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Art & Violence





# Nomadic Installations: Janet Echelman

Deborah Frizzell

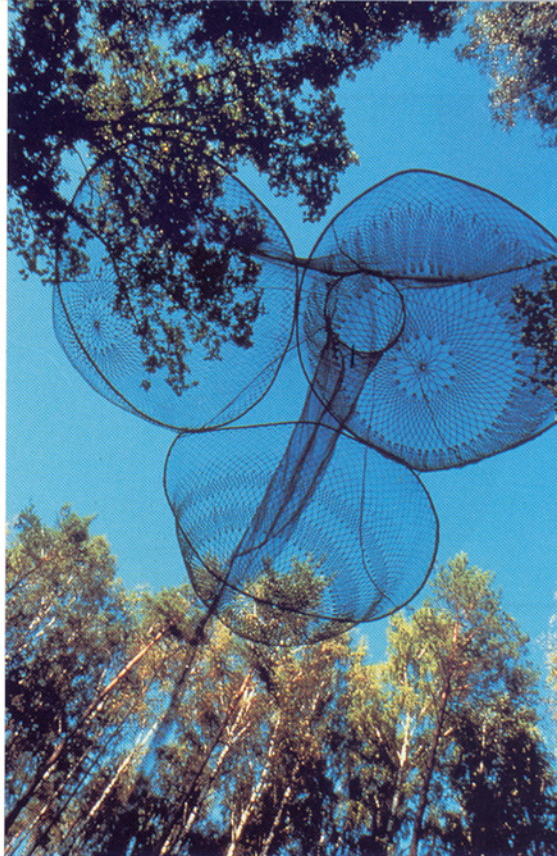
**A**rchitectural and textile structures are generally categorized as binaries or as occupying polarities in which one term is privileged over the other: hard vs. soft, cold vs. warm, permanent vs. ephemeral, architecture vs. fashion. The classically Western dynamics of this oppositional model were challenged in the nineteenth century by German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), who systematically traced the domestic origins of architecture (both Western and non-Western) to the draping of textiles over armatures. In his two volume treatise, "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics" (1860-1863), Semper argued that historically, textiles were the primary space creators.<sup>1</sup> The wall, as the essential element of spatial demarcation, had its genesis in cladding or clothing for the body, in felt robes of braided or twisted fibrous materials. Semper concluded that dressing and masking were as old as human civilization and that artfully dyed and sown textile walls were true representations of the "spatial idea." The history of architecture, Semper theorized, could thus be read as a permanent exchange of materials, as a story of the increasing reinforcement of the robe. Within this "tapestry," the knot comprised the textures and primary patterning of textiles.

In its infinite variations, the knot has become the primary "spatial idea" and structuring agent in Janet Echelman's nomadic installations made from hand-woven nets. After working in the 1980s with acrylic paints, batik dyes, and lost-wax bronze casting, the artist dis-

covered the flexibility of fisherman's nets while living in rural India on a Fulbright grant in the mid-1990s. The versatile knot itself became for Echelman a fluid scaffolding, uniting the concepts of armature and cladding. In true postmodernist fashion, Echelman eschews the oppositional boundaries of craft and fine art, textiles and architecture: "Overall, I want to be the custom tailor who crafts garments for urban airspace, creating for us the feeling of being sheltered by a sweater, lovingly hand-knotted by a relative. I am working to give new visual form to the weightless, invisible spaces of people and architecture."<sup>2</sup>

Echelman articulates tactile but, paradoxically, liminal and interpenetrating spaces in concert with the particularities of the enveloping atmosphere: an airspace of the organic and the inorganic, of columns and arcades, wind and gravity, light and sound. She "nets" space like a fisherman or tailor, working as an artisan, engineer, and intuitive symbol-maker. The artist researches her sites and collaborates with local craftspeople in hand-knotting huge, funnel-shaped nylon nets of varying patterns and colors. Packing and transporting the nets to specific sites, either outdoors in nature or indoors, she configures, shapes, and suspends the nets with stainless steel airline cables. Her voluminous, malleable forms float in space, swaying and tacking, creating both open and closed forms. The physical conditions of the site permeate the net forms, causing the highly metaphoric and allusive shapes to move and breathe. Echelman's netted installations -- *Playpen/Suckle Belt Buckle* (India, 1997), *Trying to hide with your*

Janet Echelman  
Target swooping Down...  
Bullseye!  
2,000sqm.  
Handknotted lace  
sculpture  
Aerial View  
(Sponsored by Boeing)  
Courtesy Florence Lynch  
Gallery, New York



*tail in the air* (Lithuania, 1998), *Eye of the Storm* (Harvard University, 1999), *South India Project*, *In the Garden of Earthly Delights* (India, 1998-2000), *Roadside Shrine: Cone Ridge* (Houston, 2000), *Honnen-In*, *Buddhist Monastery* (Japan, 2001) -- most often evoke awe and wonder, curiosity and mystery, as though the viewer might be entering a giant, transparent body organ, circus tent or ritual robe. The artist's installations engage the body's senses in dual experiences of weight and weightlessness, an impulse toward openness and extension, or a subsequent vulnerability and need for protection.

One of Echelman's over-sized, membrane-like nets was recently installed at Florence Lynch Gallery (December 5, 2001-January 12, 2002). *Target swooping down ... bullseye! (variation #3)* was the third reincarnation for this knotted-net structure. The first was raised in a sleek modernist four-story-tall courtyard at Madrid's International Art Fair (2001) and *variation #2* was installed at the Casa del Cordon in Burgos, Spain, a stately fifteenth century arched courtyard. In all three venues, the red and white funneled *Target* was reconfigured and transformed. Its lace mesh spans 20,000 square feet: 135 feet in diameter and 45 feet in height. In Spain, suspended from ceiling and gallery posts, "Target" was bulbous or jellyfish-like, while at the smaller and narrower Lynch Gallery the net's epidermis of one-and-a-half-million hand-made knots was deflated, contracted and gathered-up, draped from ceiling to floor. Like a falling cascade, it ebbed and flowed around pipes and out the window, over rooftops and back ter-

aces to eventually wrap around an old chimney. Spread on the gallery floor, its knotted linearity alluded to myriad living or inorganic forms: the tail of a plumed creature or the train of a regal robe or the trail of a shed skin, incorporating an intense weaving full of the energy of movement, compressing space and then extending it. From the point of origin in the hand, the net's line formed knots which, in turn, delineated an mutable three-dimensional shape. Repeating the basic form-giving knot in a simple yet adaptable shape, the artist references the geometry of weaving and basketry, while the overall organic configuration recalls the myriad designs of nature. Having found her métier, technique, and materials, Echelman embeds expression and metaphor within minimal form, allowing it to be changeable and nomadic, responsive to people and places, and thus, a carrier of memory. As hybrid Mobius-like forms, Echelman's lace nets, reshaped within nature-and-culture, confound categorical notions: inside/outside, flight/gravity, shelter/exposure, domestic/industrial, linear/cyclical. Her net-forms incorporate notions of flux, continuous transformation, and unpredictable metamorphoses. □

Deborah Frizzell / 1 Gottfried Semper, "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics," *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 181-263. 2 Janet Echelman, unpublished "Artist's Statement," New York, 2000 at web site <[www.echelman.com/docs/janetstate.htm](http://www.echelman.com/docs/janetstate.htm)>.

Left - Right:  
Janet Echelman

*Cone Ridge*, 2000  
59 x 9 x 17  
I-45, Houston, Texas  
Vinyl-Coated Poly

*Tail....*, 1998  
35 x 13 x 13 feet  
Knotted Nylon & Steel  
Museum Center of Europe  
Courtesy Florence Lynch  
Gallery, New York