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THE OTHER FORM OF THINGS. AAS47692/PICEA ABIES

Emilio Vavarella's project for Fondazione Zegna



"The Other Shape of Things AAS47692 / Picea Abies." View of the exhibition at Casa Zegna

In line with the principles and values of the Zegna Group, Fondazione Zegna is hosting Emilio Vavarella's exhibition, an artist whose interdisciplinary artistic practice combines theoretical research and media experimentation. Here he has created a project that interprets - through art - territory, excellent craftsmanship, environmental themes and the company's history.

Winner of many awards, including the prestigious Italian Council Award in 2019, Vavarella has been invited to present his work at the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative, the Italian Cultural Institute of New York, and the Goldsmiths University of London and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

His academic writings have been published in journals such as Leonardo - The Journal of the International Society of the Arts, Sciences and Technology (MIT Press), Digital Creativity (Routledge) and CITAR Journal - Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts - to name a few.

His works have been exhibited in prestigious venues such as the MAXXI - National Museum of 21st Century Arts, KANAL - Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, MAMbo - Museum of Modern Art in Bologna, the Madre Museum of Contemporary Art in Naples, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, the Museu de Ciències Naturals in Barcelona, The Photographer's Gallery in London, the Museo Nacional Bellas Artes in Santiago, the Museu das Comunicações in Lisbon, the National Art Centre in Tokyo.

Vavarella is working towards a PhD in Film and Visual Studies and Critical Media Practice at Harvard University. The exhibition at Casa Zegna was an opportunity to ask him a few questions investigating the relationship with the textile medium in his artistic practice.



Emilio Vavarella in front of "AAS47692#0002 (The Other Shape of Things)," 2022. Modified open-frame server rack (42U, X 59; Y 197; Z 73.5 cm); dye-sublimation prints on aluminium from spruce DNA processing (2pc. 42.5 x 120 cm) and digital prints with water-based dye on San Patrignano fabrics (50% linen, 50% wool, woven on handloom, 2pc. 48x190 cm); HD video (loop, bn, silent); LED neon lighting system; mirror plate, various components. Total measurements X 99; Y 197; Z 113.5 cm.



"AAS47692#0002 (The Other Shape of Things)," details 2022. Modified open-frame server rack (42U, X 59; Y 197; Z 73.5 cm); dye-sublimation prints on aluminium from spruce DNA processing (2pc. 42.5 x 120 cm) and digital prints with water-based dye on San Patrignano fabrics (50% linen, 50% wool, woven on handloom, 2pc. 48x190 cm); HD video (loop, bn, silent); LED neon lighting system; mirror plate, various components. Total measurements X 99; Y 197; Z 113.5 cm.

In both "rs548049170_1_69869_TT" (2020-2021) and "AAS47692/Picea abies" (2022), identity takes the form of a textile element. What are the reasons for this choice?

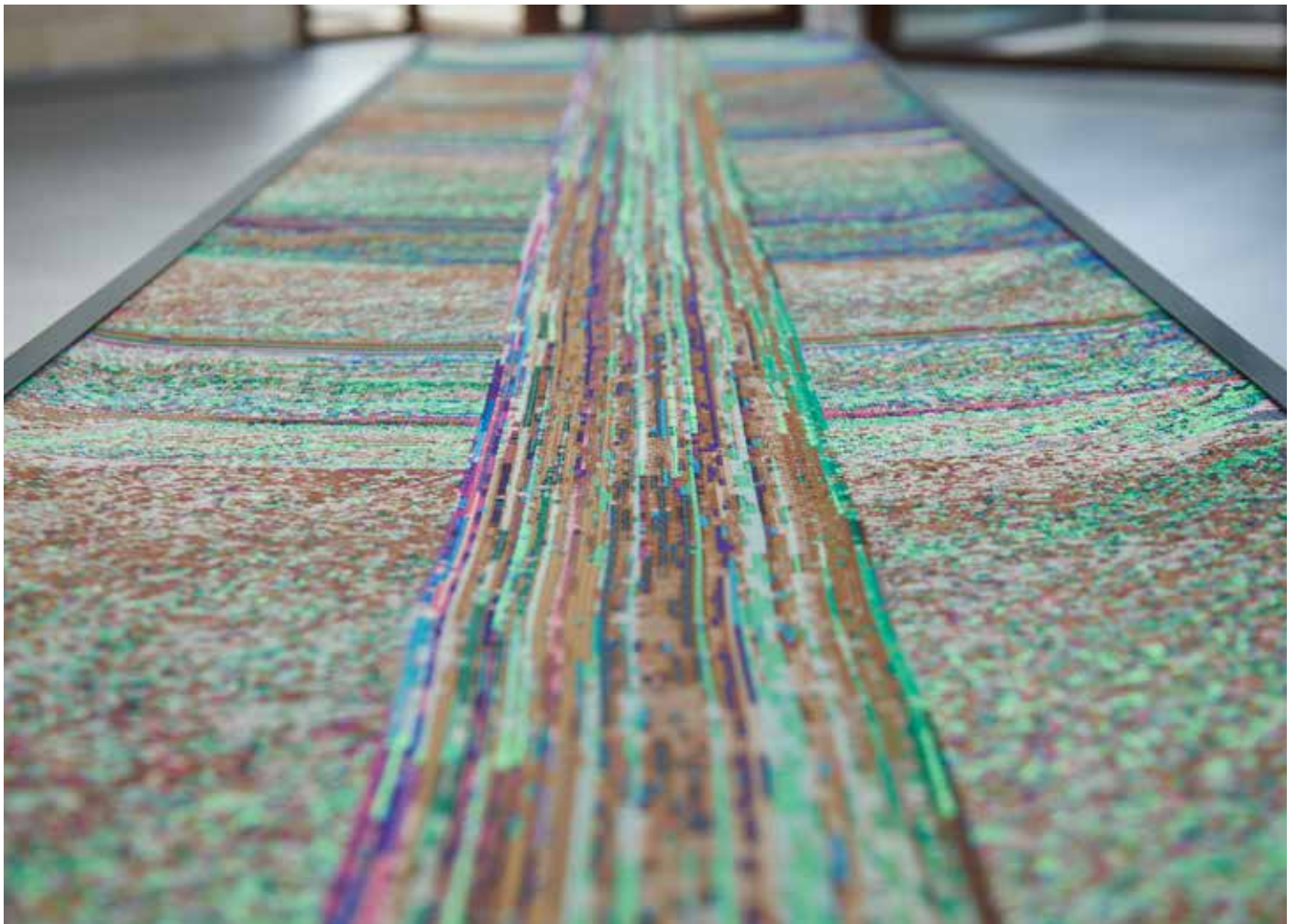
The original idea arose from a series of observations that intertwined, so to speak, with one another. The first observation is that on a scientific level, specifically from the point of view of biotechnology, it is almost impossible to talk about a life form's genetic identity, be it a person or a plant, without talking about digital technology because DNA can only be digitally codified. The second observation is the little-known fact that computer science and weaving shared the same programming techniques at the beginning of the last century and that the Jacquard textile loom, used in both fields, represents in many ways the first computer of the industrial era. Finally, another reflection has guided me in this process, namely the realisation that DNA and fabric do not necessarily act as a support for information that is 'applied on top' of them - as might be the case with painting or photographic media. Structure and information, in both fabric and DNA, are one and the same. They do not only represent information, they rather represent and present it at the same time, in the homology of form and content.

What is the genesis of the exhibition, *L'altra forma delle cose* (AAS47692 / Picea abies)?

This project started with a commission from the Fondazione Zegna, which allowed me to pursue a line of research investigating the relationship between biological life and digital technology, and the point of contact between weaving and digitalisation techniques. During my first visit to Oasi Zegna, I was struck by the presence of more than half a million spruce trees clustered next to each other. The spruces, planted under Ermenegildo Zegna's reforestation plan, started in the late 1920s to breathe new life into the land surrounding the historic Zegna Wool Mill, convey the idea of a hybrid space in which any clear distinction between the natural and the artificial is erased.

Moreover, like many plants, firs can reproduce through vegetative propagation, leading to the formation of new trees that differ formally but are genetically identical. I immediately envisioned a fir forest consisting of hundreds of thousands of manifestations of one identical genetic code. So, the next step was to acquire my 'raw material': the genetic code of *Picea abies*, the scientific name for spruce.

The name AAS47692 refers to the identifier used to digitally



Emilio Vavarella. "AAS47692#0006 (The Other Shape of Things)," 2022. Jacquard tapestry (100% recycled polyester, gr. 500/sq.m., 140x320 cm), mirror-finished alucobond, various components. Overall dimensions: X:110; Y:80; Z:370 cm. (work detail)

catalogue the tree's DNA. I then developed a series of software tools capable of converting the tree's DNA into a weave of pixels that could be transferred onto fabric.

The process led to six prints on Lanificio Zegna's Bielmonte fabrics, whose wool comes from the fleece of Oasi Zegna's own sheep. I collaborated with Mending for Good on two of these prints asking an embroiderer to manually intervene, thus re-introducing a manual skill into the translation from pixel to fabric. Along the same line, I produced two prints on linen and wool fabrics made on manual looms at San Patrignano, fixing my digital design on a highly textured warp and weft.

Then, in collaboration with BONOTTO, I worked on a final fabric translation using 100% recycled synthetic yarns woven on a Jacquard Gobelin loom. These results reflect my desire to experiment and push these production processes to their intrinsic technical limits.

Thus, the original code found expression in a plurality of materials, colours and shapes. Finally, I moved on to formalising all the materials and ideas I dealt with. To do so, I decided to convert several server racks: structures used in data centres for data processing and storage.

Fibres and textiles have accompanied mankind throughout time; in different forms, they are shared across all latitudes and cultures, all ages and generations; they are often vehicles for transmitting rituals, traditions, and identity. Does the textile medium have an additional conceptual meaning for the artist besides being functional to the artwork?

Yes, certainly. This is a theme I have emphasised and explored in the book rs548049170_1_69869_TT (published with Mousse), particularly in my text "Thinking about thought". The profound impact of textile technology can be seen, first and foremost, in the patterns of thought it has helped to create, and the profound traces of its impact can be seen in the metaphors we use, such as "weaving our thoughts" and "pulling the strings."

For thousands of years we have woven our thoughts together. We have followed the thread of what someone is saying or snapped the thread of an argument. In the oldest of Greek myths, Ariadne's thread underscores the idea that human life is incessantly unfolding—a thread unwound that marks a path to be followed. According to the Greeks, another thread, that of destiny, was in the hands of the Moiriai—the Fates—who thus held uncontested power over the life of mortals. Today we know that the language at our disposal not only determines what we are able to say, but also structures the frameworks through which we make sense of the world and our actions within it. And so it is important to note that for some time now a model based on weaving and textiles has slowly but systematically given way to new forms of thinking. The "thread of life" of the ancient Greeks has lost its privileged place in our imagination and has been supplanted by the "code of life:" a genetic code, potentially decipherable in its entirety, of which our biological life is a direct expression. And it is the intersection of these lines of reasoning, straddling the techniques and technologies that underpin them, some of them very ancient, other contemporary, that provided the starting point for this new project of mine.



"AAS47692#0006 (The Other Shape of Things)," detail, 2022. Jacquard tapestry (100% recycled polyester, gr. 500/sq.m., 140x320 cm), mirror-finish alucobond, various components. Overall dimensions: X:110; Y:80; Z:370 cm.



Emilio Vavarella, "The Other Shape of Things AAS47692 / Picea Abies". View of the exhibition at Casa Zegna.



Emilio Vavarella, "The Other Shape of Things AAS47692 / Picea Abies)." View of the exhibition at Casa Zegna.



Emilio Vavarella at Casa Zegna. View of the exhibition "The Other Shape of Things AAS47692 / Picea Abies)."