

Textiled Becomings

Making from scratch, moving, performing and reflecting

Haya Cohen
Griffith University

To move is to create (with) sense. A body perceives through difference. A change in environment provokes a sensory event.

(Manning, 2006)

This paper was presented as a part of a panel on the Reflective Artist. As an arts practitioner, I understand how different arts forms provide various ways of reflecting on the relationship between body and environment. In the context of the World Dance Alliance Global Summit 2008, I feel that there is a strong overlap between the visual arts and dance through the importance of movement. The focus of my paper is on the ways in which the movements involved in the making – whether making textile, sculptures or painting – offer ways of knowing that are unique to each material process. I use my current art project, *Textiled Becomings*, to explore the links between movement, performance (or performativity) and material processes. Within this project the embodied significance of textile art is amplified through the process of making ‘from scratch’ in which I use raw materials such as cotton and seeds, to make my own yarns.

Textiled Becomings incorporates both the notions of performance involved in the making of the work, as well as the notions of performativity in which the body performs itself and the living art’s life cycle is put on display. In this project I produce my fibres from scratch using raw materials such as cotton and seeds. I grow and collect cotton and barley seeds that comprise my artwork; after cooking the cotton in order to loosen the bonding between the fibres to facilitate the separation into thin layers, those thin layers are hung out to dry on the clothesline. Once dry, the seeds are implanted one by one within the cotton fibres and are rolled and rubbed intensively between my hands and against my body into yarns. These yarns are woven into shapes corresponding to my body’s contours as they are worked over and around it with no tools used. Video work, documenting the process of making, is an integral part of the project.

Working 'from scratch' enables me to perform the course of my embodiment and become aware of different embodied connections. Attentiveness is brought to a point where the work of art stops being a translation of, or comment on, cultural or social values and becomes a viewfinder of the movement necessary to produce oneself. Both the textile fabrication and the product are reflective research tools which facilitate two things: the slowing down of material processes in order to perceive them more clearly and becoming other – connecting objects, persons and environment – in order to observe emerging and existing connections. This process, performed outside the function of growing cotton, is subsumed by the purpose of sharing this interaction and displaying, at every step, the way the process affects me, and the way my reflective decisions affect the work. Thus, in every respect, a reflexive performativity generates what is made, what is done and what emerges to be viewed publicly.

It is my hypothesis that performance and movement whether through dancing, fibre making or weaving are all reflective ways of understanding processes of embodiment. I will argue that handling materials and the movement of making constitute a creative site where reflection reshapes all relationships: thoughts, actions, objects, persons and environment.

Moving through fibre

In this section I will focus on the process of making textile from scratch in order to examine the ways in which we can both slow perception and become other by connecting the material processes of the body to those in the environment as described above (see also image 1). As the title of my art project *Textiled Becomings* suggests, the movement involved in making textile from scratch is designed to reveal embodied dynamics. The yarns created from the raw materials are woven and knitted into shapes corresponding to my body as they are worked over and around my body with no tools used. I consider these actions as a way in which a visual artist performs an artwork, paying attention to the relationships implemented by each movement.



*Image 1 – Textiled Becomings, 2008 – the process
(Photographed by the artist)*

I see a nuance of difference between 'making' and 'performing' an artwork. The difference lies in the degree of reflection brought to the actions. I consider 'making' to be routine and habitual whereas 'performing' is self-conscious and undergoing constant modification as a result of increased awareness. Based on this distinction, I will argue that most art practices tend towards the performative.

The long and painstaking procedure of making 'from scratch' allows an awareness of the sensations as well as a tacit understanding of the connectivity and dependability of cultural, social and economic systems acquired through bodily sensation. When I am making fabric in this way, I become open to the knowledge shared by women in many cultures across the world (some examples are found in works by Australian Aboriginal and Papua New Guinean women's craft). During the process of making things from scratch – collecting materials from their environment, drying, dying, and weaving/knotting those on the body – dimensions of time and space take on different qualities. When one focuses on the movements of making which break down into smaller and smaller activities that connect to the material environment, it becomes possible to also connect to social histories through the body's relationship to others and otherness. At this point the structure of temporality changes or transforms making fluid the link between past, present and future. Sue Rowley (1999, p. 15) claims that time is experienced differently when in the process of making (for example a basket) as opposed to the time of using (the basket). She asserts that there is 'the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality, however they may be organised'. By employing similar techniques shared by women from various cultures, I become aware of the creative sites employed by the women, in which interactions with the land and with their own body are augmented by social and communal relations.

Common materials facilitate communication simply because of their ubiquity and widespread function in everyday life. Many of us wear clothes made from cotton. The plastic shopping bags that I use as the warp are almost omnipresent. Barley seeds are the second most widely grown crop in Australia. After going through a long experimentation period with different seeds, in various growing conditions, I decided to use versatile barley seeds because of their rapid growth and tolerant nature. Barley matures within two months, allowing the life and death cycle as well as regeneration to be visible as it occurs within the time of a single exhibition, unlike rice, which requires longer time or tea that takes two years to mature.

Barley provides a material process through its life cycle that occurs quickly enough to see the slowness of growth and slowly enough to see the fluidity of connections emerge in the work. A system such as this requires movement, which is essential to maintain life in every living creature. The living body, as Elizabeth Grosz (2004, p. 4) observes, is a system of 'open-ended connections with space and time, its place in dynamic natural and cultural systems, and its mutating, self-changing relations within natural and social networks.' Fluidity or a low degree of resistance to open-ended connections is necessary for movement not only in the relationship with one's environment

but also within the physical milieu in order to maintain life. For example, osmosis is a state of exchange in which the motion of substances crosses between regions through a semi-permeable membrane. Permeability is the key to maintaining or losing identity. Artists, particularly reflective artists, select movement and material processes that accentuate the body's way of feeling and connecting. Therefore, in breaking away from the solidity of sculpture, both fabric's materiality and permeability are conducive to the awareness of the artist to the process of becoming other by becoming reflective.

In *Textiled Becomings*, the fibres of the cotton are intermeshed with the roots of the seedlings. Movement is happening in diverse directions. Relationships between the fibres that capture the water, to the seeds that reside between the fibres, take new courses. The plants reshape the work. This is where perception and embodiment are actively and constantly woven. Within the process of making, rhythm becomes visible through repetition, which produces two indispensable outcomes for a reflective artist. First, repetition is the key mode of organisation and compositional movement, which creates visual effect or order, homogeneity, and rhythm (Chodas & DeMott 1985, p. 101). Secondly through repetition and meditation, artists increase their capacity 'to perceive analogies existing between matters far apart and, apparently, most dissimilar, mythopoetically [which] creates 'poetic-wisdom'¹ through laborious work' (Carter, 2004, p. 7). Repetition allows the time for reflection, which is built into the processed chosen material. Each material carries a time value, and therefore a mode of reflection.

Textiled Becomings multiplies the instances of reflection, from the making of the fibres to the movement of growing, as the pieces of fabric (implanted with seeds) are watered and grow. The work is alive and feeding back into the many systems, which comprise and sustain it. The artwork becomes a performance in the making and in the showing of its life cycle. Not only are the thickness of the fibres altered by the roots and leaves, but also, by the smells and the colours of the cotton (See image 2).



Image 2 - Textiled Becomings 2008
Living artwork
(Photographed by the artist)

Through this process, the work of art and the art process, which have the *potentiality* of life, become interwoven, literally, into an 'objectsubject'. I unite these words, which are usually regarded as dichotomised, to emphasise how the artwork becomes both object and subject through sensation. Following Deleuze's (1983, p. 104) argument, sensation is always working through the bodies of both the maker and the viewer. The artwork becomes a performing project, which has two indivisible faces. One would be the subject face, as he argues, where 'the nervous system, vital interior movement, "instinct", "temperament" and all the rest of a vocabulary that is common to naturalism' and the second face would be the object where ('the fact', the place, the event') (ibid) all come together to be the sensation. Through sensation, a person, Deleuze (ibid) states, becomes the other, always in concert through the body who gives and receives.

Perceiving embodiment

In this section, it is worthwhile to examine the theoretical frameworks that will help us understand what embodiment is and why contemporary art and science are concerned with mind/body connections. I will correlate various views by theorists such as Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) as well as by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2003), educator Linnëa Axelson (2003), and sociologist Nick Crossley (2006). The perspectives they offer help to explore how we understand the mind/body connection:

There is no separation of mind from body because there is no sense in which the mental is abstracted from the material. All is process, all is emergent. Consciousness, imagination, beliefs and desires are co-equal with reasoning and language and all are as much a part of human neural activity as is movement or perception.

(Thelen, in McKechnie, 2004, p. 20)

With the aim of accentuating the flows between a person's engagement with materials, theoretical ideas and personal experience, I pay close attention to the cognitive processes, such as conceptual blending, that occur during the creative process. Conceptual blending is a concept that describes the merging of elements from different domains to produce an 'emergent structure' that generates new meaning (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Coulson & Oakley, 2000). Thus, as Fauconnier and Turner (2002, p. v) assert, conceptual blending 'choreographs vast networks of conceptual meaning' and provides a way to think about a range of issues including the relationship of cognitive and embodied approaches to perception, abstraction and context.

The benefit of an approach that pays attention to processes such as conceptual blending is that a reflective artist can begin to correlate the contrasting activities that run concurrently through the body-environment. For example, actions such as perceiving similarity and difference appear simple and somewhat 'automatic', yet in actuality they involve extremely 'complex, imaginative, unconscious processes' (Fauconnier & Turner 2002, p. 6), and are provided to consciousness after the intricate work of combining imagination and reason. If we follow Fauconnier and Turner's line of argument, which views the links between the world to body/thought/action as

involving myriad interconnections and unconscious blending processes, it becomes apparent how these interconnections can be integrated within a creative site. Reflection within the creative site not only permeates possible connections but also acts as a catalyst for connectivity. The emphasis, which Fauconnier and Turner (2002, p. 11) place on the flows between action, imagination and reason, can help us understand the way 'meaning systems and formal systems' are intimately connected and 'co-evolve in the species, the culture, and the individual.'

Creative sites, such as *Textiled Becomings*, combine multiple inputs and acknowledge unconscious and emotional connections to provide insight into how artists may have opportunities to experiment with what is conscious and what is not. It is in a creative site that the open-ended connections that constitute embodied awareness, are creatively materialised and become available to be further interlinked. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2003 p. 54) describes the reflective moment that occurs as a result of the processing of emotions:

We process not only the presence of an object but its relation to others and its connection to the past. In those circumstances the apparatus of emotions naturally evaluates, and the apparatus of conscious mind thinkingly coevaluates.

He describes the ways in which relationships between thought, feeling, emotion, and the world of objects keep on moving back and forth like a needle in a knitting work where the holes created by the motion of the needle allow movement and flexibility between all agencies. Artists keep reworking the perceived experiences of the world by reflection. Simultaneously, in the *process of making* an object, artists encounter the actual material that triggers further emotional and sensual awareness. For example, by rolling the yarns on my leg, I become aware of the material qualities of the cotton and the contrast of the soft cotton to the rough seeds against my skin. At the same time, I am attentive to the intimate relationships between material and the body and between my body parts. Everything that I am – for example, my thoughts, body oils, flakes of skin, my past, my present and my mother's past – become entwined into the work. In a circular progression, the experience of materials triggers emotional and intuitive connections, which initiates further research. New theoretical ideas connect with other materials, renewing the loop. In this way, I assemble a mesh where matter intervenes with voids, where folds of the body are entangled with spirit, becoming a body/body of work, work of art, an artwork.

Nick Crossley (2006, p. 1) suggests that reflexive embodiment occurs where enmeshed relationships between bodies and society eventuate. He defines reflexive embodiment as the ability to perceive, emote about, and act upon one's own body. These actions include body modification and maintenance as well as 'body image' where 'subjectivity entails that the object and the subject of a perception, thought, feeling, desire or action are the same.' In addition, he argues that:

Just as consciousness emerges, as an irreducible structure, out of the biochemical interactions and relations which comprise the human organism, and out of the interaction between that organism and its immediate environment, so too [emphasis by author] interaction between conscious human agents generates emergent social phenomena, ...The social is nested in the chemical and so on, but at each level we find irreducible phenomena.

(Crossley, 2006, p. 5)²

Crossley (2006), like Grosz (2004), sees the 'becoming' of a person as a system interlaced with cultural and social systems. Making fibres and textile works has enabled me to reflect on these multifaceted notions through the performative aspect of the work.

Performing the connections

In the West, textiles are often identified with domesticity, women's creativity and shared endeavour (Jefferies, 1995, p. 164). However, textile production also allows artists to examine the gap between textile as a product and textile production as a personal, critical, reflective and embodied process. The reflective artist presents objects and situations that emphasise the body-in-process through the selected processes that perform the body's labour and leave evidence of the body's ways of connecting. This is where the artist becomes the art. Linnèa Axelsson (2003) explains this view in her conference paper *Body, Room, Artist* presented at Luleå University of Technology:

In the moment of performance, in the choices and actions the artist makes in a certain place, in a certain time, the artist him-or herself becomes the art. In that moment the body of the artist *is* art, and it is a link or path for the viewer to follow, toward a phenomenon of quite sublime meaning....,

Axelsson emphasises the process of becoming within the creative site where movement is intertwined with cognition. Relationships are not working in one direction, where the mind manipulates the body, but rather, the performative is where a cyclical interaction is suggested. In dance and movement therapy, for example, as explained by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (in Stormsted 2002, p. 223), a 'transitional space between the inner and outer world, in which image and affect are linked and which gives rise to the mover's attention, is focused on the bodily felt level of experiencing.' Also, as he identifies, 'there is a quality of allowing oneself to be moved from within as one attends to an almost imperceptible inner shifting of energy in the body, a kind of kinaesthetic free association.'

Textiled Becomings, incorporates movements involving not only the weaving but also tying my body parts one to another (see image 1) in order to map the space for the living loom that my body has become. Another example would be making yarns by rolling on different body parts. The choices taken in conjunction with the sensation and the visual image created evoke not only the awareness to the bodily felt level of experiencing and to associations established therein, but also, to being a performed artwork.

A creative practice such as fibre and textile making brings into focus processes that refuse the view of representation and assume the dynamic

aspect of performativity that is involved in the creative act and the artwork. This approach enables a synthesis of the world-artist-artwork and openness to the *becoming* art. Barbara Bolt (2004, p. 186) argues a crucial point in her book *Art Beyond Representation* where she considers that the artist 'no longer sets the world before her/him as an object, but rather allows a total openness to the Being of art, that is the "work" of art.' In this way, she believes, 'we can begin to understand that art is a performative not a representational practice' (ibid). When the process of making the artwork is accentuated, then the idea of becoming – continual process of knitting the fabric of life within the art work and vice versa – lets the body write and simultaneously be written through and with the artwork. Bolt argues for the effect that materialisation has upon perception and embodiment in which reflection of experience becomes matter (ibid) and 'the outside world enters the work and the work casts its effects back into the world' (ibid, p. 10).

In conclusion, performance of the making and performativity of the body in relation to the living work becomes, in this project, the integration of reflection and movement necessary to transform a site into a creative site and open the boundaries between artist, viewer and environment. Bolt's important insight is to recognise that art is *performative* since '[t]he practice of art is always embodied' (ibid, p. 189). Understanding the artwork as an embodied prompt allows those who interact with it, to varying degrees, to enter a performative space where their reflexive responses become meaningful within a larger social and cultural context.

I have used the reflective processes of my current art project, *Textiled Becomings*, to provide concrete examples of the ways in which arts practices can deploy material processes to slow perception and construct conditions of becoming other. In this way the aim of my arts practice is to realise a creative site in which performative, cognitive, social, cultural and physical perspectives are interwoven, rather than to produce an art object. By making the textile work from scratch, I am able to recognise the fluid connections of being in the world and highlight the importance of understanding the body as an open-ended system.

Discussion of the temporality and delimiting effect of material processes has attempted to address the gap that exists between textile perceived as a product and textile and fibre making as a critical and reflective process of materializing embodiment. Making from scratch differs from making something out of already processed materials (i.e. spun wool or cotton yarns) in that 'from scratch' requires not only a slowing down of material processes in order to obtain information, but also it involves embodying knowledge extracted from the environment that evokes the creative cognition. This movement is performative because it cannot be done without reflective awareness and reflexive movement. The goal of this exercise is the production of a creative site, which can emerge only where the performative process of making and experiencing of materials combine to reshape the relationships between thought, actions, objects, persons and environment.

Notes

¹ Carter is using the philosopher Vico's term 'poetic wisdom' to explain the difference between the imaginative and the discursive.

² Such as norms, body techniques ...roles, networks, power relations, social systems, social positions, individuals who embody them at any particular point in time, and which pre-date, 'constrain' and will outlive them (Crossley, 2006,p. 5).

References

- Axelsson, L. (2003). *Body, Room, Artist*, presentation at ITTG. Reloaded at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, November 16, 2003. Retrieved September 10, 2006, from http://www.luth.se/depts/arb/genus_tekn/Linnea_Axelsson_Body_Room_Artist.pdf
- Bolt, B. (2004). *Art beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Carter, P. (2004). *Material thinking: the theory and practice of creative research*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press.
- Chodas, M., & DeMott, B. (1985). Meaning in Women's Arts of North America. In Lacy Gully Anthony (Ed.), *PhØebus 4, a Journal of Art History* (pp. 99-105). USA: Arizona Board of Regents.
- Coulson, S., & Oakley, T. (2000). Blending Basics. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 11(3/4), pp. 175-196.
- Crossley, N. (2006). *Reflexive Embodiment in Contemporary Society*. New York: Open University Press.
- Damasio, A. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. New York: Harcourt.
- Deleuze, G. (1983). Francis Bacon The Logic Of Sensation. *Flash Art*, N.112, May, pp. 100-104.
- Fauconnier G., & Turner M. (2002). *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grosz, E. (2004). *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Jefferies, J. (1995). Text and textiles: weaving across the borderlines. In K. Deepwell (Ed.), *New Feminist art criticism—critical strategies* (pp. 165-173). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Manning, E. (2006). Prosthetics Making Sense: Dancing the Technogenetic Body. In *Fibreculture-the Journal*, 9. Retrieved April 14, 2008, from http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue9/issue9_manning_print.html
- McKechnie, S. (2004). Dance (The Dance Ensemble as a Creative System). In R. Wissler, B. Haseman, S. A. Wallace, & M. Keane (Eds.), *Innovation in Australian Arts, Media, Design: fresh challenges for the tertiary sector* (pp. 13-28). Australia: Post Pressed, Flaxton.

-
- Rowley, S. (Ed.). (1999). *Reinventing Textiles: Tradition & Innovation* (Vol. One). Malta: Telos Art Publishing.
- Stormsted, T. (2002). The Dancing body in Psychotherapy, Reflections on Somatic Psychotherapy and Authentic Movement. In P. Pallaro (Ed.), *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body Moving the Self, Being Moved: A collection of Essays* (Vol. 2, pp. 202-226). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Queensland Government - Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (2007) *Barley production in Queensland*. Retrieved May 10, 2007, from http://www.dpi.qld.gov.au/cps/rde/dpi/hs.xsl/home_ENA_HTML.htm

Biographical statement

Haya Cohen is an arts practitioner whose practice-led research is undertaken through a multi-disciplinary approach that includes creative arts practice, anthropology, biology, social sciences and philosophy. Presently, Haya is completing her PhD and is teaching at Griffith University. Her body of work ties notions of embodiment, communication and subjectivity to the processes of making fibres and textile. Making yarns and fabric become a methodology for both correlating academic research and producing experiential-based research that increase bodily possibility. Haya has exhibited across Australia and overseas. She has promoted contemporary art and community through her involvement in community art projects and performance.