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Warp and Weft as Structural Metaphor

1.

The act of alternately interlacing flexible fibers to construct a weave is one of the oldest and most decisive of human abilities. Traces of basket making appear printed on some of the earliest ceramic remains, for which they would have served as molds, suggesting that basketry developed before pottery. It is also thought that rudimentary weaving of flexible fibers preceded, and in fact originated, textile technology. If ceramics are most profusely documented within historical narratives of the earliest technologies – until the successive appearance of bronze and iron – it is due to the abundance of ceramic archaeological remains. For the same reason, stone and metallic remains have given their names to humanity's pre-writing periods. Due to their ephemeral nature, organic baskets and fabric weavings have not left remains with which to write about cultural evolution or fill museum cases. This, at least, is the pragmatic explanation for why basketry, and textiles in general, which were so crucial to humanity's socioeconomic history, have been relegated to a secondary place in western historical narratives concerning technologies as carriers of meaning.

It is possible to imagine another reason for this oversight. The account by which gestures and technical skills, whose histories have been inventoried through archaeological remains, acquire symbolic function in the West – that is, how they went from being mere skills to art forms – privileges some of these gestures and not others. Indeed, the following are considered fundamental: Subtraction, in the form of a carving, incising, hollowing out, casting, or grating; addition, in the form of assembling, constructing, or superimposing – the very act of painting; modeling; and the abstract variation of molding or melting down. All of these are physical gestures that originated in the *noble* actions that made up what history calls the arts. They are modes of giving form to material through direct action upon it. The metaphor of control over that which has no form, over nature. These actions become sign value and are characterized as arts because they account for individual expression, of the force of a subjectivity that leaves a trace of the actions – cutting, hitting, hitching together – a vestige recognizable as the cipher of a subject. Nevertheless, the interweaving of warp and weft, subjected as it is to the grid structure that makes it possible, does not seem favorable for transmitting the individual mark that the historiographical canon has privileged as the motor of progress. To the contrary, it is a skill that seems, within its own structure, to refer to a social act, to collective knowledge.

2.

Before the appearance of photographic technology, the representation of the masses in the illustrated press was achieved via almost abstract filigrees that were consistent with the printing technique used, and that reduced the tiny heads that extended to cover the landscape to an almost textile-like grid of rehearsed marks. Individuals were unrecognizable. The form represented was the totality, and not the sum of its parts. There was a revealing correspondence between this image and the characterization, between suspicious and hostile, that sociology made of the phenomenon as a kind of blind magma, uncontrollable and terrifying, subject to the mechanism of flows more than to the will of its members. Photography, on the other hand, made it possible to capture all the complexity of myriad factions in an instant, in a fraction of a second. In so doing, it generated a paradoxical effect: The form of the mass totality and that of each of the persons that made up the mass could be read simultaneously. An image was thus generated that seemed to resolve the ever-present contradiction in articulating the political – the impossible conciliation between the individual and the collective, strangely resonant with the relationship between the background and the figure in pictorial representation. The perceptive paradox by which, in a weaving, we can only perceive the warp by not seeing the weft or the weft by not seeing the warp.

In 1897 the technique of reproducing photographs directly using a rotary press was introduced. This didn't allow for good reproductions of photographs of masses of people, however, because the dots that make up the photograph, printed by means of a semitone screen became interwoven with the small heads that formed the image. The grid of dots that made half-tone reproduction possible was superimposed onto the grid of points that formed the multitude of tiny faces in the image represented. The overlapping of the

two weaves produced an enigmatic aberration in the related image – a kind of structural metaphor that the graphics industry calls *Moiré*, borrowing a term from the textile industry.