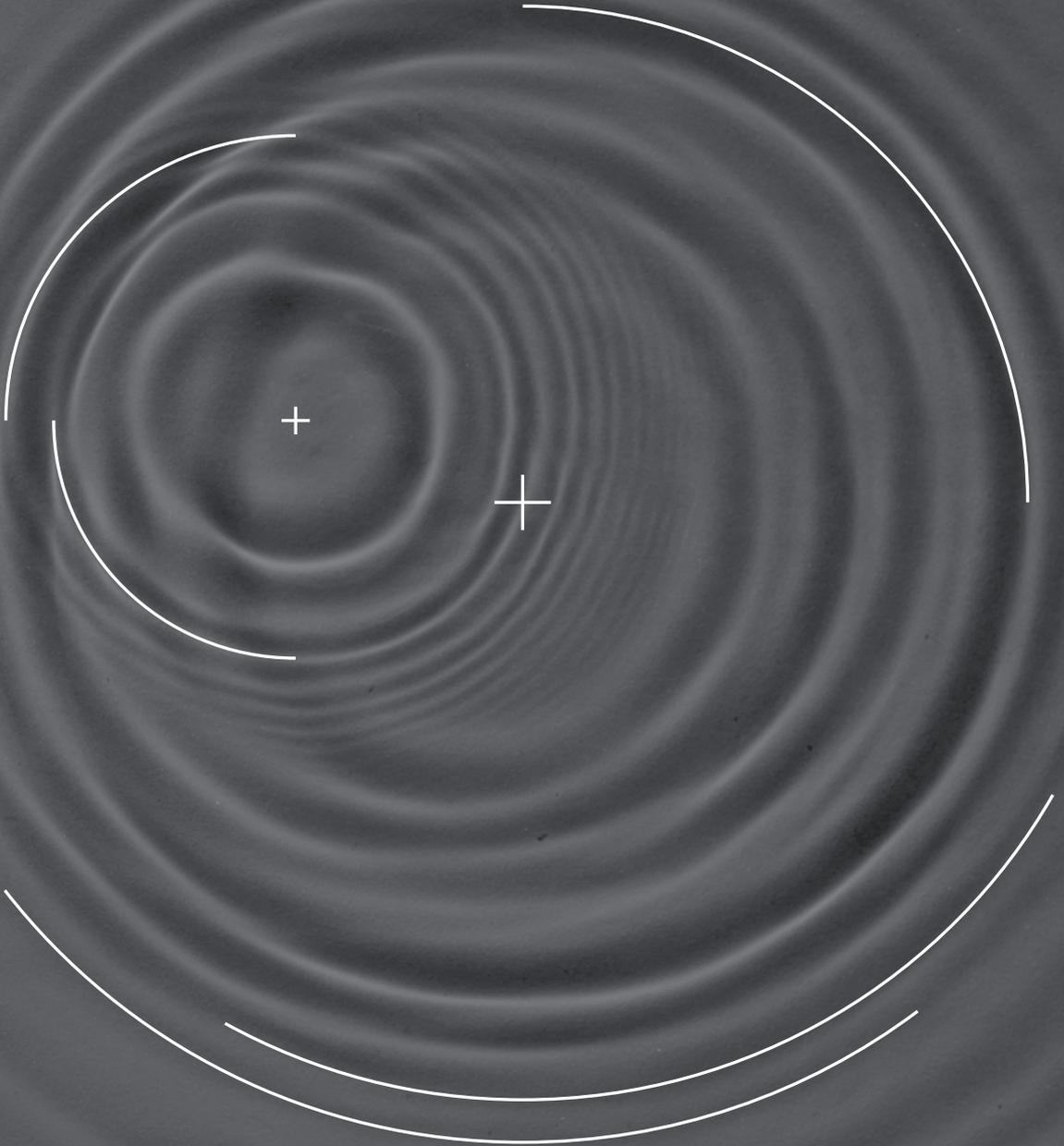


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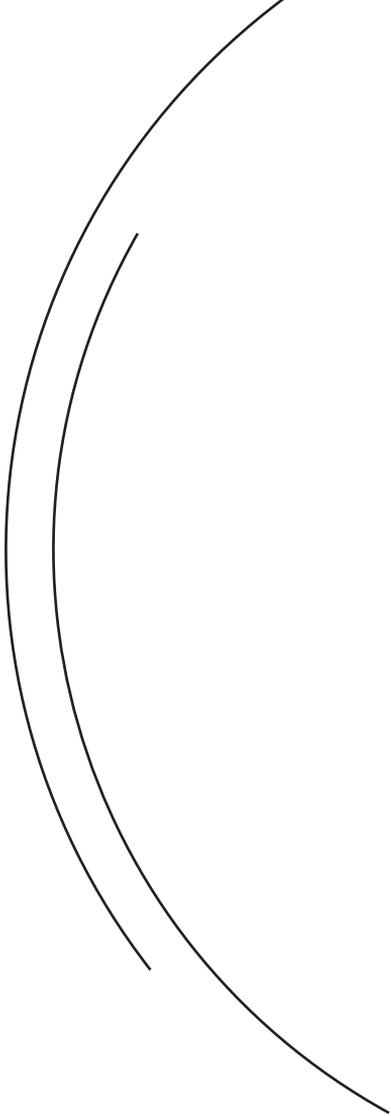
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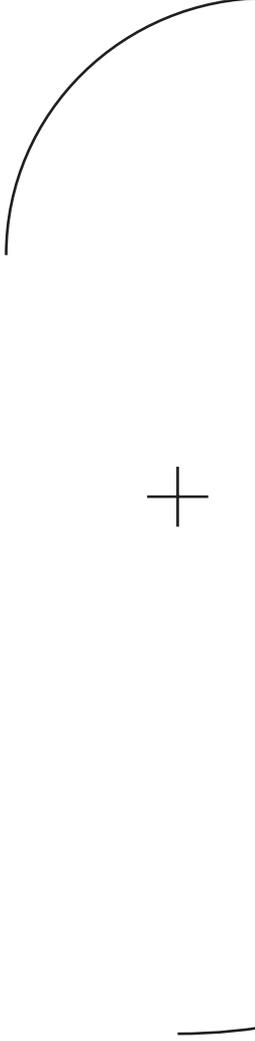
Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture



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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

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Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

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RESIDING IN NEGATIVE SPACE: THE ART AND LIFE STRATEGIES OF MARION BARUCH

Anna Keszeg

ABSTRACT

The short essay presents the main issues surrounding the works and professional career of Marion Baruch. It investigates the concept of negative space and its significance in the artist's creations. The central argument is that negative space serves as both a life strategy and an artistic research method in Baruch's body of work. Baruch's career follows a quintessentially atypical path for a woman artist from Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. Her artworks revolve around a dual exploration of negative space. On one hand, they engage with negative space as a way of perceiving the world from the perspective of the thin line that delineates the boundaries between space and bodies. On the other hand, negative space represents a conceptual negation or the definition by negation of all living phenomena. This focus provides an opportunity to reflect on the aestheticisation of capitalist markets in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

#Marion Baruch, #negative space, #remnant textiles, #sculptures, #commercialism

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In this era where the metaverse has become a reality and the renegotiation between physical and digital is ongoing, there is a newfound freedom in how we think about time and space. While geopolitical and economic crises demand our attention, the emergence of this additional layer to our existence offers reassurance. The technology-enabled dimension is akin to the tide, allowing the materiality of our lives—our emotions, dreams, ambitions, and fears—to seek new places to overflow and overwhelm.

Marion Baruch, now in her nineties, has always been fascinated by what she terms the “void.” Rather than focusing on the materiality of emotions, she is intrigued by the emptiness waiting to be filled by them. A quote from her accompanying press material captures the ambiguity of her approach: “It’s the void and there’s possibility in the void: it contains everything, it contains every surprise, lie and emotion, which is what I need.” (Baruch n.d.) In this statement, we can discern the essence of her negative methodology, which I refer to as “residing in negative space.” For Baruch, the challenge lies in the content of the negative space, yet she chooses to focus on the void, eager to understand what will eventually populate it.

In the field of the social sciences, the past few decades have seen significant shifts, two of which are closely linked to Marion Baruch’s work: the spatial turn, which emerged in the late 1970s, and the affective turn, which gained momentum in the early 2000s. Marion Baruch’s work represents an early recognition of the inseparability of these two turns due to a dialectical relationship. She explores the point where affect populates the void, thereby creating the possibility of space.

The first time I encountered one of her works, constructed from fabric remnants sourced from the textile industry, I immediately grasped their significance to her and their function as a universal working method. Her life experiences have provided her with a unique perspective on negative space. It is akin to the conscious choice of a textile artist working with remnants rather than an entire roll of fabric. The whole roll, she seems to suggest, carries a sense of spoilage, danger, and threat, primarily because it contains both the possibility of a textile form and its remnants. This duality imbues the roll with a complex tension, evoking notions of both creation and destruction. The entire roll is definitive, intact, and tyrannical, much like a name—carrying a weighty significance that cannot be ignored.

What struck me most about understanding her approach was how effortlessly she made this choice. While Baruch's work often revolves around the everyday, her conception of the ordinary is anything but. It's custom-made, reflecting her distinctive vision and perspective.

Marion Baruch was born in Romania in 1929. She began her art education at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Bucharest in 1949, but only a year later, she left the country for Israel. There, she enrolled at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. After three years, she moved to Rome, where she studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti from 1954 to 1957.

This trajectory reflects an exercise in inhabiting negative space, finding continuities in the scarcity of opportunities. The belated recognition of her work, which only emerged towards the end of the 1990s, mirrors this process. It is as if the lack of interest was eventually flooded by the presence of recognition at a certain point in time.

There are various institutional and social reasons behind this delayed canonisation—interest in women artists, in Eastern Europe, and in issues of marginality, to name a few. Yet, it seems almost as if Baruch anticipated this, much like the remnants of textiles she uses, which were almost destined for oblivion until they found their way into her work.

In 2020, a retrospective of her work was held at the Kunstmuseum in Luzern. The exhibition later travelled to Grenoble in the autumn of 2020, and subsequently to Toulouse, Norway, Bucharest, Italy, and finally Israel.

As someone with a keen interest in fashion and the evolving role of textiles in our society, I was immediately drawn to Marion Baruch's conceptual textile works and their potential to reshape our sartorial culture. What Baruch made me realize is the idea of textiles and clothing as elements used to fill the void, as thin lines where space intersects with its negative. The body occupies the centre of this process, serving

FIGURE 1. *Marion Baruch, Contre les élites végétales, 2019, 335 × 136 cm, artwork on the left, courtesy of Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.*



as something that both defines space and enables negative space, while its form is reshaped by textile armour. In contemporary fashion theory since Joanne Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (2015) it is common knowledge that dress positions the body in space and time and our garments are "situated body practices."

Baruch employs a dual method of de-situation. On the one hand, she demonstrates that the situation is just a situation, the frame is just a frame, and the Emperor's new clothes are just new clothes. According to her, a dress has no inherent consequence beyond the context in which it is worn. In the 1960s, Baruch collaborated with A. G. Fronzoni, a designer and architect, to create the *Abito-Contentitore*, a series of oversized garments that challenged the boundaries of the body, creating an abstract cartography of the human form. Since the *Abito-Contentitore* is a silhouette, the textile piece is not about understanding body practice or situatedness; rather, it's about the thin line that enables both of these criteria to come to life.

Furthermore, for Baruch, textiles represent an ongoing challenge. As she seeks to renegotiate societal norms regarding gender differences, the de-domestication of textiles has become a subtle battleground between the sexes. Many of her projects explore lost-and-found pieces of garments, as well as the forgotten and improvised elements of our wardrobes.

The use of remnant textiles has long been an inspiration for many fashion creators and is closely linked to the heritage of deconstruction in fashion. However, for Baruch, these textile remnants are not simply materials to be incorporated into something new; they are realities in themselves, each with an independent voice and volition. She enables this negative space to be inhabited by the emotions and affects waiting to be expressed.



FIGURE 2. Marion Baruch, *Le paysage n'est nulle part*, 2019, 51 × 87 cm, courtesy of Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.

Baruch's approach to exhibiting space mirrors her approach to negative space; she directs the flow of affects into the space. These discarded textile pieces reference the incompleteness of the ready-made and mirror the imperfection of something we consider complete. From these textile remnants, dresses come to life, shedding their former confines. The titles Baruch gives to these pieces reflect abstract entities (such as *La Vitesse des fleurs*, *Contre les élites végétales*, fig. 1, *Le paysage n'est nulle part*, fig. 2), thought processes (*Il gioco delle contraddizioni*, *Vie et mort des hypothèses*, fig. 3), stories (*Invitation*, *L'arresto del pensiero che è dinamico*, fig. 4), or simple similarities with well-known visual structures (*Ponte-Cattedrale*).

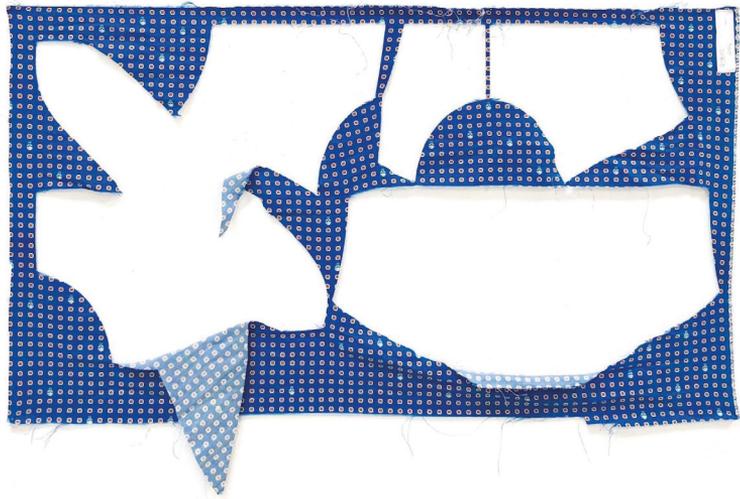


FIGURE 3. Marion Baruch, *Vie et mort des hypothèses*, 2019, 51 × 87 cm, courtesy of *Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou*, Paris.

On the other hand, negative space is concerned with the classical analytical question of naming. In late capitalist society, names are often associated with labelling and control, serving as simulacra of aestheticised markets. A radical artistic act should always transcend mere names.

Baruch refers to her works as “sculptures” because, as she explained, “they are certainly not paintings” (Ştefan 2021). The process of labelling her works using mainstream art mediums leads to a definition by negation. This casual approach to labelling is another argument for the importance of negative space. If one concept is not accurate enough, its nearest semantic association should be used. Although Baruch is deeply concerned with the accuracy of our everyday artistic actions, she cannot contend with such exactitude. She cannot contend with such exactitude. The title of her exhibition in Bucharest in 2022, *Endless Going Trying to Say*, reflects this constant need for enabling, for keeping structures undefined, and for maintaining the amorphous nature of negative space (fig. 4).



FIGURE 4. Marion Baruch, *L'arresto del pensiero che è dinamico*, 2019, 165 × 155 cm, ©Margot Montigny, courtesy of Galérie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris.

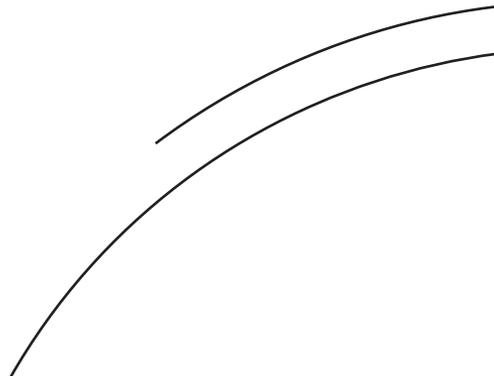
Baruch's exploration of the textile industry also addresses the issue of commercialism, which she views as a form of relational art. In 1989, she began a collaboration with Milanese gallerist Luciano Inga-Pin, marking a period of ambition to understand the relationship between art and business. This collaboration led to the creation of a prototype company called Name Diffusion (initially, she wanted to call it NAME, but was persuaded that this did not describe her intentions clearly enough).

Name Diffusion represented a pure idea of a corporation responsible for creating branded entities—conveyor-belt compatible objects labelled with Name Diffusion logos. Baruch aimed to introduce the concept of the branded ready-made into the art world, referring to herself as a business

artist. While the *Abito-Contentitore* created a negative space around the body, Name Diffusion designed the cartography of a business practice enveloped in art.

During this period, she also created an art-object titled *Superart* (1988–1990): a regular metallic shopping cart filled with a metal piece in the geometric form of a shopping cart, scaled to the size of a human body and inclined towards the person pushing it. The title *Superart* invites multiple interpretations: “super” could refer to the size of the metallic object, alluding to a form of art compatible with supermarkets, or to an exceptionally captivating art form. However, Baruch’s primary concern is how to fill the empty spaces created by consumerist society—the carts, endless shopping bags, and boxes. She believes we need a meticulously calculated number of objects to ergonomically fill the void that consumerist capitalism has created.

Baruch’s approach to negative space is applicable to almost every gap in contemporary human experience, potentially making it a universal methodology. It represents the discrepancy between fortuitous destinies, the incongruities between languages, the asymmetry of social systems, and the gaps between human and non-human bodies. The lost-and-found textile pieces embody her analytical ambition to address, in a casual manner, all the roughness that the world produces.



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