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CHAPTER 2

Stitching soft matter - a return to live iterative performance

'I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive...' (Borgeois cited in Storr, 2016:526)

Stitching soft matter is an iterative process of research-creation that in part uses Karen Barad's new materialist idea of 'diffraction' to explore what I call an 'ecology of touch'. To do this I initially experimented with stitching people's hands into pairs of cotton gloves, which created a kind of human-non-human assemblage. As exoskeletons, the gloves are a ghostly archive of a particular time, containing immanent corporealities and virtual energies. Re-activated in performance, the forces of touch inherent in the gloves affect living bodies, transforming them, making them different.

On 24th February 2023, working through assemblage, material processes and shared scores, a live performance workshop was constructed around the central action of stitching together 50 pairs of cotton gloves; a choreographic object-ile 'in-formation'. The stitching process governed the duration of the work and opened the physical event to the spectral forces of touch remaining dormant within the gloves. This experimental event, the first live public iteration of the *Stitching soft matter* project, acknowledged a re-turn to a changed world. The dancers, materials and scores were offered up as an ambient field of enquiry, investigating the possibilities of intra-activity with those present in the performance/workshop space.

There follows a visual/textual account of the timeline of the 5 hour performance:

11am preparations:

We (Neil Callaghan, Jo Young, Saffy Setohy and myself) prepare the space for the stitching process;
Two tables are placed adjacent to each other in between the Atrium's¹ central pillars; one table is a work space for the stitching to happen, the other is where the archive of 50 pairs of gloves is bundled ready, surrounded by 6 initialled linen bags that contain 6 pairs of gloves used by the dancers during the Repair project in 2021

We measure and cut the red thread, laying it out ready to use
We make a stitch of red thread on our shirts
Needles are stored in a glass jar
Skeins of spare red thread are placed next to the lamp
There is a singing bowl, used to mark time for the dancers improvisations
A watch is placed alongside
An A4 piece of paper is marked with a written time line
There are 4 chairs
A yellow table lamp
2 pairs of scissors



¹ Advanced Research Centre, University of Glasgow



Re-pair²; a compilation of films made on zoom in Spring 2021 (42 minutes looped);

A monitor is placed close to the entrance of the Atrium,

Stools and chairs are placed nearby.

A low table with a short description and context of the Re-pair project is placed nearby

A plinth with 50 copies of the performance programme adjacent

Diffractive writing³ is scrolling-repeating on a video monitor (4:39 minute looped).

This is placed in the opposite corner to the first monitor, facing inwards to the Atrium.

2 chairs nearby.

² Re-pair video compilation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z00-ehMG2c9I>

³ Diffractive writing (a one hour score, unedited): <https://youtu.be/aqPhLTyUZuU>





20 copies of the book *Stitching soft matter* are laid out on a table at the far edge of the Atrium, a text introduction alongside.

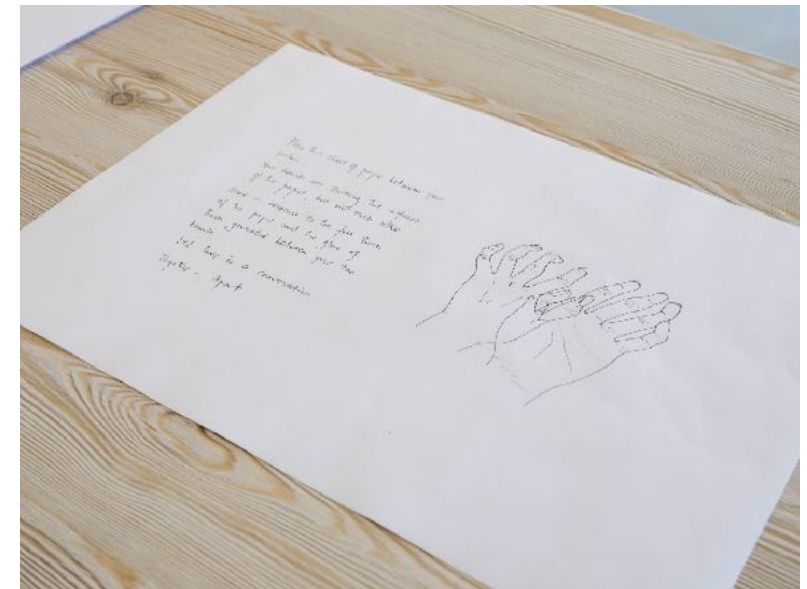
3 chairs nearby

The book is for reference and sale (£15)



4 touch Scores⁴ (from the book) are printed on A3 sheets of paper; they are placed on a high table facing the exterior windows of the Atrium. (Scores are rotated each hour)

4 wool mix blankets are folded beneath (to be used in the blanket score)



⁴ See pullout scores, inside the back sleeve of the book *Stitching soft matter*. Whitehead.S (2022:81)



1 pm

We (the four performers) begin by threading our needles, we take a pair of the conjoined gloves each and begin to stitch these together with other pairs, taking care to stitch edges to edges, keeping the openings of the gloves intact, as entry points, cavities. We are proximal to each other, we stitch gloves to a slowly-growing material body with many surfaces and undulations. A landscape emerges in this intra-active assembly, our attention is on the materials, and on the choreography of the task.

The videos begin, they are looping, I am aware of these activities at the edges of the space and my attention, both in vision and sound; the sound begins, piped and looped at medium volume through the ceiling sound system, from above our heads. The room is filling, there is a crossing made between these activities.

We learn the stitch through repetitive knot-making, a tangle of red thread at each point of contact. This replicates the original stitches used to conjoin the pairs of gloves. The assemblage of materials, a blanket perhaps? begins to emerge.

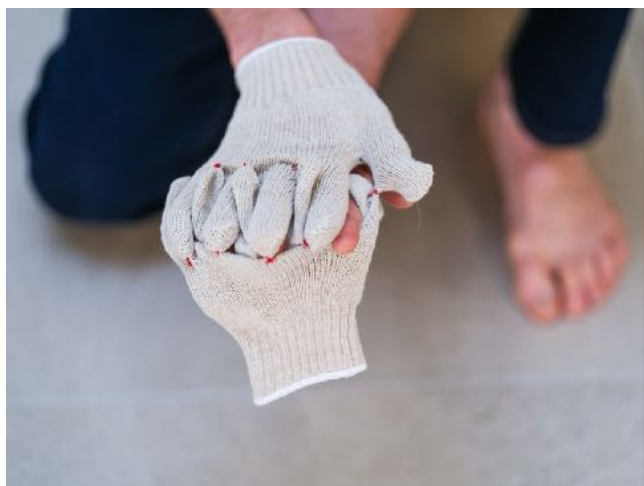
1.20 pm

The first breakout of 2 dancers; Neil and Saffy take a pair of gloves each from the table, they find somewhere in the space and begin to respond to both the material, corporeal qualities and the traces of touch from another time. They have up to 12 minutes before the bell is sounded and they return to the table to continue stitching. A rhythm begins, the dancers are noticed by others passing through the space and by those looking through the windows of nearby rooms. The atmosphere is changing, the space is becoming activated by the assemblage of activities, we are within a field of forces moving between bodies, materials and through air. The dancers' movements are initially tentative, searching. The scale of the Atrium allows for expansiveness in movement and for people to come close, or to retreat at distance.





6





The material spreads across the table. Through repetition we learn how to make good cause with the emerging assemblage, to follow its course, to stitch edges to edges. The piercing, looping and the building of tight knots of red thread tether the cotton together, offering another layer of fulcra within the folds, whilst breathing spaces open up between the palms and fingers of different gloves. I become aware of the warmth generated between hands and material-it transmits, diffracts through, it is at times, mutual. Perhaps the space is also warming us and the materials?



1.40 pm

Visitors begin to participate in the scores. We offer guidance to some, the touch-paper-hands score⁵ offers ways to feel the glow of touch between the hands through the body of a sheet of A4 paper. The paper provides a barrier to the hands touching each other, the diffractive⁶ forces of touch pass through its surfaces and begin to alter it. Participants follow this process of correspondence, noticing the ways the paper and hands respond to each other. On completion they are invited to feel the traces of this event in the skin of their hands and to notice the material traces of the dialogue left in the paper. They are invited to place the sheet on the ground next to others. A paper/hand topology begins to assemble.

⁵ See *Stitching soft matter*, S.Whitehead (2022: 81) for details of the touch-paper-hands score

⁶ 'Diffraction is not a singular event that happens in space and time; rather, it is a dynamism that is integral to spacetime mattering. Diffractions are untimely. Time is out of joint; it is diffracted, broken apart in different directions, non-contemporaneous with itself.' (Barad 2014:169)



The stitching engenders a particular set of rhythms, the scale of the gloves and the repeated refrain of stitching these red knots at the fringes of the growing object grounds the event in a continuum of time-space-matter. This becomes a steady state, ambient thing; over and over, we return to the stitching in different combinations. Whatever else is happening in the space, the stitching proceeds. This focus spills into the space, implicating others, the encounters, the performing of scores, those passing through, the sound & the looping videos in a larger assemblage of forces. The Atrium is threaded through with these converging events.



1.50 pm

Breakout happens every 30 minutes. The gloves are taken from the table and they ground the dancers' movements in the ongoingness of the event. There is always a re-turn with a difference; the gloves and dancer are both altered in this activation, subsequently another layer of touch and trace are then stitched into the material assemblage by the dancer, as stitcher. The forces of touch between bodies and materials and the undulating ambience of the space, the comings and goings, the repeated stitching, all engender a larger field of affect and rhythm.







The gloves are stitched together. In-form-ation, they embody a cluster of land masses, with surfaces enfolded, offering openings and invaginations, all within a topology of variant cotton weave and colouration. A repetition of de-human deflated fingers, wrists and palms configure a larger landscape, an assemblage of parts, emptied of bodies, though immanent with new movements to be activated/dis-covered. This is becoming a complex multiple, motile, more than human thing. It is difficult to calibrate its resonances, it is emerging; becoming a different body.

Other visitors' bodies become absorbed in the touch of things, amplifying the soft matter sensory field in the space. Touch engenders movement, the sound, the stitching, the looping and the changing light all cross each other. This diffracted space of border crossing is formed in a confluence of bodies in movement, a transparency of boundaries between outside and inside, the activation of empty things and the multiple openings offered by materials, scores and sensations.





2.20 pm

Blanket score⁷ with dancers Saffy Setohy and Joanna Young

The blankets, woven of multiple recycled textiles, offer a haptic fold of containment, interiority and motility. The enwrapped body becomes de-familiarised and is subject to the interstitial world of touch between skin, material and ever-forming, transitory folds; there is a breathing space between body and blanket. From outside, the body appears as a geological form of soft, pre-solid matter; this contradiction invokes the processes of body as earth, always in-formation.

The dancers take time, for absorption, to come into the affect of the blanket. It is a slow unfolding thing, it offers a kind of swaddling, a pre-linguistic place. The smallest movement of the body, its breathing, registers in the topology of the surface. The material/body assemblage invokes a kind of embryology, a coming into formation, occurring both through the inner sensate experience of the dancers and the exterior morphology. The score engenders a sense of weight and density, what appears are bodies made more than human.



⁷ See *Stitching soft matter*, Whitehead, S(2022:81) for details of the Blanket score



2.50 pm

The conjoined gloves offer openings into different bodied sensations. Against the skin these things estrange/ antagonise a body; a face disfigured, mouths muffled, hands multiplied. There is soft comfort in the cotton material warmth, though bordering on a violence, touch is interrupted, particularly when the spectres of past events of touching are called up and cross over.

The Atrium has anatomical resonances; naming the upper cavities of the heart, where flows of incoming oxygenated and deoxygenated blood pass on through to the ventricles. It is also descriptive of the physical architecture: an open forecourt, a passage of light and ventilation. These bodied and cosmic references gesture to how this space performed with and filtered into the live performance. The work was seen from within and without, it was subject to reflections across its glazed boundaries and gave rise to a circulation and passing through of bodies, of materials, choreographies and ghosts. These passings were also to describe the

movements between bodies, the changing ambient light, materials and sound. This was an intra-active⁸ field, where agency moved amongst, between and beyond the constituents.

These encounters with cold, thin surface boundaries, this conjunction of a winter outside with the interior warm softness of bodies moving, troubled any clear separation. The edges were all abled, another crossing happened, as the glove objects themselves cross; cutting bodies together-apart. Through the rhythmic stitched assemblage, another material field of relations and agencies begins to emerge.



⁸ Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad, 2007, p. 141) in which all designated 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably. Intra-action also acknowledges the impossibility of an absolute separation or classically understood objectivity, in which an apparatus (a technology or medium used to measure a property) or a person using an apparatus are not considered to be part of the process that allows for specifically located 'outcomes' or measurement. newmaterialism.eu/almanac/i/intra-action.html. (2016)



3.20 pm

Saffy and Joanna collaborate with one pair of the conjoined gloves. They pass through the space and move alongside other small events and as spectator one begins to experience the crossovers. The stitching continues nearby, the sound spills from speakers overhead (recordings of a body moving with a Stratocaster in a moving river, 5 short pieces looping, repeating⁹), nearby a text piece scrolls and loops and speaks of diffraction, touch and difference, people mill about-coming close and retreating to get wider perspective on the movement.

In this duo, multiple selves emerge. There is a trio of touch enfolded in the relations; a past encounter in the cotton contaminates these sensate bodies. The wider space incorporates all of this and the making exudes a a diffracted fuzzy haze; the spaces between bodies, materials and media all ashimmer.

Joanna closes her eyes, the contact, the touch guides, the gloves haunt, people are watching. Nearby, someone is also watching the video of Saffy moving with the gloves in Spring 2021. The different elements of movement, stitching, materiality and dialogue are enfolded in this process of making with and alongside each other in a space-time. A world is being made, a sympoiesis¹⁰.



⁹ Dulais recordings - May 2022 - see <https://materialthinking.net/commissions/simonwhitehead/>

¹⁰ 'Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer "world game," earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company' Harraway, D. (2016:58).



Leftover threads accumulate, residual, too short to stitch with

3.50 pm

A group of dancers arrive from Indepen-dance¹¹, a Glasgow-based inclusive dance company. They are here to participate. There is an openness in their demeanour, someone picks the Touch Ears¹² score, they leave the red paint on their fingers and ears.

Two other dancers join with Saffy and Jo in the Blanket score. The space intensifies with this collective action, various levels of animation and slow-ness emerge between the materials and bodies. The score proceeds in the space close to the exterior windows, people look into the space as they pass. At the end, two of the dancers emerge slowly, close to sleep.



¹¹ <https://www.indepen-dance.org.uk/>

¹² See *Stitching soft matter* Whitehead, S(81:2022) for details of the Touch Ears score

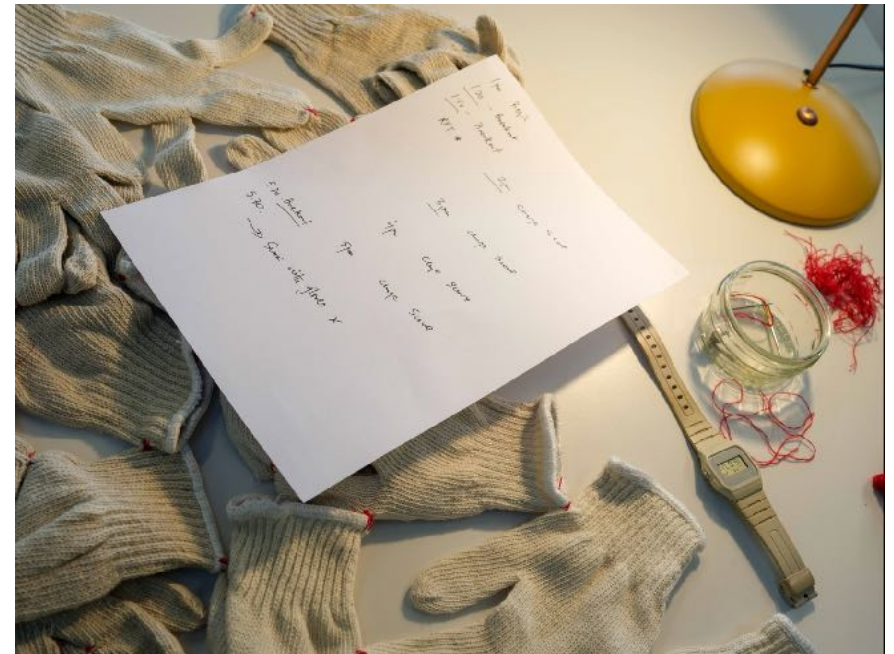




Visitors commingle in the space, moving between activities and media they make their own choices, relations, engagements. The assemblage is made of the many ephemeral threads and traces that people follow, then leave behind; there are multiple agencies playing out in the space, many of these crossover and have affect on each other. Each person's experience of the work is different, they are part of making it, activating it. The space and the configuration of events offer pathways, places of intensity, of observation, respite, movement and co-creation. One is not separable from the emerging event, all are implicated in this process of becoming.

4.20 pm

We have a simple visualised timeline of activity. The rhythm generated by the act of stitching increases in intensity as we become more practiced. We notice this happen and we all slow down to incorporate the process. As we handle the increasing size of the blanket we become aware of its weight, the ways it moves, its body-scale. It is emerging between us as we stitch across its span. Its immanence as an actant in the space begins to radiate amongst us. It is bigger than a body.







Multiples of hands-as hands-traces of the touch of hands on materials-the empty casings of hands stitched together. Hands as figures in the emerging landscape. Bodied, disembodied. Touch is a reaching towards...





4.50 pm

Walk-touch score¹³. An invitation to walk together and to remember the places on the body where touch takes place, then to recount these 'touch events' to each other whilst sitting back to back. The daylight is fading, there's a calm in the space, it seems like the larger space of research in the building is winding down for the week. The blanket is taking on a density and variegation in its surfaces, openings and folds and there are only a few more pairs to stitch in. Jo and her partner are sitting back to back, whispering touch to each other, imbuing a sense of ground, a resting, care taking place between them.

¹³ See *Stitching soft matter*, Whitehead.S(81:2022) for details of the walk-touch score



5.20 pm

The Atrium doors are opened, a breach is made, I leave and move into the concourse outside with a pair of gloves. The twilight is gloaming, the air is cold. The breach happens both ways as cold air breezes into the Atrium and scatters the assembly of paper casts left by people's hands across the floor. The atmosphere is momentarily changed, 2 people are offered the conjoined gloves to wear, they raise their arms, make an arch, it could be a folk dance. I remove the gloves slowly in their elevated gesture. I am aware of exposing their hands to the cold, for a moment they remain in a state of suspension. We all return indoors, I notice that there is now a different mix of air in the space and the temperature is lower.





5.30 pm

We return to stitch the remaining gloves into what we have called (for now) the blanket, a material assemblage of things and events, something that in activation will no doubt reveal multiplicities of identity and movement. People gather, there is a collective anticipation of a phase shift, the material stitched these past 5 hours is to become an actant for engagement and movement; a material score, a choreographic object. We complete the details, check the fulcrums of stitches and material. On the table it appears to be in repose, a thing composed of many states and masses; it contains folds, ghosts, pastness and immanent physics. We make eye contact; there is no plan, other than to be in touch, to follow the heft of the materials together.

I remember the sensation of this touch in the crook of my neck. Occurring in the aftermath of moments spent in the chill outside the building, the gloved pair on my skin ground me in the comfort of warmth and the ambience of the space. I am reminded of another time, a scarf I wore as a child; there are many layers of touch, diffraction and time happening here. Nearby, the other dancers are stitching the remaining gloves into the assemblage, this pair will be added soon.





What was originally an emerging suite of multiple objects has now become assembled into another body. There is a collective hauntology of gloves—each stitched arrangement has an affect on the others and they haunt the body/blanket to come. The constituents are identifiable, but are altered in their relationships with each other and the larger mass, they become a patchwork of stitched, woven matter. We tentatively lift the weight of the assemblage, it is surprisingly heavy, it falls in many directions through its tethered points. There is a moment where we pause, register the presence of this body, it measures a scale between us, we begin to feel the agency of its unsupported parts, multiple pathways, unstable forces.



5.40 pm

We proceed with care, with attention to the play of weight, tensions and the openings that begin to appear in the material, both literal and agential. We approach with our hands, meeting the many empty shells and formations of hands present. Holding the edges, the material stretches and under tension, our hands find ways through the surfaces, probing through gaps between, adding another layer of warmth and corporeal touch to the pastness and liveliness activated across these bodies and materials.

This material body engenders a field of forces, where the emerging movement is happening across the dancers bodies and the material itself. Affect emerges as a sensory/material ecology in these expressions of force; we collectively and individually follow the patterns that appear amongst us. We are holding a multitude of beings.



The object becomes both a variegated surface process and a body covering. We attune to its weight and touch on the different surfaces of our own bodies. There are different expressions and loci of relation happening across its scale. To watch, the assemblage appears at times as landscape; movements activate its complexities, the localised events unfold across all the bodies in its field. Indeed, in this field another body is emerging, it feels as if we are all a part. The space-time of the atrium itself appears altered, the process leaks outwards.



We invite the people who have assembled to become involved, to respond to the emerging forms and sensations. It feels compelling, as if the event-ness of the assemblage transmits something magnetic. People enter the gloves, the openings, they hold the weight and cover/compose the materials over other bodies, they place themselves beneath. Sometimes they retreat to watch. There is a field of co-composition, what emerges in movement and sensation seems to guide us, offer agency.



There is a moment where the rhythm of engagement changes. People move more quickly, other bodies enter the event and they become involved in something more kinetic. The movement spills across the space of the atrium, the assemblage travels and flows; another force emerges from this meeting of bodies, materials and the space itself. Someone's body is covered, uncovered, moved by the tensions across the surface and between the stitched objects. We are all moved across the space, along the pathway that many bodies have taken during the day, something playful emerges in these relations, transformative, diffractive in its affect.



6.00 pm

Another phase begins as people step away and the activated material is carried between us; eventually just two of us are holding it, everything slows, we unfold the blanket open. Stretched to its span, others follow, it becomes a procession. The material appears net-like (someone mentions a caul; a mammal's amniotic membrane), it has resonant kin, but it also contains its own worlds. A thing that perhaps requires more time to engender different affective relations and reveal its agencies?(For now, it feels like we are moving towards the end of this iteration). We walk towards a cluster of people, we feel its weight again, pulling downwards and for the first time we place it together on the ground. It rests here, we lie close to it in repose, on the earth. We watch it, give it a breathing frame, its weight and textures are still felt in our bodies, its topologies and colour variegations clarify against the off-white floor. We are somehow changed by this encounter and the materials appear changed also, we continue to remember its formations. The space feels full, the event, for now, is complete; but vibrating/ echoing still. This thing has life; it holds a past and has future ghosts folded within it.

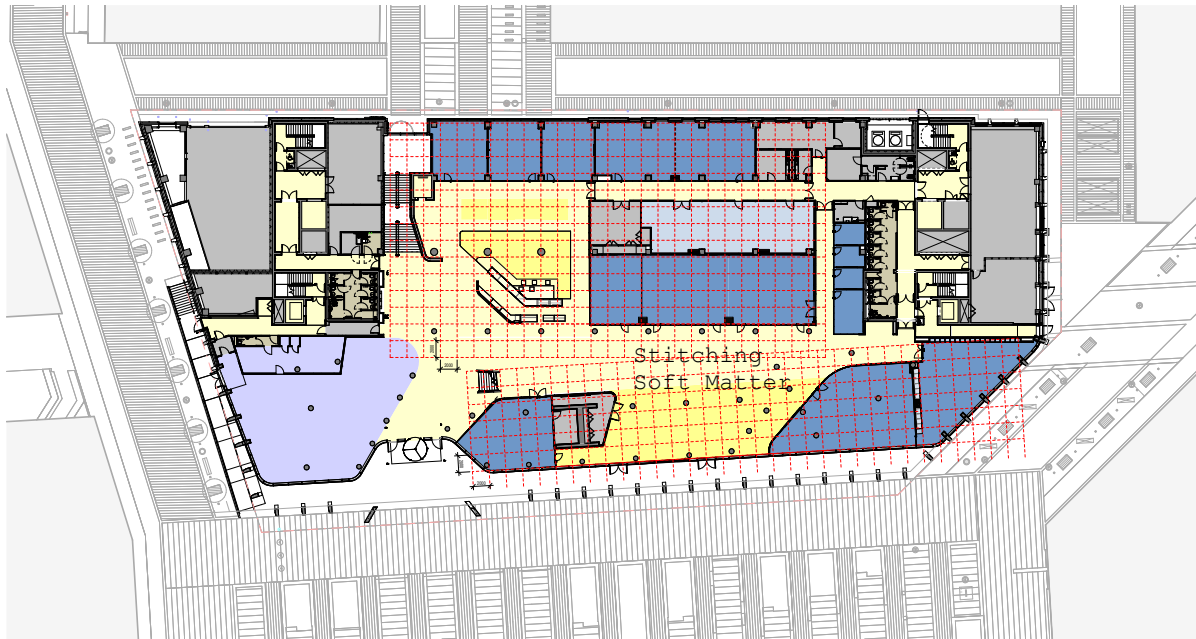


The scale of the ARC atrium offers different perspectives on the event's culmination. The photos from above remind me of the agency of this space in the spectacle of its unfolding; people working in the ARC building have borne witness through varying angles, elevations and windows, whilst involved in their own processes of research. Another thread of diffraction and crossover has taken place, revealing some of the affordances of the space for intra-active research and the cross-contamination of ideas. The space itself is altered by the articulations of *soft matter*; the haze of activity, the forces and rhythms moving through the bodies, materials and the space mobilise an ecology of touch and relation. As we sit at the end of the event it is possible to feel the resonances of this field both in those present (there is a collective hush) and in the atmosphere of fuzzy repose echoing in the space. The traces of many events remain; paper scattered, blankets in different states of folding, red thread and needles on the table, video and sound continue to loop, books fall open and closed, paper scores (some on the floor), the light dusking outside, the building slowly emptying. There is a soft fullness here and as we begin to clear the space of residue, to pack up, we have conversations with those present. I feel as if I have done a day's work; I'm tired, hungry, my body carries the physical traces of labour in its tissues, in the skin. My body remembers the sensations of material touch, of surfaces, light, the slough of other bodies and the cool ground, the soft stitched cotton; the newly borne blanket body is all aglow with all these resonances.

A milieu was engendered between bodies, materials, sound and the qualities of the space; a 'steady state' ambience, a field where invitations to participate were perhaps implicit and open. The felt state of performing this work, over a duration governed by the labour to sew together 50 pairs of cotton gloves, became both materialised, sensate and spectral. A field of becoming emerged, contingent on physical and immaterial things and actions; the recorded sound looping, recorded texts looping, recorded *Re-pair* video dance looping, the physical stitching looping, the scores physically activated, people entering and leaving. The space was changed by the work and in turn offered the motile conditions for the labour of work to emerge/occur. This process of labour attempted to offer a sensate ecology to the space and the time, to those present and those passing through. The dancers, attending to the touch of materials, the space, each other and visitors offered a bodied field. This field was to engender the multiple crossovers between the many constituents of the event, forces of diffraction were to occur in movements across the space, between matter, bodies and surfaces. I experienced a temporal flow emerging; characterised in occasional waves of activity and dialogue, the performing of scores and the ongoing, unbroken rhythm of stitching the soft matter of cotton gloves with tethers of red thread. A threading together of matter, the space, the time and bodies was to occur.



In this re-turn to a physical practice together, we felt a parasympathetic calm was generated between us, an attention to care, to response-ability, there was no rush. The immanent glow of the materials were to give off forces, ghosts, warmth and became non-human others to those present, we were never alone. The space itself was light, open and in its hard and often transparent surfaces it was to meet a multitude of skins, of soft, sensitised bodies in touch with each other, all entangled in this emerging/growing multiple-bodied object, a stitched assemblage. The labour of the stitching engendered a rhythmic refrain of space-time-matter; there was something magnetic in this, generated by the mesmerism of repetition perhaps? Plus, in the stitching-looping of thread, the piercing of cotton skin; touch was held together and apart. An assemblage emerged across the Atrium and the material blanket was always larger than it appeared-it gave off forces, possibilities; it created an ecology of immanence as other bodies and events in the space became implicated in its formation. Eventually, when carried and activated, the blanket had surprising weight, it engendered a motility in the dancers bodies in response. Teetering in unstable processes; it de-familiarised those present. In its many selves, it is a disruptive, antagonistic thing, leaking immanent movements and spectres. The blanket - objectile will have future 'outings' and iterations as part of an ongoing performative enquiry into diffractive modes of touch. See 'Epilogue' (160).



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LEVEL 2 PLAN WITH FURNITURE PLANNING GRID OVERLAY
SCALE 1:200 @A1

Atrium floor plan. ARC (Advanced Research Centre, University of Glasgow).2022



BODIED PREPARATIONS

On the day prior to the performance (23rd February 2023), dance artists Joanna Young, Saffy Setohy, Neil Callaghan and myself gathered in a studio in the West End of Glasgow. For the first time since the pandemic, this occasion marked a re-turn to a changed world, to a corporeal practice together and to a multiplicity of physical relations that had accumulated between us over 3 years and that had, up to now, been activated remotely.

We handle and touch the glove materials. For the first time since 2021, we are with the spectral haze of past touch that this matter gives off; we are under their affect, influenced by their arrangements. We practice touch with each other; something that has become unfamiliar to us, but rapidly the bodies wake and respond; a sensate re-membering occurs between us. An ecology of touch emerges in this intra-active entanglement, opening both bodies and matter to a field of affect, making them different.

We work with the wool blankets as second skins; all encompassing, enfolded, enraptured by wool and warmth and the glow of touch. Everything slows down - bodies become soft; they assume the morphology of landscapes, movements appear geological in their intra-active formations with wool. The dancers' nervous systems calm into para-sympathetic states; the soft matter offers warmth, comfort, embryonic resonance. The sensate affect of the bodies together with the materials seem to co-contaminate, space+time+matter fold into each other.

In this rehearsal, I begin to recognise that the work is already here, amongst us. The elements have immanence, deep memory, we are supported by them, there is mutual care in the processes of realisation. We must simply open ourselves to these im/material processes and let the work move through; cultivate a porosity, a following of the forces present, a somatic mobilisation. The future - tomorrow's event, is immanent in this pastness. We will thread it all together, build a world from the constituents, allow them to correspond with each other.

The accumulated experience of working with these materials and each other in different conditions both during the pandemic and subsequently in person, will support the liveness of

the performance (see the book: *Stitching soft matter* for reference). There is tangible excitement amongst us, an anticipation of the known and the unknown elements of the performance. Our curiosity resides in what will emerge from the assemblage of the building, actions, materials and bodies; a relational field of incipient movement passing between everything; a loose assembly of gloved materials stitched together, a process of making a choreographic object/ile, an apparatus for diffraction.

STITCHING SOFT MATTER AND A DIFFRACTIVE FIELD

In these bodied rememberings, the disruptive, processual forces that occurred between matter, bodies, the parameters and temporal dynamics of the space, speak of diffraction. The variant practices of touch performed by bodies with soft matter, the rhythms of stitching, the iterative phasing of the event-space offered the conditions for diffractive forces to emerge, to be noticed and to crossover. In Physics, diffraction describes the interference patterns

that occur as force waves meet obstacles, move around and pass between objects. These forces are altered by these encounters; they change pattern, they break apart, they reveal the complex relations and entanglements between things and the ongoing motility of an unstable world. Within a research field, diffraction inculcates a process/method of emergent experimentation, it brings attention to the always in-forming, to the complexities of interference patterns moving between bodies and materials and the intra active agency of participants.

Leila Dawney describes diffraction as a process

that refuses to reduce or reflect, or to hold anything still. It is about experimentation: putting things together and seeing what happens; or putting ourselves in particular situations; or recovering histories and genealogies that became lost as objects were being made into objects. Diffracting involves thinking with disjuncture; thinking about where data rubs up against data and what that exposes about how subjects and objects of research are made through the research...It unsettles and mixes, producing disturbances to watch how they pan out. It delves into

forgotten material histories, making visible and asking what caused them to be forgotten: it exposes the world in its complexity and messiness.(2018:110)

The agencies emerging through this performance occurred between the dynamic assembly of objects and bodies and moved through the forces activated in the field. Indeed, objects did not exist here as objects, rather they were always unstable, in process of formation, incipient with movement. The scores, the stitching practice, materials, the dancers movements - all iterative, looping, crossing over - became other and reached in excess of themselves. This entanglement of matter, bodies and the space itself was to engender different relationships to time in the event's unfolding. There was no pre-supposed temporal arc; the central rhythm of stitching, of the assemblage of the cotton gloves together allowed for different relations to time to co-exist and to leak across each other; a steady state, fluctuating milieu was made. The agency of this milieu emerged from the material relations, the dancers responsive improvisation practice and the apparatus of sewing. These intra-active relations(a term coined by Karen Barad) understand that agency does not pre-exist, but emerges through a dynamism of forces, from within the forming relationships, not outside of them and a mutual constitution of entangled agency subsequently emerges. Here, in *Stitching*

soft matter, the material constituents (cotton, thread, needles, paper, blankets, bodies, sound, the space and movement of air) were always in relation with the corporeal tasks the dancers performed, the participation and visitation of others and the looping video pieces; proffering a messy entanglement, the making of a world, an incomplete haze. Karen Barad (2004:169) describes the commingling of these assemblages as '...a diffracted condensation, a threading through of an infinity of moments-places-matterings, a superposition/ entanglement, never closed, never finished.' This 'condensation' affect emerged in the movements made across boundaries, engendered through the dancers' attention and correspondences with matter. The resulting interference patterns were to activate this field of affect, emerging in the relational space between matter and bodies. Many of these engagements were predicated on the sensate intention of touch and the forces moving through relations, occurring as they did between bodies and matter: cotton, thread, needle, paper, wool, the surfaces and arrangements of the space, skin. Here, the boundaries of matter became thresholds, places and surfaces of crossover, where emerging movements became the primary force of organisation.

The early work of dance minimalist Simone Forti's *5 Dance Constructions and other Things*¹⁴ has relevance to the reading of *Stitching soft matter*. Her *5 Dance Constructions and other things* was a catalyst for a radical re-orientation in post modern dance, it left a substantial legacy in the re-mattering of dance practice; performing as it does, a particular understanding of the relational interdependence between bodies and the material world. Its relevance here is partly through the sensory attention of performers towards the affective lives of matter and in response to the im/material forces that move through the assemblage of bodies and materials. In the *Dance Constructions* the forces between the material apparatus and the performing bodies provide a field of potentialities for the work to emerge through movement and that these assemblages are always experienced in their processes of 'construction' and individuation, always in-formation. In *Stitching soft matter* it could be said that these processes occur in the field of affect engendered between the iterative stitching of matter, the human visitations, the performances of scores with different materials, the undulating sonic milieu and the shifting atmosphere of the space throughout the duration of the performance. In this context, it is the growing, piecing together of the

¹⁴Refer here to Chapter on Simon Forti; 'I'm still attached to the Earth.(77)'

blanket from its ghostly and material parts that constitutes a strange, immanent apparatus; eventually coming in to life as choreographic *objectile*. An object that was to haunt those gathered with its accumulated traces and to eventually reveal its motile life through the bodies entangled within it. Simone Forti's designs for the *Dance Constructions* allowed an unfolding of the force-field of each piece, affording the materials' agency to speak through bodies. There is a virtuality of relations and touch that occur as the composite material/body performs its adjustments. In the diffractive field of *Stitching soft matter*, bodies became opened to the immanent forces within the expanding material and as these leaked out, movements emerged through the multiple bodied assemblage and became manifest in a passage through the space. This performative re-membering of the body/matter ecologies engendered in Forti's influential 5 *Dance Constructions* is an important reference in the unfolding processual assemblage of *Stitching soft matter*.

SOUND

The sound playing throughout the event via the atrium ceiling sound system was a series of river-field recordings made with a Fender Stratocaster guitar. In this parallel project, *Dulais*¹⁵, the processes of diffraction between a body, apparatus and the physical frequencies of a spring river commingle into an ambient, passive/active assemblage of sound events, all enfolded within each other. A localised and durational practice, the decision to involve this sound in the design of the space was in part influenced by the similar ecological approaches to process and production; an invitation to a horizontality of relations, the opening to the affect of other than human forces. This is a field of sound events materialised live, an artefact of an unstable and responsive-bodied process of listening/feeling with guitar to the movements and beings of a river with all its emergent textures and seasonal atmospheres. The intra-activity generated between my moving body and the guitar's body in correspondence within the eddies and fluctuating agencies of the river's body produce short episodes of

¹⁵ (2022) *Dulais field recordings*. Centre for Material Thinking. Aberystwyth University
<https://materialthinking.net/commissions/simonwhitehead/>

machinic sound. Subsequent interference patterns are sonorised through the guitar's strings, the river's larger cosmology briefly excavated and grounded in a mutual, intra-active field of touch.

This sediment of sound had a gentle, but affective contribution to the ambience of the atrium performance space; it was a fluctuating constant, with its own waves of activity and permeabilities. A diffractive polyphony looped over and over.

THE EMERGENT CHOREOGRAPHIC *OBJECTILE* / *BLANKET*

Matter itself is diffracted, dispersed, threaded through with materializing and sedimented effects of iterative reconfigurings of spacetime-mattering, traces of what might yet(have)happen(ed). Matter is a sedimented intra-acting, an open field. Sedimenting does not entail closure. (Mountain ranges in their liveliness attest to this fact.) (Barad 2014:168)

This relation to matter was to permeate the performance space, nothing was stable, all was moving in a field of becoming more than the physical constituents. This process of materialisation and the sedimentation of memory and action was fundamental to the making of the glove blanket; the different configurations of the materials led the composition and the stitching together, the growing object co-created its emerging formation. The emerging patterns of the blanket began to have increased affect on its own making and to influence the space-time of the event. There was certainly a sense of anticipation, a felt sense of the blanket's motility between us, a moving towards an engagement with the object and its incipient choreographic agencies. Our bodies, in relation to the emerging material were subject to these changes, to difference. The intensity of activity increased as we moved towards completion, the accumulated temporal resonance and traces of what were to happen contaminated us, we were all moving towards something that became an unfamiliar artefact of all our making: something that included the spectres, the material and bodied histories enfolded in the space. The '*blanket/caul/objectile*' was to become the main protagonist in a space of multiple interference patterns. This research object(ile) progressed with and became an agent of affect in the space, altering people's experience and participation in the

physical space itself and in the space-time-mattering of the building. Invitations to participate were open and people were often met by the dancers; a porosity of attention was cultivated and led these engagements, embedded in all the relations: material, human, more than human. A culture of care was to emerge from these conditions, both from those present and the material assemblage, which was subsequently to inform relations to space-time. The stitching, assembling of the blanket was to engender a relational field of becoming, incipient with choreographic information. This process of formation was an elusive refrain, the blanket object was continually altered, differentiated in its emergence; a pattern growing outwards, multiplying. Erin Manning (2013:92) elucidates the complex agencies of these choreographic objects¹⁶ '...they present themselves as part of an evolving ecosystem. They extend beyond their object-ness...' The emergence of the blanket was to add another layer of processual complexity; it was revealing itself in its slow materialisation, its tendencies were being felt/diffracted by the iterative rhythm of stitching, a folding outwards and inwards. The *objectile* accumulated many surfaces, invaginations and intervals, its touch seemingly contaminating, haunting and implicating the dancers in its affect. The repeated

¹⁶ Whilst Manning refers to these as 'objects', in this project I conceive them as 'objectiles', as they extend beyond their own 'objectness'. (See Chapter 3)

action of stitching grounded the event in a relative slowness; the atrium was imbued with this state, there was no rush.

The choreographic object activates experimentation and play by bringing together the pastness of experience(the object as we know it) and its futurity(the object-ecology in its novel unfolding) ... the experience of time no longer feels linear, it's because the event is beginning to take over...you are now experiencing the potential of the future mixed with the resonance of the past: a futurity of pastness in the present. Event-time. (Manning 2014:95)

In this process of material-formation, the fragmented disjuncture of the singular glove objects were to govern the event in its unfolding. Their past resonances, coupled with their material arrangements and immanent echoes, engendered the event-time and were agents in the alterity of the space and the distributed intra-active movements of bodies.

'We stitch an assemblage of materials together, that in turn choreograph us. This is the radical proposition; We get out of the way - we open ourselves to this field of

affect and we follow the curve. We attune to the forces that move through us, the forces that erupt from the assembled materials.'

(Whitehead, S. Notebook entry 24.02.23)

In this slipping ecology of bodies, materials, scores, media and participation a distributed agency emerges, where relations are foregrounded and rhythms are governed by the touch and affect given off the assemblage. There is no innate control, the event is led by the emerging *objectile* and the series of engagements that happen through its milieu. This is a posthuman motile assembly, as Erin Manning(122: 2014) proposes: 'No longer do we have the human at centre. Instead we have priming-for-movement, cues, alignments, inflections, vacuoles of expression.' The event proceeds through this accumulated mattering and the culmination reminds us that there is no resolution. The object and the space-time engender a futurity, movements and responses to come; further iterations are implicit, materially immanent.

Stitching soft matter Assemblage in relation to Bruno Latour's Terrestrial and Distributed Agencies

Referring to Bruno Latour's theoretical proposals for distributed agencies, here agency is a hybridised process and is composed of assemblages of humans and non-humans. In this field of intra-active mutuality the act and the actant cannot be separated. In *Down to Earth* (2018) Latour proposes a new agential construct, 'a new political actor' (2018:40). *The Terrestrial* describes a field of participation and agency that continues to react to human actions. In this way, *the Terrestrial* actually envelopes the human. It is no longer simply a framework in which the human is the only actor, it is now understood as a territory that in turn occupies us and implicates us in its movements. From this perspective, *the Terrestrial* implies a mutuality, an instability in contrast to the old order. Put simply, it poses questions relating to new ways of moving: 'How are we to act if the territory itself begins to participate in history, to fight back, in short, to concern itself with us - how do we occupy a land if it is this land itself that is occupying us?' (2018:41).

In *Stitching soft matter* it could be proposed that the agential processes involved in constructing the material objectile engendered a space of mutual 'occupation'. The dancers and the emerging material 'territory' became part of the same more-than-human assemblage. *The Terrestrial* situates itself as a zone of attachment, whilst identifying itself as a site of entanglement, acknowledging that agency is a distributed phenomena amongst all beings. In Latour's argument *The Terrestrial* is a movement towards an inhabitable Earth as a political project. In recognising ourselves as such we face the imperative to re-describe our place in the biosphere, to move from centralised human systems based on constant production towards systems that focus on 'engendering' relationality:

The system of engendering brings into confrontation agents, actors, animate beings that all have distinct capacities for reacting...It is based on the idea of cultivating attachments, operations that are all the more difficult because animate beings are not limited by frontiers and are constantly overlapping, embedding themselves within one another. (2018:83)

During the performance of *Stitching soft matter* there is a multiple coupling, a bringing together of fragments, a stitching, where the fragments become a part of the larger material body. Whilst retaining their disjunction, they operate in relation to each other through a loosely tethered structure that was to fold and move in correspondence with other moving bodies. A relational, motile actant, an assembled material-ghost body, future antagonist.

In his ecology of the late capitalist present, Latour identifies the ground, the soil, as being on the move, an animistic agent in the new order of things. Here the very foundations of land and placement have become destabilised and it is towards these conditions that we are called to reorient, and to land in a place. The implications of this earthly mobilisation foreground the imperative to learn anew ways to think through the mixed-up chaos of the Anthropocene and to imagine alternative ways of being together as humans with the Earth. At a time when the Earth begins to express its resistance to the ravages and unquenchable thirst of global capitalism, a capitalism that is preoccupied with 'a flight out of the shared world' (76), Latour suggests that there is a need for radical perceptual change - a change of direction that would break the spell of the ever-receding horizon of globalisation. This is a

direction back to the ground we live upon and the soil we become. Although Latour is not directly concerned with this point, I would propose that landing in a place suggests a different physicality, dropping from the geo-political disassociation of forward and outward moving progress, back into the sensing body. It is through the sensate, feeling body that we return to the materiality of the local, whilst embracing a 'worlding' consciousness. As Latour puts it:

'In the end, what counts is not knowing whether you are for or against globalisation, for or against the local; all that counts is understanding whether you are managing to register, to maintain, to cherish a maximum number of alternative ways of belonging to the world.' (2018:16)

These comments are crucial. Not only do they form the political centre of Latour's argument, they also lead to a series of further questions. How do we return to the ground, find our footing, whilst avoiding the traditional and narrow territorial hierarchies of the local? And at the same time to embrace the return of the Earth and consider our movements with it? Landing, for Latour, or so it seems, requires that we find some land, that we live outside the protection of the old globalisation order and we re-attach to the soil. The soil exists,

in his understanding as a cosmos of human and other beings, a foundational matter of life and compost and death. A ground that encompasses us, without boundaries; a ground that provides physical support, that is always on the move.

It would appear that Latour's proposal needs bodies, agents in this 'material' process of landing. I would suggest that in *Stitching soft matter* that the ground itself was being made, there was no pre-existing container. The scores, the stitching together, was implicit with border crossing, an engendering of relations and response through space-time-mattering offered 'landing' as a processual, coming into being, an event. In support of Latour's concern with redistributed agencies, and indeed in an attempt to actualise them, to make them specific and experiential, it is important to consider how current and extant ways of thinking with the body can lead us to land (referring particularly to the practices that emerged out of the Judson Dance Theatre and influenced the movement artist Simone Forti). These corporeal methods and choreographic practices reconstruct a bodily agency that has been sidelined through modernity's preoccupation with mechanised expansion and scale. The scale and weight of the body is a place itself, a return to a living earth, a dance with soil and ground. Steve Paxton (post-modern choreographer, dancer and Judson pioneer) describes his experience

of contact improvisation in *Talking Dance* at the Walker Art Centre, New York (2015): 'There is a direct and constant dialogue between our own mass and the mass of the Earth. If often limiting our movement, it also gives us stability.' Here Paxton emphasises our dependancy on the physical conditions of the Earth's gravity as earthbound beings, and perhaps it is in these ways of thinking and being with bodies that we can reconstruct our 'dwelling places'? This, by necessity, involves a process of therapeutic re-tuning, a reorientation to a complex sensate world, towards a physical field of landing. This is a field all mixed up and entangled, where every movement happens in relationship with its animate neighbours. Steve Paxton: 'Solo dancing does not exist: the dancer dances with the floor' (1977:24) Here, the dancer cultivates an undifferentiated orientation to the ground-ness, a site of constant movement, support, touch and adjustment; a place in the making. A commensurate medium of soil through which the dancer moves in counterpoint and in collaboration. Dance, in this reading, is not a singular thing. So, here I am proposing that in order to land, that we may need to return to the physical and permeable life of our bodies, to animate negotiations to a moving Earth and what Donna Harraway names, our 'other-than-human kin'. To remember that our bodies

are themselves distributed matter, not discrete entities, but porous and already contaminated with other living matter and forces.

This dance with the material world offers up a vast reorientation to who, or what we are as human beings within the *Terrestrial* fold of earth cosmos. It suggests that within the necessary re-descriptions of the *Terrestrial*, the disruption of the human, the ways living beings move together and amongst each other has too often omitted the agency and affect of the field of the material Earth. In light of this: How might we think as the 'earthbound'? Is landing a way to return to the living humus of soil and the biosphere? And, how might this play out on an always moving Earth? As Latour notes:

From the soil, this attractor inherits materiality, heterogeneity, thickness, dust, humus, the succession of layers, strata, the attentive care that it requires ... the ground, the soil, in this sense, cannot be appropriated. One belongs to it; it belongs to no-one. (2018:92)

Here we pause for now, with a manifesto for corporeality and its ghosts; in order to land in the *Terrestrial* domain one needs a body, a body that feels itself as intra-active agent, that orients to the local and also dances within a cosmology of matter and dust.



Diffractional Writing(2) PLEASE READ ALOUD, CLICK ON
IMAGE BELOW FOR VIDEO

(Post-performance, February 2023)

WORKADAY INTERLOCUTORS ALWAYS ADD NEVER SUBTRACT AWASH
WITH **WINTER LIGHT** MEETING ELECTRICITY CROSSING THIN
REFLECTIVE BOUNDARIES STITCHING AS TIME KEEPING THE
LABOUR OF FIFTY ALWAYS MORE PAIRS OF HANDS ONGOING
MATERIAL RHYTHM LEARNING THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF THREAD AND
NEEDLE AN ATRIUM A PASSAGE OF BODIES OF FORCES OF
RELATIONS ALWAYS CROSSING THROUGH ARRIVING DEPARTING
LEAVING THE SPACE ALTERED ACCUMULATING TRACES OF TOUCH
WORDS VIBRATION MOVEMENTS **RED THREADS BLOOD** CIRCULATORY
REFRAINS BUILDING BETWEEN BODIES MATERIAL SOFT THINGS
COLD SURFACES INTRA ACTIVE RESEARCH IN ATRIAL AMBIENCE
MOVING BETWEEN BODIES A VAST NESS OVER OUR HEADS OVER
AND OVER WE GO RED THREAD FORMING PRECIOUS TETHERS AT
THE EDGES OF COTTON BOUNDARIES WE ARE **NEVER APART** FROM
THE REFRAIN WE STITCH WITH CARE THE CARE IS STITCHED IN
PERVADES PERHAPS A MAGNETIC FIELD IN THE ALMOST OF
TOUCH IN THE AIR THE ATMOS THROUGH THE ATTRACTION OF
BODIES TRANS-FORMED BECOMING MORE THAN HUMAN SCORED
SACRED SOMETIMES UNCONSCIOUS OFTEN SMILING CROSSING THE
TRACKS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER A GUITAR
SOMEWHERE MINGLING WITH CURRENTS ELECTRIFIED MACHINIC
PICKING UP COSMIC FREQUENCIES SPILLING THEM INTO THIS
SPACE HERE NOW MAKING FUTURE FROM THE PAST MATTER
EXPANDING UNFOLDING SMUDGED WITH SOUND TOUCH THREAD RED

AIR AFTERNOON LIGHT PAST INCUMBENTS OPEN TO NEW
LANGUAGES MAKING ANEW SEEN FROM OUTSIDE IN INSIDE OUT
AND UP CLOSE TRANSPARENT MOVING OUT OF THE WAY AS A
RUSH OF COLD AIR ENTERS FROM AN OPEN DOOR **SCATTERING
STUFF** INSIDE SWEEPED THROUGH WITH THE WITHOUT HIS BODY
BREACHES OTHERS FOLLOW INTO THE GLOAMING RE-TURNING
LATER SKINS COOLED ATTUNED TO A RECEDING DAY AWAITING
ANTICIPATING THE FULLNESS A CAUL BLANKET SHROUD
SWADDLED OPENINGS INTO OTHER LANDS COLLECTIVE VACUUM
EXPECTANCY GATHERING FEELING THE LEAKAGE FROM MATTER
ANNOUNCING BODY-SPACE-TIME UPWELLING FINAL STITCHES
FIRST THOUGHTS IN A NEW LAND HOW TO FEEL LISTEN TO ITS
CURVES SURFACES WEIGHT FUTURES LIFTING TENTATIVE
GREETING MATTER WITH MATTERING **CARE-FUL CONTRACT**
UNDOING GRACE STITCHING TIME FORCES UNCOUPLED MOVING
ACROSS MULTIPLE BODIES TOUCHING PROXIMATE CONTAINING
REACHING THIS POINT FROM ELSEWHERE RADIATE GLOW TOUCH
BE WITH IT ALL WHAT IS IT DOING NOW HERE UNKNOWN
YIELDING ENFOLDING DIFFRACTED ACROSS ALTERED TIME-SPACE
RECEIVE THIS BODY IN ITS BECOMING ITS GUIDANCE ITS
FULLNESS EMPTINESS ACTIVATION A RUSH A REPOSE A PARTIAL
ENDING A LIVELINESS IMMANENT IN CONNECTIVE TISSUE SOFT
BODIES RETREAT RETURN TO **GROUND EARTH** TEMPORARY LANDING
MORE AND MORE LIVELINESS TO BE CALLED FORTH FOR NOW WE
ARE UN-DONE FULL AND HUNGRY



SEEN FROM OUTSIDE IN
INSIDE OUT AND UP CLOSE
TRANSPARENT MOVING OUT OF
THE WAY AS A RUSH OF COLD
AIR ENTERS FROM AN OPEN
DOOR SCATTERING STUFF
INSIDE SWEEPED THROUGH WITH
THE WITHOUT HIS BODY
BREACHES OTHERS FOLLOW



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