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What if you weave your own story?

Curating Authorship in 'WE ARE NOT CARPETS'

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WORKING PAPER SERIES | NO. 43 | NOVEMBER 2026
Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation

Working Paper Series
Collaborative Research Center 1187 Media of Cooperation

Print-ISSN 2567-2509

Online-ISSN 2567-2517

DOI doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/11092

Handle dspace.ub.uni-siegen.de/handle/ubsi/11324

URN [urn:nbn:de:hbz:467-113243](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:467-113243)



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Publication is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project-ID 262513311 – SFB 1187.

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Layout: Karina Kirsten

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What if you weave your own story?
Curating Authorship in WE ARE NOT CARPETS¹

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Abstract This article examines the collaborative research and exhibition project *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* as an intervention into the socially organized anonymity of carpet weavers. The article argues that this anonymity is not simply a gap in knowledge, but a field of active not-knowing sustained by an epistemology of ignorance and by the scopic economy through which carpets circulate as cultural and narrative commodities. Against a regime of curiosity directed toward pattern, region, authenticity, technique, and price, but rarely toward the weaver, the project asked weaver-colaborators: What if, instead of weaving the market's pre-given designs, you wove your own story? Drawing on the carpets, the weavers' writings and reflections, collaborative curatorial practice, and audience responses across exhibitions in Cologne and Siegen, the article traces three interconnected displacements: the emergence of the weaver in an authorial position; the development of a multimodal curatorial practice that holds social recognition together with aesthetic indeterminacy; and the formation of a new literacy that reconfigures the relations among weaver, viewer, researcher, and curator. Reading through Rancière's concepts of the distribution of the sensible and dissensus, the article argues that authorship operates here not as the addition of a missing voice, but as an interruption of the scene that separates making from the authority to determine meaning, form, circulation, and interpretation. Curating, in turn, becomes a practice of care for the circulation, return, and negotiation of meaning across the unstable seams between these positions.

Keywords Handwoven carpet; Weaver authorship; Scopic economy; Multimodal co-curation

¹ *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* is part of the collaborative research project *Weaving Memories*, by Arjang Omrani (Ghent University) and Tahereh Aboofazeli (University of Cologne), developed in collaboration with weaver-artists from North Khorasan, Iran: Asieh Davari, Zoleikha Davari, Taqan Beik Barzin, anne beik koochi rabe' rahimi, Saheb Jamal Rahimi, rabe' rahimi, Masoomeh mohammadi, Masoomeh Zolfaghari, Zohreh Parvin. The project was presented in Cologne at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (co-curated by Arjang Omrani, Tahereh Aboofazeli, and Simone Pfeifer) and in Siegen at Poool art space (co-curated by Arjang Omrani and Tahereh Aboofazeli) in cooperation with the Collaborative Research Centre 1187 "Media of Cooperation" at the University of Siegen.

1. The Affect of a Torn Carpet

The first scene is of a largely intact twelve-meter handwoven carpet, cut into pieces and suspended on the exhibition wall. At first glance, this torn carpet provoked, for many, a mixture of pity, discomfort, and protest. Before and during the installation, many friends, as well as some colleagues in the museum and gallery, were visibly affected. Asking almost indignantly: “Why would you tear apart such a beautiful carpet? When we asked what, exactly, had moved or disturbed them, they spoke of the loss of a handwoven work, of the labour embedded in it, of the hardship of the weaver. Our response was simple: “Which weaver?” For many of them, this question opened, perhaps for the first time, the problem of the weaver’s anonymity.

These moments of conversation were linked, for me, to a second scene: a discussion I had with a group of handwoven-carpet weavers about their anonymity. A carpet lay between us. We had been speaking about its motifs and weaving technique when one of the weavers suddenly turned it over in anger, pointed to the knots on the back, and said: How is it possible for someone to see these knots and not ask who wove them? How can people look at this and not think that someone made these knots, one by one, with such difficulty; when they themselves could not even count them?

Her words point to something at once simple and profound. Read alongside the first scene, they shift the problem from [in]visibility to the regime of visibilities; the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2010, 54) through which the visible is organized. A “natural” logic that distributes the visible and the invisible, speech and noise, capacity and incapacity; that pins bodies to their assigned places, allocates them to specific times and spaces, and separates private from public lives (Rancière 2010, 139–140). Therefore, the question is not merely whether the weaver is seen, but within what sensory order she can appear, from what position she can be heard, and whether she can enter the common world as a subject of meaning.

At the epistemic level, this political distribution takes shape not simply as a lack of knowledge, but as a form of manufactured ignorance and active ignoring (Venkatesan 2024, 123–126). The anonymity of the weaver is not an accidental gap in people’s knowledge about the hardship of weaving, the difficulty of the work, or the low wages paid to those who make carpets. It is produced by an order that trains viewers, in markets, museums, and exhibitions, to direct their curiosity toward pattern, region, age, authenticity, technique, and price; but not toward the weaver. This distribution does not merely render information invisible; it organizes the regime of curiosity itself. It determines what



Fig. 1. Installation view, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne (2024)

can become a question, when and where, and what remains outside the horizon of curiosity.

In 2006, a series of fifteen short documentaries titled *Persian Carpet* was commissioned by the National Carpet Center of Iran and made by fifteen of the most prominent Iranian filmmakers. Many of these directors – who, in much of their other work, had approached social issues with a critical sensibility – did not name the carpet weavers, except in a few brief episodes. Instead, the films offered romanticized images of artistic hands and fleeting glimpses of eyes reflected, as it were, in the four corners of the carpet. They dissolved into a poetic meditation on motifs and on the aesthetic relation of carpets to other dimensions of Iranian culture and art.

In the winter of 2021, *Angāh*, a well-known Iranian cultural and art magazine, published a widely discussed special issue titled “*Carpet, the Iranian Beauty*.” The issue brought together around thirty-five essays, interviews, and conversations with carpet scholars, visual artists, carpet designers, and social scientists. What is striking is that nowhere in the magazine does the weaver’s voice appear.

These two examples belong to a much broader body of cultural, artistic, and historical works and writings shaped around the carpet and its aesthetic and cultural relation to Iranian life. Across this literature, the weaver remains outside discussion and outside discourse. The carpet may be celebrated as an artwork and as “a complete mirror of Iranian culture, art, and literature” (Beheshti, *Angāh*, 1400/2021). Yet, as Brian Murphy writes, it is probably “the only work of art that carries no trace of the name or identity of its artist” (2006, 36).

Therefore, what we encounter is not a simple absence of knowledge. Rather, it is a socially organized field of not-knowing, shaped by hierarchies of class, gender, and race and sustained through what Mills calls an epistemology of ignorance (Mills 2017, 51, 55, cited in Venkatesan 2024, 128).

The complicity of this epistemology of ignorance with the regimes of carpet production and trade, and with its historical-economic mechanisms, becomes evident where the carpet is transformed from a handwoven domestic textile into a narrative commodity. This is a kind of “scopic economy” (Moallem 2018, 29) in which, through an “aesthetic education”, the embodied and narrative knowledge of weaving is absorbed and distributed within *regimes of mediation*, in the “*spectacle of labour*” and *affective forms of value-making*, and modes through which *identity and otherness are commodified* (ibid.).

Mediation in this economy is not simply the passage of the carpet from loom to market, catalogues and pages of magazines. It also entails how disconnected and detached is the weaver from the network of merchants, experts, designers, and cultural narratives through which the carpet is interpreted and valued. The

value of the carpet is produced across a continuum that extends from price-making to historical, aesthetic, and spiritual valuation – a continuum from which the weaver herself remains excluded.

Zal’s ethnography of weavers in the town of Āveh, Iran shows how the weaver’s wage is determined through seemingly technical criteria: adherence to the given patterns, cleanliness of execution, and fineness of weave. Any deviation from the prescribed pattern can reduce her payment. Yet the very same deviation may later reappear in the market, in connoisseurial language, as the trace of the weaver’s hand and as evidence of the carpet’s handwoven authenticity, thereby increasing its value (Zal 2011, 65–68).

The weaver’s labour, then, is not necessarily invisible. Rather, it is made visible in a way that displaces its political and authorial stakes. It is no longer defined primarily through production relations or authorial rights, but is made to signify patience, love, femininity, skill, suffering, and authenticity; woven into the “soul” of the carpet and absorbed into its affective and aesthetic depth. This is the logic through which labour can be romanticized, for instance, as “knots of love”:

I attribute this anonymity to the art of weaving as an act of love. When one is in love, one becomes quiet avoiding showing off and pretension. The carpet weavers in Iran are some of the most deprived and expelled artists. If you were a weaver at the loom, you would have known what I am referring to. The first row, the second, the third, there is the movement of hands similar to Sama. (Arabzadeh, interview in Heshami Razavi 1992, 14).

The spectacle of labour produces a distinctly fetishistic effect. It absorbs the concrete visibility of the production process, along with the value of the weaver’s work, into frozen images of pattern and ornament. The “matter-of-factness of production becomes anything but matter-of-fact” (Taussig 1992, 5); inside and outside change places, and the carpet appears to erase the social nexus imploded within it, assuming the form of a self-activating spirit – a fantasy of the flying carpet – almost a “thing-in-itself” (ibid.). In this transformation, the carpet becomes an artwork without a creator – even an artwork against its creator (Zal 2011, 60).

Within this circuit, the carpet moves between the market and the domains of art and culture. It appears at once as a floor covering and an artwork, craft and commodity, national heritage and Oriental object, luxury good and ethnic sign, a bearer of culture and a vehicle of value. Yet it is not inherently art, craft, or commodity. Rather, each of these forms is activated according to the regime through which the carpet is presented, displayed, and valued. This mode of arranging the sensible brings the carpet close to a heterotopic logic (Moallem 2018; Venkatesan 2009): a space in which heterogene-

ous elements are gathered together, while its own ordering determines which aspect of the carpet is brought to the surface and which relation is left recessed.

In one of the essays published in *Angāh*, titled “Performer of Warp, Warbler of Woof,” Rassam Arabzadeh, one of the well-known Iranian carpet scholars, writes:

Let there be a day dedicated to honoring Persian carpets, where every Iranian, as a gesture of respect for this traditional art, hangs their room carpet—whether of fine quality or not—at the entrance of their home for everyone to see. Then, you will witness the meaning of the greatest and most astonishing exhibition in tribute to art worldwide. At that moment, you will realize that Iran is entirely about patterns and colors, the patterns and colors of its carpets. (2022, 82–99)

What emerges here is a grotesque image of a day of pride: the very people who are most likely to have nothing to hang at the entrance of their homes are the weavers themselves. One of the weavers I was speaking with, reflecting on the many carpets she had woven, said: “When I am behind the loom, I want to know where the thing I am weaving becomes a carpet.”

In their homes, the carpet does not become a “carpet.” It remains on the loom; and once it is cut down, it is handed over to the commissioner as quickly as possible, lest it become dirty or damaged in the interval and the weaver’s wage be reduced. The weavers often do not even see the carpet after *pardākht* – the final shearing and finishing of the pile, through which the excess fibres are removed and the design becomes clearly visible

among the knots. In their own words, they do not get to take pleasure in their work. The visual enjoyment of the carpet takes place elsewhere.

Following Venkatesan’s theorisation of traditional craft as a heterotopic social space in which marginalised makers and things acquire agency under conditions defined by powerful others, this sensory displacement also marks a threshold: the object passes beyond the maker’s experiential reach and enters other fields in which its meaning is redefined. In this sense, the heterotopia of the carpet does not simply gather heterogeneous elements; it distributes access and agency. It determines who may appear, under what name, in which role, and through what language presence and meaning become possible. (Venkatesan 2009, 79, 83, 92–93).

This is where the weaver’s position becomes decisive. What is at stake is a place from which she, as maker, could determine her own relation to the meaning, value, and social destiny of what she makes; reclaim that relation in her own language; and be recognized through it. The heterotopia of the carpet does not grant her such a place. It does not erase her, but keeps her agency confined to the work of making the heterotopia possible. The authority to name, interpret, value, display, and determine the destination of the carpet is transferred to fields that operate beyond her lived experience. The weaver is not the author of the very work she creates.

Here, I would like to return to my conversation with that weaver in the second scene. Her question concerns the relation between seeing and ignoring, and it draws our attention to the very grammar of the scene. What

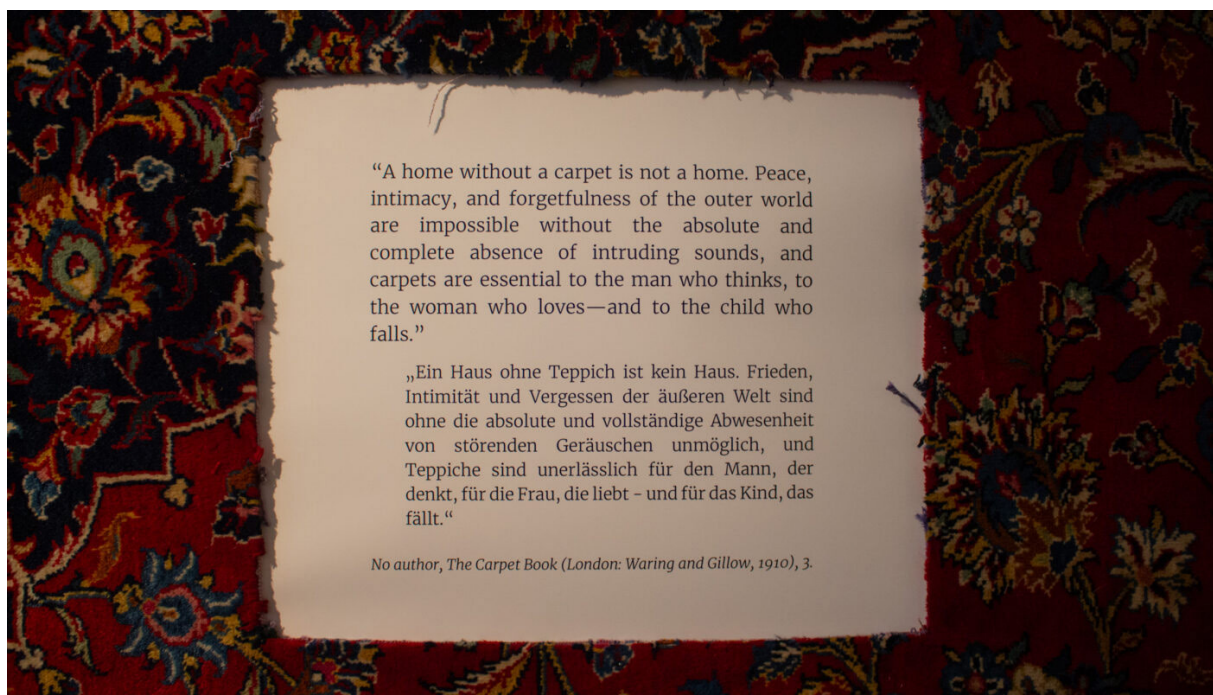


Fig. 2. Exhibition wall label, quoting *The Carpet Book* (London: Waring and Gillow, 1910), *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, POOOL art space, Siegen (2025)



Fig. 3. Curatorial statement, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, POOOL art space, Siegen (2025)

becomes important, therefore, is not simply to bring the weaver's name, narrative, or voice onto the scene, but to introduce a rupture – an interruption in the logic of this scene and in the way the sensible is distributed within it: the staging of a “dissensus” (Ranssiere 2010, 36–38). A dissensus between what is and what could be: the weaver as author. “What if, instead of weaving the market's pre-given designs, you weave your own story?” (Omranı & Aboofazeli 2023,11).

2. Through the tear: A Landscape of Visibilities

The question “What if, instead of weaving the market's pre-existing designs, you weave your own story?” is not simply an invitation for weavers to narrate their lives, nor to replace one design with another. It opens a new regime of curiosity, that turns attention to the relation between the carpet as medium and the weaver as author. Within this modality, the question concerns the relation of aesthetics, narrative, and medium to the weaver. It also concerns the weaver's relation to the socio-political, economic, and aesthetic structures that this mode of storytelling challenges.

In these carpets, aesthetics is understood in the sense of the “perfection of sensation” (Howes 2011, 167) and art is understood not as a final product, but as the name for an endless exploration of the encounter with oneself and the other: the process of facing, affect-

ing, and being affected, rather than merely the completed art object (Biesta 2018, 17). Within this framework, what takes shape in the project as an “artwork” is a form of art that privileges the sensory-relational encounter, while attending to its facets of beauty only secondarily and consequently. The mastery involved in creating beauty is therefore not an end in itself; it functions complementarily, assisting the evocation and intensification of that encounter, rather than replacing it with the formal criteria of the market or with established regimes of taste (Omranı 2023, 132).

In this sense, art-based research is employed not as a technique for “data collection,” but as a shared practice of collective knowledge production. It functions as a “learning-learning environment”: an environment that seeks to “create with [the participants] circumstances in which they can gradually transform their own needs and knowledgeability” (Omranı & Aboofazeli 2024, 2–3). In this environment, knowledge was produced through the movement between weaver, researcher, material, while the relation between weaver and researcher remains itself a constant subject of inquiry.

This shared field of knowledge-practice and modality of curiosity opens a landscape of visibilities: it shifts attention from the carpet as a finished object toward narrative, the medium through which narration takes form, and the narrator herself: Contrary to the commodified narrativity that the “scopic economy” (Moallem 2018, 29) builds, narrative in this field is not the final datum of experience or life. It is a living practice that, as the carpet becomes a medium, continually reconfigures the weaver's relation to herself, to her life, to the materiality of the carpet, to its future, to its audiences, and to the political life of narrative itself. What is narrated does not come to rest at the moment of telling. It moves instead across pattern, voice, text, silence, conversation, and re-reading. It resonates among the weavers, circulates among friends, family members, neighbours, and the local community, returns to the narrator, and at times finds another life through the trajectory of the carpet or through the narrative of another weaver.

Narratives are neither the “pure creations of autonomous individuals” nor unalloyed expressions of subjective experience. Rather, they emerge through ongoing dialogue and redaction within fields of intersubjectivity (Jackson 2002, 22). Moving continuously between the past and the future of something being created in the present, they exceed the level of recounting the past and of retrospective anthropological description and interpretation. In this process, narrative does not merely represent a self or contain a condition; it participates in the making of the relations through which subjectivity and social possibility come into being. It activates possibilities of flight from stabilized structures, of creativity and invention, so that, without

remaining faithful to any pre-given genre or style, it can displace both the carpet and the system of power woven around it from their established domain.

The second displacement occurred within the medium of the carpet itself. Once the carpet became a medium of expression, the discussion could no longer remain at the level of describing or interpreting “the weaver’s life.” The field of dialogue shifted onto a formal-sensory terrain that the weaver herself knew: colour, pattern, density, rhythm, knot, scale, surface, interruption, and the material possibilities of weaving. In this situation, the researcher and the viewer could no longer follow the narrative solely through the languages of explanation, analysis, or translation. The carpet was no longer the visual example of a narrative; it became the scene of the weaver’s act of narrating. In this sense, turning the carpet into a medium did not simply mean adding another expressive tool. It meant relocating the dialogue onto a ground where the weaver’s knowledge moved to the centre, and where the external languages of research, curating, and spectatorship had to readjust their own position in relation to it.

The weaver, too, no longer remained merely the narrator of her own experience; she gradually began to appear in an authorial position. Becoming an author here does not mean simply adding the weaver’s name to the carpet or attaching her narrative to a text. It means that the weaver can determine and claim her relation to medium, form, narrative, audience, and the social destiny of the carpet; that she can opt for what is to be said, what is to remain suspended, what is to become pattern, what is to become voice or text, and what is to remain only within her private relation to the carpet. This displacement entails a reconfiguration of the regime of seeing and hearing. Before being recognized by others as an author, the weaver found herself in a position from which she could intervene in the sites where meaning is expressed and made to appear. The visibility of the weaver as author is therefore not only a matter of being seen as such by others, but also of the weaver coming to see herself as author (Omrani & Aboofazeli 2023, 12).

This displacement reconfigures the regime of seeing and hearing. Before any external recognition, the weaver found herself entitled to intervene in the conditions through which meaning is expressed, withheld, and made to appear. Authorial visibility, therefore, was not only a matter of being seen by others, but also of the weaver coming to see herself, as a weaver, from within an authorial position (ibid.).

In this respect, becoming an author is tied to processes of “subjectivation”: to the emergence of a subject who no longer accepts her pre-assigned place within the regime of carpet production, and who, from within that very regime, opens another possibility for speaking, making, and being seen (Rancière 2010, 139–140):

The Kilim was finished. But many things began: courage, bravery, patience, and the desire for change.

I had to practice change; I had to write it down and learn its lessons. I wanted it, but I did not know how. And now, when I think deeply, I see that The Kilim of Life not only depicted my past, present, and future, but also brought about a profound change within me, in my thoughts and feelings.

The Kilim of Life was a playground for what I desired. Patterns were whatever you liked; materials were whatever you wanted; colors were whatever you preferred. You could give your own meaning to the colors, not what was conventional. Concepts were shaped by your hands and thoughts, and you were the creator of your life’s Kilim. You are the deity of your beliefs.

Today, I am the ruler of this palace and the emperor of my land. Today, I command where each color and each pattern will sit. The Kilim of Life gradually, calmly, and slowly instilled the courage to change within me. It gave me bravery and courage in a gentle way, without any battle or bloodshed, to change while maintaining respect and not harming anyone. I changed, and I learned the language of change.”

—From the notes of M. Zolfaghari, weaver-artist collaborator in the Weaving Memories project and artist of The Kilims of Life collection.



Fig 4,5,6. The Kilims of Life



Fig. 7 & 8. *Bittersweet Mood* By Zoleikha Davari, 2004, exhibited in *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne (2024)

It can be argued that the displacement of the weaver's position is the most central displacement in this process. Through this shift, the weaver is no longer merely the one who becomes visible within pre-existing frames; she is also able to take hold of the other forms of visibility discussed above and redirect them, in her own terms, toward different possibilities for transformation. This, of course, becomes possible through the exhibition of the carpets, their entry into public exposure, and their capacity to intervene in the political regimes of visibility that organize how carpets and weavers are seen.

Here, however, another question emerges. What happens when these carpets reach the public display? What relation do they enter into with audiences, with the scopic economy described earlier, and with the interpretive mechanisms that may shape their public destiny? The question, then, is not simply how the carpets are exhibited, but how the curators define and negotiate the relation between the research field and the public sphere.

3. Patching Together: Curating Multimodality and Aesthetic Indeterminacy

I was eager to know what people thought of my carpet. I would show it, or a photograph of it, to others and wait to hear their responses. Once I heard that someone had

attributed the dotted weave of my carpet to my *tupi*,¹ saying: 'This image is the way she sees the world around her. Because she always wears a *tupi* and sees the world blurred from beneath it, through the weave of its fabric, she has woven the carpet in this way. At first, I was upset. Then I laughed at the relation they had made. I thought a lot about why they had read it like that. I feel that it is not I who see the world from behind the *tupi*; it is they who look at me through the *tupi*, and see nothing of me but the *tupi*.

—From the writings of Zoleikha Davari, weaver-artist in the *Weaving Memories* project.

For me, this scene is not simply a misunderstanding, nor a misreading. It is the moment in which interpretation is activated within an economy of representation and a regime of knowledge. Interpretation, as Sontag writes, is "the revenge of the intellect upon the world"; a response to what appears unfamiliar, strange, or new (1986, 4). We continually interpret and reinterpret the world in order to make sense of what we encounter and to domesticate it within the limits of our own understanding. Through interpretation, we tame the world into the terms of our own regime of knowledge.

¹ *Tupi* refers to a specific form of facial covering used by some Turkmen women after marriage when they go outside the home. It is pulled over the face as a way of concealing it from men outside the circle of kinship.

In such a reading, the work is made to function either as raw evidence of lived reality, from which a rational order must be extracted, or as a network of signs whose “real” meaning is presumed to reside outside the work itself – in identity, gender, class, culture, desire, or ideology. The first risks falling into a representational realism that produces a naïve valorization of what is represented, particularly in encounters with subordinated subjects, and remains, as Spivak argues, bound to positivist empiricism (2010, 44, 232). The second installs a referential relation in which the phenomenon is reduced to a sign pointing beyond itself: to an unconscious force, a repressed desire, a reflection of power structures, ideology, or political relations.

The significance of curatorial mediation emerges precisely here: at the point where the logic of the representational regime encounters the aesthetic regime. The question is how curating can transpose the social, the political, and the economic into the aesthetic. This does not mean refusing interpretation in the encounter; rather, it means producing a simultaneity between social recognition and aesthetic indeterminacy. It means suspending the “unifying logic of action” (Rancière 2009, 121) – a logic that is governed by cause, effect, consequence, and end – and carrying the modality of curiosity opened in the research field into moments of public encounter.

For us, the carpets were not blank surfaces to be filled by the weavers with memories and life stories. They were entangled assemblages of rememory, of remembering and learning; scenes in which conversations emerged between the weaver, herself, and her audiences; fields of response, critique, and return; carriers of hopes, desires, despair, exhaustion, faltering, and fragmented, interwoven imaginaries. Out of these entanglements, each weaver, according to the specific conditions and rules of her own authorial becoming, brought something new into existence.

This assemblage opened possibilities not merely for making the weavers’ narratives visible, but for practising an aesthetic politics of narrative and storytelling through the transformation of the carpet into a medium and the transformation of the weaver into an author.

From this perspective, what is co-curated in this field is not a collection of carpets, nor a set of narratives being prepared for display, nor raw material to be transformed into an artistic output. Rather, what is co-curated are generative and unfinished moments of passage; the “special generic moments of becoming” (Halse 2013, 182, 194).

Co-curation, in this sense, is not the organization of a product. It is a practice of working with thresholds through which experience moves between body, material, narrative, form, silence, voice, and audience. It is a shared epistemic practice between researchers and the weaver-artists: a way of holding the field open as a field of possibility.

Consequently, when the work enters the moment of public presentation, the curatorial question is no longer limited to how the carpets should be displayed, nor to exhibition practice in any narrow sense. It becomes a question of how the field of knowledge-production itself can circulate and be shared publicly. The carpets can no longer be understood simply as artistic outputs or research documents. They have to operate as ways of practising, mediating, and circulating knowledge beyond the boundaries of the academic field. In this regard, two points need to be emphasized:

First, for us, choosing a multimodal mode of presentation did not mean simply adding more media in order to explain the outcome of the work, nor translating or mediating it through a multimedia format. Rather, it expanded the very multimodal modes of knowledge production within the research field itself. It opened the possibility for the weaver-artist collaborators to explore the problem through different media with which they had experiential and embodied familiarity, thereby activating different regimes of expression within the field.

The process through which the carpet became a medium of expression did not only activate its own potentials – pattern, colour, material, and weaving technique. It also enabled the weavers to extend the range of their experience by imagining one art through other arts. In this process, narratives entered the field through poetry, text, sound, image, and song. This condition brought narrative sequences into contact with small sensory events, placing different media in relations of mutual mediation while also holding them in tension.

As a result, sounds, images, patterns, and carpets entered into an aesthetic configuration. In this way, social recognition and interpretation – for both researchers and collaborators – became simultaneous with aesthetic indeterminacy.

This leads to an “inadequate confrontation” (Moten & Harney 2004, 109) with the social: a social that has been, and continues to be, transformed, and that exceeds every attempt to contain it – including attempts to contain the thought of it within the “affective turn”. What remains, then, are the residues of learning to together. (Clough 2007, 28)

Curating the Multimodal, therefore, was not a strategy for producing tension at the level of representing the outcome, nor for obscuring meaning through the entanglement of different media. It was a way of extending the very range of this confrontation.

The exhibition was configured around fourteen completed carpets and one unfinished carpet (accompanied by the weaver’s own account of why it had remained unfinished). These carpets were placed in relation to poetic audiovisual pieces. The installation also included narratives by weavers who had become familiar with the project but, for different reasons, had not been able

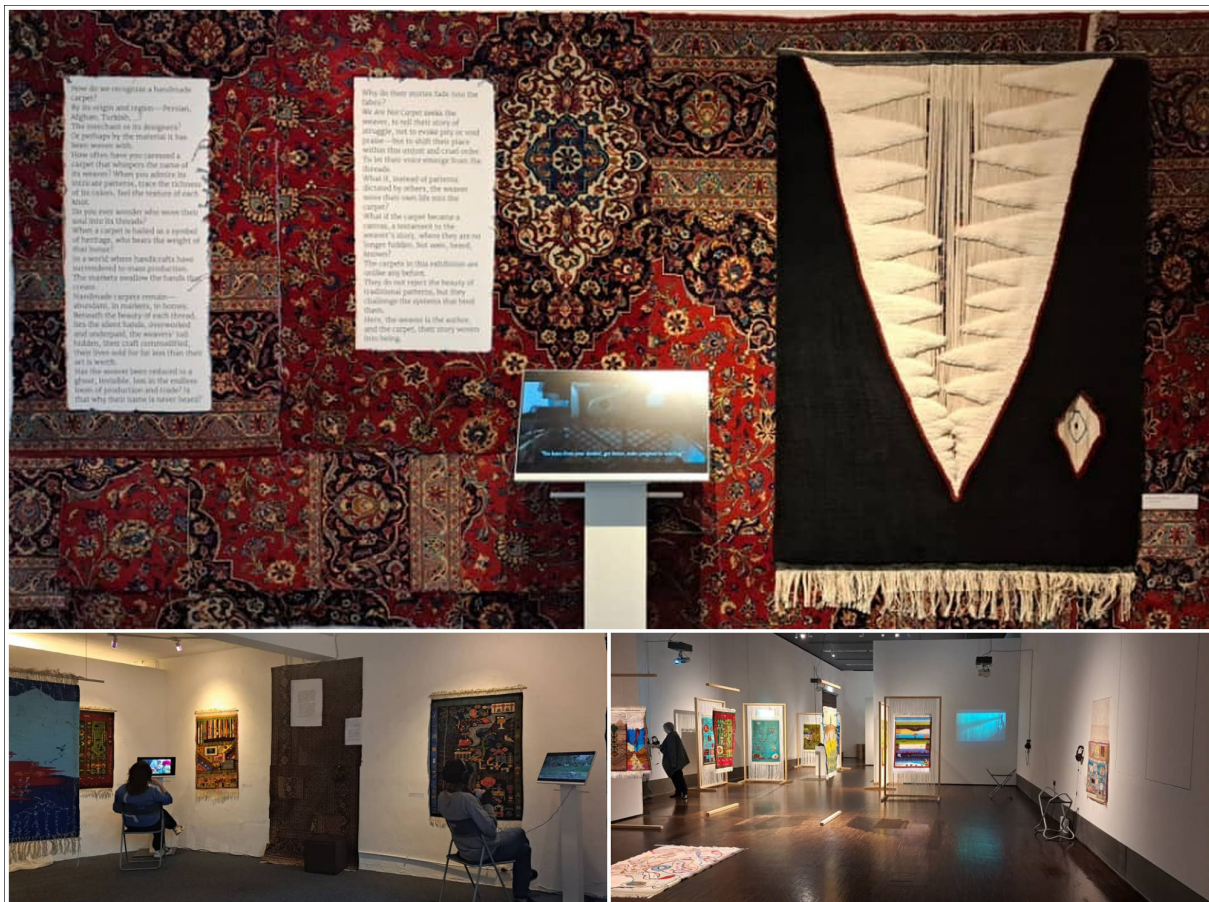


Fig. 9-11: Installation views – *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne (2024) & POOOL art space, Siegen (2025)

to join us; the weavers' handwritten notes; preliminary drawings and sketches for the carpets; historical documents concerning the colonial and economic history of the regime of carpet production and trade; and discourses formed around the carpet through the voices of experts, artists, and researchers.

In a reflection on their experience of the exhibition, one visitor wrote to us:

I was searching for the stories behind the carpets, and it felt as if they were not presented, but as if it was my task to get to know them, to search for them and, above all, as if they were fragments.

The installation was part of an attempt to effect a simple displacement from the more spectacular affects – indignation, pity, shock, guilt, empathy, and aesthetic admiration – toward the less spectacular, but more unstable affect of curiosity (Rancière 2015, 150). Curiosity, here, gathers around a simple question: what would happen if you wove your own story? What would happen next?

Yet it is important to stress that this intervention does not operate outside regimes of visibility. Although it may introduce an interruption into the established distribution of the sensible, it always remains exposed

to reabsorption by the very circuits of power it seeks to disturb. It is from this point that the relation between curating and care can be formulated: not as the protection of the carpets or the weavers from these circuits, but as care for the possibility of connecting the project collaborators – here, the weavers – to the networks of power and knowledge, interpretation.²

Care, in this sense, is a curatorial practice of attending to the public circulation of the carpets so that readings, judgements, and valuations do not remain

² The co-curatorial dimension requires an engagement with the commercial and economic prospects of this project. Indeed, any transformation in the weavers' condition without intervention and altering their exploited and marginalized relationship with the market is not viable. In fact, the hope for improvement in the economic condition should be considered as a primary incentive for the weavers to join this project. Therefore, our commitment to curation extends beyond the traditional or mainstream focus, which primarily emphasizes representation through organizing exhibitions. The urge to engage in the economic aspects is aligned with the co-curatorial prospects which expands the mode of research and is situated within the framework of shared anthropology. The overall idea is to increasingly involve the weavers in the processes, enabling them to independently navigate both the commercial aspects and the exhibitor paths, including public outreach. However, we commit ourselves to stand by this process long enough for it to become self-sustaining. (Aboofazeli & Omrani 2023)

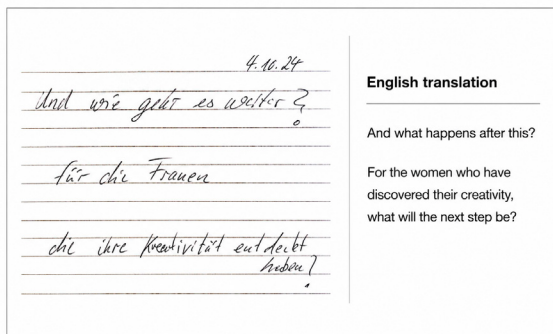


Fig. 12. From the collection of visitor comments, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne. 2024.

distanced from the weaver, but return to the field of her own experience and decision-making.

Later, when we spoke with Zoleikha about the responses to her carpet, she made an important point that is worth recalling here:

“People think that this way of weaving, which makes the image appear dim and blurred, is a sign of blurred vision. But they do not know that, in order to weave like this, you have to look at everything with several times more clarity, and weave with several times more precision”.

Through the movement and combination of colours, she had produced a trembling modulation between colour and light – a quality that led many viewers to associate her work with Impressionist painting. Yet this apparent resemblance also concealed the specificity of the medium. What, in painting, may emerge through the freedom of the brushstroke, the speed of gesture, or the fleeting vibration of light and colour, is produced in carpet through knot-by-knot weaving, the calculation of intervals, the control of density, and the sustained precision of chromatic transition.

Through her mastery of the medium, Zoleikha was able to read the interpretation itself and to measure it against the logic of weaving. The conversation was thereby displaced from the position of external interpretation onto a ground on which the weaver herself also had authority. The work could no longer be read solely through ready-made codes of identity or culture; it had to be negotiated through the logic of a medium that the weaver knows, constructs, and speaks from within.

In this displacement, others too are compelled to leave the secure position of spectatorship and to re-adjust themselves in relation to another literacy which is formed in the mediating space where the audience’s gaze and the weaver’s embodied knowledge encounter one another and place each other under question.

4. Touching the Seams: The Emergence of a New Literacy

I feel that engaging with these carpets – and with what they bring forth – requires a new kind of literacy, one that I must first learn by immersing myself among them and then slowly acquire in order to relate to them.

—Visitor reflection, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS* exhibition, Pool art space, Siegen, 2025

At the Cologne museum, before the exhibition was installed, we were unrolling the carpets one by one, showing them to our museum colleagues, and discussing possible modes of display. One colleague, looking at and touching the carpets with visible excitement and curiosity, asked: “Even if this is her [the weaver’s] life story, I cannot read this story.” That day, Arjang replied: “They are not meant to be read” (Aboofazeli, Omrani and Pfeifer 2025, 85).

The significance of this response did not lie in a refusal of reading, but in the suspension of a horizon of legibility that would already have assigned the carpet, the weaver, and the viewer their respective positions, and would have translated the story into a narrative readable in a language external to the medium itself. The carpets were not meant to become visual texts whose hidden meaning the viewer could decode through an already established literacy.

Literacy, here, is not simply the capacity to understand or decipher. It is part of the very distributive system that determines in advance what can become legible, through which medium and under what conditions; who is authorized to read, interpret, and assign meaning; and who is rendered readable as the object of another’s knowledge. Literacy operates within what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible: it allocates capacities across bodies and positions, making some the bearers of meaning and others the bearers of matter, sign, voice, labour, or experience (Rancière 2010, 36–38, 139–40). It is also shaped by what, following Said, can be understood as a citational logic of knowledge: a self-referential structure in which established texts, authorities, and interpretive frames authorize one another and determine the position from which the object of knowledge becomes legible (Said 1978, 20–22, 67). Reading, therefore, had first to re-constitute its own relation to medium, authorship, and the distribution of positions.

The question “What would happen if, instead of weaving the market’s pre-established designs, you wove your own narrative?” operates precisely at this point as dissensus: not because it adds a new voice to an already existing scene, but because it interrupts the logic of the scene itself. The question of weaving one’s own narrative is not merely an invitation to express ex-

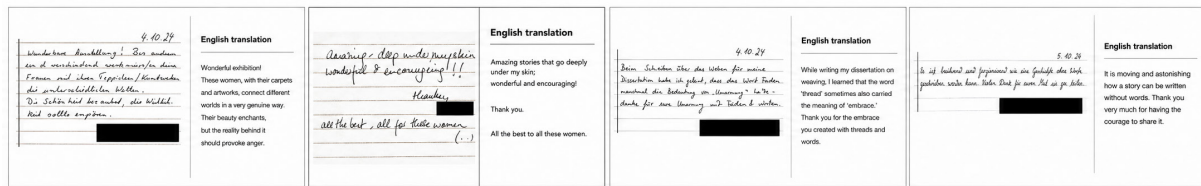


Fig. 13–15. From the collection of visitor comments, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story* exhibition, Rautenstrauch–Joest Museum, Cologne. 2024.

perience. What changes is not only the content of the carpet, but the very grammar of encounter with the carpet: who is able to ask, from where the question can be posed, and from which field of knowledge an answer may emerge.

The new literacy, therefore, is not a literacy for encountering a carpet whose hidden meaning must be deciphered. It is a literacy for encountering a scene in which the weaver, the viewer, the researcher, and the curator are placed within a new distribution of capacities, and in which every act of reading is compelled to reconfigure its relation to the other. Meaning belongs neither to the weaver's intention, nor to the viewer's interpretation, nor to the explanatory language of curating, nor to the expert apparatus of the market or the museum. It takes shape in the movement between these positions, in the seams between medium and narrative, image and sound, labour and authorship, social experience and aesthetic indeterminacy.

This reconfiguration returns us to the weaver's displaced position. The weaver's authorship is not formed

only at the moment of producing the work, nor does it end with the placement of her name beside the carpet. It continues through the circulation of readings, their return, and their negotiation with regimes of interpretation. When readings return to the field of the weaver's experience and decision-making; when misreadings are reread through her embodied and medial literacy; when external interpretation is compelled to negotiate with the logic of weaving, material, density, colour, rhythm, and interruption, the weaver becomes not merely an object of knowledge, but one of the producers of the conditions of knowing.

Curating, then, is neither the protection of the carpets' meaning nor the guardianship of a hidden secret within them. It is a practice of care for the possibility of circulation, return, and rereading. What must be sustained are the unstable sites of contact: the seams where the viewer's reading, the weaver's embodied literacy, the media, and the regimes of interpretation meet without being dissolved into one another.

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Cover image: Installation view of *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 2024. Author unknown / Non-commercial use allowed. Source: Archives of the Weaving Memories project and the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (RJM).

Figure 1: Installation view of *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 2024. Photograph: Arjang Omrani. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figure 2: Exhibition wall label featuring a quotation from *The Carpet Book* (Waring & Gillow, London, 1910), *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, POOOL art space, Siegen, 2025. Photograph: Judith Münster, University of Siegen.

Figure 3: Curatorial statement, *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, POOOL art space, Siegen, 2025. Photograph: Tahereh Aboofazeli. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figures 4–6: *The Kilims of Life*, works by weaver-artist Masoumeh Zolfaghari, Weaving Memories project. Photographs: Arjang Omrani. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figures 7–8: *Bittersweet Mood* by Zoleikha Davari, exhibited in *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 2024. Photographs: Arjang Omrani. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figures 9–11: Installation views of *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 2024, and POOOL art space, Siegen, 2025. Photographs: Tahereh Aboofazeli. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figure 12: Excerpt from the visitor comment book of *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, English translation added; contributor's name omitted. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Figures 13–15: Excerpts from the visitor comment book of *WE ARE NOT CARPETS: I Tell You My Story*, English translations added; contributors' names omitted. Source: Weaving Memories Project Archive.

Author

Tahereh Aboofazeli is currently a PhD candidate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the A.R.T.E.S. Graduate School for the Humanities at the University of Cologne. Her work explores multimodal knowledge production, collaborative storytelling and arts-based research. Her practice is driven by a commitment to inclusive and decolonizing approaches to knowledge-making. Her academic and artistic work is grounded in long-term engagement with marginalised communities, particularly women workers, migrant women and children. Her doctoral research, developed through **Weaving Memories**, critically examines the marginalisation and exploitation of weavers within the hand-made carpet industry, particularly in relation to Persian carpets, and investigates how regimes of authority, gender, and social domination shape authorship, agency, and the conditions of knowledge production. Working collaboratively with weavers, the project explores carpets as medium for storytelling where memory and political relations are woven together.