

“Walking threads, threading walk”:

Embroidering reflection



Figure 1: “Walking threads, threading walk”, embroidering reflection  
All photos © Valeria Lembo

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*Improvising, playing and singing with a golden thread*



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# “Walking threads, threading walk”: Embroidering reflection

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This series of embroideries on textile (see Figure 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) was inspired by the “Walking Threads” event, which took place spontaneously and alongside the “Performance reflexivity, intentionality and collaboration: A Sourcing Within worksession” in Dunbar Hall, University of Aberdeen. Before starting the worksession, Gey Pin Ang compiled a list of things for participants to bring along, including “either a daily object or an object from [y]our childhood or a dream” (see also Ang, this volume). As an object from my childhood I chose a bundle of golden thread. By acting and improvising with it under Gey Pin’s guidance, I could explore its “affordances” (Gibson 1986) beyond the usual ones, searching both for possible and impossible affordances; sensing the thread, playing with it, relating to it as though it was for the first time: an exercise in astonishment and wonder. It was a thread and not a thread, it was more than just a thread.

I re-enacted the atmosphere of my childhood games, my physical theatre improvisations with songs and texts resonating with the memories of my grandmother - a professional embroiderer who taught me the first rudiments of her art. Moving and acting in the workshop room, together with the thread, allowed me to re-live the imaginative and playful attitude of my younger self, wherein a thread could transform itself into an animal, into a rope on which to balance, or into an instrument to play, hence enacting a ‘poetics of affordances’ which animated and affected my processes of memory and imagination.

## **Walking With A Golden Thread**

After the workshop I went for a walk together with my fellow participants, Brian, Paola, Peter and Ragnhild, in order to see the medieval St. Machar Cathedral and the adjacent Seaton Park. The thread was still with me. Leaving St. Machar’s Cathedral, I impulsively took it out of my bag. I was holding the thread as I stepped around the old graves of the cemetery while trying to keep on to that same explorative attitude of wonder I had during the workshop. I passed the thread to each of my fellow walkers at the gate of the Cathedral, and we all started walking and moving with it in ways we had not intended. By sharing the thread, as we had previously shared singing during the worksession, the playfulness of our individual and collective improvisations in the workshop room leaked out of that time and space: it “exceeded”. The playful exploration of the thread’s affordances hence was collectively reenacted in the park, becoming an “enabling constraint” (Manning 2009: 230), through which, in turn, we could mutually explore the participants’ and the park’s intertwined affordances.

By walking and holding the thread, whilst simultaneously being held by it, we started a “journey”, as Ragnhild Freng Dale (this volume) names it, across the park: St. Machar’s Cathedral, the cemetery, a gate, dust that we inhaled, brown leaves, white flowers, benches to pay attention to or to jump on, a narrow path, a wide open green space beyond the whole length of the thread, uncounted diagonals of our w(e)aving arms, joints bending, shoe laces, curious and non-curious people passing by, a dog, a curve, a slope, a crossing, the smell of the hoed ground, a twig entangled, the noise of the river getting closer. In this collective coupling of perception and action (Ingold 2000, 2011a), in order to keep playing, our attention had to stay as open as the park we were in, engaging in a search for meaningful and creative modes of “being-in-the-park”.

The thread was shimmering in the sunshine, moving through the air, as well as through our fingers, constantly animated by the currents of the Aberdonian wind. By proceeding with the walk, as we were moving across Seaton Park, the thread’s webbed shape was ever-changing. We stopped several times in order to contemplate the beauty of the movements of these glittering patterns through the air. Observing the threaded web shaking and changing its shape according to our movements and to the air’s movement in the park made me reflect on the link between wind, movements and materials and on the Ingoldian notion of the “weather-world” (Ingold 2007b, see also Looers, this volume).

## **Breathing With A Golden Thread**

As a former practitioner of a breathing awareness technique for singers called *Atem*, *Tonus*, *Ton* (Breath,

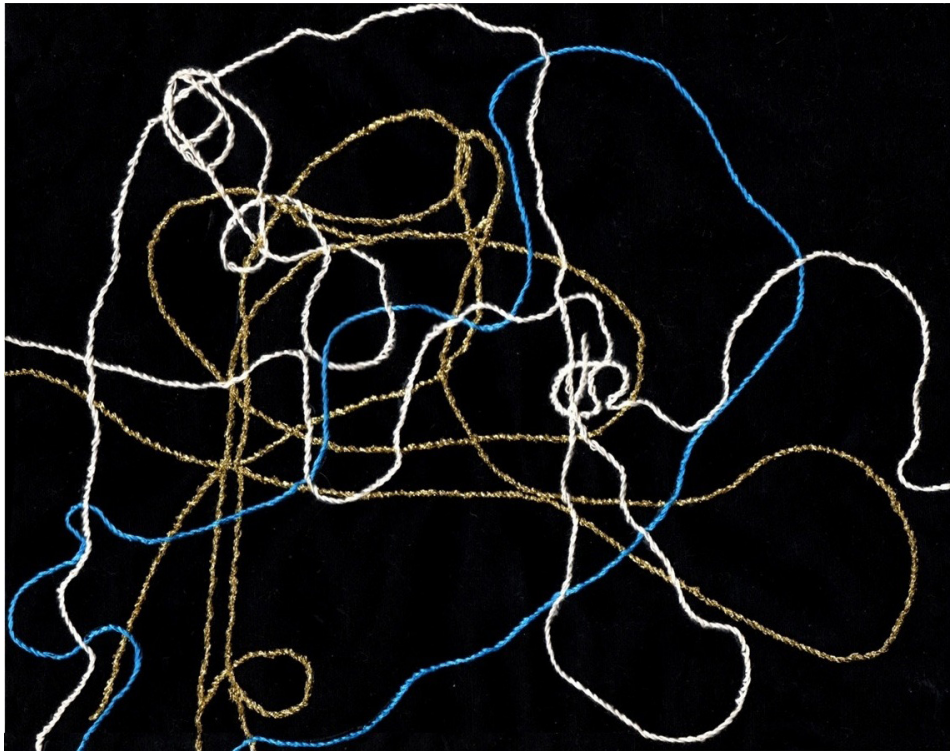


Figure 2: "Walking threads, threading walk", embroidering reflection

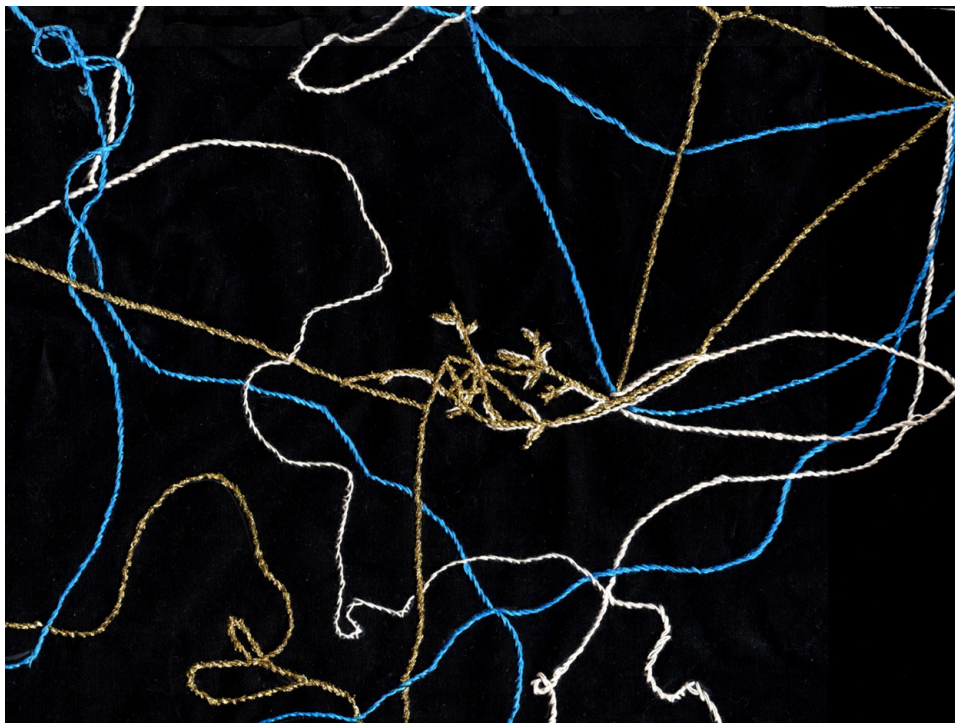


Figure 3: "Walking threads, threading walk", embroidering reflection



Figure 4: "Walking threads, threading walk", embroidering reflection



Figure 5: "Walking threads, threading walk", embroidering reflection

Tone, Sound), developed from German breath-therapist Ilse Middendorf's research and teaching principles while adapted specifically for singing, I have learned how breathing and movement are intimately connected. During the walk I tried to observe and to "actively listen" (see also Ang, this volume) to what was going on, in terms of air circulation within and without my body. According to Middendorf, breathing and movement are indeed like a playing couple: breath fuels movement whilst being guided by it, as well as movement rising from breath (Middendorf 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The Aberdonian wind was animating not only the thread, but also our movements with it. In turn, our movements and actions with the object affected the quality of our breathing processes. By "drifting" together across the park, as Brian Schultis (this volume) writes, the thread drew the entanglements of our bodies (and of the things that we encountered) in the weather-world. Lines of interchange occurring between wind currents and our breaths became visible through the air. This sort of bodily engagement with the thread shows some similarities with the one between the kite and the kite-flyer described by Ingold. As Ingold writes, these are "both jointly immersed in the current of air" (Ingold 2010: 133), likewise we were jointly immersed with the thread in the wind. Ingold develops his discussion by highlighting the importance of the "medium" within this kind of relation: "the medium is a condition of interaction, than it follows that the qualities of that interaction will be tempered by what is going on in the medium, that is by the weather" (ibid.). The Walking Threads event and exercise enabled us to visualise and sense through our fingers, and around our bodies, precisely how our social interaction as breathing beings was tempered by the currents of the wind as medium.

### **Embroidering With A Golden Thread**

Once back home, I chose embroidery as a reflexive technique to engage with the "Walking Threads" event. An important source of inspiration was an edited book titled *Redrawing Anthropology*, in which Ingold calls for a "Graphic Anthropology" (2011b). The notion of "Graphic Anthropology" aspires to a rekindling of the discipline, where "to follow the materials, to learn the movements and to draw the lines" (Ingold 2013) are at the very core of its agenda.

As a preparatory stage, I started drawing many sketches to be copied on textile and embroidered with golden thread. Keeping in my heart the memory of our animated "Walking Thread", I tried to draw with it. Again, I started playing with it, reenacting the exploratory attitude I had improvised with during the physical theatre workshop in Dunbar Hall. Working on the floor of my room in Capri and Naples, I have been randomly throwing the thread on paper and blowing on it. Whenever possible, I have been working outdoors or keeping my window open, in order to let the thread alter its lines following the air currents of breath and wind. In addition to this, I also referred to the pictures we took during the event.

Bearing in mind Ingold's lesson about lines, according to which traces and threads (two main manifestations of lines, see Loovers, this volume) are readily inter-convertible (Ingold 2007a), I was excited by the idea of engaging in a reflexive process to transform the golden 'Walking Thread' into an embroidered surface.

### **Lines And Reflections**

Reading Ingold's book *Lines*, nevertheless, left me with a major unresolved question. The book's preface and introduction begins with the question: "What do walking, weaving, observing, storytelling, singing, drawing and writing have in common?" and the subsequent answer: "they all proceed along lines" (Ingold 2007:1). As embroidery is also included within the book's discussion, I would consequently add embroidery to the above list. My big question was: Where exactly does this common factor lie?

By stitching again and again in *punto erba* (stem) technique, re-living my grandmother's teachings by pointing the needle on the black textile and pulling it with my right hand diagonally towards the side, I could not help but think about the thread moving through Aberdeen's cold wind. I started to realise how much this experience of entangled walking had affected my embroidery practice and the way I look at embroidered artefacts – as complex things created within complex social interactions in the "weather-world". I

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<sup>1</sup> Middendorf's research on breathing has been highly influenced by Asian bodily and spiritual disciplines such as *yoga* and *tai ji quan*. All of the workshop participants had practiced the latter every day, prior to engaging in the theatrical sessions of the 'Performance Reflexivity' worksession, under Gey Pin's guidance. Ang is indeed conducting research on *tai ji quan* as a pedagogical tool for singing and performing. By practicing *tai ji quan* before singing and acting during Gey Pin's workshops I felt able to explore more in depth the relation between breathing, movement and singing.

also began to pay attention to the breathing process related to my looping gestures whilst embroidering and decided to explore the similarities between this activity and singing. In this process I considered songs as threaded breaths embroidering the air, *vice versa* my coloured threads became breaths that were singing a story through textile. By paying attention to embroidery as it was a different (and silent) way of singing, I tried to apply to my stitching what I learned from the *Atem Tonus Ton* singing workshops: to observe the flows of breath and to become attentive to the way in which the air (and the wind) flows through the body. Whilst embroidering I noticed how the quality of breathing could affect the precision of my stitching. The more the breath could flow unconstrained and deep, the more beautiful were my stitches. This, again, was similar to some aspects of singing, wherein unconstrained breathing is fundamental for the quality of sound exhaled and for the singer's full expression. I take this to mean that the processes at the very core of the formation of lines, both in singing and in embroidery, deal with breathing and air circulation processes within, outside of and in relation to breathing bodies. What about writing, drawing, walking, observing, weaving, storytelling? What about the breathing processes related to these actions? Perhaps this was (and is) the direction towards my search in understanding what these activities have "in common". Perhaps the commonality might be found in that tiny yet immense, mysterious "in-between" (Ingold 2015) of exhaling and inhaling again.

Regarding my embroidered reflection, I like thinking about these stitches as though they were similar to steps. Proceeding stitch by stitch in order to embroider is a repetitive gesture which is nonetheless different each time; similarly each step and breath is unique while being repeated.

For me, this opens onto a new research question: in what ways can materials, artefacts, skill apprenticeship, gesture, breathing, lines, songs (?) and the "weather-world" relate to each other? The way I would like to proceed in my research aims to keep the openness of our unplanned walk across Seaton Park. In order to investigate these relations, it is my intention to intersect my anthropological research practice with playful collaborations and experiments in singing, embroidering and, of course, further walking with the golden thread. The embroideries I present here are intended as the initial traces of the movements of an ongoing process of research, reflection, study, and knowledge formation from inside the knots of theory and praxis. The golden thread is modifying its form again, generating new avenues of inquiry.

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