

Backs and Fronts: Stitching Thread and Thought Through Manning, Methodology, and Art

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Abstract

This paper started with a messy embroidery back and a question: *What happens when we play with/in mess, attending to how front/back, process/product, art/research, are counterparts in the event?* To answer, we passed embroidery and writing techniques through each other, exploring what becomes possible when you think and make relationally, that is, *between*. Here, we stitch together Erin Manning's theorization of the event with our experience. As we attuned ourselves to how thinking back-and-front together mattered, we found that our artful inquiry required us to rethink both *what* we thought and *how* we thought. Thus, we found that a methodology of front and back was *made* in this event, as a result of passing *between*. Finally, we invite readers to experiment with crafting their own methodologies of the between by flipping over their research as the embroidery hoop, and thereby opening the inquiry to its more-than.

Keywords: Erin Manning, embroidery, qualitative methodology, artful inquiry, event

Introduction



***Event: Thinking Mess Affirmatively.** How do you feel about mess? What is it, and what does it do? Is mess a name for an accident, or something that needs to be cleaned up? Is it a name for a mistake or sloppiness in process, a failure of technique and rigor? How does mess orient you to the inquiry process? In *Mess: The Manual of Accidents and Mistakes*, Keri Smith (2010) defines “mistake” and “accident” as “happenings or occurrences by which the creator does not have complete control over the final outcome (end result) that result in conclusions the creator did not predict. We might also call them ‘experiments’” (Introduction, para 6, emphasis added). We add: we might also call them events.*

Flipping Over the Hoop

During the pandemic summer of 2020, Carlson brought her embroidery materials to her parents’ farm. Sitting on the porch—during that long, languid space that is early evening in an Alabama summer—she showed her grandmother what she was learning. Her grandmother had done embroidery in the past—perhaps learning it in home economics courses or from her own mother who was a seamstress known for her curtains. By that point, Carlson had made a handful of embroideries: a girl, a pair of sunglasses, a crystal, some abstract patterns. A few weeks earlier, before she could get her hands on a stack of neatly-cut ivory cotton squares, she had started embroidering on the edges of a previous embroidery, as if doodling on a page of notes—flipping over to surface more space, the back becoming front and the front back. As she stitched fresh

edges, Carlson worked around the old backsides. How interesting they were—perhaps even more so than the front. They showed the tracks of the needle, revealing connections that were obscured on the finished side. The back of the textile enabled (Manning, 2016b) the work as well as situated the work. And, most interestingly, it showed the intense interconnectedness among the design elements: the ways they sprung from each other, ran back to one another, zig zagged across space back and forth from one another.

Her grandmother ‘oohed’ and ‘awwed’ over the fronts. However, when she saw the mess that was the back—unintended knots; loose ends; thread erratically stretching from place to place—she encouraged Carlson to try and make it more neat. It was good advice: certainly, there are practical and aesthetic benefits to a neat back, and it has long been a mark of good craftsmanship (e.g., Higgin, 1880). However, Carlson wondered if there was another way to think about the messiness. What did the messy back make differently visible? When it was viewed not so much as a failure of technique as much as a sign of the event’s becoming, might it attune her to how she had improvised *with* (not on) the materials, letting color and line and shape and stitch guide the making? She thought about how embroidery artists often cover the backside in the ‘finishing’ process, as if it is not part of the work—as if the back was simply incidental to, or the opposite of, the front. But, the back was not the front’s opposite, really; it was its counterpart, made up of the very same thread, the very same colors. It was the same work, but simply seen from a different angle.

She shared some embroidery backs with Kelly, and together we wondered what it was that the back showed, and how it might be thought. We felt it was useful for its relationality. We also wondered if thinking about the two sides not as opposites, but rather as the other’s more-than, made it possible to see how the fingerprints of thought and making and materiality joined to “create conditions conducive to the event earning its name as an event” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 92). That is, perhaps, the messiness of the back was valuable because it conveyed the *relationality of the becoming* more clearly; by thinking the back and front together, we could read in the product the process, and in the process the product. Paying attention to the back in relation to the front helped us attune to how it was that process and product, back and front, were not separate. Likewise, we wondered if, paradoxically, this affordance to see back-and-front as relationality at play was produced in part by the very limitation that obscured their relationship. That is, it was partly *because* the fabric was solid that the ‘sides’ emerged as distinct *and* relational. Thus, neither could be abandoned: the back provided a view that was impossible from the front, and vice versa. From the front, how the event came into itself—how it emerged out of relation—was concealed. Likewise, from the back, what the event produced—what it emerged into through shape and line and color—was concealed. Both were important, both provided insight into the event’s becoming that the other could not, but the back was frequently dismissed.

These thoughts about what the messy back was, and what it might do when thought in relation to the front, lingered as “a conceptual force—a word, an idea, a landscape” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 94) between us. When picked up by techniques, the skills learned by practice, a

conceptual force activates a technicity. In return, technicity—the name for that veering into newness when the maker or dancer or thinker pulls from technique the beyond—“moves the process towards a practice still to be defined” (Manning, 2016b, p. 126). This is to say that when a conceptual force reaches through and within and across technique and situation, it leads the way into something else—something “*more-than*” (Manning, 2016b, p. 126, emphasis added). Here, we explore this very happening: how a moment seeded a lingering that activated us, that led us into and through events, and moved us to consider what the messy back made thinkable and doable.



***Event: Between and Below.** Can you see the image on the left side? That’s the embroidery (seen from the front). Can you see the image on the right side? That’s the embroidery (seen from the back). Between them is the fabric. Can you imagine it? Now, picture that fabric invisible so you could see straight through. Can you see how what looks like individual lines from the front are actually just one side of many loops? These many loops are like roots, darting through the ground. When you choose only to look at the front, it’s like thinking a flower begins on the surface of the soil. It’s to miss the roots.*

Embroidering Together/Writing Together

When Carlson suggested that we embroider together—both working in the same hoop, thread and needle passed back and forth like invitation and gift—we had little idea of where our work would take us. But that was okay—we were more interested in what would come to be, what

thought in the act (Manning & Massumi, 2014) would produce. We were there to take the messy back seriously as co-thinker, co-maker, and co-producer of the event, one that “activat[ed] a passage between creative forces” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 94), between making and thinking and writing together. So we jumped in, coursing along our inquiry as it took us through the pandemic and embroidery fronts and backs, techniques and technicities, enabling constraints and conceptual forces. In the process, we were inspired conceptually, artfully, and methodologically by Manning (2016b) who asked, “What else can artistic practice become when the object is not the goal, but the activator, the conduit toward new modes of existence?” (p. 460). What else can the back be when understood as itself a process, a relationality, an ushering through and on? We extend Manning’s question and wonder: What are we missing when we ignore the back—or discipline it, or hide it—instead of thinking it (in all its messiness) in relation to the front? What happens when we think *between*? Similarly, what newness, what connections, are opened through (this/our/any) art when we think and make in relation to methodology?

Our inquiry takes up these questions, exploring the artful, methodological, and relational implications of thinking, writing and making with backs and fronts that are inextricably linked. We have dwelt on the ways that the processes and the products—art-making and researching, embroidery and writing—enabled each other. We imagine them joined by fabric and flip over the event like the hoop, literally and figuratively, in this paper. Writing in this way has been messy. But, like the back that first sparked our questions, we do not hide it or tame it. We hope that the messiness will capture you too, that it will be a conceptual force that evokes your own inquiry, your own exploration of the forgotten, hidden or ignored links that enable your practice. This paper sits at the intersection between embroidery and writing; it is a text/ile and an invitation, not a report. Therefore, it does not follow a traditional structure but rather reads with subtle movements and artistic rhythms. We pass through the fabric, swaying in and out with needle and questions, purposefully cultivating and extending and complicating the evocative messiness. We write to reveal both back and front, literally and conceptually, exploring Manning’s question of what happens when the product/object/front/research is not the goal. To guide you, we offer two signposts: (1) We do not abandon the clean front; we do not reverse the binary by calling front bad, or showing only the back. That is to misunderstand our experience and our argument. It is not in simply becoming aware of the back but in moving-with *both* front and back in mind that we have found ourselves ushered into the event. We are not choosing one over the other but rather dwelling on how their relation, their linking, makes something more-than possible. (2) As we pass between process and product, research and art, embroidery and writing, we do not construct an order, or an allegory. We do not assign to the back or the front the name ‘art’ or ‘methodology’ or ‘research’ or ‘process’ or ‘product.’ We do not line them up chronologically, because they overlapped for us. To think with embroidery—with how it orients us to the back and front—means to see it all as back and front continually in process: art as both, the process as both, the product as both, the writing and research as both.

Thus we begin, again, at the hoop. (*Thread the needle*). We pass the needle back and forth between each other, with our art, with Manning, and with you, our reader. (*Line up the ends*).

Think-with us. (*Tie a knot*). With Manning's question above along with our own related questions. (*Pierce the front from the back, pulling the knot against the fabric taut in the hoop*). We wonder what the artful practice of embroidery opens up; what it makes possible, when we shift our focus between back and front, letting the processes of making and the concepts that snag us push technique into technicity. (*Find a new place where the needle will pass*). How the making unfolds from the interplay of concept and process and technique and technicity. (*Puncture, this time from front to back, and pull*). How this unfolding changes how we think and write and make, how we live in the world. (*Turn the needle, trace the next place*). How it attunes us to what and whom we are connected, and what results when we see ourselves knotted with the knots we make (Haraway, 2016). (*Pass the needle through, again. Pull the thread tight.*) We show you what we have made by stitching together our questions with the constraints of writing and embroidering—with the techniques we use to make ourselves legible and those that might use us to become more-than, that is, the technicities—that become-with our histories as makers-and-scholars, and the desire to experiment with the techniques of qualitative inquiry. (*Continue.*)



Event: Leaning into the Rhythms. *If you had seen the event as it unfolded, you would have seen the ways that we were moved with the rhythm of embroidering and writing together. (- - Back-and-Front- -). If you've collaborated before, you have an idea; but, since you weren't there, we have tried to represent some of what this looked like. (- - Knot-and-Thread- -). We try to share our embroidery rhythms, our (frequently messy) movements of back and forth, front and back. The stitched lines, - -, are representations of the simultaneous and overlapping nature of our embroidery and inquiry practice, similar to how one might note overlapping speech (=) using Jeffersonian transcription (Jefferson, 2004). (- - Tie-and-Cut- -). We caution our reader not to read this clean sequential description*

as, in fact, indicative of a clean and sequential process. (- - Front-and-Back- -). As you read these descriptions here and throughout this section, hear our voices as overlapping, understand our thinking as ongoing, and see the practices occurring in tandem. (- - Cut-and-Rethread- -). We also caution the reader not to read these as separate from or incidental to the theoretical, methodological and artful work; they are the messy back of our artful methodology, not separate from the making or what it produced. (- - Stitch-and-Pass- -). It is all the same thread, whether seen from the back or front. (- - Back-and-Front- -).

Embroidery as Process

Embroidery is a type of needle art that involves stitching designs onto materials, often fabric stretched over a hoop, using thread (My Modern Met, 2019). Some embroidery forms, such as cross-stitching, use specific stitches with prescribed forms in a rigid grid. Other forms, like crewelwork and needle painting, do not follow a grid pattern and employ a wide variety of stitches. In these forms, there are many common stitches, including those like the running stitch, that darts in and out of the fabric; the backstitch, that creates a line by tracking back; and, the long and short stitch, that uses differing lengths to create a smoothing effect.

To begin embroidering, you must first stretch the fabric taut in an embroidery hoop, a frame made of two pieces of wood, most often a circle inset in a larger, expandable circle. After catching the fabric between the two circles, you screw the larger one tight and pull the edges of the fabric to establish tension. The fabric should be tight enough that tapping on its surface sounds like a drum; if the fabric is too loose, you will have trouble passing the needle and thread through to make stitches. *(This may sound strange: to pass through, you must create and work-through tension; but it's true. Art and research, making and inquiring, all take effort and intention.)* To make a stitch, next tie a knot at one end of the thread, pass the other end of the thread through the eye of the needle, and pass the needle through the fabric. When you pull the thread tight *(tension, again)*, the knot catches on the backside of the fabric *(and the knot keeps this tension in play)*. When you pass the needle back through from front to back, you leave behind a line on the front. Again, pull the thread tight, this time from the back, so that your line lays flat on the front *(more tension!)*. Turn the needle, and pass again through the fabric. If you are having trouble passing the needle through the fabric, it could be because the fabric is too thick, or your needle is not sharp enough. Press harder, or change your tools. *(Don't give up. It's hard sometimes, to craft with the event as it's coming into being. Lean in.)*

For this project, we chose crewel embroidery for a couple reasons. The first was relational and personal: Kelly's grandmother had done crewel embroidery and each grandchild had been gifted one of her crewelworks, typically as wedding gifts. Textiles reaching through and across generations, threading cartographies across the United States. By learning the process and

working the materials, Kelly added to the relations that stretched across times and places, connecting lives. The second reason was methodological. Crewel embroidery is distinctive for its use of wool threads that are twisted into a two-ply yarn for stitching (My Modern Met, 2019). This materiality—the twisting together of two into one—was a visual reflection of the events of our embroidery process, as we made with each other, literally and figuratively. In this way, the crewel yarn was a touchstone by which we continually oriented ourselves to how relations—familial, collegial, artful, methodological, material—sparked, intensified, and composed the event. Thus, we have taken guidance from crewel thread, diving into memories and wonderings, histories and new becomings. We think together art and research, the personal and professional, the process and the product, the back and the front. We understand them not as opposites but as parts of the same becoming. As co-compositional. Together, they make a strong, beautiful thread.

We chose crewel work, therefore, for its material composition, its personal significance, and for its methodological alignment. But this materiality and relationality bloomed further still. Crewel thread literally and figuratively darted through the front and back of the fabric and of the process. It became more than technique. Like a new speaker, new dancer, new inquirer, it spoke: *if this inquiry is a twisting together of the back and the front, the artful and the methodological, the personal and the academic, what does that mean for the writing? That is, how do you twist together these techniques of embroidery and these techniques of writing in such a way as to continue it, to intensify it, to embody it?*



Event: Stitches Yielding Stitches. *Stitches in embroidery are always folding over into the more-than, extending the event even as the technique finishes. This is what we mean: imagine you pass your threaded needle through the fabric from front to back, and then back to front a little along the fabric. You've made a very*

simple stitch and with it a line. But, now, your needle is back on the backside and there's still so much thread. You have finished that stitch, perhaps, but aren't you also at the beginning of a new one? That stitch, that technique, has put you back into place for something new, even something other, to happen. One has unfolded into two, and two will unfold into three, and on, as you pass through back and front, from technique to technique, from stitch to stitch.

Technique and Technicity

As Manning (2016b) writes about with dance, embroidery and inquiry are replete with movements and techniques, the new and familiar. Our embroidery process, for instance, was always an extension of prior movements, a space to try old and known techniques even as we also began to learn new ones. Carlson, for instance, made jewelry in the past—knotting after stringing each freshwater pearl or matte agate round—and, as such, quickly found similar rhythms in the movements of embroidery. Kelly, too, made jewelry and was a visual arts teacher prior to becoming an academic. She taught jewelry and metalwork, knitting, weaving (both basket and yarn), and other artful practices that she found bear resemblance to embroidery. When embroidering, we found ourselves relying on techniques we used in our previous artmaking, exploring the limits of how those techniques could be enacted or re-envisioned in this new medium. We found affordances even as we encountered limitations. In this section, we turn to Manning's (2016b) discussions on techniques and technicity, exploring how each was enacted in our artful inquiry practices.

Manning explains a difference between technique and what she calls technicity. Technique is that which we learn through repetition and practice, touching “on how a process reveals itself as such” (Manning, 2016b, p. 40). Not method, Manning (2016b) explains, technique is potent, activated by ecologies of bodies that are ever changing, shifting, always immanent to the event as it unfolds and enfolds. “Techniques enliven practice” (Ulmer, 2018, p. 729). Technicity, according to Manning (2016b), is “the experience of how the work opens itself to its potentials, its more than” (p. 40). Through such opening, technicity always exceeds the event as it teems with the potential of what-might-become, never fully capturable or articulable. Technique is what we pour into our art; technicity is what erupts outward into the world in uncontained liveliness and expression.

As we stitched-together ways of thinking and making, we found that our techniques shifted into technicity, and with this opening, invited us to dwell within the becoming-event in a different way. Specifically, we found that being in the event was less about reaching a “state” (e.g., making a product) but instead about “activat[ing] ecologies that in turn activate tendencies in the milieu of their co-composition” (Manning, 2016b, p. 90). The techniques of embroidering and writing we were using might or might not lead us to a product that made sense, but we were finding ourselves within their more-than, either way—within the more-than of artmaking and thinking

and inquiry, the event in its becoming. Thus, as techniques overflowed their boundaries into technicities, altering our perception of what the event might do, they began to alter our perceptions of other boundaries. We began to ask not only, What might the making produce? But also, How is the making producing *us*? And, similarly, how do other events, other experiences, other moments where techniques are inadequate and overflow into their more-than, or are simply inadequate (such as when we must explain death to a child), make us, too? *What all is part of our back?*

Manning (2016b) explains that “modes of existence act, cut, reorient: they are world-constituting procedures” (p. 90). Thus, as we followed the conceptual force of the messy back, and wandered from back to front and front to back, we found that the techniques were entry points into something more: into an understanding of what the relationality between the back-and-front had hinted at. Namely, that we—as artists-scholars—are not separate from what we make, but rather are similarly the event’s counterpart; we emerge together, always in relation. Thus, as we stitched, we thought-with Manning’s notions of technique and technicity, yet these concepts got tangled up with our livings and our personal histories. For instance, the techniques from the videos that Carlson found and shared with Kelly certainly informed their artful movements; however, it was the story of the bee that flooded Kelly’s mind as she stitched. The bee had been discovered in Kelly’s driveway by her 1 year-old daughter—its black and yellow body ambling slowly, circuitously, unable to fly and clearly near death. (*Bee? Bee? She had pointed sadly at the struggling creature.*) When Carlson passed the flowered embroidery to Kelly, she initially fumbled as she stared at the hoop, searching for inspiration. (*Stifled with anxiety, afraid to ‘mess up.’*) First, she considered a butterfly, but her mind went to the struggling bee, pausing when she realized she did not know how to execute the vision in her head. (*Holding threaded needle—how to begin?*) Instead, she worked intuitively, not knowing what stitch she was using or if she was doing it “right.” (*Pushing needle through textile. Stitching the struggling bee.*) Her movements attended to texture, color, aesthetics, dimension; Kelly worked by sight and feel, using colored crewel threads like a painter rather than relying on the skills of a true embroiderer. (*Stitching-with the struggling bee.*) Affectively, the technicity of her movements was inspired and sustained by the excess of the events in relation. (*How do you explain death to a 1 year-old?*) Certainly, the crewel techniques guided her making, but making-with the bee would neither contain nor make visible the excess that entangled with every single movement. (*Ecologies of bee-stitch-Carlson-hoop-flowers-daughter-needle-driveway-dying.*) Technique *and* technicity (*and making-with*).



Event: Thinking-Making Knots. *When she first started embroidering, one of the first things Carlson sought to learn was how to prepare the thread for the needle. (Are knots necessary?) She thought knots were the bane of needle art, as she imagined torsos folded over gnarled skeins coaxing threads apart. (When and where to make knots, and how many?) Of course, some knots do make messes (glorious or otherwise). But, the thing about a knot, Carlson learned, is that it actually also enables the embroidery (Guyotte et al., 2021). The way she learned to start a stitch was to thread the needle, knot one end, and pull the thread through the fabric until the knot caught on the back-side. (Thread, knot, pull, catch.) This made sure your stitches were secure, that they would not be pulled loose by accident, and left your other hand free to work more complicated stitches. (Now, I'm ready.) This is to say that a knot makes embroidery possible. It stops and allows. A pause that enables movement. (What movings-with do I notice, when I have to 'stop'?)*

Knots as Enabling Constraints

Knots are a curious mix of movements, allowances, and closures. They have a structure, a form, a technique. French knots, for instance, are a specific embroidery stitch in which the thread is wrapped around the needle to create delicate coils that resemble rosebuds (My Modern Met, 2019). But, in embroidery, knots are also key components of preparing the needle and thread. Therefore, while knots can be their own stitch, they are *also* the beginnings of something *else*. Does that make the knot a technique, or a technicity? We answer yes. Something that is *always* or *never* enables nothing. A knot is technicity *and* technique. It is both. Otherwise, a knot could not open. It would only foreclose possibilities. By anchoring the stitch, the knot prevents the thread from pulling all the way through. In this way, it secures the evidence of the movement on the face

of the fabric. In other words, it prevents the stitches from pulling right through, disassembling what was made. Sometimes, a knot anchors the stitches on the front. Sometimes it can be decorative, like the French knot. Yet, other times, a knot can be unintended, and cause a great deal of frustration. An undesired knot in an inconvenient place on front or back may stop stitching, requiring painstaking unravelings or, more drastically, cutting and rethreading and reknitting. In talking about students learning embroidery, for instance, Hofverberg and Kronlid (2018) describe knots as “inhibit[ing] (or block[ing]) the flow of the crafting process” (p. 961). They explain how such knots can be made when the thread rubs against itself as it runs past the fabric (Hofverberg & Kronlid, 2018). That is, our materials are not just in relation to us—they are also in relation to each other; art-making comes out of and produces complex knots.

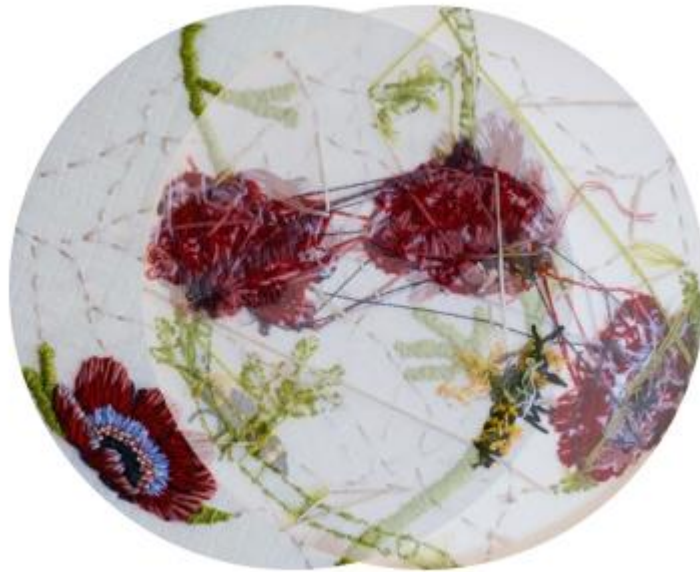
We choose to think these constraints alongside the knot’s affordances. Thinking with Manning, we see the knot as an enabling constraint that allows new ways for moving-with to emerge in embroidery and methodology. Manning (2013) describes enabling constraints as “a series of conditions that foster a limiting of the field of experience even while they allow the incipient event to remain open to invention” (p. 111). That is, the enabling constraint functions paradoxically: like a knot, it makes some actions impossible and others possible (Guyotte et al., 2021). Because they are a strange doubling of opening and closing, possibility and rules, the enabling constraint/knot resists binarization while still pulling the event towards its becoming. By establishing knots in the thread—by employing enabling constraints in the event—the becoming gathers traction, moving towards its more-than. Thus, the knot is ultimately relational not only in its construction (e.g., thread tied to thread) but in its functioning (Guyotte et al., 2021). By tying together affordance and constraint, it catalyzes the event.

In utilizing both limitation and opening, the knot tangles together conceptual force, technique, and technicity. The enabling constraint, as the “relational technique in its event-conditioning role” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 93), ushers in the event not only *out* of relation but also *in* relation. That is, the event unfolds as bodies, ideas and techniques, come in contact along relational paths. This process enlivens technique, mediating the becoming-together of the event. Because “the constraint embedded in the procedure becomes enabling of new processes” (Manning, 2016b, p. 91), technique morphs into “technicity, the outdoing of technique, the capacity to take technique to its limit, and then to go elsewhere” (Manning, 2016b, p. 126).

Of course, technique and technicity are only not the only aspects involved in this transformation—the event occurs within a complex “ecology”, of human and non-human, limits and affordances, concepts and bodies, “tendencies” and “potentiality” (Manning, 2016b, p. 118). For us, this event was indeed situated within a relationality, an ecology. When our processes and techniques of writing and reading “co-combine[d] with a conceptual force” that was borne out of a moment and pulled an inquiry together and “across registers of content and processual invention” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 94), technicity became possible. For instance, when we employed techniques of writing and embroidering together, the enabling constraint of the typed page (and the techniques it allows) led us to experiment, as we wondered, for instance, how might the techniques of

embroidering translate to writing and reading, and thereby enliven the ‘academic paper? Thinking with stitches and knots, we invented a new sort of technique, that is, a technicity. Specifically, we wrote as if we were embroidering, crafting events like/as thread to pull together sections of the paper, and using grammatical signs of both connection and separation (i.e., en and em dashes -- and --/—) to communicate steps in the making as nonetheless iterative and overlapping. To the reader familiar with the running stitch, which looks like (- - - -), we hoped the dashes especially would evoke the sense that we had passed a needle through the page, prompting visions of a back full of zig-zagging connections threaded from concept to event, sentence to word, paragraph to image.

Such strict limits to *always* or *never* foreclose possibilities without opening; they are not techniques. They are the type of methods that Nordstrom (2018) warned against, that are not “a product of what a study does” (p. 223) and might do, but rather are rehearsals of what another study did, another event evented. Methods of this type, that are not techniques because they close without opening, will only confine us to comfortable reproductions of the same, a ‘same’ that was not even enough to begin with. Writing about following such striating rules in methodology, St. Pierre (2018) notes that “the problem with preexisting, formalized, methods-driven methodologies is that they are never enough for the too much of inquiry” (p. 607). As strange moving-withs—ones that both enable and frustrate—knots invite us to consider the “too much” of materiality in our research practices. How does material help and hinder, and do both at the same time? In what ways do our practices account for excess and complexity? If, like art, research can be understood as moving-with more-than-human others in a dance that trades off between “differentials... tensions... [and] contrastive intensities of the moment” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 33), how we participate matters. Attending to how knottings produce the art/research, via techniques and technicities, with enabling constraints and conceptual forces, makes it possible to truly move-with and move-beyond. Following the way things have always been will produce what has always been. To be response-able to material and human and non-human participants, we must take up as enabling constraints “the provocation, the knot, the world kicking back” (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 607).



***Event: (The) Making Flowers.** We laid these questions on the ground, hoping that we were generating soil, that “the event itself had set anything in motion” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 92). We planted, or wrote, or embroidered—here, they are the same. (Pressing seed through soil, like fabric.) How do you do that we wondered—prolong the event’s magic, the twisting-together of material and histories and becomings? (Unseen roots sprout, like loose threads on the back). How do you write with the making, not about it, so that the two twine around each other like crewel thread? (Something green emerges.) The event, we found, will seed new events, if you let it (Manning & Massumi, 2014). (It grows, somehow, stitching itself together.) This paper is an experiment of what this might look like; how letting the event grow is both to prolong the event, and to see what it seeds. (A bloom stretches open, releases scent. Tiny seeds glimmer, like beads. Like potential.) Writing together the event and its exploration, the making and the explanation, the front and the back. (A bee comes by, tastes red and dew; coats feet with pollen, and leaves behind mixture, relation.)*

Unsnipped Threads: Methodology in the Making

In this paper, we have tried to convey what we experienced as we were swept along the currents of the process, as we moved-with each other, backs and fronts, skeins of thread, stitches, questions, events, knots, flowers and bees, Manning, and methodology. Now, we find it is true to say many things about what has happened here, about what this paper is, and about what it does. It is a paper about what happens when embroidery is used to catalyze thinking, when the

movements of bodies in relation are taken seriously as partners in inquiry. When messiness and backs drive you to translate relationality with a choreography of hands. It is a paper about what happens when writing and crafting are allowed to go to seed in each other's company. It is a paper about what happens when a conceptual force does work, pushing technique into technicity, art into research, and research into art. *Now, this is what the paper did*, you might say, *but what did it produce?* While we are tempted to answer, to follow traditional methodological outlines and provide a clear summation — “*What can we say we produced?*” — we resist. Such a question foregrounds product over process, the clean front over the messy back. Similarly, it presumes the event is over, that the making-with is done. In so doing—in prioritizing the front over the back and the neat over the messy, and in presenting the process as a product (e.g., done, ‘cause we’ve written it as such)—we would risk either trying to take control over the event, or stepping outside of it. Either way would be to work against the inquiry we have taken up. Even as we know such a choice makes us less legible, it is a risk we take so that we might linger longer in the generative messiness of the ‘between’.

Thus, this is not a conclusion. It is at most a pause between thoughts-in-acts (Manning & Massumi, 2014). As we continue to stretch the event from the inside, pushing our experience further, we find that the thinking guides the acting, and the acting guides the thinking, and that in truth they are inseparable: making and researching are counterparts in this inquiry. We do, however, offer this additional guidance, a new signpost to add to the two we offered earlier: (3) Inquiring *between*, conceptualizing and making the back-and-front together, has methodological consequences. It, too, functions as a knot. This is what we mean: if you too, imagine art-making and researching as passing through each other, you will find that this alters how you proceed in the inquiry. Such a conceptualization of the event both crafts possibilities for inquiry and closes off others. That is, a methodology of front-and-back opens the event, pulling in technique and enabling constraints and conceptual forces. But, a methodology of the front-and-back also closes the event, in the sense that certain ways of thinking and doing become impossible or nonsensical. For instance, one such consequence is that we cannot conceive of this as a *conclusion*. Stitching through never ends; the needle is always poised to pass back through to the other side. Because the making never ends, the writing cannot either—we cannot think of the event and the inquiry, of the writing and the making, as separate. They unfold together, knotted-with each other (Guyotte et al., 2021). They make each other out of their mutual need, like “modes of existence” — that is, how the world (is becoming) itself, “out of a necessity that has a procedural tending” (Manning, 2016b, p. 90). As the inquiry unfolds, guided by a dedication to think through, to think the back-and-front always together, it makes ways through methodology out of need—it makes anti-methodologies and resists standardized post-qualitative methods (Nordstrom, 2018; St. Pierre, 2018, 2021; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). It pushes the event onward, leaning in, as technique becomes technicity, and event becomes itself but more.

Here, we want to make this point clearly: inquiry that passes between the front and the back cannot follow pre-formed methodological structures. That is okay, however, because it is always *making* them, pushing through technique to make the new, in the swirl of immanence that is the

event. That is why this—the making, thinking, creating—is never done: because neither is the event; neither is the back-and-front of inquiry. Accordingly, we leave this ‘ending’ lingering, as an unsnipped thread on an everlasting skein. We provide not a conclusion but a creative proposition (Manning, 2013). Returning to Manning’s (2016b) question, “What else can artistic practice become when the object is not the goal, but the activator, the conduit toward new modes of existence?” (p. 460), we consider what the front-and-back together has made possible for us, but then we edit ourselves: what is that it is *still* making possible for us? And, what is it that it is making possible for *you*? We hope that you will experiment with a methodology of the front-and-back, and discover how it opens up the event to the unforeseen and disrupts the routine. We hope you lose track of which is front, and which is back (Coogler, 2021). We eagerly await to learn what else you find when you knot your own knots.

We have intentionally misplaced our scissors—we cannot, or will not, or do not want to, neaten up the back. (*We can’t, or won’t, or don’t want to, remember which side is back, anyway. We hope you likewise can’t, or won’t, or don’t want to, see them separately.*) We do not cut off the thread, but instead pass the needle to you, and the hoop, with an invitation to think with us in the between. (*Please accept these provocations.*) To think front-and-back together. (*Remember how stitch always unfolds into stitch, one into two?*) We have played here with the actual and figurative stitchings that stitched us together as artists-scholars, as thinkers-in-the-act, as thinkers made differently as a result of our participation. (*Inquiry is that way too. What new stitches will emerge while the needle is in your hand?*) We let techniques of reading and writing and making collide in “a generative encounter between different modalities of practice” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 94). (*We are eager to find out how you will continue our making.*) A collision, an encounter, a stitching-together, in which techniques were not reduced but rather multiplied (Manning & Massumi, 2014). (*What will be made possible?*) Now, it is your turn. (*Push the needle through the fabric, and through again, pulling tight.*) What sort of events might come from you flipping over a hoop? (*Make another stitch, and another.*) What else might you discover, if you think between? (*Pass through, between, back and front, again, and again, and again.*) If you, too, move with the mess?



Event: 10 Propositions for Messy Inquiry (inspired by Manning [2016a])

1. Stretch the selected fabric of your artful inquiry into the hoop. Pull taut to enable creation.
 2. Forget immediately which side is front and which is back.
 3. Thread the needle and push it through the fabric. Don't forget the knot. Thread, knot, pull, catch.
 4. Remember the techniques you've learned, but don't let them limit your creation.
 5. Create openings for technicity to burst forth.
 6. Flip the hoop over; attend to relationality.
 7. The end is not the goal.
 8. Locate and value the enabling constraints.
 9. The event is the experience; the experience is the event.
 10. Continue --
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