

# EXPERIENCE EX/MATERIALI LITY/ARTIC ULATION

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### EXPERIENCE/MATERIALITY/ARTICULATION

#### PAPER 06

**Seaming, Writing,  
and Making Strange:  
Between material and text.**

#### AUTHOR(S)

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#### ABSTRACT

*Although prevalent in the process of artistic research, uncertainty and ambiguity seem to be most powerfully present in the transaction between material and textual elements. This article focuses on the productive aspects of ambiguity emerging in the process of translating the experience of making into a communicable language. The article derives from the author's in-depth case study of her own practice: making seamless woven garments via peculiar hand-weaving methods. The materiality and corporeality involved in the process of research can prolong and heighten this ambiguity. In the course of the physical and emotional process of making with the hands and documenting the process, the author discovers an 'empathetic' relationship developing between the self and the 'body of work'—the artefact-in-process, documented material, fragmentary texts being put together—maximizing the 'stranger effect.' This complicates the arrival at certainty, or settled knowledge, but is also recognized to enrich the outcome of the research. The article demonstrates the ways in which the author sought to retain, within the layout of the article and the text itself, this rich ambiguity arising between material and text.*

#### KEY WORDS

*Seamless, ambiguity, materiality, documentation, handmade, making strange, case study*

### Reading Instruction

**The structure of this article  
is in two halves:**

**please read it with the photographs  
on the left-hand side, and text on  
the right. This formalism is deployed  
in order to integrate into the article  
the sense of the research process  
being led by the creative practice.  
Each page of ‘explanation’  
(ex-planare, unfolding) is preceded  
in space by a page of photographic  
documentation that records the  
creative process as a form of  
implicit, or enfolded, knowledge.**





Figure 1 /  
Dress One with hand-woven seams. Front detail.  
Photo: Yeseung Lee.

## INTRODUCTION

*This article focuses on one aspect of my PhD research, namely, the complex relationship between the making of artefacts and the making of texts. It explores the productive aspects of uncertainty and ambiguity that can emerge in the process of translating the experience of material-making into a communicable language. It argues that no seamless relationship of writing to practice, of text to material, may exist.*

The research itself was a case study of my own fashion practice: making seamless woven garments via peculiar hand-weaving methods. The research is a detailed in-depth study of my own practice as the individual unit of inquiry, placing particular focus on the process—how it evolved in changing time, place, and situation. If I follow Christopher Frayling’s categorization, my research would be a case of ‘research for the arts’ (Frayling, 1993, p. 5), where the radical approach does not fit in neatly with the more conventional academic research: this type of research need not start with specific research questions to which answers are given over time, but may have emergent questions during the process, and relevant methods can also emerge accordingly (Frayling, 2008). Further, according to Nancy de Freitas, in artistic research ‘creative practice plays the most important role in the cluster of research methods used’ (De Freitas, 2002).

Because art practice is an open and speculative discipline, artistic research, subsequently, is also essentially exploratory. Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge suggest that methods appropriate to artistic research are not fixed or predictive, but arise through and from the research itself. In other words, research for the arts is ‘particular to its author, its contexts and the capacity to reflexively unsettle’ (Macleod & Holdridge, 2011, p. 355). This points out the importance of artistic research as the uncanonized and liminal sphere of ‘wild’ knowledge that possesses an openness to experience the unknown (Busch, 2009, p. 6). The probability that artistic research may not be standardized underlines the importance of each ongoing and existing model as an incommensurable and singular case, particular to its researcher, circumstances, and context. Bent Flyvbjerg maintains that it is often not desirable to summarize or generalize case studies, as their nuances of difference and rich ambiguity can be lost in distilling them into formulas or standard cases (Flyvbjerg, 2011, pp. 311–312). This accounts for the particular emphasis and importance placed on

the process of artistic research. According to Frayling, in ‘research for the arts’ (my emphasis),<sup>1</sup> the entire process and its documentation form an integral part of the final output, as the thinking and new knowledge are embodied in the body of work, which includes the artefacts, notebooks, materials in progress, and informed textual appraisal of what has been achieved (Frayling, 2008).

The written component of artistic research, therefore, takes on a more complex role than simply being a description, summary, instruction, or analysis of the practice. In my PhD research I aimed at writing texts as the ‘mimetic double’ of the practice, or written versions of the ‘seamless’ garments I put together.<sup>2</sup> Instead of describing the practice in detail, or explaining how the garments were made, or the techniques involved, I focused on the complexities and ambiguities of first-hand experience, which I understood to be the particular advantage of artistic research. As the self was part of the context and therefore inescapable, I did not seek to be a ‘value-neutral’ researcher. In other words, I placed the main focus of texts on what researchers working within the ‘data driven paradigms of the physical sciences’ (Griffiths, 2011, p. 185) call ‘variables’—such as emotions as interference with the data—and how these affect the interaction between self and research during the process.

1 / During a talk given by Frayling (2008), he mentioned the much-quoted categorization of artistic research to help us understand what he called the ‘Radical Academy’: ‘Research into/through/for the arts’. In the 1993 article where this originates, Frayling elaborates the three approaches through a quote from E. M. Forster:

How can I tell that I think till I see what I say? That seems to me to be very like the first category. If we modify this to ‘How can I tell what I think till I see what I make and do?’, then we’ve covered the second category as well. But if we modify it further to ‘How can I tell what I am till I see what I make and do?’ it seems to me we have a fascinating dilemma on our hands. As much about autobiography and personal development as communicable knowledge. (Forster in Frayling, 1993, p.5)

2 / My research was conducted in the Royal College of Art which awards the PhD by practice to candidates who have presented and defended creative work, and also a written thesis, by oral examination. Submission of a written thesis was thus mandatory for the award.



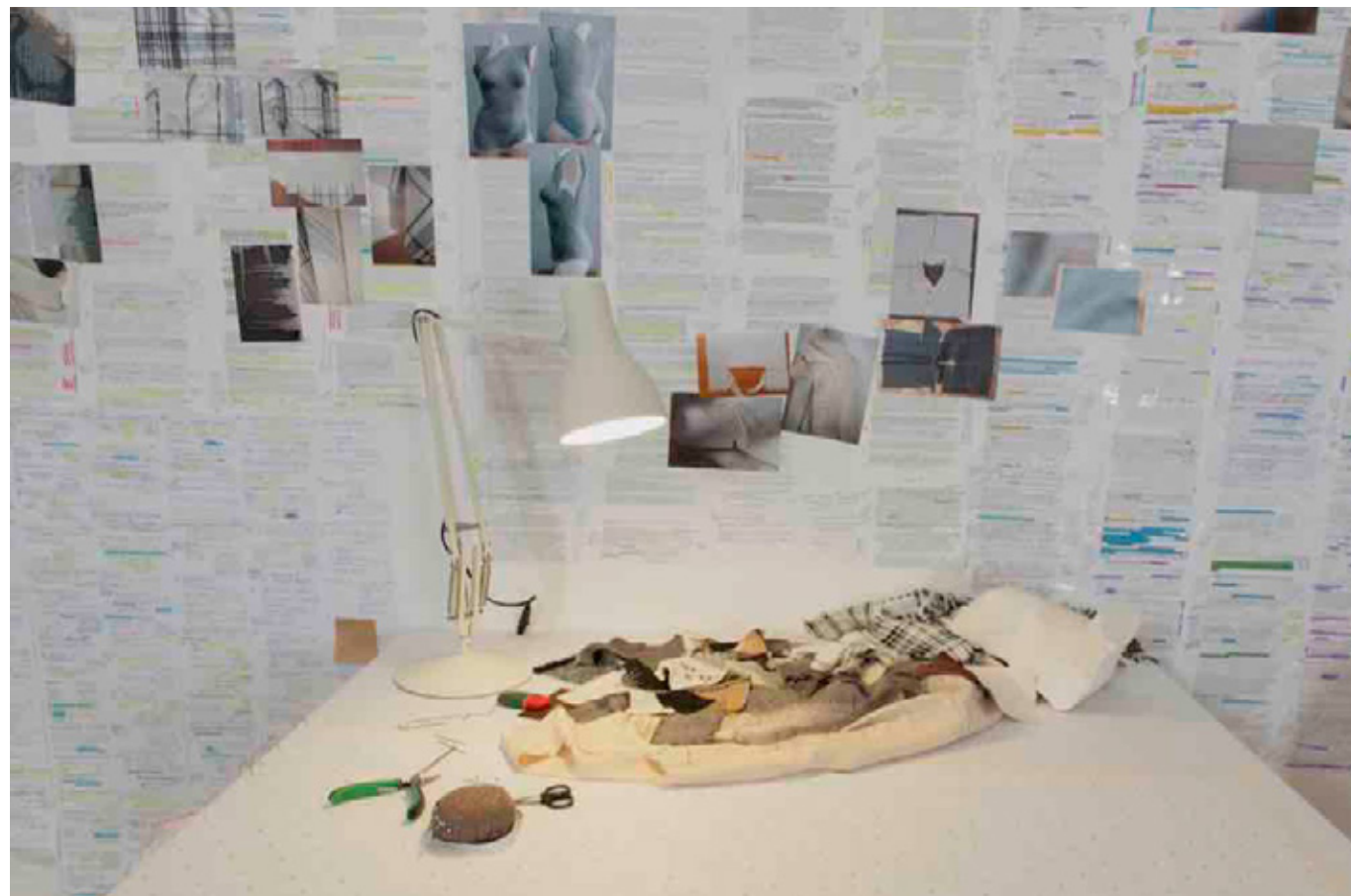
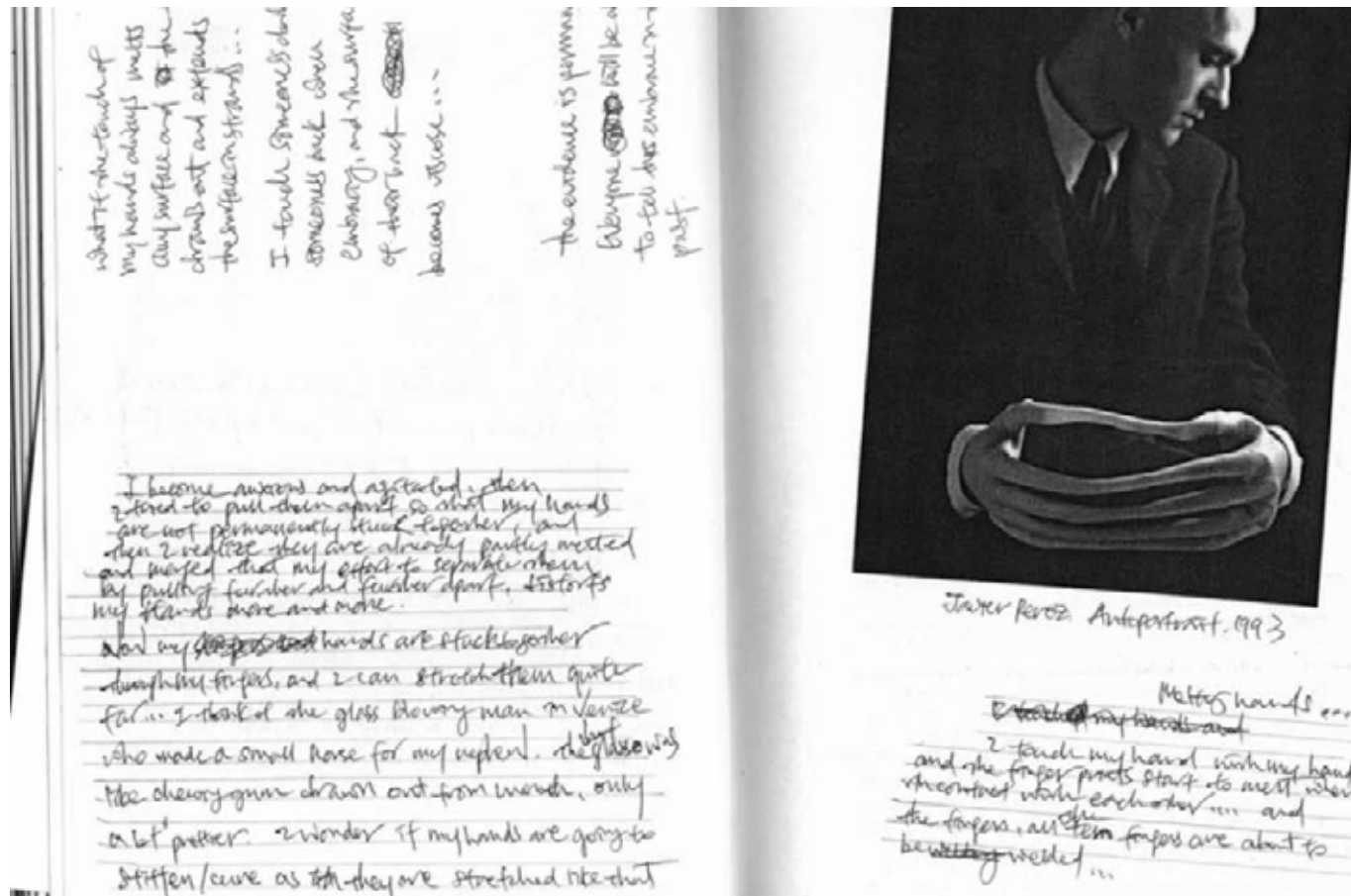


Figure 2 / Top  
An example of the work-journal entries.  
Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Figure 3 / Bottom  
My work space recreated for an exhibition (2013).  
Photo: Yeseung Lee.

The material-making—making a series of ‘seamless’ hand-woven garments—was documented in the form of note-taking, drawings, photography, and sound or video recording,

seeking to capture the ephemeral, non-verbal and affective aspects of the ‘action.’ This documentation was followed by repeated appraisal of it as ‘reaction,’ through free-writing as well as more structured writing. The research itself developed in a fragmented and non-linear manner, making use of available circumstances, and was often led by instinctive judgments and assumptions, as is often the case in artistic practice. In becoming aware of the probability that not being in complete control of the process can be advantageous to the overall research, at times I intentionally complicated the process, or made detours, maximizing the play between in- and out-of-control situations. By taking detours rather than shortcuts, the state of uncertainty was prolonged. The particular emphasis on the process in research for the arts entails taking advantage of this ambiguity—withstanding the anxiety that often comes with uncertainties. The entire body of work in my research therefore lets slip this fragmented, uncertain, ambiguous, anxious, and emotional process. In this paper, however, it is through the relationship between the material artefacts and the textual components being made that I aim to reveal the productive aspects of uncertainties prevalent in artistic research. If the process of artistic research is the repeated oscillation between making and its written appraisal, between action and reaction, the seams in my garments materialize the fragility of meaning, when the maker tries to make sense of her own making.

In attempting to translate the ephemeral experience into a more settled and communicable form, the fragility of newly arising meanings can be intensified because of the materiality of cloth: it is simultaneously self-like (in constant contact with skin, hence ‘empathetic,’ naturalized, and ‘compliant’ to the hand and needle) and also ‘Other’, the radically heterogeneous matter out of control (with which any hands-on maker is familiar).<sup>3</sup> However, it is this uneasy state of confusion and ambiguity that compels the maker to continue the ‘itineration’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 410) of making and its interpretation, which is a meaningful process all on its own.

My approach to putting together the final written text from the accumulated body of work amounted to a process of writing ‘an ethnography of the self’ or autoethnography. For this reason, the way in which anthropologists speak about ‘familiar schema’ or ‘provide an account of one’s own culture’ (Bloch, 1998, p. 46) became pertinent to my artistic research. Therefore, the particular emphasis placed on anthropological references in this article is intended to highlight the sense of displacement experienced in the process of research, and the reflexivity this experience afforded. Anthropological fieldworkers find themselves in foreign lands ‘awash in floods of otherness and daydream of home’ (Taussig, 2011, p. 26). Their method of participant observation is ‘seeing from the inside as well as from the outside and translating between’ (Ibid, p. 133). Having experienced being a stranger to myself during the oscillation between making and writing, I find these texts resonate with my own experience of estrangement and the ensuing emotional responses.<sup>4</sup> As Sarah Pink suggests, ‘ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge that is based on ethnographers’ own experiences’ (Pink, 2007, p. 22). Through autoethnography, in particular, the subtleties of a research context that are difficult to access from a third person point of view may be effectively communicated.

The layout of the article has been carefully considered in order to lay bare this rich ambiguity arising between material and text. On the one hand, equal importance ascribes to the visual and textual representations: words and photographs (of material, pattern pieces, and journal entries) face each other, each occupying an entire page. It thus connects the act of making garments with the process of writing and (un)knowing, underlining the research process as a parallel to the making process. On the other hand, the seam between the left-and right-hand pages reveals the inevitable schism between experience and its textual articulation—between making and writing—that the reflexivity of artistic research affords. It hopefully provides an insight into the way I tried to turn this schism into a potentially creative space: such as the correspondence between the seaming methods as a detour and the purposeful digressions within the text through the use of narrative references.

3 / The terms ‘making strange,’ ‘stranger effect,’ and ‘estrangement’ in this article are used with reference to the notions explicated by Victor Shklovsky (2009, *ostraniene* [enstrangement]), Bertolt Brecht (*Verfremdungseffekt* [defamiliarization effect]), and Georg Simmel (1950, ‘the stranger’). For in-depth applications of the above Shklovsky’s notion in relation to my fashion research practice, please see *Seamlessness: Making and (Un)knowing in Fashion Practice* (Lee, 2016).

4 / The ‘material turn’ and ‘affective turn’ that characterizes recent scholarship within the arts, humanities, and social sciences challenge the classical view of matter and material artefacts as ‘inert,’ waiting to be shaped or formed by human agencies with ‘design’ in mind. It is this Aristotelian *hylomorphic* model of creation—imposing form (*morphe*) upon matter (*hyle*)—that Tim Ingold (2006; 2007; 2010a; 2010b) criticizes, in favour of itinerant and improvisatory movement of continuous becoming.

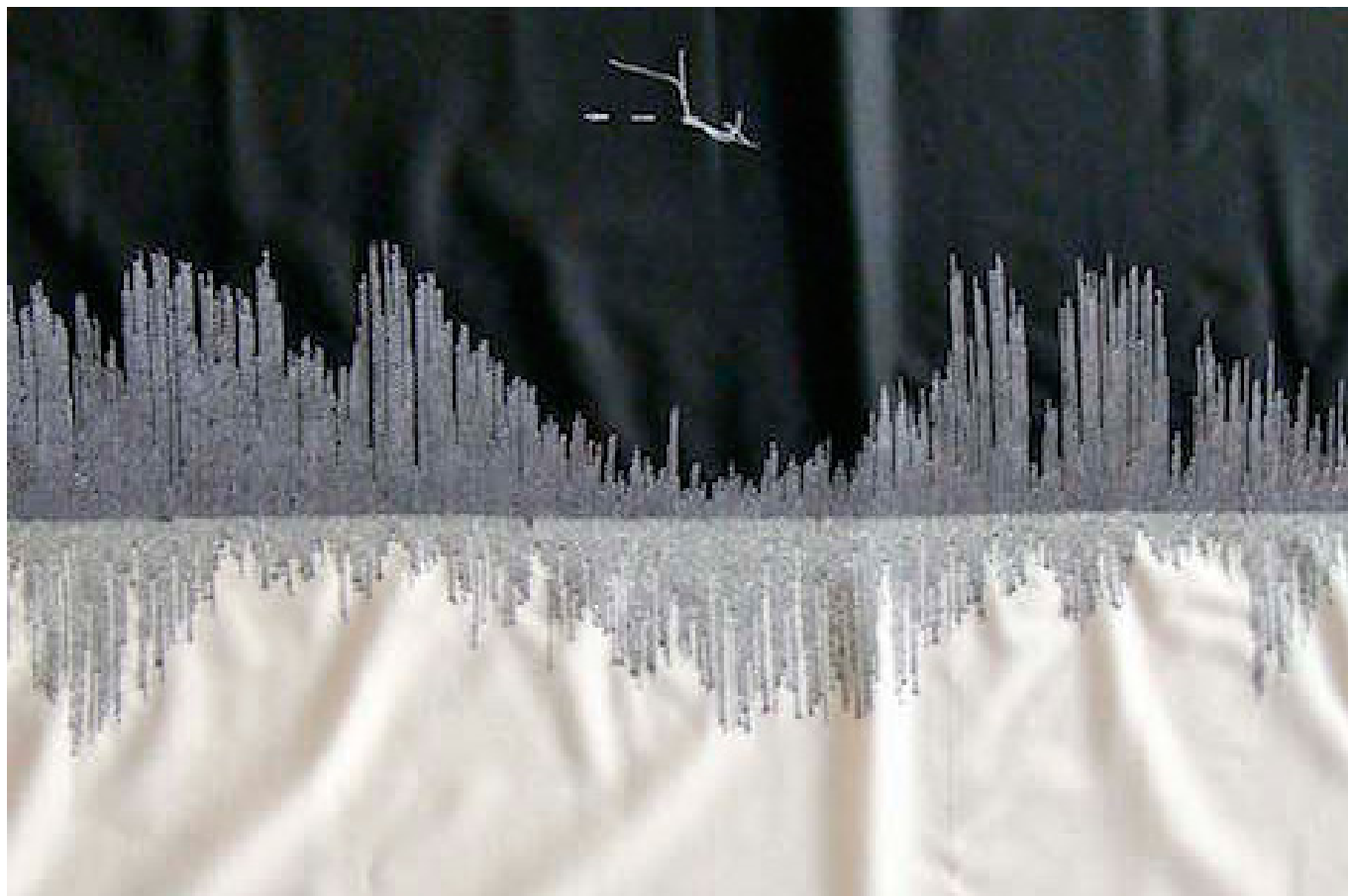


Figure 4 / Top  
The seaming process. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Figure 5 / Bottom  
A completed seam. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

### MAKING A DETOUR

My research on the woven seamless garment was carried out between 2008 and 2012 as a PhD project at the Royal College of Art, London. As a professional designer working in the fashion industry, the research provided me with a reflective distance, one that the regular rhythm of fast-moving industry denies. The reflexivity arising from the research process allowed me to approach my own field critically, and led me to choose handmade methods held consciously in opposition with existing methods of woven seamless garment production. The main aim of the existing methods is to remove human hands from the making process and thus to economize the production cost. Putting together ‘seamless’ woven garments entirely by hand proved to be a demanding yet productive method of investigation, on account of its slow and laborious process, its ‘strangeness,’ and the materiality and corporeality involved. The process revealed how the practice of artistic research complicates and hinders the arrival at certainty, explicit text, or settled knowledge, and how the outcome of the research benefits from the detours and digressions in the process.

### THE ACTION: SEAMING AND MAKING STRANGE

The garments are put together entirely by hand: it is a long and laborious process of purposefully fraying the edges of industrially woven cloth, and then reweaving the frayed strands into another edge of cloth. This results in a ‘linking surface’ as sturdy as the selvage of cloth. I find it difficult to tell if the linkage is a seam, or if it is seamless. Visually it shows a contagion-like transition simultaneously drawing and dissolving the boundary between the meeting edges. Structurally the seam, or the surface, is a doubling, trebling, or sometimes quadrupling of the original layer. Weaving through the cloth, repeatedly seeing the needle piercing the cloth and then immediately touching my skin, out of sight underneath the cloth, is a synesthetic and visceral experience. I feel as if the hands, material, and tools are repeatedly being merged and separated, the boundary permeable and impermeable, continuously becoming: I *become* the skin, the fingertips, the cloth, the frayed edge in contact with the needle. This making process presents my skin and myself to me as a permeable surface that can be disrupted, patched, and modified, akin to the cloth I am holding and handling. The visceral quality of making prevents the material from being a mere representation, and it is instead experienced as *the edge of the self*. The amount of stitches used in these seams is utterly disproportionate, which makes the seam far sturdier than it ever needs to be. Having precariously resided on the fraying edge, however, I find it reassuring and empowering. The fragility of the edge and the excessively sturdy woven-in seam set up, to quote Catherine Spooner, ‘a complex tension, whereby the boundary’s permeation and its reinforcement happen within the same symbiotic movement’ (Spooner, 2004, p. 11).



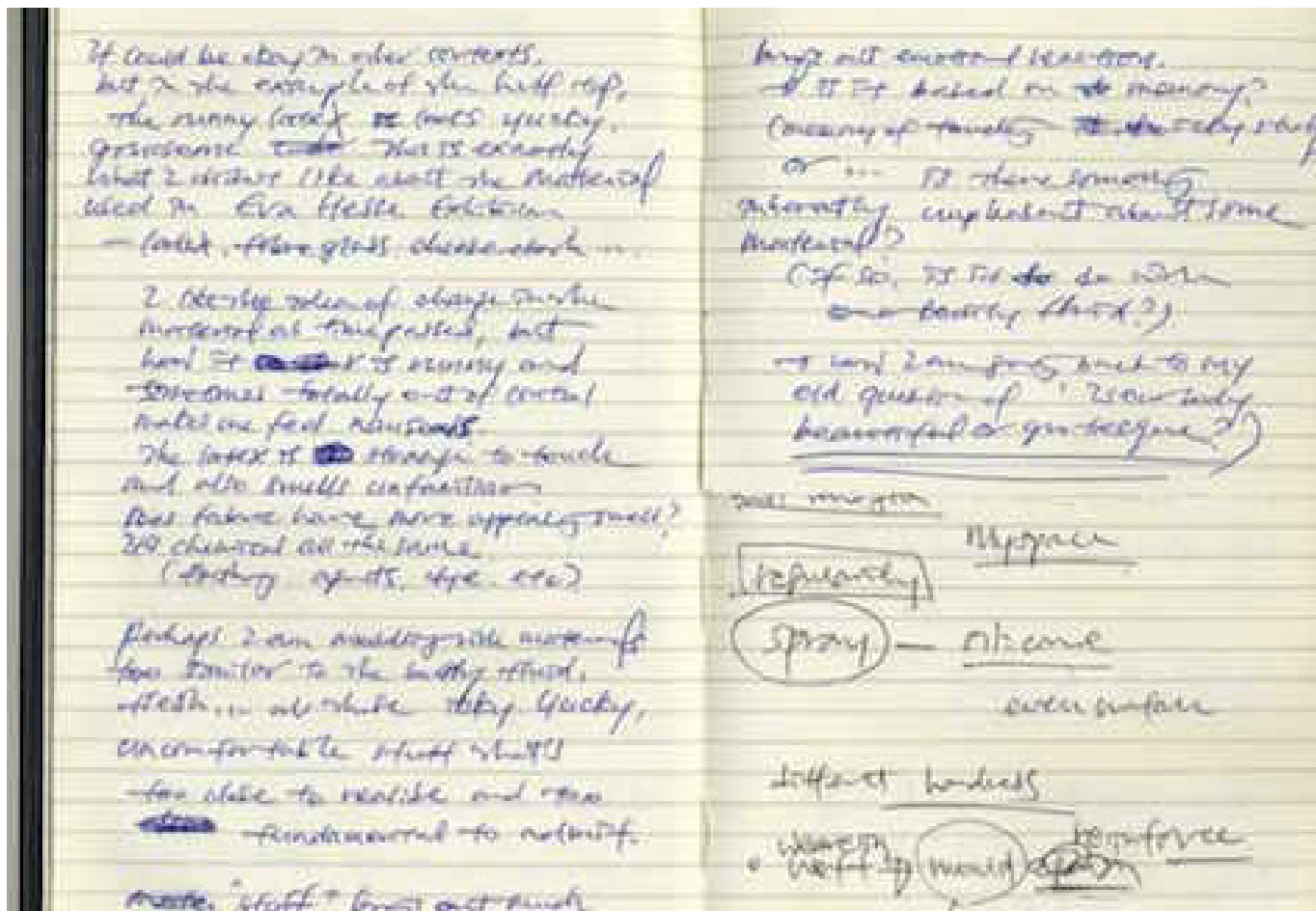


Figure 6 / Top

A hem in the process of being made. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Figure 7 / Bottom

An example of my work-journal entry. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Repeatedly fraying and restitching the edges, I experience my bodily self as the contaminable and manipulable garment. Yet at the same time, I feel that its integrity must be kept intact at all costs. Making garments by seaming this way, I feel as if I am constructing a double or a mimetic copy of myself. Or else, when I make the seam, I *am* the seam: *I am making myself*. According to James Frazer's (1906/1920) anthropological study of sympathetic magic in *The Golden Bough*, clothes are one of the archetypal charms that combine the principles of homeopathic and contagious magic. Homoeopathic magic is founded on association by resemblance (like produces like), whereas contagious magic is founded on contiguity (things that have once been in contact remain united). Occurring along with the movement of the needle, in and out of the cloth, is the perpetual mimetic 'contagion' between the maker and the material, the bodily process of knowing the unknown.

Also occurring with the act of seaming is the known becoming unknown: the naturalized (hence invisible) boundaries are made strange, uncertain, and doubtable. Identification and displacement take place in tandem. The weaving hands dissolve the boundaries between maker and material, between self and other, *replacing the distinction with the constant movement of transition*. In making by hand, the heightened 'empathy' between the maker and material aids both immersion in, and emergence from, the making. This uncertainty or confusion that the act of making can induce in the maker is greater when the making is not an exact application of pre-existing ideas and when the maker allows herself to deviate from the initial plan. The particular challenge, and also advantage, of material-making is the unpredictable contingencies brought on by the material out-of-control and indeed the maker out-of-control. Being skilled, it seems to me, is knowing how to relinquish control when the material becomes too 'compliant,' in order to take advantage of the increased uncertainties.

### THE REACTION: WRITING AND MAKING STRANGE

In an attempt to capture the actuality of making during the repeated oscillation between making and writing, I diligently document the process. The material, visual, and textual documentation is intended as the evidence of my experience, a means of retrospective reflection, and of my authority as the maker. The actuality, however, seems always to escape. At the very moment of recording—inevitably done from a particular temporal, spatial, personal viewpoint—the deformation of actuality starts. The process tends to disappear in its representation (Schwab, 2014). On the rewatching or rereading in later stages, the documented materials appear to be as 'alive' as my memory and I need to repeatedly thread through the gap between what is recorded and what I remember. This process is a strange mixture of convincing myself that I can faithfully capture the experience of making, and *doubting* my own perception and memory. In his book *I Swear I Saw This* (2011), Michael Taussig reminds us of what Roland Barthes (1989, p. 369) calls 'the interstices of notation': a strange mechanism at work on rereading a typically mundane diary entry that makes Barthes recall the greyness of the atmosphere precisely because it is *not* recorded (Taussig, 2011, p. 117). In this respect, a maker-researcher's work journal can be a deeply unsettling vehicle: the once trustful companion who was always at hand, patiently listening to my inarticulate rambles, complaints, or commands, turns into a stranger who only communicates in ambiguous oracular responses. 'How something could be so much a part of you and so alienating as well?' (Ibid., p. 25). Shattering my expectation that the documented materials will help me better remember my making, and therefore consolidate my authority over the process, the work journals turn into a *de-authorizing agency*. Each time I revisit it, the documented material keeps building layers of ambiguity upon itself, instead of transparently revealing my own making process. Just as the mirror promises to show us the 'truth' by creating illusions, the only available 'truth' to me is different *versions of truth* that I, the autoethnographer, create and recreate.





Figure 8 / Top  
Seaming process in detail. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Figure 9 / Bottom  
A diagonal seam being made. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

I would compare this deformation of actuality and the resulting anxieties with the sense of being in the labyrinth that Tim Ingold analyzes in *Lines: A Brief History* (2007). In this book, Ingold roundly categorizes lines into threads and traces: a thread is a line *without* a surface, whereas a trace is a line *with* a surface (Ingold, 2007, pp. 41–43). In actuality, however, each stands as a transformation of the other: ‘It is through the transformation of threads into traces... that surfaces are brought into being. And conversely, it is through the transformation of traces into threads that surfaces are dissolved’ (Ibid., 2007, p. 52). The labyrinth, in particular, is conceptualised as the spatialized instances when the surface or ground disappears—that is, when traces are transformed into threads. Although the labyrinth may be surveyed in a pattern-like form with an aerial perspective, such a perspective is not available to the person who is already inside the labyrinth. At the very moment of entering the labyrinth, the surface itself seems to dissolve. The person fully enclosed within the labyrinth loses the perception of walking upon solid ground beneath their feet, and they have to *thread* their way through the intricate passages. As the labyrinth is not visible in its totality, every path is now a thread rather than a trace (Ibid., p. 56). For this reason, the labyrinth is a metaphor of human existence for Alberto Pérez-Gómez. It is ‘ever-changing, full of surprise, uncertain, conveying the impression of disorder, a *gap* (chaos understood in the etymological sense) between the only two certain points that it possesses, birth (entrance) and death (its centre)’ (Pérez-Gómez, 1985, p. 51). Such ‘threading’ through the labyrinth—a journey on a par with the process of artistic research—is an itinerant wayfaring rather than a pre-planned navigation with a map. Whereas for the navigator a journey is an explication of the plan, the wayfarer reconstructs the itinerary as they go along. Only upon reaching the destination, can the wayfarer truly be said to have found their way (Ingold, 2007, pp. 15–16).<sup>5</sup>

5 / Ingold also applies the metaphors of wayfarer vs. navigator and thread vs. trace to reading: the readers of Antiquity and the Middle Ages did not experience the text as a ready-composed plot, ‘but rather saw it as comprising a set of signposts’ (Ingold, 2007, p. 16). In other words, they ‘inhabited’ the page. In contrast, Ingold suggests, modern readers survey the page ‘as if from a great height’. In so doing they occupy the page and assert their mastery over it (Ibid., p. 92).

This conversion of traces into threads and the consequent dissolution of surface are akin to the sense of estrangement that inevitably accompanies a *reflexive* researcher. As I try to be an objective observer calmly watching my other making selves documented, the boundary between the self and other becomes blurred and the stable act of perception separating a subject from the object becomes unsettled. As I grasp at the self, it dissolves in my hand, reassembling itself somewhere else (Griffiths, 2011, p. 168). The deformation of actuality, the sense of loss, and ensuing ambiguity of meaning deepens during the attempts to translate the bodily, material experience into a more communicable form of language. As a continuous reaction to the photos, drawings, or fragments of thoughts jotted down in my work journal, I endeavour to write more organized and objective texts. The more I write, however, the more I get this feeling that the writing is actually pushing reality off the page, closing off the contingent, or the particular (Taussig, 2011, pp. 6 & 16). Despite the sense of irreparable loss, I slowly come to accept the gap and partialness that are inevitable in logical communication (Milner, 1971, p. 125). It appears to me that no seamless relationship of writing to practice, of text to material, exists. Artistic research is an exploratory and sensuous process where the researcher becomes unravelled and then ‘entangled’ (Hodder, 2012) with the artefact and text being made. The researcher finds him/herself in the thick of it. The text in artistic research, then, needs to be valued for the insights it gives into ‘what it might be to think as a creative practitioner’ (Macleod & Holdridge, 2011, p. 363), rather than regarded as a repository of neatly explicated research findings.





Figure 10 / Bottom  
Dress One with hand-woven seams. Side view detail. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

The act of writing in artistic research, therefore, is a *liminal* experience: it embodies the 'situation of stasis and movement in which the far-away is brought to the here-and-now.' (Taussig, 1993, p. 41) In this encounter, we gain reflexive viewpoints and the text gets continuously rewritten from these displaced perceptions. The textual articulation is thus a de-centering device that constantly *doubts* the veracity of experience: the writing unsettles the fantasy of the stable, knowing 'I,' and of an authentic reality. According to Norman Denzin, this reflexivity renders both making and writing transformative as the two unsettle each other (Denzin, 2014, p. 38). Clive Cazeaux sees writing as positive interruption of making:

Putting a situation into words, ... far from being a mere reductive gesture of containment, in actual fact alters the situation; [becoming] almost like sculpture in that each sentence, each metaphor, each turn of phrase, chisels away at our perception of the work. (Cazeaux, 2006, p. 49)

The unresolved relationship between material and text, between lived experience and its written interpretation, reveals the 'constitutive function of text in articulating the research process' (Editorial, 2006). Moreover, just as the omnipresent thus 'invisible' garment seam is made strange by the act of seaming in an unconventional way, through the act of writing, the seemingly habitual and repetitive aspects of making are perceived in an unusual way, as something worth reflecting on and writing about. The gap between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge enhances the stranger effect. This is a reminder of Ingold's labyrinth, a powerful image of movement and wayfaring that lies beneath the surface of the world of quotidian experience (2010b, p. 20), letting us experience the ordinary in an extraordinary way. The process of reflective practice is thus experiencing the continuous transformation between trace and thread, the surface appearing and disappearing. Thus considered, my seams are the liminal experience spatialized and temporalized, stitch by stitch. Making sense of my own making, therefore, is to reveal the fragility of meaning. It is a form of making in itself and another dimension of knowing, which drives the 'itinerative' process of making things and making sense.



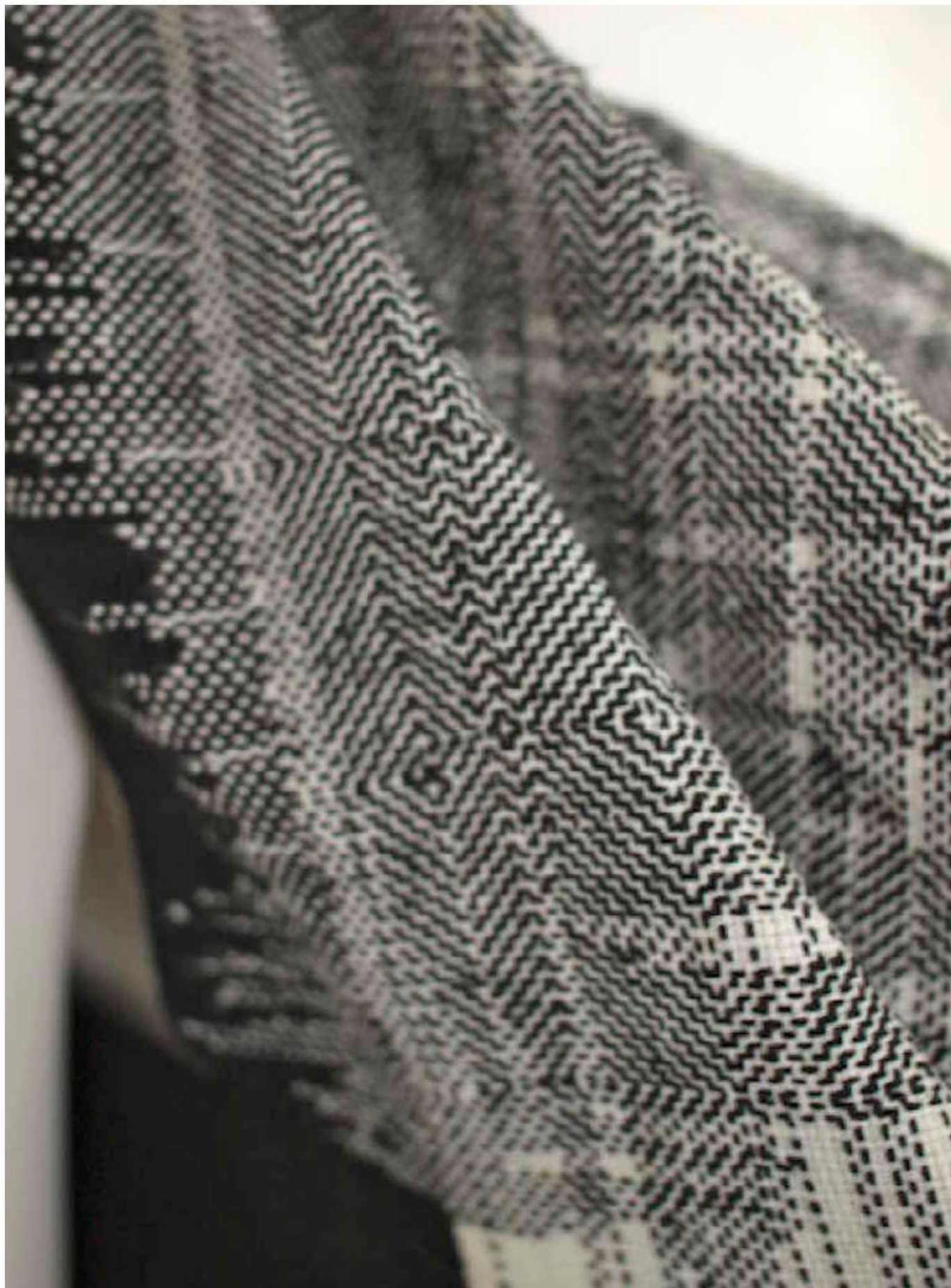


Figure 11 / Bottom  
Dress Two with hand-woven seams. Front detail. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

## UNKNOWNING

My seaming process is thus a prolonged state of *unknowing*. It reveals the oscillation between making and writing as an estranging process. My seaming methods allow my making and research to stay ‘formless’ rather than be prematurely shaped or put together. While taking detours and tolerating the state of not-knowing, the research nurtures fertile ambiguity. It is this constant state of deferral, residing in the gap between non-sense and meaning, that Taussig discusses in his essay ‘Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism: Another theory of magic’ (2006). Through descriptions of magical healing rituals extracted from various early ethnographic records, he questions the boundary between trick and technique, between magic and science. Most of the rituals described involve the repeated movement of some objects being extracted from, and inserted into, the human body, as if weaving through and in-between the bodies of the people involved. I find marked similarities between these descriptions and the visceral quality of making garments by hand: first, there is the manipulation of the shaman or patient’s body as the boundary that needs to be traversed. At the moment of a conjuring trick, the body seems to be rendered unstable and transparent (Taussig, 2006, p. 127). Then there are ‘the exceedingly curious objects,’ supposedly withdrawn from the interstices of the human body: they mark the exit from and re-entry into the body. These possess a ‘remarkably indeterminate quality’—such as ‘the white feathers of newborn birds shaped like a puppy,’ or the semi-transparent dough revolving at high speed—‘all acting like extensions of the human body and thus capable of connecting with, and entering into other bodies, human and nonhuman’ (Ibid.). Taussig stresses a capacity on the part of these objects ‘for an implosive viscerality that would seem to hurl us beyond the world of the symbol’ (Ibid., p. 128). At certain moments of the ritual, the bodies and the objects both become the movement of mimesis, turning ‘totally plastic and protean, in a rush of becoming other’ (Ibid., p. 140).

The fluid gestures made by performing shamans, and the movement of the objects going in and out of the body, are akin to weaving in and out of this and other realities (Ibid., p. 142). Intensified by the viscerality and corporeal movements involved in rituals, these descriptions accentuate the doubt of the existing boundary or ‘the stranger effect’ that occurs during the process of making and its interpretation. Taussig explains that although a great part of shamanistic procedure is a fraud, there is an unwavering ideal of the truly endowed shaman. But as one never knows whether any particular shaman is a cheat or not, faith in any practitioner is tempered by skepticism. This mixture of doubt and belief also exists in the shamans themselves: most are doubters, avidly debunking the tricks of others and even their own, but they still believe in the magic itself and yearn to learn the ‘real ways of shaman.’ (Ibid., p.129).

The visceral shamanic performance, and the sense of the beyond enhanced by the ever-present doubt, seem to find a parallel in my practice: in the ‘dissolving’ boundary between the skin and the cloth; in the continuously evoked sense of the unknown; and in the hermeneutic gap that opens on revisiting documented materials. As argued previously, making is the process of mimetic interaction with the material, overstepping the boundary between self and other. During this process, the maker becomes aware of the otherness of the self, as well as the self in others. In this way, making constantly generates the unknown in the process of knowing. Therefore, making—whether seaming or writing—is ‘shamanic’ in that it is an endlessly *enfolding* process, aiming at the unattainable catharsis of revealing the truth, the authentic self, perfect skill, or settled meaning: ‘In its unmasking, magic is in fact made even more opaque’ (Ibid., p. 146).

## INVISIBLE SEAMS IN SCIENTIFIC EPISTEMOLOGY

The comparison between my research and shamanic practice is intended to accentuate the ‘non-rational’ forms of knowledge: a form of ‘animistic’ knowing that emerges from the empathy with the body of work. Throughout the making, the cut pieces of cloth being seamed and my work journal are constantly ‘in touch’ with me. The sustained sensory and affective interaction means that the seams and my journals are all me and my body. This becoming is mutual: each seaming stitch bringing me closer to the object until I am finally, ‘as it were, inside it’—the seam I have made marks ‘the edge of what I have become’ (John Berger quoted in Taussig, 2011, p. 22). The knowledge that a maker can make via the experience of *being* the objects, via the experience of being taken apart and newly assembled during each making, reveals the previously imperceptible gap in the scientific methods used in studying human making.



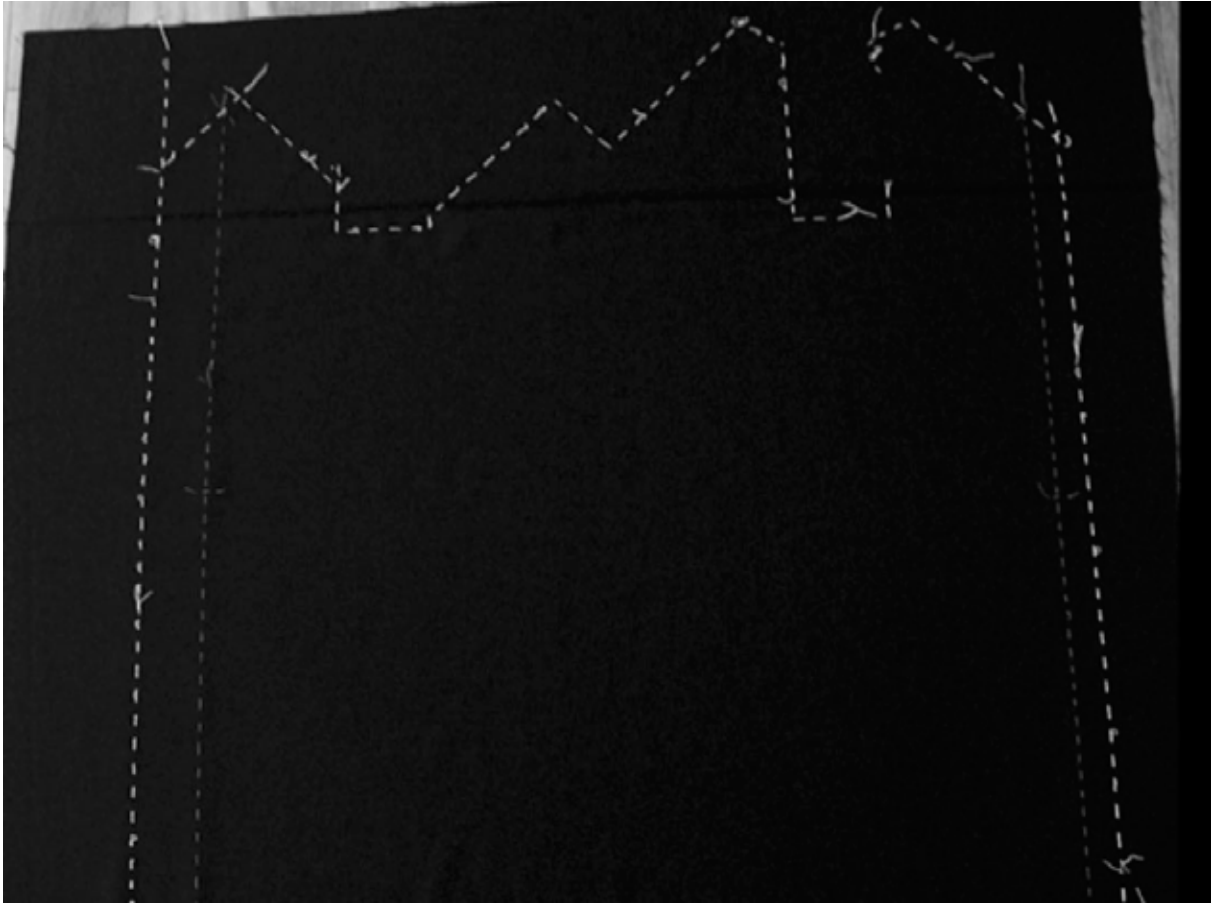


Figure 12 / Top  
The main body pattern of Dress Two marked on the cloth.  
Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Figure 13 / Bottom  
The hand-woven hem of a flared skirt. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

Rational scientific methods are insufficient in studying human endeavour, especially that of material-making and artistic practice. In the aforementioned shamanic performances, the magic is generated through the skilful manipulation of bodily surface, the fluid corporeal movement, and the strangeness of materiality. According to Pérez-Gómez, the pre-classical meaning of the word *techne* is not differentiated from the act of magic. Technical action depends upon the same kind of intelligence as *metis* (magic).<sup>6</sup> (1985, p. 49. See also Mauss, 1935/2006, p. 82, and Mauss & Hubert 1902/2010, pp. 23–24). According to Peter Pels, the anthropological analysis of magic and ritual emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century against a backdrop of evolutionist confidence, high imperialism, and high bourgeois anxiety. It thus concerned the discursive boundary between the ideal modern subject that makes true perceptions and practices a rational discipline, and a magical, animistic subject that is set up in contrast as primitive and retrogressive (Pels, 2003, p. 31. See also Borck, 2012, and Ingold, 2006). This attitude of early anthropology is evident in Frazer’s remarks in *The Golden Bough*:

[T]he primitive magician knows magic only on its practical side; he never analyses the mental processes on which his practice is based, never reflects on the abstract principles involved in his actions. With him ... logic is implicit, not explicit [and] to him magic is always an art, never a science; the very idea of science is lacking in his undeveloped mind. It is for the philosophic student to trace the train of thought, which underlies the magician’s practice; to draw out the few simple threads, of which the tangled skein is composed; to disengage the abstract principles from their concrete applications; in short, to discern the spurious science behind the bastard art. (Frazer, 1906/1920, p. 53)

6 / The labyrinth of Knossos was made by the mythical artificer Daedalus who is said to have been endowed with *metis* (magic). In the Athenian tradition, *metis* is a kind of practical intelligence and ingenuity, mostly associated with the wisdom of craftsmanship. (Pérez-Gómez, 1985, p. 51)

The anthropology of today, as it is evident in the works of Tim Ingold, Michael Taussig, and very many others not referred to in this article, values the non-rational forms of knowledge as a valuable counterpart of rational scientific knowledge. It is in fact the magicians (i.e. artists) who need to study their own practice, as they will experience that art does not become science as it is analyzed, nor does it become explicit. The constant oscillation between belief and doubt in the performing magician is likely to render his/her own analysis as constructed as the scientific observer’s analysis, but the magician is the last person to believe in any stable truths or canonical knowledge. Making is a humbling experience, through which makers learn that ‘they don’t know,’ a knowledge that is constantly recalled by the contingency and displacement brought on by material agency.

For me, the act of seaming, together with its articulation in textual form, transforms the industrially woven fabric into an ‘estranging device’. The peculiar hand-seaming method delays the easy and safe arrival at certainty, allowing multiple possibilities of interpretation. My making as a sensuous and contemplative, thus estranging, experience is pronounced by the simplicity of the patterns, which is a result of technical restrictions: in order to minimize the scar-like ‘threshold,’ I only employ straight grains or true-bias grain. Such design would minimize production time, if sewn by machine. Yet these garments refuse this simple closure by complicating the very assembly of these most straightforward shapes. Each garment is a structure of intentional digressions. By suspending certainty this way, the various dichotomies of intellect/intuition, surface/depth, self/other are deferred. It is the doubt of certainty in the maker, or knowing the ways of not-knowing, that continuously evokes the belief in the unknown, driving the continuous process of making things and making meaning, working the mysterious gap between self and other. The seam therefore embodies the process of reflective practice.





Figure 14 / Bottom  
Dress Two with hand-woven seams. Side view. Photo: Yeseung Lee.

THE AMBIGUITY OF SEAMLESSNESS

Marion Milner suggests that the creative arts provide ‘a half-way house to external reality’ (Milner,1971, p. 139) that discloses the scientific blinkers that privilege objective facts, shutting out the overtones and haloes of feeling and subjective seeing (Ibid., p. 84). Artistic research acknowledges that a comprehensive science of human creative endeavour may not be possible. In the social sciences today—since the ‘reflexive turn’ through the ‘writing culture’ debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986), and since post-structuralism critiqued the notions of objective knowledge and of a subject able to know him or herself (Culler, 2002, p. viii)—there is no longer a God’s eye view that guarantees absolute methodological certainty (Denzin, 2014, p. 70).<sup>7</sup> Deconstruction, in particular, questions the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought—inside/outside, mind/body, nature/culture, form/meaning—to show that these are not natural but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it (Culler, 2000, p. 126). In this regard, the writing in my research was an effective deconstructive device, as the text as ‘reproduction’ of making challenged the ‘original’ experience, questioning the text as a transparent mirror of the experience. Correspondingly, by revealing its own construction, my seams also accentuate these deconstructive aspects of research.

In my research, the ephemeral activities caught in notebooks, photographs, and films are ‘animated’ and used as means of transforming conceptualizations of the practice and the researcher’s self within the academic convention. The generative power of the ‘body of work’, beyond being a simple record, may be explained through Jacques Derrida’s view on the archive, not as ‘the question of the past which might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal,’ but instead as a question of the future, and the question of a response (Derrida, 1995, p. 27). This remark seems to emphasize the fertile complexity and rich ambiguity that reside within the body of work, and also the likelihood of losing these if I were to claim the all-knowing authority over the process, or distill them into neat conclusions. My ‘seamless’ garments and the texts composed from the recursive appraisal of journal entries reveal the cut, gap, or failure I experienced during the process of research—as well as how I created a peculiar knowledge from these failures. Effectively revealed, therefore, in the ambiguity of seamlessness is the tension between credulity and skepticism inherent in knowledge-making, and that our knowledge is forever incomplete, a process, not an end goal.

7 / The ‘messy’ processes involved in scientific research have also been underlined and discussed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), Paul Feyerabend (1975), Andrew Pickering (1995), John Law (2004), and Isabelle Stengers (2007) to name but a few. This seems to suggest that elements of messiness are constitutive for research activities and should not be avoided in favour of methodological hygiene.

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