Over the past decade, Steve Zeitlin, director of City Lore and chief curator of Weavings of War, Ariel Zeitlin Cooke, curator, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, folklorist and founding board member of City Lore, had numerous discussions that helped shape the Weavings of War project. This conversation took place on June 4, 2004.

BKG: The first thought I had was, what is it about cloth as a medium that lends itself to memory?

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is the great example. Frankly I think of the AIDS quilt as a war quilt: there is a fight, there is a battle, there are casualties. Here we have the use of textile arts not only to commemorate the dead, but also to mobilize people around a collective concern. It’s a brilliant concept. In this show, the Latin American *arpilleras*
come closest to the AIDS quilt because they’re made up of pieces of fabric rather than being embroidered or woven. They are connected to the banners we hold up in protest movements and on parade. There is something unique about the ways that textiles figure, or function, in mobilizing people.

AZC: Well, people tend to make textiles together. Sometimes it’s a group that forms for the purposes of this work, like the AIDS quilt. There are workshops where people trade designs, and talk about what they are doing. A lot of the women represented in this show are women who are just learning to raise their voices. If you are afraid, it’s much easier to speak up in a group.

BKG: Yes, there is a social aspect of it. The relationship of sewing, embroidery and weaving to the ongoing business of daily life is of a very different order than with most other craft media. For example, with pottery, you’ve got your hands full of clay, you have tasks that are time specific—the drying, the kilns, the firing. Fabric arts are clean. The work can be picked up and put down. You can sew, embroider, weave, talk to other people, and keep your eye on a child. You can sew with other people or alone. A piece of embroidery is portable: you can put it in a bag and pull it out when you’re traveling or work on it to fill time when you’re waiting.

There is something also about the quietness of textiles, the quietness in their making and in their nature. They are painstaking, intricate, precise, unrelenting. The repetition and patterning—the grid of warp and woof—gives a meditative quality to the experience of making of them. It strikes me that there’s an opportunity for the inner experience that must take place when you make textiles that address the trauma of war.

AZC: Those crafts have their own allure.
**BKG:** Absolutely, and they have their own life. They continue even in high tech societies. There’s a knitting craze at the moment. The wealthiest people in the country are busy cross-stitching, doing needlepoint, quilting.

So that was one thought, textiles in relationship to memory. But also, the way in which textiles figure in war—whether it’s as flags, banners, regalia, on coffins—

**AZC:** —and bandages.

**BKG:** Yes, there is something about the connection of cloth to war and pain and wounds and in relationship to memory, that is unique—and much broader than this exhibition. Not clay, not wood, not metal. What is it about cloth? Cloth is for the most part soft and it’s all about touch. You handle it in order to make it and there is something especially tactile about it. It yields, it bends, it wraps, it ties. It comforts and protects. It warms. But it can also hide and hurt, in the case of masks, blindfolds, gags, garrottes, and cloth used in suffocation and strangulation. It is really of a very different order from other materials, very unlike metal or wood or clay.

**AZC:** People have asked, “Why don’t these women use the new media they are encountering?” But how would they get hold of a TV camera in a refugee camp? This is an art of poverty.

**BKG:** An art of poverty? Let me take the opposite position and suggest that Americans and Europeans have lost a sense of the value of textiles. Historically, textiles were enormously valuable; the silk brocade for a wedding gown could cost the equivalent of a merchant’s income for a year and the dress would be passed down for generations. Think of Scalamandré, that incredible company in New York with the antique jacquard looms that is moving its premises to North Carolina. Some of their textiles cost four thousand
dollars a yard. This price is not a modern aberration; it’s a holdover from a time when textiles were worth a fortune.

I would say what is luxurious about these textiles is the time and labor invested in them. Not just in the sense of brute force or energy but literally time, concentrated time. The rugs, the weavings, and the embroidered tapestries especially are like a time bank. And we don’t value their work in quite the same way as we might if were made here in New York City by a skilled craftsman who based his prices on an hourly wage.

AZC: Fabrics are incredibly time-consuming and expensive to produce by hand. In fact, it’s not an accident that textiles were the first industry to be industrialized.

BKG: Quite! Before the cotton gin, cotton fabrics sometimes cost more than silk.

AZC: But when I look at the materials used to make these textiles, I think of how creative people are in using what little they have. There is no gold thread, no silk, no velvet here. Some of the Palestinian intifada dresses are polyester. The rugs have harsh, aniline dyes. So that’s what I mean by an art of poverty.

BKG: I’ve noticed that the examples that are at the center of this exhibition, the ones that dominate the exhibit, are woven or embroidered. The Latin Americans are the one group that appliqué. And there are no painted or printed ones.

AZC: I never found any textiles of this kind painted with explicit motifs of war. There is one group of quilts that are Israeli, that have been made by the settlers, organized by an American emigrant. They’re made by Israeli mothers who have lost their children in the violence, with giant photo silk screens of the children’s faces. It’s very powerful but it doesn’t depict the war itself.
BKG: In my view, there is something strangely disembodied about the images of weapons and helicopters appearing on some of these textiles, like the Montagnards and the Afghans. I think it has to do with all the things the weavers know and are thinking and talking about that are not on the textile. The Hmong textiles tell a complete story: there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Montagnard weavings with the helicopters don’t, the Afghan rugs with the Kalishnikovs don’t.

The technique is also important. With the Peruvian *arpilleras* and the Hmong story cloths, the “folkiness” lends them an innocence that makes the sense of victimhood absolutely unbearable. They make war seem like infanticide because the figures are so miniaturized, so sweet, so nonthreatening. In fact it’s extremely difficult to convey such extraordinary pain in such a sweet medium. They have a quality of sadness.

AZC: Well, they show people crying.

BKG: Yes, they actually show emotion. You don’t find that in the Afghan examples. They are the only ones that don’t depict people.

AZC: Sometimes the Hmong story cloths show a kind of snapshot of a battle scene.

BKG: But they show the soldiers, not just the weapons. In the Afghan rugs there is a certain glamorization of war; the Afghan weavers seem to be fetishizing the instruments of war because they don’t show them in relationship to the disaster they inflict. You could even read that as desire for the weapons not unlike the fascination that boys and men have with model airplanes and tin soldiers. If you can’t have it, you can make a picture of it.

AZC: Well, the Afghans did capture some of the enemy’s weapons and use them.
**BKG:** Do we know that these weavers were against the Soviets and not with them?

**AZC:** Oh, yes. There was a very small number of Afghanis who supported the Russians.

**BKG:** But what are those rugs about? They are not about pain.

**SZ:** One thing that strikes me about this whole phenomenon of war textiles is that some of the people are fascinated with the technology. They want to get the depictions exactly right. They never saw a helicopter before and they are fascinated just as we would be with a new gadget we saw for the first time.

**AZ:** But the Afghan rugs are complaining, they are fiery and angry.

**BKG:** Yes. There is also an element of protest in the Peruvian, the South African, and, most of all, in the Palestinian *intifada* dresses. Not just that they put the Dome of the Rock on the hem of a skirt, but they are already expressing defiance just by wearing the traditional dress.

**AZC:** The Palestinians actually adapted this garment from the traditional dress. It was revived in the first *intifada*.

**BKG:** That’s what gives the dress its value and power. It’s not the continuity with tradition. Its power is in being *redeployed*—being dropped and picked up again. It’s not a simple continuity.

Another thing about these textiles is that they are transactional. In your essay you describe some of the transactions: between a refugee worker and an aid worker, between Afghan rug-weavers and their markets, for example.
In the transaction the interesting question arises, is a war rug a trophy? For whom? Is it a souvenir, a memento? War trophies have a very difficult history that continues into the present day. For example, the gun Saddam Hussein was holding when he was captured was given to Bush as a gift.

SZ: And now he has it in the Oval Office.

BKG: For a war trophy! Of course it’s grotesque. Apparently some of the photographs that were taken at Abu Ghraib in Iraq were intended to intimidate new prisoners, but the others were a kind of virtual war trophy to be e-mailed around the world.

AZC: The Nazis were famous for taking souvenirs of war and Americans collect Nazi memorabilia.

BKG: War trophies are transformed by their connections to painful experiences. Whether they are loot, confiscated weapons, or photographs, they are the mementoes that the victors take away from the scene of battle. So they are literally part of the battle scene, a material witness to it. Similarly, the war textiles in this exhibition were made in response to war, whether during or after the event. It is part of their provenance. The object is literally part of the battle scene, a material witness to it.

SZ: Some collectors don’t like these textiles because they’re so different from the work beforehand and they worry about their authenticity. What do you think of that, Barbara?

BKG: What does authenticity mean here? It’s not necessarily faithful adherence to tradition. I would suggest that the war textile derives its authenticity from the maker’s experience—not from its resemblance to the textiles made before the war. If we were to
outsource the manufacture of war rugs so that Turkish immigrants living in Marseilles were making them, those wouldn’t be “authentic” war rugs—if you get my drift—though in a world of knockoffs, it would be something else and even interesting in its own right.

SZ: I like the way you’re defining authenticity here.

BKG: There is something insidious about it when finicky collectors complain that these rugs are not authentic. I think it is perverse. Frankly, I wouldn’t care if the Hmong were painting on canvas! Who cares? What matters are their experience and their expression of it, whether that is painting or embroidery, writing or talking into a tape recorder, whatever it might be. Why does it matter that they didn’t use it before? Why is that of any relevance whatsoever?

Consider the ethical implications: You’ve got people who are desperately poor and they can’t even sustain themselves and you’re holding to the idea that to encourage or even introduce innovation would somehow contaminate their craft and make it less authentic. It doesn’t make sense to me.

AZC: In folklore they call the people who continue traditions “tradition bearers” and sometimes it’s a very heavy weight.

BKG: But that’s also the most passive possible way to talk about them—they don’t make, they don’t create. They just carry, they transmit, they bear the burden. Where is this language coming from? It’s oriented towards the tradition, not the person. The idea is that it’s the persistence of the tradition that counts and the bearers can die as long as there’s more of them coming afterwards. Frankly, it’s the heritage approach, the idea that crafts are better as heritage than as life.
AZC: Something occurs to me in the context of this discussion about market. People in the museum establishment loved [the preliminary version of] this exhibit. But they kept turning us down until after 9/11. Now we have a tour with seven sites. Yet we don’t think we’re “selling out.”

BKG: Yes, we encourage innovation in our world but not in theirs. Innovation is the basis of capitalism, of the market, of product differentiation. But we consider innovation anathema in these other societies because we think it makes them less of what we want them to be.