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NEW DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.

Writing Textile, Making Text: Cloth and Stitch as Agency for Disorderly Text

Catherine Dormor

The key aim of this paper is to consider and reflect upon means and ways that knowledge gained through textile practice, material-conceptual tacit knowledge, can be expressed through textile processes and technologies derived from that practice itself.

Sarat Maharaj writes of artist-theorist Janis Jefferies' articulation of her relationship with textile practice and theory as 'The drenched-in-voice quality of [her] think-speak-write sequences, their soaked-in-oral feel signals the pivotal element of her expression – unscriptedness'¹. In this Maharaj highlights an indivisible oral-practice-textual interplay and in this sense foregrounds Jefferies' practice in terms of a set of intimate bodily technologies. In consciously drawing upon textile-rooted language and material practice here, I want to actively highlight the specifics that such processes refer to in terms of form, function, embodiment and language, whilst opening themselves up metaphorically and conceptually. In this they share that 'drenched-in' quality that Maharaj finds in Jefferies' writing-thinking practice.

The framework or matrix of knowledge that I will be proposing and outlining here draws particularly on the relationships and intertwinings between text, textile and *techne* (craftsmanship). These notions not only share etymological roots, but they can be considered also as formative processes and technologies that together establish an interwoven structure in which writing and making are brought together as concomitant partners of knowledge-production. The matrix proposed posits language and text as modes of practice alongside and in mixture with material-based textile practice suggesting writing textile and making text as emergent forms of articulating text-textile-*techne* interplay. This also serves to preserve the relationship between theory and practice as one in which practice articulates theory at the same time and in the same space as theory or text materialises meaning.

In order to explore this matrix further, this paper will focus upon the process and technologies of seaming and making seams. As such this paper takes as its point of departure ways in which tacit knowledge caught up in the foundational processes and activities of making are brought into intimate relationship with written and aural modes of communication. These material processes suggest a generative and communicative conceptual-material model for thinking-making-speaking about and the intimacies of making.

Seaming

'The hand-stitched line acts as a tracing - as if my fingers were slowly tracing the pathways that I am stitching as a way to map them and as a way to understand them.'²

The idea of making a seam will be considered here primarily as a concept by which to trace a pathway between theory and practice (text and textile). This paper will explore techniques and processes for making seams to create this pathway both metaphorically and literally. In this, seaming will be taken in terms of its capacity to extend the cloth, but will also address aggressive and disruptive aspects of needle and thread passing through the textile.

In this paper there will be a focus upon the status of conjunctions, crossings, edges, boundaries and exchanges, thus drawing on precedents such as Janis Jefferies³, Elaine Showalter⁴, Mitchell⁵ and

¹ Maharaj in Victoria Mitchell, *Selvedges: Janis Jefferies - Works Since 1980* (Norwich: Norwich School of Art & Design 2000) 8

Paula Owen⁶. These ideas will be extended by tracking a route from the technicalities of the processes involved in making seams through to develop a methodological model for writing and thinking *about* textile practice within an expanded field of visual culture.

In considering the idea of making a seam, or seaming, as a concept by which to trace a pathway between practice and theory, this paper will be arranged around three aspects for thinking about, and caught up in, the process: seaming as passage, seaming as suturing and seaming as trace. These three aspects, taken together, offer ways for thinking about and assembling fragments of narrative into intricate, intimate and expansive constructions, constructions within and upon which theoretical and practice-based perspectives can be brought together. This establishes a mode of thinking through making that foregrounds plurality and multiplicity rather than linear narratives that are constructed in terms of beginning, middle and end.

The American literary critic Elaine Showalter presented a paper, 'Piecing and Writing' in 1985, in which she looks to the practice of quilting, particularly the patching and piecing techniques, as a way to understand American women's writing. In this essay, which has recently been re-published⁷, Showalter identifies three phases of work: piecing or sewing together fragments of fabric, patching or joining units together, and quilting or attaching the patchwork to its backing. She establishes parallels between these and written language, namely the sentence, the structure of the story or novel, and the imagery or symbolism used. Quoting art critic Lucy Lippard, Showalter asserts that 'the quilt has become the prime visual metaphor for women's lives, for women's culture'⁸, suggesting quilting as an expression of 'the pre-verbal semiotic phase of mother-child bonding.'⁹ Taking an approach that mirrors patching and piecing with the narrative traditions of American women's writings Showalter highlights ways in which fragmented time, repetition and the building together of the whole operate within these frameworks. Showalter builds a compelling scaffold for women's writing in which blocks of memory, flashbacks, repetition, melancholy, joy, irregularity and recycling become strategies for an open-ended and potentially unfinished model for writing, a model which allows for and celebrates the potential for ongoing patching, piecing and recycling.

What I want to do in this paper is to take a step back from Showalter's exploration and focus upon the activity and processes involved in creating that patchwork, that scaffold: the seaming together of fabric and text. By this I am suggesting that the process of joining or seaming is an inextricable element of, and vital to, the final results.

Here, then, I am proposing that the final result, be it patchwork, artwork or text (or indeed a combination of all three), is only part of the wider activity that surrounds it, in many ways it is Nicolas Bourriaud's 'dot on a line'¹⁰, a line which traces the path from process of creation to user/viewer/reader interaction. In this Bourriaud suggests that the process of fabrication (of an art work) cannot, and must not, be separated from the significance of the work, something many craft-artists would support, particularly perhaps those working with and through textile. As Paula Owen notes, 'The long history of the craft arts is built around the artistic significance of the physical: the properties of the materials, the tactility, use and the rituals which require them.'¹¹ It is in and from this physicality and knowledge of the properties and technologies of making seams that this paper

⁴ in Jessica Hemmings, *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (Berg Publishers, 2012).

⁵ Victoria Mitchell, "Dialog Stitching with Metonymy," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 11, no. 3 (November 1, 2013): 314–19.

⁶ in Maria Elena Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁷ Hemmings, *The Textile Reader*, 157–170.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

departs from Showalter, Owen and indeed Victoria Mitchell's edited catalogue of Janis Jefferies' writings¹² in that all three offer patchwork and piecing as a mode through which to construct a material-based field of knowledge and one which offers modes of thinking and writing from within the intimate technologies of that material practice itself. What this departure seeks to explore is the potential, or agency, of the processes by which this patching and piecing occurs, namely through seaming. In this it considers the technologies and processes involved in seam-making in terms of the construction of structures on and around the body, but also as modes by which the body and its tacit and intimate knowledge can be revealed.

In order to make this departure, I have structured this paper around three aspects for thinking about the seam: seaming as passage: a mode for thinking about seaming as a bodily process, perhaps a form of gestation, that draws upon Cixous and the notions of seaming and writing as performative activities; seaming as suturing: by which to consider ways in which the thickening or overlap between sutured elements secretes meaning within the extended structure; and seaming as trace: in which there is a focus upon agency and its role in bringing-into-being, where the trace of that activity opens up the possibility of different legibilities.

Seaming as Passage

'My first hand is my sewing hand. A line of thread drawn up and down through cloth influences how I think about the confluence and rhythms of space and time.'

(Ann Hamilton¹³)

The simple utilitarian straight stitch can be used to patch, repair, connect and hold fabric pieces together, the needle passing back and forth between them. This term 'back and forth' indicates a mutual exchange brought about by the action of needle and thread, suggesting openness and engagement between pieces. Back and forth implies repetition and rhythm, notions that are most commonly associated with a sense of well-being, perhaps even a meditative state. But this back and forth also conjures a sense of the incessant and urgent, perhaps the need to complete, to reach the end, establishing a different rhythm, one more closely associated with speed, mechanisation and industrialisation.

What I want to focus upon here is the balance between what stitching does and what stitching can become as a narrative or metaphoric element in the joining together of pieces: the passage between. I want to explore ways in which this stitching between, both by hand and machine, joins and connects pieces and fragments together, to create new, expanded pieces: stitching as a form of meaning-making machine, not based upon linear paths, but rather as a mode of and for writing that champions differences and fragmented paths. To draw upon material theorist and historian, Peter Stallybrass, the stitch, like other elements within a cloth economy, is 'richly absorbent of symbolic meaning'¹⁴, meaning that comes into being by parts and inferences.

As a joining mechanism the stitch could be thought of as operating as a form of translation within a realm of symbolic meaning. This is not translation in terms of swapping or exchanging like-for-like, but in terms of the drawing together of cultures and cultural understandings. In the same way as the translator cannot simply take a package of words from one language and supplant it, unchanged, into another without any acknowledgement of cultural contextualisation, so the stitcher needs to understand both pieces of fabric, their properties and behaviours, together with the desired outcomes, such that the stitching used is figured and fashioned accordingly between them. The stitcher and stitch operate within the double world of the translator, something Sarat Maharaj refers

¹² Mitchell, *Selvages*.

to as a 'perfidious fidelity'¹⁵: untrustworthy faithfulness.

Within this realm, in the creation of the expanded cloth through stitching, there comes together in the passage of the seam both the translatable and the untranslatable, those cultural references that remain within that cultural space. As needle and thread make their passage between the two pieces of cloth, that which is directly translatable tracks back and forth between them whilst the untranslatable elements remain on their 'own' side, but traces of these do pass between, suggesting a sort of veiled supplement to understanding and meaning. I can know what the French equivalent expression is without fully understanding as a French citizen would, the fuller cultural, historical and fabled understanding of the wolf as imagery, grounded as I am within British understandings and imagery. Thus in French wolf stands as signifier of hunger, whereas in Britain it is the horse: two signifiers, one signified - hunger. Likewise the French citizen of the British idiom. In this sense then, seaming brings alongside each other two, culturally located, sets of signifier-signified relationships, highlighting differences and similarities between the fabric pieces. To seam a high stretch fabric such as silk jersey to a more rigidly structured kind, such as cotton twill requires either the first to be carefully positioned such that the stretch is minimised within the seaming and so the twill dictates the space of the seam, or the jersey is allowed to stretch along the length of the twill, which becomes a supporting structure for the flow of the jersey. What is seen here is what Derrida refers to as 'a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another'¹⁶ of one cloth by another. This regulated transformation enables, through the passage of the seam, fragments of text, or part-texts, to be held together. The model of the seam, however, ensures that this is not a rigid join, but rather it is flexible and malleable, each piece offering veiled supplements to the other. As the seams used to construct clothing wrap themselves around the contours of the body, so too does the seam as regulated transformation wrap itself around the contours of the two, culturally located, sets of language.

In considering this further, it is useful to think about different forms of stitch used for making seams. When hand-stitching the running stitch becomes readily supplanted by the backstitch, for its added strength and flexibility. The strength of this stitch arises from its construction, which is a circular motion of needle and thread passing forwards and backwards to form a continuous connection on both sides, between the two pieces. In terms of the notion of Maharaj's 'translatable and untranslatable' and Derrida's 'regulated transformation', what the backstitch offers is a model in three dimensions: back-and-forth between the pieces and to-and-fro along the line of the stitch, such that revisions, omissions and clarifications are given space. In this the backstitch suggests a model for the exchange of meaning that operates across two levels: direct translation and further cultural contextualisation. As the needle and thread make their first passage between the pieces, immediate equivalents are established; with the second passage, the culturally located signifier-signified relationship is further developed such that '*j'ai une faim de loup*' becomes firstly 'I have the hunger of a wolf' and then 'I could eat a horse'. This is mirrored in the visible structure of the backstitch: on the one side a seemingly constant row of simple stitches can be seen, whilst on the other, the pattern of toing and froing reveals the repeated passage of signifier-signified relationships between the two.

Within this passage between two signifiers and signifieds: names, objects and meanings form a fluid relationship with each other such that, hunger, wolf, horse and voracity all co-exist and co-mingle albeit momentarily. This fluidity, that precedes the subsequent stabilisation of these relationships leaves the relationship forever changed by the process. The stitch not only brings the pieces together, but in so doing it permanently affects change on each of the pieces involved. Thus within the space of the stitch, there resides potential for the stitch to become both signifier and signified. In its role as the holding and joining mechanism between pieces, the stitch offers the

notion of translating, or stitching, as a field of possibilities. This field is structured around shifting or floating meanings, which when thought of together expand the fabric of language and understanding, rather than foreclosing within a rigid regime in which each language resides in its own separate and separated sphere between meaning-making bodies.

Although here I want to foreground the hand-stitched seam, it is worth pausing briefly to reflect upon the machine worked seam. Unlike its hand-stitched counterpart, the machine-stitched seam is not so much about binding and drawing through, but about bringing two (or indeed more) pieces together through an intertwining of the sewing threads. This fundamental difference in construction mirrors the difference between the role of the maker's body in the process of stitching. Louise Bourgeois, talking about her stitched works or elements, says of hand-stitching:

‘The beauty of sewing is precisely in the fact that things can be done and undone without damaging the fabric ... (it) has to do with binding and stitching things together. It is a prevention against things being separated. The form and the process must always be connected to the psychological.’¹⁷

The hand-stitch then, is formed from a single, unbroken thread passed to and fro (and back and forth) between the two pieces by the needle, the whole ensemble held within that intimate bodily space framed by head, lap, torso and arms. In this space, perhaps a maternal space, both nurture and rupture occur and in this sense it could be said to be the site of the semiotic *chora* where both complete union with, and reflection of, the mother co-reside in bodily sensations. Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* suggests a space of mother-infant communication before the symbolic structuring of language, before signifiers become the dominant reference point. Entry into the language-based symbolic order necessitates a splitting, or rupturing, of the mother-infant unity. Binding and stitching by hand could be thought of in terms of invoking the potency of the child's world of polymorphous perversity: in the production of the seam personal creativity and that which is created come into intimate relationship and through the intimate and bodily technology of seam-making recovers the semiotic *chora*.

The space of hand-seaming offers a form of meaning-making that is about both access and egress. For Luce Irigaray, such a passage between echoes the process of birthing and giving birth, that inextricable link between mother and child. Existence, then, begins with encounter: two before one. A form of seaming.

For Cixous writing is a bodily process; writing the passage is like giving birth:

‘There is a long time and a short time ... there is gestation and giving birth’¹⁸

Seaming as Suturing

There is something inherently ambiguous about the seam: at the same time as it brings two or more pieces of cloth together, it sets them apart. It functions both as an extending mechanism, whilst also as a limit. The seam conceals and asserts the raw edge of the fabric, the space between the pieces and bodies: a crevice, a suture, a scar.

In this section I want to consider the space of that suture also known as the seam allowance, the extra border of cloth that is built into the planning and structure of the seam. As the seam is formed by stitches made a small distance from the raw edge, so the seam allowance is created which later becomes hidden from view, but in fact creates a space of thickening, and renders the surface stronger than before the lesion. This is a new point of juncture where there was separatedness and

lesion. Cixous prefaces her text *Stigmata* by declaring that all of the texts within are the result of an injury:

‘The texts collected and stitched together, sewn and re sewn in this volume share the trace of a wound. They were caused by a blow, they are the transfiguration of a spilling of blood, be it real or translated ...’¹⁹

and again:

‘All literature is scary. It celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion ... scar adds something: a visible or invisible fibrous tissue that really or allegorically replaces a loss of substance which is therefore not lost but added to ...’²⁰

In order to develop these ideas, it is useful here to think about the seam allowance in terms of Gilles Deleuze’s ‘*montage interstice*’, which he identifies in terms of the cinematic cut and splice:

“What counts is ... the *interstice* between images, between two images ... It is the method of BETWEEN, ‘between two images’ ... It is the method of AND, ‘This and then that’, which does away with all the cinema of Being = is”²¹

In thinking about the seam allowance in these terms, as the *interstice*, there is the sense that the cloth pieces are simultaneously separated and conjoined and thus seaming represents a liminal process: a threshold between. In crossing to and fro between the pieces of cloth, needle and then thread appear to alter and suspend time and meaning between them. They are joined and yet there has been no elision nor merging, but rather a bringing into proximity, a thickening that foregrounds Deleuze’s notion of ‘the method of AND’²².

‘Can you read it? Do you understand?
By squares, by inches, you are drawn in.
Your fingers read it like Braille.
History, their days, the quick deft fingers.
Their lives recorded in cloth.
A universe here, stitched to perfection.
You must be the child-witness,
You are the only survivor.’²³

Rachel Blau duPlessis suggests women’s writing as a ‘verbal quilt’ in which ‘the materials [are] organised into many centres’²⁴, but in focussing upon seaming as sutured scar, duPlessis’ idea of the quilt as a counter-hierarchical structure, proposes the role of the seam allowance not simply as a mechanism for joining but the site for an ‘anti-authoritarian ethics.’²⁵ In this duPlessis and Showalter are framing structures based upon time rather than meta-narratives, short sections or even fragments brought together, juxtaposed and with their edges held firmly within the space of the suture and allowed to mingle and co-respond as scar tissue.

Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein offers a reading of montage that foregrounds the spectator, and in allowing for extension here to duPlessis’ reader opens up thinking about the space

¹⁹ Ibid., xi.

²⁰ Ibid., xii.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 1989), 179–180.

²² Ibid., 180.

²³ Joyce Carol Oates, *Celestial Timepiece: Poems* (Pressworks, 1980).

between bodies, between writer and reader:

‘The strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator. The spectator is compelled to proceed along that self same creative road that the author travelled in creating the image. The spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image just as it was experienced by the author.’²⁶

In this, Eisenstein suggests that in the sutured film, the process of montage continues to hold that which is no longer visible between them. That space between, known as the ‘gutter’, stimulates the viewer’s eye, mind and imagination, retaining engagement through absence or invisibility. Thinking of the space of the seam in these terms sets it as the repository of both association and differentiation, returning again to Deleuze’s ‘AND’.

In this, I do not want to suggest that piecing and montage replace seamless and stable narrative forms with a range of free-floating, unrelated elements, cobbled together. Rather, piecing offers a way to bring different and differing voices together and alongside one another, the seams marking flexible points of juxtaposition and the seam allowances thickened, scarred spaces for mutual exchange, a space within the process of translation in which meaning becomes oblique, multiple and mutable. The sutured scar becomes a new place for departure, an intimate technology between bodies, that links but does not direct - a site for du Plessis’ ‘anit-authoritarian ethics’.

The Argentinian poet and writer Jorge Luis Borges considered language to be a map searching for its territory²⁷. In its efforts to draw boundaries, it always falls short as the words are not the thing, but signifiers for that thing. In other words, language seeks to bridge the gap between *what* we know and *how* we know it, or explicit and tacit knowledge. Like the seam, language seeks to conjoin, but not constrain.

The work of the artist Ann Hamilton approaches this gap repeatedly through variable forms of practice. In so doing, she creates a pieced landscape of visibility, sensory awareness and language. Like Borges’ short story ‘On Exactitude in Science’ and duPlessis’ essay, ‘For the Etruscans’²⁸, Hamilton’s constructed environments and installations consist of elements brought together that reflect both human and natural systems and patterns of growth: they are, using Deleuzian terms, rhizomatic. In this sense, then, Hamilton’s work is as much concerned with the processes of its fabrication as it is with the ‘completed’ installations. Thinking in this way of an extended understanding of fabrication, its technologies, positions the work alongside Eisenstein’s framework of ‘montage’. Hamilton speaks of her practice in terms of its bodiliness:

‘Cloth, like human skin, is a membrane that divides an interior from an exterior. It both reveals and conceals. It can surround or divide. In its making, individual threads of warp are crossed successively by individual threads of weft. Thus, cloth is an accumulation of many gestures of crossing which, like my gestures of accumulation, retain an individual character while accreting to become something else.’²⁹

This accretion and accumulation, layering and montage, create a space between and within the elements, a form of container where the notions and processes of joining are brought to the fore. Like the sutured lesion, Hamilton’s rooms become sites of polymorphous eroticism, a space for

²⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, [New ed.] edition (Faber and Faber, 1947), 35–6.

²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni and N. T. Di Giovanni, New

undifferentiated, partial and yet enveloping, bodily experiences of materiality.

In order to think about this further, I want to focus upon Hamilton's *human carriage* (2009), installed in the Rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum as part of their exhibition: 'The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 - 1989' (2009). The work is described in the catalogue as 'a mechanism that traverses the entire Guggenheim balustrade, taking the form of a white silk 'bell carriage' with Tibetan bells attached inside. As the cage spirals down, along the balustrade, the purifying bells ring, awakening viewers. The mechanism is hoisted back up to a post at the uttermost Rotunda Level 6, where an attendant exchanges weights composed of thousands of cut up books that counter the pulley system that propels the mechanism itself.'³⁰

Such a description of the work covers all of the essential information, but fails to suggest the beauty, playfulness, imagination and ingenuity of the work. As the bells, in their cloth 'tent', wind their way down the Rotunda, ringing gently as they pass, the piece at once both occupies the entire central space and yet it is intensely intimate. This is a work about reading, transmission and transformation of information and ways in which these processes affect or even infect the reader forever. It speaks of latent content accreted and then secreted within the reader to be re-found at some later stage and re-combined in new ways. Hamilton reflects upon reading:

'What I love about the experience and process of reading is being immersed; the falling into the fold between two pages, the being in the completely 'somewhere else' that is the book. This ability to simultaneously be both here and far away, to be both inside and outside parallels the condition of being a body; it is no surprise the book is the central artifact of culture.'³¹

In *human carriage* the seemingly simple becomes increasingly scary: the lesions between forming thickenings and augmentations. There are the prayer bells sliding their way around and around, down and down, taking in each of the levels of the museum, intermittently calling attention to themselves as they pass over the 'triggers'. Traditionally such bells mark the beginning and end of meditation, acting as space clearers and helping the mind to become free of negative thoughts. In this installation the bells create a gentle moment of rupture in the viewers' contemplations around the whole gallery space and act as metaphor for the nuggets of information held within the body and mind after reading: not the whole, but partial fragments that can be re-connected. There are slices of books, gathered randomly into bundles which act as counter-weights to the bells. These bundles of disconnected pieces of information suggest ways in which reading accumulates within and the build-up of knowledge from different sources becomes the counter-weight to the quiet and solitary act of reading. Hamilton suggests it's a 'trade-off between what we know through language and what we know through our tactile, sensory experience.'³² There are the silk flags creating a tent around the bells as they float past the viewers on their descent and then another around the 'landing stage'. The Tibetan tradition of hanging flags is ancient and marks the sending out of prayers for peace, compassion and wisdom onto the wind, white representing air as one of the five elements. The delicate habutai silk used here in *human carriage* serves to emphasise the spread of knowledge from secreted reading, but as it flutters according to changes in the atmosphere within the building as well as with its movement downwards, the live nature of each passage is emphasised. Each individual performance of the bells from top to bottom mirrors individual acts of reading. The silk offers the viewer a visual cue to that individuality, marking the passage of time and pace of reading the text, making them materially present, with each of their individuations.

In *human carriage* Hamilton offers a spare and yet pregnant space that enables the viewer to contemplate ideas of reading, language, secretion of knowledge and the passage of meaning

³⁰ Alexandra Munroe and Ikuyo Nakagawa, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia 1860-1989: American*

between bodies. Susan Stewart, in *On Longing* writes of reading:

‘Although reading may give form to time, it does not count in time; it leaves no trace, its product is invisible. The marks in the margin of the page are the marks of writing, not the marks of reading. Since the moment of Augustine’s reading silently to himself, reading has inhabited the scenes of solitude: the attic, the beach, the commuter train, scenes whose profound loneliness arises only because of their proximity to a tumultuous life which remains outside their peripheries.’³³

Here, then Hamilton materialises the irrevocable distance that Stewart describes, between writer and reader, experience and memory. Through the installation she gives form to the seemingly impossible, and yet extraordinarily intimate, space between language and the material world, not as a mirroring of either or both, but as part-objects and partial forms. In this she opens up knowledge as fragmentary and evasive, greater than language, residing between the fragments between bodies and within the seam allowance and suturing together.

The Rotunda space within the Guggenheim Museum carves a path through the gallery, creating fissures and gaps which reveal glimpses across and through. As the viewer approaches each individual work they do so through a process that could be likened to an archeological investigation. Simultaneously the balustrade and the walkway of the Rotunda operate as forms of suture or stitching of the gallery, creating a pieced whole that could be described as chiasmic. It is within this suture-cum-fissure that *human carriage* offers an impression of suspension and expansion of space and time within this contradiction.

Hamilton reflects upon the activity of reading:

‘What happens when you read? So often we read out of context or misread things, and I started wondering how you could trace the influence of a particular line or section of text as it passes through all the other things you’re reading and being influenced by. How do you account for an influence that comes through a process that changes you forever but doesn’t leave a physical trace?’³⁴

In this sense Hamilton, through *human carriage*, creates a metaphoric or poetics of reading, which actively marks the slippage that exists between language (signifier) and referent (signified). In so doing, this work establishes the activity of reading as a form of deviation from exactitude, highlighting the abstract nature of language. Reading, thought of in this way, draws attention to the different potentialities of the book: as an object, as a set of surfaces, as an abstraction of thought and as a crucible for new knowledges. Stewart meditates upon the book thus:

The metaphors of the book are metaphors of containment, of exteriority and interiority, of surface and depth, of covering and exposure, of taking apart and putting together. To be “between covers” - the titillation of intellectual or sexual reproduction. To be outside the cover, to be godlike in one’s transcendence, a transcendence of beginning collapsed into closure, and, at the same time, to be “closed out”.³⁵

The post-structuralist project of *écriture féminine* is founded upon the principles of extra-narrativity, a space that could be said to foreground the performative, processual and part-known. Cixous suggests a mode of and for production that can be thought of as ‘works of being’. This is a

³³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.:

mode that celebrates fragmented and incomplete technologies and the intimate and bodily matrix of connectivities created between artist, maker, writer and the viewer or reader of such production.

Thinking of such connections and connecting, the sutured seam is a model which celebrates the scar or seam allowance as a thickened space where tacit and communicable knowledge and understanding come together: a space for signifier-signified slippage.

Seaming as Trace

In her poem *Don't put up my thread and needle*, Emily Dickenson writes a form of meditation upon the practical, bodily and performative act of sewing, offering a focus for considering the relationship between performance and language through the stitching threads, the notational form punctuating the fabric of the text. Thinking in terms of text/textile relationships it is useful to turn to Julia Kristeva's study of the interplay between language and the body; an interplay that thinks in terms of the textile-body together and in combination with its accreted text:

'The body, moreover, is the place where we 'are' as speaking beings; it is the place of material support of the language of communication.'³⁶

In this sense, then, building a text could be thought of in terms of a performance between paper, agency and the human body, the text remaining as the trace of that performance. Luce Irigaray refers to this trace as morphology, the study of the form of words and their parts: 'a concept that opens up the possibilities of different legibilities.'³⁷

Thus Irigaray posits the performance of writing, or bringing into being of the text-as-trace, as a performance that is 'never complete or completeable'³⁸. Such a morphology of incompleteness involves what she calls 'mimesis as production'³⁹. This is a mimicry by woman that plays with ideas about herself, through her bodily performance, leaving traces of possibilities rather than one, essentialist, 'woman'.

As the needle and thread pass up and down, to and fro, between the pieces, the fragments of cloth, so they mimic those that have gone before. They differ, however, in the minutest shifts and changes of tension, of position, of relationships with warp and weft. Thus the one stitch and the many together bring together fragments, fragments without a linear narrative between them, to form a matrix of knowledge that can be traversed in multiple ways. Each nomadic journey in turn mimics those that went before, whilst simultaneously creating its own trajectories and its own linguistic performance.

Both writing and seaming, then, return their performance to the nomadic body, not as a palimpsest to be written upon, shaped and determined by circumstance, context and passage through the world, but rather as a body that functions and performs conversationally within and between those forces, environments and passages as it travels. Thus, as the thread is drawn to and fro between the fabric pieces in the performance of seaming, the trace of its passage remains not only on the substrate, the cloth, but also on the thread itself: in its rubbed or softened edges. In this way, both thread and fabric, joiner and joined, are assigned co-active roles in the production of the seam and thus of meaning. Thread and fabric are neither active nor passive, but become re-cast as forces on each other that reply and respond, even answering back.

In this there is the re-uttering and re-exploration of Sara Ahmed's concern for an approach which

³⁶ John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London : New York: Routledge, 1990), 53.

‘refuses to privilege mind over body’ but ‘emphasises contingency, locatedness, the irreducibility of difference ... and the worldliness of being.’⁴⁰ Such a phenomenological approach means that each specifically located, individual experience is, and repeatedly becomes, the experience through which that body relates to the world and other bodies. Each experience marks its trace and becomes marked simultaneously. Ahmed refers to this in terms of the ‘with’ of bodily relationship, or ‘the fleshiness of the world which inhabits us and is inhabited by us’⁴¹. To think then of seaming as trace is to think of that performance of Ahmed’s ‘with’ or ‘fleshiness’. Seaming opens the cloth to the thread, whilst simultaneously opening the thread to the cloth: separation becoming undermined in the intimate and proximate performance of the seaming.

Writing on stigmata, Cixous thinks not only of the marks, the constantly re-opening wounds in sight, but also about how they came to be:

‘Stigmata are traces of a sting. *Piquer* in French, to prick, to sting, to pinch, pricks in order to take, in order to prick, *piquer* steals, strikes and removes, sows, speckles signs it blows, leaves behind and takes away, annoys and excites at the same time, gives back what it takes, serves the interests of the thief and the police.’⁴²

In this passage Cixous sets out the basis for a collection of texts that she describes as having been ‘stitched together sewn and resewn ...’⁴³, suggesting a form of writing or textual fabrication that is about creating traces between, across and back, foregrounding ‘with’ in bodily relationship and an intimate technology that marks those traces in the very fabric of those/that text. To think of seaming in terms of *piquer* or stinging is to think of a needle piercing the cloth and drawing through its surface the resistant thread: leaving behind the space of its passage, taking away the uniformity of the woven cloth. That piercing needle, that dragged thread, that pierced cloth - together bringing forth new possibilities, new paths to track, new avenues and new meanings to be brought into being.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Storyteller*⁴⁴, highlights a form of narration that has its roots primarily in oral and experiential traditions and from which emerge or sprout multiple variants. The storyteller’s craft is to take experience, personal or received, and turn it into the bodily experience of his audience. In this he creates a patchwork of conjoined and rejoined experiences, marking traces of journeys taken, imagined and proposed. Here the storyteller becomes needle and thread: pricking and stinging, leaving the irreducible marks of her presence.

Seaming itself, that performative act of hands, eyes, body, needle, thread and fragments joining and being joined through piercings, threadings and stitching, could be thought of in terms of a materialisation of such storytelling. For Benjamin ‘storytelling is always the art of repeating stories ...’⁴⁵, but each seaming or performance of the story embeds itself differently within the listener, it becomes assimilated into and alongside other stories or other versions of the same story.

Thus the ‘story-fabric’ is brought into being through its own performance, a performance that, following Benjamin, relies heavily on a continued dynamic of agency between storyteller and listener: ‘A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship.’⁴⁶ It is this companionship, this focus upon the prefix *com*, this witness and togetherness that create the story-fabric through a seaming together. Here is Showalter’s multi-centred patchwork quilt, joined in its non-hierarchy. The story-fabric has as its focus not a linear narrative, which conventionally is structured around a beginning, a middle and

⁴⁰ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴² Cixous, *Stigmata*, xiii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xi.

endpoint that brings the recipient to a given point of destination. Rather this form has multiple centres, multiple routes through, and each journey upon the story-fabric emerges with differing and multiple foci. Each nomadic journey is a series of new seamings of parts and fragments, in new arrangements: needle and thread each operating as both storyteller and listener, to and fro they pass between the pieces, leaving traces of their performance in their wake. These traces become points of encounter on subsequent journeys or returns.

Italo Calvino, in his preface to *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*⁴⁷ writes of Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando furioso* (1516) that it is: 'a book of landscapes, of rapidly sketched but vibrant figures, a book of words both precise and true. It is also an absurd, mysterious book, in which the object of pursuit is only pursued in order to pursue something else, ... and we never reach the ultimate goal.'⁴⁸

In this Calvino champions a form of writing-as-technology, based upon the poetic and metaphoric, that operates as a story-fabric in much the same way as Benjamin's storytelling and Showalter's patchwork quilt, but in this preface he is concerned to foreground the agency that draws the fragments together, highlighting the notion of memory, 'or rather experience - which is the memory of the event plus the wound it has inflicted on you, plus the change it has wrought in you ...'⁴⁹ Such a seaming together of the different facets that form the basis for writing from the body suggests a mode of writing that could be considered to be an activity of dialogue or conversation between writer and readers. Thinking of writing-as-seaming the story-fabric brings about a return to Cixous' *piquer* or sting, a way of making expression that builds upon re-tracings, re-finding traces of previous journeys and sites of previous seamings.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper set out to reflect upon and consider ways and means by which knowledge gained through the intimate technologies tied up with making seams can be expressed through those practices, processes and technologies. In this seaming has been considered as both a physical process and as a concept through which to think of a pathway between theoretical and practice-based concerns. In thinking through and with seaming as a model for conjoining or bringing together differing elements, the physical and necessarily bodily technologies of hand-stitching have been foregrounded. The three aspects of this: seaming as passage, seaming as suturing and seaming as trace offer different, but associated modes for this reflection. Seaming as passage focuses upon the shared space of making and writing which prioritises to-ing and fro-ing between as a structure for understanding. This is an intimate space of coming-into-being or perhaps coming-into-understanding, where tacit and explicit language mingle and the semiotic chora is recovered.

Seaming as suturing, by contrast, offers a way for thinking through and with the thickened space. This is a speaking-space that defies narrative and chronologically constrained forms of writing in favour of multiplicity. Here, between tacit and explicit knowledge and language, meaning is oblique, multiple, mutable and partial, a tactic adopted to enable occupation of Cixous' 'scarry' habitat. Operating as a triangulation of the concept of seaming, seaming as trace suggests a mode for meditation upon the technologies of seaming, through which the potentiality and multiplicity of outcomes are opened up. Seaming as trace places the focus of joining and conjoining as nomadic mappings and journeyings. With each new departure across the 'story-fabric' comes a new performance in which there is a continued dynamic of agency between path, ground, writer-maker and viewer-reader.

⁴⁷ Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun, 2009 edition (London: Penguin Classics,

In creating 'new' fabric, seaming brings together the agency of maker, writer, reader and viewer, foregrounding the bodily activities or technologies of stitching that both heal and celebrate Cixous' *piquer*. In this, then, the seam and seaming as an activity suggests a form of language construction that does not conceive of itself through being bounded or constrained by conventions, but rather it is enabled to burst out from within itself: writer and reader in dialogic or seaming relationship upon and within the story-fabric, an ever-expanding field of experience, imagination and mimicry.

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