New Material as New Media: The Fabric Workshop and Museum

I was first introduced to the Fabric Workshop as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the mid-1990s. My instructors explained how the projects conceived by the Fabric Workshop's famous artists in residence were being produced on a kind of mind-numbing scale. I remember hearing, for example, how each and every one of the thousands and thousands of flower petals comprising Jim Hodge's piece Every Touch (1995) had to be stitched to one another, then restitched into large "tiles" which were stitched again into even larger tiles to attain the object's eventual, impressive (192 cm sq.) size. Then there were Chris Burden's seven-foot-tall police uniforms. My fellow students and I learned how those uniforms had been produced to exacting LAPD standards, all the way down to their enameled steel badges. We also learned about the enormous collaborative efforts involved in creating Ann Hamilton's installation work, and this information, too, left me spellbound.

To me and many of my friends at the Art Institute, the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia came to represent a sort of textile artist's North Pole, where anything that could be dreamed up could then really be produced--impeccably, by teams of efficient, knowledgeable, and art-savvy apprentices. I was fascinated that such a place existed for artists and even more fascinated that the place had its roots in the world of fabric. New Material as New Media: The Fabric Workshop and Museum addresses my curiosity--which I know that many people share--about the goings-on at...