrapping cloths for children and foetuses that die in pregnancy or at birth. The secondary objective was to study the design of the blankets in terms of size and tactility. A dialogue was established with the regional office of ethical standards, which provided an advisory statement. This period felt like learning a new language, far away from my comfort zone in the studio. Parallel with all preparations, one difficult and completely essential part remained before the study could begin. I only had agreement with one hospital and I wanted the study to be conducted in at least three different wards. It was hard to get a positive response. Artistic research? Weaving? Blankets? When I managed to get beyond the first contact and was invited to come and talk, and to show the blankets, the blankets themselves solved the situation.

Blankets for stillbirths was my initial focus but during preparations for the study I received requests from midwives for even smaller blankets for late-term miscarriages and abortions—no larger than 45 x 45 cm. I realised that the fabric I had produced for the blankets was going to be too rough for a very small body. What should I do? I recalled the power of the first study, of weaving my way, blanket after blanket, into a deeper understanding. The

time invested in handweaving had created space for lots of ideas and existential questions. What if I invited colleagues and students to form a weaving research group (see also Hemmings 2018, 67)?

Until then, I had been working on my own, but for the next step, to prepare for the clinical study, I needed various kind of expertise. A research team was formed with representatives of aesthetic, methodological, clinical, and artistic perspectives. Throughout the study period, we have woven, hemmed, and felted more than 70 blankets, most of which we've donated to hospitals. We were eight members when we started, but the group has since added two more weavers.

We have woven in a double weave technique with merino wool in the warp of the bottom layer and mercerized cotton in the top layer. The warp consists of 576 threads in each layer threaded on 16 shafts. We used one loom with digital thread control that makes it possible to change the draft and points of binding from one blanket to another. Each weaver has chosen their own weft and draft themselves. The loom became our meeting place and our textile production was noted in a journal, documenting each new blanket.

We have striven to achieve a fragile feeling for these blankets, barely just holding together. The balancing between softness and firmness that was necessary with the larger blankets is not important with wrapping shrouds for foetuses. Instead they need to be designed for shrouding a very delicate body and for parents to be able to receive, to look, and to say goodbye. In cases when there is physical deformity of the foetus, the blanket serves as a protective sheath. Sometimes it was hard to weave these blankets, or rather, afterwards, in all the finishing handlings before the blanket was ready to fold with the little sheet inside; all these different steps developed the thought of the very absent body. I had to stay with the thought of the child and the loss. The slow process of doing crafts helps to stay focused.



Figures 15: Gunnel Sthen, member of the weaving research group in the fibre workshop at HDK-Valand. Photograph by Peder Hildor.

THE MEANING OF CRAFT

In my work as an artist, I see craft as an artistic method. Craft is a means for making art and for conveying experiences that travel further than the materials that mediate them. By choosing to write about both an artistic commission and a delimited research study, I have wanted to demonstrate how interwoven weaving and research are. It's not just because the two activities are united by a common theme; this interweaving applies to practitioners from any field who conduct research on and through their own practice. The process of thinking and making unite in the act of thinking through making.

Changing Views of Dealing with Death

The study on infant wrapping cloths is being conducted during a time that reveals a changing view of death in relation to newborns, as seen from both clinical and existential perspectives. While there has been a culture of silence around the death of children, today we emphasise the importance of bonding with the dead child (Bendt 2017). After the study was concluded, I interviewed some of the midwives and nursing aides who participated in the study, and from one of these interviews I remember one sentence in particular: “I want to do the best I can for these parents—the worst has happened, you know” (Nordström 2019, 59–61).



Parents are encouraged to *see* the child, to be close, to hold the child, and to say goodbye. Many of those who had lost a child previously but that I met during the course of the study describe a different time when the approach was the opposite: the child was taken away, and the attitude and message were intentionally conveyed to the parents that it was not appropriate to look at the dead child—that it was better to look ahead and move on instead.

In her book *När möte blir avsked (When Meeting Is Parting)*, the professor and midwife Ingela Rådestad (1988) gives an account of her own experience of giving birth to a stillborn baby in 1981, and of how poorly she was treated then. One example of her contributions to research in the field is the Cubitus Baby (www.stillbirth.se), a cooling cot for stillborn babies. There is now a Cubitus Baby in every maternity ward in Sweden, and our blankets are tested in/together with this device in those wards where the study was conducted.

Similarly, the parting of the elderly is in a process of change. As more and more people in Sweden choose to be cremated directly rather than having a funeral ritual with the coffin before the cremation, these rooms are only going to become more significant in the grieving process. Will a new ritual be created for loved ones in the viewing room because the viewing won't be followed by a burial ceremony? Holding a ceremony with the urn following cremation is becoming more common. Though it was once very rare in Sweden, urn ceremonies are now held in over 6% of deaths according to statistics from the National Funeral Directors Association (Hagberg and Lindberg 2018).

Figures 16: (Opposite page) SaraMy Bernetoft, member of the weaving research group in the fibre workshop at HDK-Valand. Photograph by Peder Hildor

Crafted Materials Can Mediate Dignity and Play a Large Role in Comforting

From the study on the infant shrouds there are both quantitative and qualitative research data to analyse from fifty-six occasions when infant shrouds were used. For each question on the questionnaire, the healthcare providers have been given space to add their own comments. If I were to mention one thing from all the material we have gathered, it would be a word that emerges when midwives and assistant nurses write these personal comments: the blankets make it more *dignified*.

The word *dignity* was also present in my research for the funeral palls: “*It must be dignified and lovely*” said the autopsy technician, and yes there is no other way, but what is it that makes the situation dignified? The viewing rooms and the objects in them can, for some people, become enduring bodily memories. I recently spoke with a friend who had lost her son in a car crash. We spoke about the room where she went to take leave of her son, and realised how precise some of her visual memories of that event were. She recalls that the steel piping of the chair she had to sit in was cold and chafed her skin, and that there was no daylight in the room, and there was nothing to rest her head on.... Those kinds of memories can remain permanently clear, while it's more difficult to remember the most painful: the dead body. And this is the delicate situation that provides the context for the art in these rooms. The negative experiences told by the people I met show how material qualities such as cold stainless-steel chairs without headrests or provisional cheap materials, insensitive colours such as the orange of the county council's hospital blanket, and flimsy last-minute solutions such as the entry to the viewing room can make the situation awkward and disrespectful. Craftmanship and proper attention



Figure 17: Terese Molin is hanging handwoven blankets in the smallest size drying in the air, after the felting/washing process. Photograph by Birgitta Nordström.

to materials and sensitivity to the many unconscious but emotionally triggered physical experiences such as the warmth of a material that the space affords have the potential to make all the difference.

Meaningfulness in the Hardship of Making

The artistic process of weaving blankets, each one with its own feeling, is more meaningful than just weaving many new blankets for a study. It takes about three and a half hours to handweave a little infant wrapping cloth—time for enough reflection

that gives you the force you need to drive the work onward. The weaving is not generally a therapeutic process for me, but our weaving research group includes two weavers who have lost children at birth. That has helped the rest of us to never lose sight of the objective. The study has been anchored by their experiences.

The study at the birth ward was monitored through recurring visits to the hospitals. I passed out blankets of different sizes with accompanying sheets and gathered up the questionnaires. There

were many small craft tasks to do in preparation for these visits. Cutting and sewing new blankets from the industrially woven fabric, felting them, and if any handwoven blankets were ready, doing the same with them. Dry, press, fold, sew a little sheet of cotton satin—everyday textile actions that in this context took on a momentous gravity.

The smallest blankets, each one quite distinct from the others, have been a source of conversation and sometimes wonderment when I visited the maternity wards included in the study. One midwife says, “What blankets do you have with you today? I shouldn’t be happy to see you—of course I know why you come here, because the blanket supply needs to be replenished—but I am anyway.”

The knowledge of it all being meaningful made the hard and slow, sometimes tedious work bearable. This was also the case in the weaving of the funeral palls, as I was reciting the numbers of threads as a mantra to keep going. A man that once wanted to use one of my funeral palls for his wife’s funeral expressed that it was comforting to know that I was in the studio, weaving that pall for his wife. And I didn’t tell him about all the monotonous hours and my aching shoulders. These different perspectives are inevitable parts of the same story.

Material Choices Mediate Empathy

While the textiles woven in these examples are not going to be felt by the wearer, they mediate the care, emotions, and feelings of the mourners. The textiles have both a pragmatic, functional role to play as they shield or show aspects of the situation. The wrapping cloth protect the fragile skin of the child, and the pall function as a bedding for the deceased person at the moment of last goodbyes. The textile qualities also work in the background, on an embodied level, as the warmth of the wool

that mediates the experience of life or the action of wrapping as an action of protecting. These tactile qualities might not be consciously understood but rather unconsciously felt.

The weaver mediates the situation of farewell for the participants, well before the event occurs, by orchestrating the fundamental prerequisites for the event via material choices and conscious decisions. This is exemplified with the statement: *I didn’t want the pall to seem heavy on the body, either visually for those attending the viewing or for those who prepare the body for the viewing.* To be able to empathise with the users of the textiles in such depth requires time spent reflecting on these issues deeply and with a sensitivity for details and a true feeling for the situation at hand. Craft is not a speedy process; instead, craft practice allows for deep and prolonged reflection and sensitivity to materials and their properties that make the difference in quality and purpose. In this way, craftsmanship has the potential to mediate empathy through materials and reflection.

It is very hard to imagine the pain that parents experience, or to understand the difficulty of the situation in which the medical staff work. The blankets were given to the parents and followed the child, either for a short period during care taking or as a shrouding blanket for cremation. Every single blanket is destined only for one loss, no reuse. Some parents kept the shrouds as a memory.

One midwife writes in our questionnaire about a father who lovingly swaddles his child in preparation for its transfer to the morgue. When I read about that, I wonder if he ever even saw the blanket. I expect that he only had eyes for his child, and that’s how it should be. The infant wrapping cloth is never the focus of attention, but only makes possible a ritual action that becomes part of the

construction of memories surrounding the deceased child. It is a memorial act to preserve, an act to be remembered with the hands as well as the eyes.

Afterwards, when reading the questionnaire from the study, I think of the most frequent words used by the midwives: shrouding, softness, firmness, dignity, ritual, sorrow, trauma, empathy, absorbance, liquid, loss. It is all there. This is what my research is about.

CRAFT AS A CHANNEL FOR REFLECTION—THROUGH ACTION

In this chapter I wanted to share reflections about the roles these textiles play and how craft offers a way to help us comprehend the incomprehensible. I believe that my research on infant wrapping cloth and my artistic work with funeral palls demonstrates how craft has an unquestionable role to play in society. Weaving a fabric and cutting it off the loom is a grand human narrative about life and death, but that narrative is also extremely tangible and turns into a factual situation when I am working on the loom.

In addition to reflecting on the human situations that I encounter in these processes, the loom also forces me to think of the logic and concrete reality of the craft at hand. Threads must be sorted, grouped, and stretched. Weft and warp are interlaced, one centimetre at a time. And it proceeds this way until it is time to cut the weaving off the loom, and then it is over. But when the infant wrapping cloths are used in the wards, they become part of this grand narrative again. It is almost unbearable to concretely imagine the dead child, but the act of swaddling is something we can think about and understand. Something we can do. There is comfort in a blanket, and in the act of wrapping a body in one. How unbearable is the thought of leaving

our loved ones helplessly unshielded at that moment when we have to part from them? Even the thought of being able to do something like that may offer some comfort. -

Sorrow Turns into Social Making and Reflecting

Recently I wove a new funeral pall. That weaving was very different. Both my parents were very ill. I knew it was for them I wove. Now my father has passed away and the pall was used during his funeral which was a funeral held during the Covid pandemic, in the Summer of 2020. Only the closest family was sitting around the coffin. And we all spoke to him—or about him—sitting there. I told the others that the picnic blanket which he used to have in the backseat of his car was now placed around his body, and that I thought of the funeral pall we covered the coffin with being something for us, something speechless to be active with. To see, to touch, to make up his final bed with. Afterwards, what touched me deeply was the undraping before carrying out his coffin to the waiting car. The textile is fundamental and essential as an object through which to tell the big life story of beginning and ending; being at the theatre as a curtain, or in life as a swaddling blanket at the beginning and as a shroud at the end. Receive and depart.

When death occurs, we need to visualise the parting, whether within a formal ritual or as an instant action. In that sense I believe my craft navigates in the direction of gravity. For me, this specific kind of weaving is about gravitation. I write this thought down now, in this very instant. I have to think, is it so? Is that feeling my fuel and my force? If so, in order to answer the question about crafts' potential contribution to society, I play with the different tasks we have, whether being an astronaut,

a baker, a builder, or a weaver, weaving textiles for moments of sorrow.

Yes, for the moment I embrace the idea of gravitation.

And to turn helplessness into action, the act of making comes to the rescue. A new fabric for the infant shrouds, made at the factory, is almost finished. This large roll of textiles is now being placed in the corner of a gallery space in Stockholm as I write these lines. When the exhibition *Songs of Sorrow* opens, this part of the gallery will be transformed into a small sewing factory. I will be there from time to time, colleagues and friends are also coming to assist. We will be inviting visitors to follow us in the steps of making small shrouds out of the roll of textile one by one. The first task will be to decide whether to sew a blanket of 90 x 90 cm for a fully delivered child, born in week 40, or 70 x 70 cm for babies born around week 30. The smallest size, 45 x 45 cm, is designated for foetuses.

I know from earlier experience that this action of choosing a size really evokes feelings of empathy and reflection around the intended purpose of the shroud. We all have someone to think of: a sister that has lost a child, a brother that was meant to be, an invisible child, taken away from the mother in earlier times... the process of making does this, for a small moment of time; for maybe an hour it releases the thought, but not entirely in the sense of therapy, just as a trigger of reflection. This act of actual making is also proactive. Someone will be needing the blanket at a hospital in the near future. In this activity of crafting together, a mixture of memory, action, and empathy is hidden. The textile will in the end be cremated to ashes but the memory of making might stay alive in the hearts of the people who live on.

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