

**an architecture of thread and gesture**

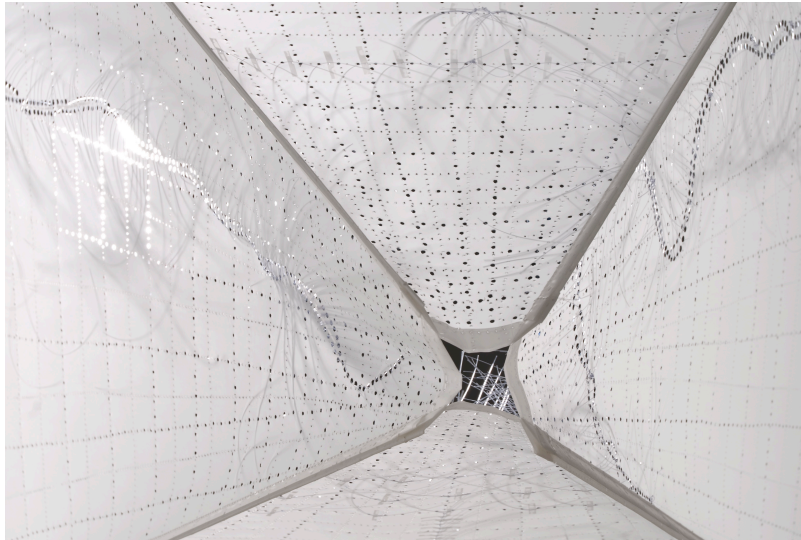
空間と感性

**ainslie murray**

'An Architecture of Thread and Gesture' is a series of three spatial works considering the impact of human gesture on architectural space.

The work is drawn from an encounter with Kyoto artist Machiko Agano in 2006. As Agano installed a three-dimensional textile work in a gallery space, the fluid movement of her hands was mapped to generate a series of spatial diagrams. The diagrams reflected a complex series of invisible spatial interactions and offered insight into an alternative way of considering architecture.

In An Architecture of Thread and Gesture, these diagrams have been revisited and reinterpreted in three dimensions to offer a new kind of 'construction'. Threads of monofilament trace the choreography of the human body moving through space in varying intensities, gradually shifting attention from material traces to the passage of light through surface perforations. Gesture, handwork and materiality are pursued to an extreme before finally dissolving in showers of light.



'Footfall'. 2007. 1:5 scale model for 'An Architecture of Thread and Gesture', double frosted matte mylar, monofilament, timber, approximately 50 x 50 x 50cm; image courtesy of the Banff Centre

## **An Architecture of Thread and Gesture**

Julian Worrall

Where do I end? Where does otherness begin? What is the shape and nature of this boundary?

Such questions of subjectivity and alterity are also questions of space and time. They are questions of architecture. Imagine the limits of one's bodily existence as extending not simply to one's fingertips and toetips, but to the edges of one's duration in time. Imagine the human body as tracing out a space during its movement in time, revealing the diaphanous sheath of our presence in the world. Imagine an open shutter on existence, our extremities luminous, as our being-in-the-world traces out a coiling plume, smokelike, on a sensitive emulsion of space-time. Mammals that we are, this ghostly residue is yet our invisible snakeskin, one that we spin and shed in time.

How to reveal these contrails of our passageways in the world? And what spaces, what architectures, what invisible cities emerge from this revelation?

An encounter with Ainslie Murray's architectonic art prompts these chains of questions and trains of thought. The materials and methods of her investigation are membranes and threads, weavings and stitchings and knittings and knottings. Things drawn from the universe of textiles. We enter a thicket of etymological associations linking materiality, perception, signification: textile, tactile, tensile, ductile, labile. All convey a sense of mutability, softness, insubstantiality. Such associations run counter to the materiality and meanings embodied in the usual conceptions of architecture: fixity, stability, durability. In her work, Murray imagines another kind of architecture, a construct of ties and yieldings.

Space, ever-ready reserve of latent possibility, is here no longer simply absence. It is thickened, made viscous, a presence in itself that embraces and yields: a fluid. Instead of the stilled abstraction of a mathematical space, Murray's rustling membranes register the living air – that generous ether which enables human occupation and which subtly responds to our movements with sympathetic eddies. This is a sensibility towards space attuned to "reading absence over presence and disturbance over inertia".<sup>1</sup>

Attending to air foregrounds a host of perceptual registrations of space mediated by this ubiquitous gas – the acoustic, the olfactory, the thermal, the haptic. Social awareness is also clarified – air is revealed as an invisible commons, something irreducibly public, which links us to others and which we give to and take from with every breath. Air can gather forces of extreme violence or exquisite delicacy: the former governs the design of skyscrapers; but engaging the latter requires a materiality of Murray's sensitivity, one which simultaneously yields an alternate architecture.

Such an architecture is not imagined as container or frame, but understood as pathway and matrix. The social and temporal dimensions of spatial inhabitation achieve materialisation. The geometry of lines, conventionally coded architecturally to indicate boundaries (walls, edges, seams), here trace motions and relations. In the material language of textiles, these lines become threads.

Threads stitch and weave and trace lines of flight. They constitute annotations of gestures. What is the significance of gesture? We may imagine gesture as a choreography of signification. A “conducting” of communication, in the musical language of the body. But gestural language is not personal, it does not communicate an interiority or a subjectivity. It is a persistent feature, a standing wave in the flow of collective existence. Kundera writes on the potency and the inheritance of gesture – in the novel *Immortality* it is a gesture (a backward-looking turning of the head accompanied by a raised arm) that conjures a memory and gives birth to a character. Gestures may be primal and eternal (a sway of the hips), or redolent of an era and an ideology (a straight-arm salute). But like genes or memes, gestures have an existence independent of the bodies they are manifested in – they do not reveal us but rather inhabit us, flow between us, and are born, propagate, and decay across a population. “It is gestures that use us as their instruments”.<sup>2</sup> Gestures are the atoms of interaction, the articulated joints of a complex of social roles that that we adopt and discard according to situation, era, culture.

Gestures, then, are the punctuation marks of culture. In Japan, such gestural inheritance has been particularly carefully tended. The bow and nod, with averted eyes – subtle or emphatic, always instinctive and immediate. The hands over the laughing mouth, fluttering like butterflies above a waterfall. The crossed arms to indicate the not possible, the forbidden. The chop on the forehead – *sumimasen* – “please forgive me”. These are gestures of signification, enacted words. But daily life in Japan is also filled with gestures of making, of production: the wrapping of merchandise; the flick and snap of paper money during counting; the sweep and point of the train

conductor conducting his routine visual check. Such gestures are performed in deference to the integrity of the gesture itself, rather than to its outcome or utility. The gesture is an end, not a means.

When Murray repeats the motions of stitching, folding, hole-punching, she is acting directly upon material, transforming its state, investing it with intention. These are gestures of making. But perhaps these gestures of fabrication are simultaneously gestures of signification, at one remove? These knots in the threads are frozen gestures, as notes on the staff are encoded motions of a musician's hands. Both are intimations of embodiment, anticipations of performance.

What city emerges from this architecture of thread and gesture? Perhaps a place something like Calvino's Ersilia, a city built from the threads of its relationships: "In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or grey or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain."<sup>3</sup> Murray's works can be seen as the blueprints and ruins of the multiple incarnations of Ersilia - "spiderwebs of intricate relationships seeking a form".

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<sup>1</sup> Ainslie Murray, "The Flood that does not Flow." (Paper presented to the Architecture of Flows Conference, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, June 23, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), 76.



'Footfall' (detail), 2007, 1:5 scale model for 'An Architecture of Thread and Gesture', double frosted mylar, monofilament, timber; image courtesy of the Banff Centre



Machiko Agano at work during the mapping process, 'Gallery Gallery', Kyoto, 2006

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