

Stepping in and out of the picture:  
A drawing-based reflection on Walking Threads

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## Stepping in and out of the picture: A drawing-based reflection on Walking Threads

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Following the “Walking Threads” experience (henceforth WT), Peter, Ragnhild, Valeria, Brian and I kept in touch to share pictures and videos. After some time, Valeria and Peter proposed that we also gather our thoughts and reflections on the walk. Up to that point I had spent little time reflecting on the peculiar turn that sunny afternoon in Aberdeen had taken. I had enjoyed it in the moment, up close and through immersion in the action. The contributions of my fellow walkers reflect the richness of this perspective. They evoke a sense of opening to the unknown (Freng Dale), of blurring individual boundaries through “drifting” together (Schultis). They venture into the poetic and theoretical “affordances” of getting tangled in thread-lines (Lembo, Loovers).

My own recalling of the walk triggered a tactile sensation of something clinging onto my limbs, like a spider web. This sensation anchored my memories of the walk to my body, and resisted my attempts at seeing the walk from a different, more removed perspective. Along with my memories of entanglement in the web thus came a sense of frustration, of not being able to untangle myself and see the walk from a distance. Because of this, I felt that the significance of the WT eluded me. Until, one night, a different perspective offered itself. It came without warning, as a “hunch” of an image (Talbot, quoted in Ingold 2013: 127).

Prior to that night, I had been reflecting on Bruce Baird’s (2012: 194-6) review of *Ailing Terpsichore*, a text by Japanese *butoh* dancer and author Tatsumi Hijikata. As I was reading the few pages that Baird devotes to this text, I had the uncanny physical sensation of something seeping into me and, in an impulse that I can only describe as terror, I left the pages, promising myself I would go back to them later. As it turned out, Baird’s words had already worked their way in, and now, scattered like fragments of glass, they strived to condense, disturbing my sleep and waking me suddenly in the dead of the night, demanding attention. As my thoughts ebbed and flowed, words were finally drawn out into a rapid sketch (Fig 1).

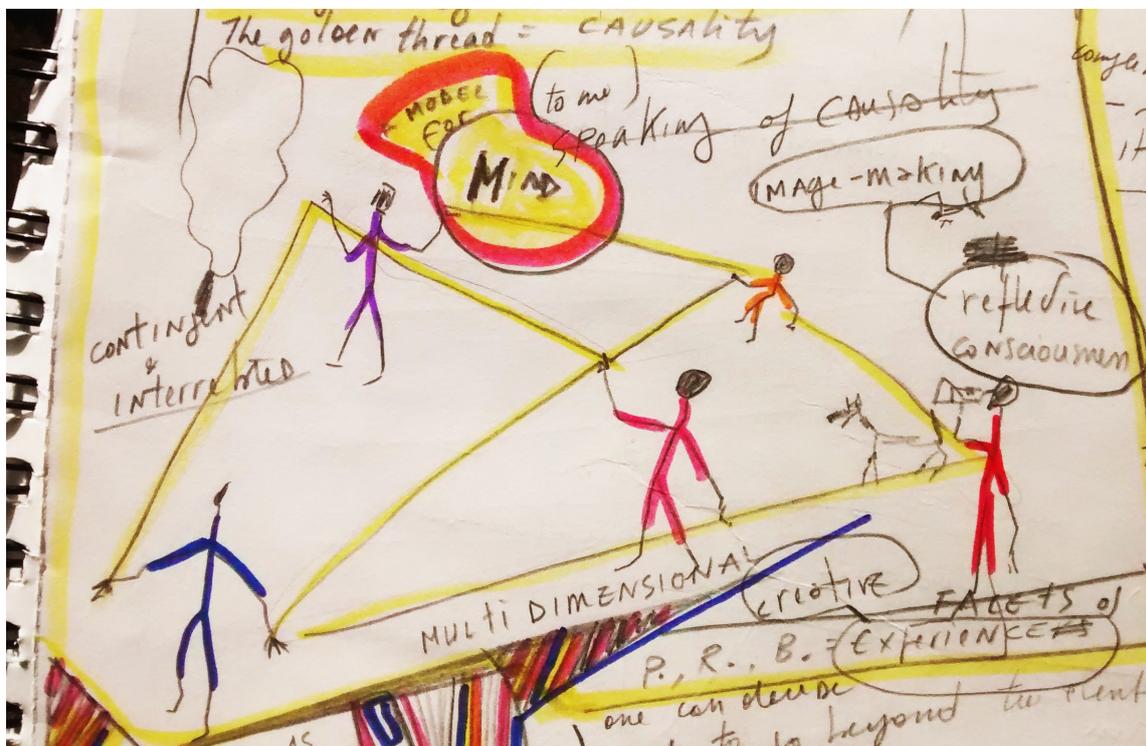


Figure 1: A sketch of Walking Threads. This is a “zoomed out” perspective at its incipience. Lines are still “gestural” or “non-propositional” (Ingold 2013: 126).

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In his discussion of drawing as a way of telling, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013: 126) points out that “sketches are [lines] *on their way towards proposition*” (emphasis in original). The lines composing a sketch are “gestural” in that “[t]hey issue *from* things (including bodies) rather than making statements *about* them” (ibid; emphasis in original). The lines I drew that night issued from my body in the same, gestural way. They guided me through the sensuous, visceral tangle of the WT, in which I had felt trapped, out in “the open” of a perspective “from the outside”. The development of that initial sketch (Fig 1) into a digital image (Fig 2) consolidated this movement of my thought from close-up to distanced, from visceral to detached, and from haptic to optical (Ingold 2013: 126). In what follows I lay out the thoughts that, through the traces of words and of drawings, yielded a “double” perspective on WT: haptic and optical; “zoomed in” and “zoomed out” (Knappet, in Ingold 2011b: 45-63).

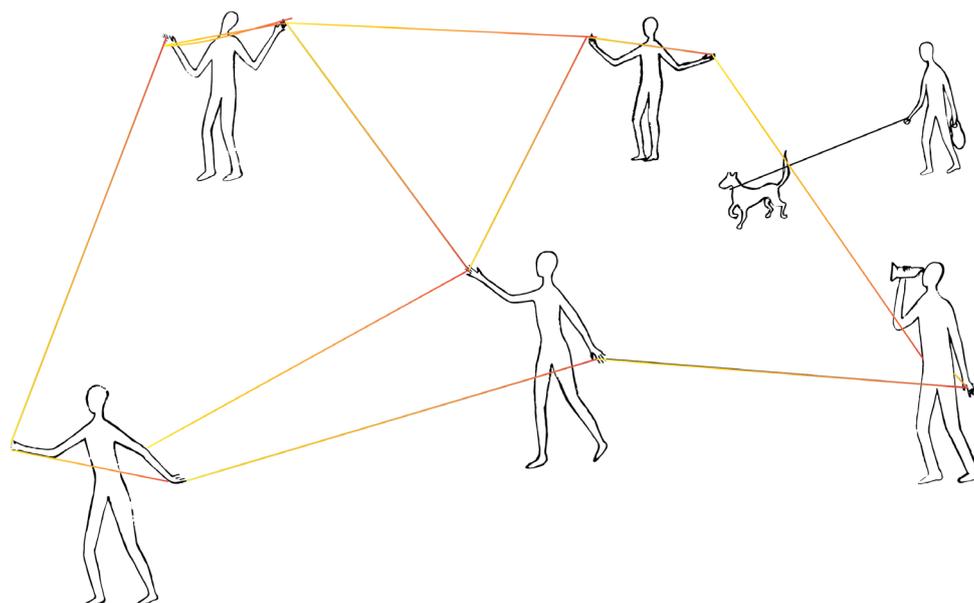


Figure 2: A “zoomed out” view of the Walking Threads. Lines are “non-gestural” and “propositional” (Ingold 2013: 126).  
Photo © Paola Esposito

Why, then, had I been so deeply affected by Baird’s writing on *Ailing Terpsichore*? To answer this question, a few words on Tatsumi Hijikata and his work are in order. Hijikata (1928-1986) is generally known, along with Kazuo Ohno (1906-2010), as one of the founding fathers of *butoh*. This is a dance that is said to be “formless”: it resists formalisation into any conclusive system of movement, relying on intensified proprioception – the perception of one’s own body – to sustain movement work instead. The use of verbal imagery is widespread among *butoh* dancers: words act as devices to stimulate and “scaffold” (Downey 2008) perceptual attention as well as to achieve nuanced qualities of movement.

Hijikata was well known for probing the limits of the moving body through counter-intuitive verbal cues and combinations of words. He drew inspiration from manifold literary and figurative sources, including French literature – especially Genet and Artaud – Dada and Surrealism. Memories of native Tohoku, his involvement in the Tokyo art scene (where he moved to pursue a career as a dancer) and the rebellious, unsettled cultural climate of post-war Japanese society are also acknowledged as formative influences to his work. He developed a visceral, radical approach to dance, which made him a maverick of the Japanese dance scene, and a cult figure for generations of artists to come.

In his review of *Ailing Terpsichore*, also known as Hijikata’s memoirs, Baird offers a fresh entry point into Hijikata’s world. He does so by highlighting some of Hijikata’s stylistic choices as a narrator. These choices point to the dancer’s sense of his body as enmeshed in a world of continuities, in which everything connects to everything else through multiple if not always obvious trajectories. For instance, Baird highlights the reoccurring of the Japanese word *sei* throughout *Ailing Terpsichore*. He tells us that this word can

be translated variously as “on account of what”, “outcome”, “consequence”, “result”, “guilt”, “fault”, and “blame” depending on the context in which it is used (Baird 2012: 194). Contextual nuances aside, Baird explains that a sense of causality is constant in *sei*, and its appearing over and over in Hijikata’s text points to the dancer’s “obsession with actions and entities that affect things” (Baird 2012: 196).

In attempting to trace the origins of a particular situation or event, Hijikata follows different imaginary leads, hunting “for hundreds and hundreds of *seis* but with little surety as to whether the right one has been identified” (Baird 2012: 195). This leads to a proliferation of *seis* in the text and, for the reader, a sense of immersion in a dense field of cause and effect, with actions and entities that affect each other, even when spatially and temporally apart. Hijikata’s interest in how things are wrapped in, entwined or involved with each other is cited as another sign of the dancer’s concern with causality and relation:

Hijikata’s physical preoccupation with things that envelop, such as mist, haze, gossamers, odors [sic], and clothes, and the way that they wrap, cloak, and involve other things, is a counterpart to his metaphysical (but in fact equally physical) preoccupation with how things are connected to and related to other things (Baird 2012: 196).

Baird argues that this ubiquity of causal links or relations, and the disregard of spatial and temporal distance between “cause” and “effect”, corresponds to “all the choices, thought patterns, and societal structures that constitute the life-forming and identity-forming space surrounding [Hijikata]” (Baird 2012: 196). That is, “[t]he concern with *sei*... when multiplied over and over is the same as the concern with the socialization of the body and mind by customs, concepts, and purposiveness” (ibid). The notion of “desocialisation” to reveal the “origins” of the body is, incidentally, a core theme in *butoh* practice.

From reading the excerpts in English from *Ailing Terpsichore*, one may infer that Hijikata was indeed someone who was very observant and alert. These characteristics might have led him to perceive his own self as “parcelled out” or distributed between different “origins”. Consequently, he might have conceived of his very identity as sparse, with no fixed centre. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from *Ailing Terpsichore*:

I developed with the feeling of always having my pulse actually taken. I was constantly eaten by snow; and during the autumn, bitten by locusts. During the rainy season I was cut by catfish; during early spring drunken greedily by a river; and I guess my vision was naturally oriented toward those sorts of things. (Hijikata, quoted in Baird 2012: 185)

The notion of “being consumed” by disparate things suggests a distributed, dispersed sense of self, which is evocative of the elaboration of a schizophrenic point of view by Deleuze and Guattari (1984). While for Hijikata it is *sei*, cause-effect, for Deleuze and Guattari it is “desire” that drives the world’s cannibalistic intimacy with itself. Desire causes things to be involved with one another, flowing into one another, feeding into multi-layered processes of “production”.

For the schizophrenic as a “universal producer” (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 7), everything is a “desire-machine” involved in a relation of production, everywhere and at all times. The ever-working connectedness of machines, of different sizes and at various scales, leaves no clear boundary between producers and produced. In fact, for the schizophrenic, “[t]here is no need to distinguish ... between producing and its product” (ibid): caught in the flow of desire, they are one and the same thing. Even the body is composed of micro machines, which engage with the macro machines of the cosmos: “Celestial machines, the stars or rainbows in the sky, alpine machines – all of them connected to those of this body” (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 2).

Against this backdrop of relentless production, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of “body-without-organs” (BwO). This is a body that has ceased any productive or reproductive function to become a mere place of passage. The BwO is a de-subjectified, de-gendered body, which serves as a transit for the “plateaus” of intensities that constitute the world. “A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate” (ibid: 153). This body has no organs in the sense that they have themselves become nothing more

than “intensive principles” (ibid: 165) which distribute themselves regardless of the form of the organism.

[O]rgans are no longer anything more than intensities that are produced, flows, thresholds, and gradients. “A” stomach, “an” eye, “a” mouth; the indefinite article does not lack anything; it is not indeterminate or undifferentiated, but expresses the pure determination of intensity, intensive difference (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 164).

I shall return to the notion of BwO later on. Meanwhile, the reasons of my “terror” in reading Baird’s review of *Ailing Terpsichore* might have become self-evident by now: the notion of the world as sensuously, voraciously interpenetrated, with everything potentially linked to everything else must have struck a chord in my imagination. With regard to Baird-Hijikata’s use of *sei*, I must have transposed it onto my experience of WT, which also lingered in my mind at that time. As I drew a sketch of WT, I remember seeing the thread as a materialisation of *sei* or “causal relation”. I also remember not being concerned so much with effects or results, as with the very intertwining and sorting of *sei* in a sentient web of experience – what Ingold might have called a “meshwork” (Ingold 2013: 132-133).<sup>1</sup> In drawing the walkers’ silhouettes, their representation as self-contained “bodies/entities” was no more significant than their “flowing” into and forming one another through connecting thread-lines. For Ingold, a particular type of “containment” applies to the body: far from being “embodied” – a term evoking enclosure – bodies are, like things, implicated into one another and the world through a constant, if not always visible, process of “leaking” (2013: 95). Similarly, the silhouettes in my drawing entailed continuation not just self-containment. Otherwise put, their “containment [was] not equivalent to enclosure, confinement, or immobilisation” (Ingold 2000:100). It entailed permeability.

As I drew, I imagined our bodies as simultaneously distinctive and enmeshed. Each silhouette has a recognisable outline – vaguely defining our particular identities as participants. Yet, if one suggestively “steps into” the drawing, that is, at the level of the traces left by the pencil on the paper, then silhouettes would become virtually indistinguishable from each other, as well as from the thread that connects them. Like in Ingold’s (2011: 89-97) anecdote of the spider web, the lines of thread become extensions of our being. As with SPIDER, “[i]t is as though my body were formed through knotting together threads of life that run out through my ... legs into the web and thence to the wider environment. The world ... is not an assemblage of bits and pieces but a tangle of threads and pathways” (Ingold 2011: 91-92). The threads tell of their own intersecting and entwining with bodies and with aspects of the world. That is, threads are “transducers” (Ingold 2013: 102): they “register” the walkers’ bodily movements across the “weather-world” (Ingold 2000), converting fleeting encounters into kinaesthetically perceivable pulls, vibrations, slacks and tensions, and into visible, geometrical shapes. Like a cobweb “telling” the spider of the insects and leaves that are caught in it, the WT could be understood as a kind of body-prosthesis which “extend[s] the spatiotemporal range of a person’s movement, influence and experience” (Ingold 2000: 100).

Step into the picture, and bodies *are* entangling lines – bodies are “things” (Ingold 2013). Step out of it, and bodies are discrete silhouettes, bound by discernible shapes – bodies are “objects” (Ingold 2011b: 5). Their relation, or “topology” (Knappet, in Ingold 2011b), changes accordingly: in the first case, it is a meshwork; in the second, a network (Ingold 2013:132-133). Step out, and silhouettes are nodes in a circuit, “facets” of an “aggregate,” what Gregory Bateson (1979: 92) would have called a “mind”. Bateson, whose contributions span anthropology, biology and psychology among other sciences, was fascinated with the patterns of resemblance and correspondence between the “natural” and the “human” world. For instance, he saw any process, being it cultural or biological, as resulting from an interaction of different parts. Such combined interaction, which hinges on “difference”, creates “wholes” or “aggregates” of the kind of “*thought, evolution, ecology, life, [or] learning*” (ibid: 92, original italics). Mind is such a kind of aggregate, since “mental function is immanent in the interaction of differentiated ‘parts’” (ibid: 93).

Step into the picture: shifts and adjustments, thresholds and gradients beget “difference” (Bateson 1979: 94-100), which is captured by the silhouettes-threads and channelled into movement. Step out of the picture: the thread carves transient geometries of immanence out of the “intensities” of air, wind, sunlight, trees, land, water and the movements of passers-by. These intensities spill over, exceeding the two-dimensionality of the drawing. Perhaps a 3D rendition of the drawing would be more appropriate to approximate

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<sup>1</sup>I am here following Loovers’ (this volume) interpretation of the walk as “meshwork”.

the intermingling of forces and materials, flesh and currents. Silhouettes would then become bodies-without-organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1988): pure bodies constituted by what passes through them, passages of intensities and compressed spatiality, caught up in transverse relations with other aspects of the world – trees, grass, wind, sunshine, passers-by – regardless of physical distance from them.

It is a question of making a body without organs upon which intensities pass, self and other... The field of immanence is not internal to the self, but neither does it come from an external self or a nonself. Rather, it is like the absolute Outside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 156).

It is in this field of transiting, morphing immanence, which knows no inside nor outside, that a twig decides to get entangled. This precipitates another nodal convergence, another passage for intensities, and another body-without-organs. I say “decides” to get entangled because, in joining in the dance of *seis*, it is as though the twig becomes one of us walkers. That is, the thread is not “one of us” in absolute terms, but by virtue of its enmeshment in the *sei*-web, of its co-option in the animated fabric of our treading. As a puppet comes to life through the calibrated pulls and releases of a puppeteer’s threads, so does the twig through enmeshment in our web – walking, dancing and drifting as we do. Animacy is the basis for the twig’s new identity, which mirrors our own by virtue of mimetic empathy (Willerslev 2007: 99-106). In this respect, the twig is less one of us and more a projection of us as different facets of an open-ended whole.

While empathy is a condition for metamorphosis (Ingold 2000: 106), the transformation of the twig into “one of us” is only temporary as the twig retains its twig-form, its “coming to life” relying on the make-believe we engage in – a bracketed occurrence in the flow of being. Within this flow the distinction between “zoomed-in” and “zoomed out” perspectives blurs, as open-air intensities fill in the shells of our thoughts and memories, and our stories unravel, staged on the unfolding scales of sky, land and rivers – singing and sung in the multi-faceted resounding of life. Albeit temporarily, then, WT allowed us “to [temporarily] dissolve the very boundary that separates mind from the world, and ultimately to reach a level where they are one and the same” (Ingold 2000: 100).

Bateson understood mind as a self-monitoring (and self-corrective) system of multiple parts, at least until death occurred, which dissembled and randomized the multiple parts of the system: “Death is the breaking up of the circuits and, with that, the destruction of autonomy” (Bateson 1979: 127). By a movement of self-dissolution, or perhaps of moult, we entangle the threads to a post, and the twig with it, as vestiges of our passage. The post stands as the conclusion of our walk, and as the “death” – and rearranging – of the mind we were.



Figure 3: Tying the thread to a post at the end of the walk  
Photo © Walking Threads

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