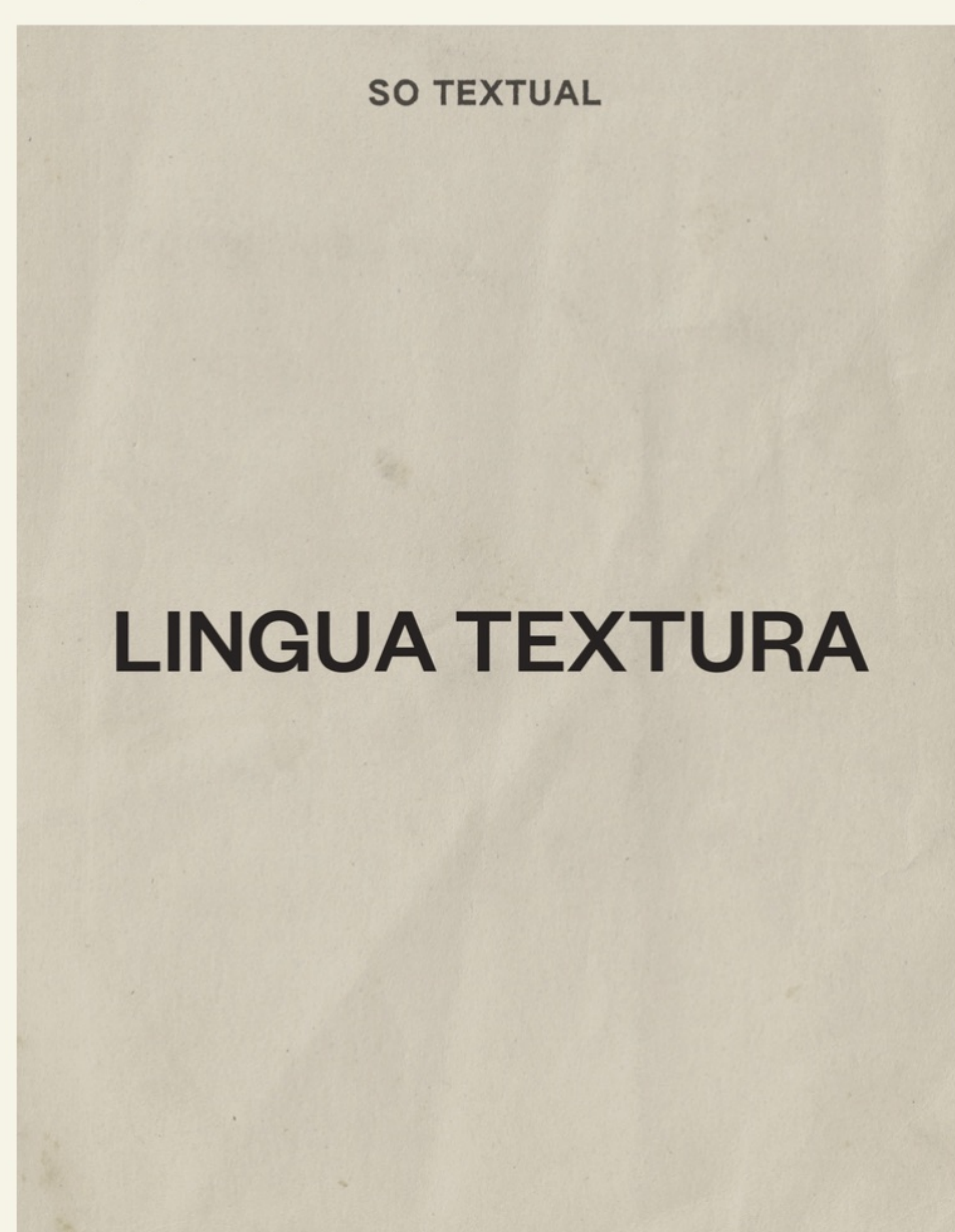


*Of Mention: Lenore Tawney, Jane Alison, Hilton Als, Olivia Laing, Tarfia Faizullah, & more*

## WHAT IS “TEXTURE” IN LITERATURE?

*Lingua Textura 001*

Written By **Grace Ebert**



Writer Grace Ebert joins us for a monthly column that explores the texture of language, how it permeates our reading practices, and the space it produces for thinking about literature, art, and all forms of creative expression.

Although she came to textile arts later in her life, Lenore Tawney (1907-2007) established a new language for the discipline. She helped catapult fiber, which had previously been relegated to the realms of craft and design, into the art world by expanding its technical and conceptual possibilities. Utilizing linen, cotton, and wool in neutral tones, Tawney draws attention to the intricacies and texture of her pieces, which she insisted suspend from the ceiling for full 360-viewing rather than be hung against a wall. Her *Woven Forms*, in particular, meld open, free-flowing segments with perfectly executed lacing to create sculptural works unlike those exhibited at the time.

Considering the feel and appearance of Tawney’s fluctuating topographies is crucial to understanding both why the forms are so groundbreaking and how they encapsulate the unparalleled vision and skill of their creator. Texture, in Tawney’s works, permeates well beyond the oscillating surfaces and is essential to the structure itself: in one piece, tight rows might secure the loose threads gently billowing to create negative space, and in another, a seemingly minimal crisscross diverts the course of otherwise vertical fibers. The most innovative qualities of Tawney’s works are apparent when studying her then-unconventional approach to knots, plaits, and other techniques. In part, the beauty and originality of the forms are apparent when the viewer encounters the intrinsic connection between textile and texture.

When thinking linguistically, the link between these two becomes even more obvious. Both textile and texture, in addition to “text,” are derived from the Latin root *texere*, meaning “to weave.” Whether referencing the written word or a tapestry, the act of creating texture involves interlacing individual elements to establish a cohesive whole. Type adds visual texture to the otherwise blank page, and even audiobooks attune the listener to the cadence and tonal shifts of the speaker’s voice. Content, of course, adds another layer and helps develop what Jane Alison describes as “the medium... through which a reader moves.”

“How do writers create those primary sensations of speed or sluggishness, transparency or murk, that a reader meets in our medium? ... I want to go down to the true elements, the tiniest particles a reader encounters: letters, phonemes. These gather to form words, which line up as sentences, which clump in paragraphs or *crots* (prose stanzas, *stanza* being Italian for “room”), everything flowing over white space.”

Reading, therefore, is an inherently textured practice, one that asks us to nestle into the grooves of language and narrative, to pick apart the singular ideas or fractured thoughts and grasp how, once strung together in a unique pattern, they come to constitute the whole.

Take Olivia Laing’s latest book, for example. Revolving around the story of Wilhelm Reich, a Freud devotee turned rebel psychoanalyst, *Everybody* unfurls into a wide-reaching consideration of what it means to inhabit a body. Laing draws on the personal, the political, and the historical, including the story of wielding her tiny frame as protest and recounting Susan Sontag’s incredibly aggressive approach to cancer treatment. Each anecdote or fact, which sometimes appear only loosely fastened on first reference, emerge in the end as a dense web evocative of the fibrous connective tissue in the body itself.

Similarly, there’s the genre-defying work of Hilton Als who’s known for braiding together strands of criticism, personal experience, and meditations on race, sexuality, and class. In “Revealing and Obscuring Myself on the Streets of New York,” a moving essay from 2018 addressing love and survival, Als imagines the distinct feel, or texture, of the pieces he’s not yet written: “Of course, they’ll be made up of many things, including questions, and images, and gestures, because we live in a world of too many things and half-understood selves.”

Poetry has its own manner of texturing a page with line breaks and white space we might liken to the intentional gaps of Tawney’s sculptures. Tarfia Faizullah’s lyrical collection *Registers of Illuminated Villages* entangles lives lived and lost in Iraq, Turkey, Michigan, and Texas, twisting distant locations together through tragedy, haunting grief, and survival. Faizullah produces texture in form and movement, with works like “Self-Portrait As Slinky” impersonating the stretching leaps of coiled springs descending down the page. Lines like “lurching forward / in the dark, another / soaked black ringlet, / that sudden halting—” abruptly ends the piece and similarly mimics the toy’s staggered stumble.

In the case of Laing or Als or Faizullah, texture adds dimension and generative spaces for thinking and finding one’s positioning in the world. But art, as Maggie Nelson argues in *On Freedom*, can have many impulses. Quoting Sontag’s “On Style,” Nelson writes, “For many—perhaps even for most—life feels more ample, more livable, ‘wider and more various,’ when it doesn’t reduce to one long episode of caretaking or repair. It feels good when it has more texture, more space for different kinds of pursuits, compulsions, and delights, even those with no apparent use value.” Texture, however it manifests, is about feeling, about moving the reader to comprehend, to act, to respond, to wallow in the coarseness of someone’s words, to luxuriate in the softness of their contentment. Through sleek, straightforward prose or an entangled tale that requires a fine-tooth comb to parse, texture is ultimately where artistry blossoms.

As its name suggests, *Lingua Textura* will center on the texture of language. By pairing literature with visual art, film, and various creative outputs, these essays will position texture as an entry point for deeper, perhaps even fertile, spaces to engage with writers and their works. The idea is to explore texture’s presence and import and how, just as in Tawney’s *Woven Forms*, it’s rarely confined to the surface.



Yousuf Karsh, Lenore Tawney, 1959

Sources:

*Meander, Spiral, Explode* by Jane Alison

“Revealing and Obscuring Myself on the Streets of New York” by Hilton Als

*Registers of Illuminated Villages* by Tarfia Faizullah

*Everybody* by Olivia Laing

*On Freedom* by Maggie Nelson

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