

The Green Magic of Recycling

Suzanne
Morlock



BY KATARZYNA ZIMNA

An 80-foot-long train of knitted newspaper “glides” through the gallery space at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, Poland. Its tangled, dynamic shape plays with air, light, and structural elements, winding around pillars and hovering just below the ceiling. Suzanne Morlock’s *Magic Carpet Ride* seems to represent both the carpet and the ride itself. It is full of mysterious primal power and energy, despite its fragile material.

This charming, outwardly simple installation serves as a perfect introduction to other projects by Morlock, a mixed-media artist based in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. *Magic Carpet Ride* offers a conceptual and emotional “ride” on many different levels. It can be interpreted as a piece of site-specific, sustainable art that makes new connections between Third Wave feminist issues and ecological concerns. Manifesting eco-feminist ideas in its celebration of women’s creative potential, the work does not refer to oppression, a shared reality for many women and the natural habitat in our civilized world. Instead, it introduces a positive—maybe even idealistic—way of thinking by connoting the Moirae, or the Fates, symbols of feminine power—creative, inventive, playful, and responsive—and spirits of transition and transformation. Femininity, a theme knitted into *Magic Carpet Ride*, refers to the strength, determination, and persistence of every sorceress and every housewife who transforms the mundane into the magical, who recycles abandoned waste and toxic, outworn scraps of life into something new and inspiring.

Magic Carpet Ride, 2011. Knitted newspaper, 25 x 20 x 80 ft. 2 views of installation in Łódź, Poland.



**Overlay, 2010. Knitted newspaper, 144 x 48 x .25 in.
View of installation in Le Vigan, France.**

The idea to knit installations with newspaper came to Morlock as she considered what to enter in a paper exhibition held in France in 2010, for which participants were challenged to think about alternative ways to produce paper. One night, at her hearth, she used a newspaper to ignite a fire. This act sparked the idea of using newspaper as an art material—a material that she would knit. Inspired, her husband invented a system of spinning glued pieces of newspaper into yarn. This perfect, almost archetypical, beginning to the story of a magic carpet transforms darkness, night, and destruction into light, warmth, and the creation of a new series of artworks. The show was held in a chapel turned art space in Le Vigan. Morlock's *Overlay* was designed to cover the stained glass windows with overlays of knitted paper to create a border zone between light and shadow, sacred and profane, old and new. Since the show relied on natural light to illuminate the

works on display, Morlock covered only one window, but l'association "Chaine de Papier" invited her to develop her idea in a second, separate show at the Chapelle de la Condamine (2012).

Excited by the creative potential and formal qualities of her knitting technique, Morlock adopted it for other projects. For her, the attractiveness of knitting stems from its associations with women's craft, something widely considered as less valuable than high art. Morlock enjoys the ambiguous territory between craft and art (between useful and useless, practical and poetical) that makes her work difficult to label.

Magic Carpet Ride primarily explores the conceptual duality of mundane/routine/ordinary versus magical/startling/revitalizing, telling a story about movement and the ongoing transition between these opposite yet complementary aspects of our experience. The aspect of the everyday

can be traced on a few levels. *Ride* was knitted with local newspapers, a kaleidoscope of news that had already lost its sparkle. The process of knitting took seven days of monotonous labor by Morlock and 12 students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź (10 women and two men).

The notion of routine work (particularly in textile production and workshops) relates to the local context of past and present-day Łódź and the Central Museum of Textiles. The museum is located in the classicist White Factory, a facility erected by the family of Ludwik Geyer between 1835 and 1886. The White Factory was the first multi-department factory in Poland, with steam-driven spinning, weaving, and printing looms for cotton. The history of Łódź is closely tied to the development of the textile industry. The city experienced rapid development in the 19th century, becoming a multicultural promised land that then suffered a decline by the end of the communist era. This history brings together the lives of rich industrialists, who made fortunes on cloth production and trade, and the lives of the thousands of women—spinners and seamstresses—who worked in three shifts, day after day, and represented the city's main workforce. Łódź has recently transformed again, this time into a center of creative industry, with a strong academic foundation represented by the Technical University, the Władysław Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts, and the famous Leon Schiller Film School, among other institutions of higher education.

This historical, practical, and functional context provides important elements for Morlock's site-specific work. The aspect of magic can be understood as a reference to the hope for transformation—or rather transmutation—of Łódź from a gray, gloomy, and polluted city of chimneys to a vibrant center where abandoned industrial sites are being revitalized and adapted for new cultural and artistic functions. Here, women eagerly use their opportunities for education. Because of a difficult job market, however, they must embrace and employ their creative potential to tailor career

opportunities for themselves. In response to these local conditions, Morlock's installation asserts that women's creativity can do wonders.

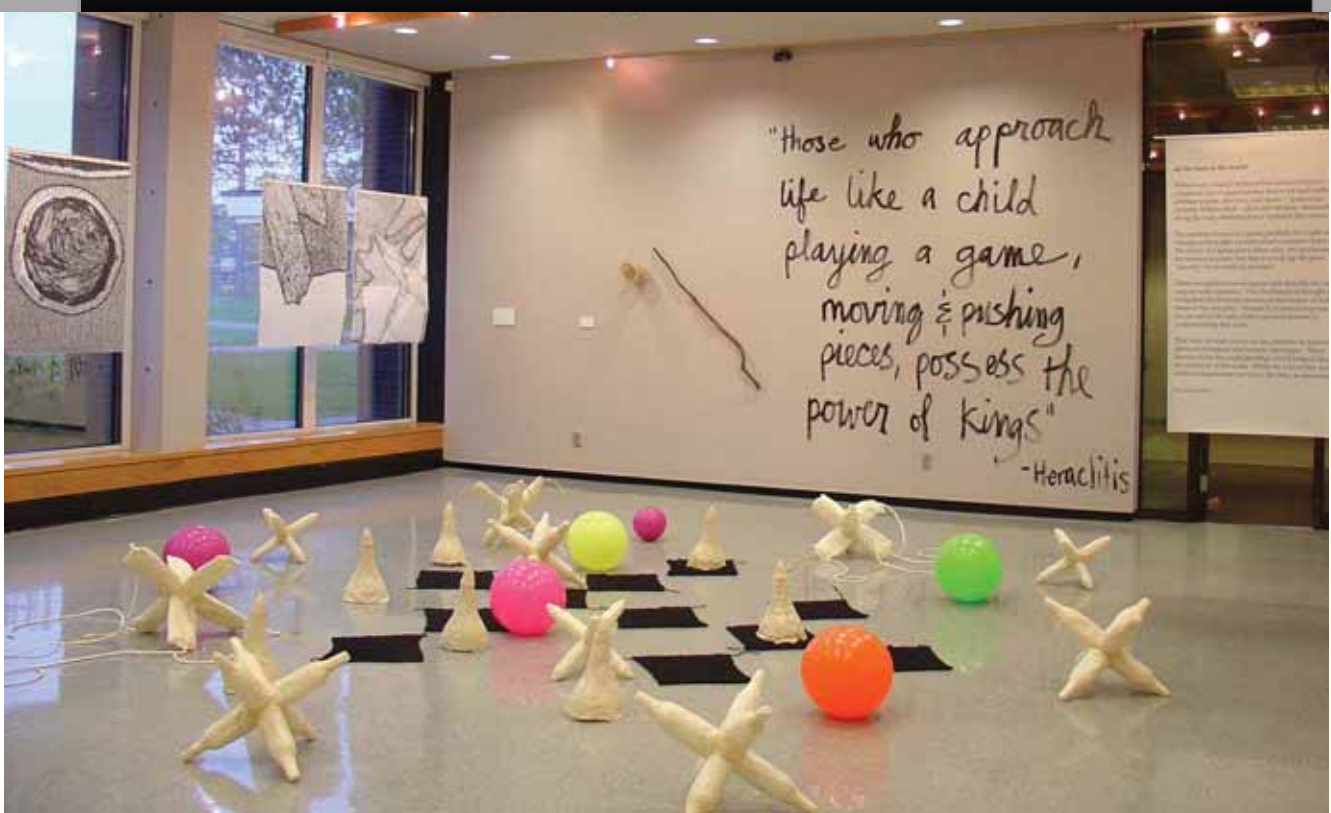
Morlock recently executed a project in Skagaströnd, Iceland, that, like *Magic Carpet Ride*, references the social and industrial context of its site. In *Nets*, she combined two concepts: knitting and fishing. In order to develop the contextual background, she spent time talking to the owner of a local net-making shop and to a woman recognized as a local knitter. At the village dump, Morlock found old, discarded nets, took the refuse to the studio, cleaned and sorted it by color, and tied the material end to end in order to knit a new and curious version of the original nets. This was again a laborious process of reworking—not only of the old material into a new object, but also of a piece of history and of the local everyday into an unexpected piece of artistic magic.

The ecological dimension in Morlock's work is related to the feminine side of creative nature. "Eco," from the Greek *oikos* or home, suggests that we should go back to basics and seek solutions within reach of our hands. Home—the traditional domain of women's activities—can be interpreted as a beginning for the transformative process of healing people and communities suffering from the side-effects of civilization: environmental degradation, isolation, loneliness, stress, and unhealthy lifestyles. It is not a matter of going back to the tired nature/culture dichotomy, but of finding a creative and responsive solution to the problems that arise in a specific local context. Morlock's work proposes that knitting can be a contemplative and creative form of recycling.

A great remedy for the overproduction of our civilized world, recycling represents the inventive character of women—not, as Claude Lévi-Strauss would have it, the invention of an engineer but of a *bricoleur*, someone who resourcefully combines and uses already existing objects and ideas, regardless of their original purpose. It is

***Nets*, 2010. Knitted found materials, 84 x 60 x 84 in. 2 views of installation in Skagaströnd, Iceland.**





Above: *all the time in the world*, 2005. Mixed media, installation view. Left: *Kitedreams II*, 2010. Found materials, dimensions variable.

second nature for women to find solutions to everyday problems on the go, to use creatively accessible tools, and to do all this with the household budget in mind.

Morlock designs her works to be ephemeral, avoiding the production of new waste. In fact, the process, and not just the product of her knitting, is crucial to the conceptual impact of her installations. She invites collaborative help to make the creative process a social experience, and she often performs knitting during the show, as in

the case of *Overlay*. Her works belong to the endless cycle of creation and decomposition that characterizes both the natural and the human-made worlds. These elements make Morlock's work an example of sustainable art, produced with consideration for the wider environmental context (ecological, social, economic, historical, and cultural). Locality (an extension of site-specificity), especially with regard to materials, is very important to Morlock. She knits her installations with fabrics

that are part of a local, everyday experience.

This said, Morlock's work resists the ossification of ethical position-taking. She avoids didacticism, and her work is open to interpretation. Above all else, one important and eagerly applied ingredient—play—makes Morlock's work ambiguous and full of life. Playfulness helps her to balance at the edge, between everyday life and magic, repetition and surprise, ethics and aesthetics. She admits that the artist is a player—one who juxtaposes distant objects, materials, processes, and ideas and invites surreality into everyday life. In her installation *all the time in the world* (2005), she posted a motto from Heraclitus on the wall: "Those who approach life like a child playing a game, moving and pushing pieces, possess the power of kings." In this respect, Morlock draws her inspiration from the Surrealists: she welcomes the unexpected, incorporates chance into her working process, plays with various materials, and looks for unusual applications of ordinary things. Her objects can be seen as fetishes or strange dream-like creatures. She does not want to terrify viewers, but she does want to surprise and inspire them to look outside the box.

Sweater, 2010. Knitted Mylar remnants, view of work in Jackson Hole, WY.

Childhood themes and attributes often appear in Morlock's works, a product of her nature and disposition. She is cheerful, loves to laugh, and possesses that child-like ability to look at things as if for the first time, with innocent eyes. The beautiful and poetic *Kitedreams II* (2010), an installation of tiny dresses collected from thrift shops and hung as if in defiance of gravity, expresses her playful tone. Her recent project, *Sweater*, is reminiscent of Charlie Brown's iconic shirt. Morlock knitted her enlarged version of this familiar piece of clothing with Mylar remnants from a sequin and spangle factory. *Sweater* was installed outdoors in Jackson Hole as a temporary public art piece during the winter season. Huge and strange, *Sweater* acted as a playful totem watching over local residents. As Morlock explains, she was inspired by Charlie Brown's unfortunate experiences, and she wanted to capture that spirit with an image that would carry people through the long winter and provide them with some mental refreshment.

This project refers us back to *Magic Carpet Ride* as an example of "good sorcery," white or rather "green" magic that gives new life to the by-products of civilization. Riding through Morlock's world turns out to be simultaneously serious and playful, visually pleasing and mentally demanding. She proves, by example, that we can draw inspiration from our closest surroundings, from such simple activities as knitting, to transform the everyday into the magical, old into new, gray into green. The ecological attitude begins at home and concerns all aspects of life. Women have the power and potential to lead the way, and they should celebrate and use their everyday creativity, ingenuity, and playfulness.

Katarzyna Zimna is an artist and researcher based in Poland. She is currently working on a book about play as a creative strategy in contemporary art.

Silage, 2011. Knitted recycled water barrier fabric and cable spool, 65 x 45 x 45 in.

