

This essay takes a trip down several speculative roads, or rather, propositions. After all, a catalyst is some sort of precipitated event that catalyzes an increase in a given rate of activity. The following six propositions are written accounts of several years of latent thoughts and times that felt like catalytic events in my mind: once the door is opened, the paths to follow keep multiplying.

Mesh does that for me.

It's the pleasure of touching it, of seeing someone wearing it or of wearing it oneself without anyone knowing it. It's the rabbit hole of its own textile histories, the satisfaction of making it or finding some. There are countless "mesh moments" that excite me.

I want to think of this specific material in an expansive way, tapping from history, production, and the identity of its wearers and makers. I want to make outrageous connections, meshing eras and places.

I want to use mesh as a purposely unstable reading grid.

mesh is precise, mesh is blurry

The desire to define something is very often limiting and the human propensity for categorization too often finds its origins in dark racist and colonial rhetoric. For this reason, *Oxford English Dictionary* might seem like a counter-intuitive starting point for this discussion—except that in the case of “mesh,” its classifications fail to clearly categorize and instead open up different possible trajectories of thought.

Mesh is both a noun and a verb, a thing and an action. It “entangles as if in a net,”¹ a quite graphic explanation that brings textiles to the center of the term. And while its etymology remains blurry, it most likely comes from the Proto-Indo-European *mezg* meaning “to knit, twist, plait.”

As a noun, mesh is both a “material formed of a network” and a “material containing a pattern of holes.” Nothing about this definition suggests that this material is a textile. Actually, what really defines mesh is its network of holes. Yet, nothing indicates that this *network* or *pattern* has to be regular, it simply implies repetition. Nothing even indicates the size of the holes or what the substrate is made of.

From the mesh tank-top one might wear at the club to the fence at the border of a country, mesh is an expansive term that refuses categorization, therefore lends itself very well to self-identification and appropriation.

Théo Bignon, *Entre*, detail, 2019.
Wood, paint, pearl trim, various mesh fabrics,
steel installation. Photo credit: Brittany Laurent.





mesh is matter, mesh is void

Defined by its holes, mesh is probably the only surface characterized by the absence of the material that it is made from. Materiality and void sit on equal grounds. And while the number of holes relative to the amount of material can shift from zero to one-hundred percent, there will always be a relation of codependency. On the molecular level, every surface can become mesh.

The metaphoric potentials of these holes are boundless. Psychologically, Jacques Lacan believed that no matter how much a patient would share their thoughts and emotions, the gaps and omissions in the stories were the most productive. Psychoanalyst Parveen Adams described Lacan's psychoanalytic process as:

that which from time makes a stuff of [what is said], not borrowed from the imaginary, but rather from a textile, where the knots speak of nothing but the holes which are there.²

The holes can be that space of trauma, of repression, and of loss. Worn, they can be an empowering way to decide exactly how much of your body you want to reveal.

Théo Bignon, *F* (Old Sins Cast Long Shadows)*, 2019. Hand-embroidered glass beads on mesh, ejaculate, wood, paint, 22"x16." Photo credit: J. Houston.

mesh is the grid, but better

Let's take a break from the holes and focus on what is present. Let's go even further and put the structure of mesh in conversation with art history and the modernist grid.

A kind of icon of modernism, the grid is also a mesh. Rosalind Krauss's seminal text "Grids" focuses on these "geometricized," "antinatural," and "antireal" structures and how they can be read through a mesh lens.³ "The peculiar power of the grid," she writes, "arises from its potential to preside over this shame: to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time." Mesh has this same power, but enhanced by the fact that it is a physical object and not purely mental construction.

Mesh is a better grid. While it loses the infinite potential of the grid because of the limits of its material, it fulfills the grid's true non-hierarchical promise by materializing the codependent relationship between material and holes. One needs the other to exist. Mesh can also stretch and take any shape it wraps. It doesn't have to be "flattened" or "geometricized." It can be as organic and voluminous as it wishes. It doesn't need to be straight, and actually often follows diagonal and deviant lines.

Mesh is a grid that acknowledges the textile nature of paintings, a field that is often too occupied with representing grids to realize that under the coats of Gesso lies a gridded canvas.

Théo Bignon, *Cruise*, detail, 2019.
Various mesh fabric, thread, felt, variable
dimensions. Photo credit: Brittany Laurent.





mesh is antique, mesh is cutting-edge

Mesh and humankind go hand in hand. Mesh is a primal structure that will be around until we are gone. There is no birthplace of mesh; it was simultaneously invented in various parts of the world as a mechanism of survival. Nets were the first mesh structures, invented to provide shelter and facilitate hunting. They were originally made out of whatever knotted natural fibers were available; they were then turned into carriers and tent-like structures by layering other material on top.

Since those early manifestations, mesh was constantly reinvented, perfected, transformed. The functional net eventually gave to filet crochet, which opened the way to lace. Mesh went from necessity to coveted luxury, from hand crocheted cricket wear to digitally engineered and thermo-sealed athletic wear. Increasingly, mesh is ever-present. Today, this ancestral structure serves as the basis for the most advanced digital modelling and computer renderings.

The first nets were made of perishable materials and they have all disappeared; only a few entanglements remain. It is a lost and fragmented origin story that reminds me of queer identities: we have always existed, and so much of our history is inaccessible or unknown. We are often left only with scraps of narratives.

Théo Bignon, *X (The Hole)*, detail, 2019.
Hand-marbled polyester mesh, thread, wood,
paint, found handle, 31" x 80" x 11" (leaning).



mesh is trash, mesh is a \$3,400 Dior tote bag

Mesh has been in and out of style repeatedly since the 1960s in the United States and Western Europe. However, now it seems it's here to stay in our athleisure-filled pandemic days.

Tacky, gauche or even sometimes considered a serious *faux pas*, mass-produced mesh has had a bit of a bad rep from tastemakers over the decades. It's either too femme or too butch: what decent person would wear fishnet in public?

It is specifically for its relationship to indecency that mesh became a cherished textile for misfits, activists and counter-cultural groups in the second half of the 20th century. Radical Dykes, SF Clones, and punks found in this porous material an object of radical visibility with a refusal of normativity and of the erasure of sexuality. Mesh was a semiotic marker for the deviant, purposely injecting eroticism into wardrobes, one hole at a time.

Now mesh is mainstream again. Mesh is for health freaks and the ones that love their gear. It satisfies the desire for slick contemporary design while being warm and cozy. It's an inexpensive utility fabric that has the power to become a luxurious overpriced bag.⁴

Look around, you will see it everywhere.

Théo Bignon, *Us*, detail, 2018-ongoing.
Hand-embroidered glass beads, pearls, ribbons,
leather, rubber, mesh fabric, trims on suede, ejaculate,
jockstraps, 23"x18." Photo credit: Carlos Ribeiro.





mesh is gay, mesh is queer

Two major mesh moments happened in 1993, the year I was born.

The first occurred when the toy company Mattel decided to rebrand and update their tired old Ken Doll. The results: blond highlights, a cock ring necklace and, last but not least, a lavender mesh shirt with a matching pleather vest. There are no better words than the ones of fashion columnist Dan Savage to describe this cultural glitch: “The makers saw Prince and Madonna’s dancers wearing it in her concerts and films and, as it happens, what ACT UP and Queer Nation fags and dykes were wearing to demos and raves.”⁵ This accidental best-seller proved that, when filtered through the mainstream, the gayness of mesh is misunderstood and becomes comical. When the makers of *Earring Magic Ken* realized what they had done, they removed it from the market. It was just too gay for Mattel.

The second major moment was the publication of the seminal text *Tendencies* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in which she defines queerness as an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality are not made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”⁶ It is no accident that one of the pillars of early queer theories was to use mesh to understand queerness. After all its structure was seen as “unnatural” by modernist discourse but it has also

Théo Bignon, *Rush (Never Fake It)*, detail, 2019.
Hand-sewn upholstery trims on mesh, wood, paint,
25” x 17.” Photo credit: J. Houston.

been around since the beginning of human culture. Mesh represents the impossibility of ever truly defining gender.

Mesh is ever-present in my work. I embroider on mesh, I hand-marble mesh; I cut it, restitch it, shape it... I engage in never-ending play with this material.

From the *Oxford English Dictionary* to Sedgwick, these six propositions are ones that I carry with me constantly in the studio; I dwell on them and make them connect in one way or another. Each of these speculations are embedded in my work. In a way similar to the bi-faceted power of mesh—to cover and to reveal—my work is about camouflage: sex club narratives in colorful marbled mesh or shiny beads that encode what is seen as “deviant” into a decorative pattern. I enjoy having different audiences understand the works differently. A pearl necklace might be a sexual reference, a kitsch or campy element, or simply a decorative trim. I encourage viewers to decode the work for themselves.

While mesh can be an obvious metaphor for a politics of visibility, its inherent queerness goes deeper than the simple binary of exposure and concealment. Mesh is a perfect record of time. It holds and presents stains, wears, and repairs that act as evidence of human experiences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have taken on a project that involves diaristic embroidery, on a piece of cotton mesh left in the uneven shape I have found it. I stitch a bead onto it at least every day. It is a pandemic journal, centered on

Théo Bignon, *Pandemic Journal*, detail, 2020-ongoing.
Hand-embroidered glass beads on found mesh, 30” x 14.”



the repetitive domestic experience we are currently sharing, looking at the erotic and poetic potential of this daily textile act.

Notes

- 1 “Mesh.” Oxford English Dictionary.
- 2 Clio Padovani & Paul Whittaker, “Twists, Knots and Holes: Collecting, The Gaze and Knitting The Impossible”, in Jessica Hemmings, ed. *In The Loop, Rethink Knitting* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010), 3.
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, “Grids.” *October*, vol. 9 (1979), 51–64.
- 4 For example, see the Dior Book Tote (Black Mesh Embroidery). https://www.dior.com/en_ca/products/couture-M1286ZWRA_M911-dior-book-tote-black-mesh-embroidery
- 5 Dan Savage, “Dan Ken Comes Out: Barbie’s boyfriend sports a cock ring,” *The Chicago Reader*, July 22, 1993. <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ken-comes-out/Content?oid=882402>
- 6 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.