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Dissertation

**Ariadne's Thread -
memory, interconnection and the poetic in contemporary art**

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Abstract

This Dissertation explores the metaphor of Ariadne's thread in terms of interconnection, when an element from the everyday is used as a locus linking broader concepts of time and space.

Such experiences and associations are reflected in the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Doris Salcedo, Lucio Fontana, Richard Tuttle, Mona Hatoum, Simone Mangos, Anya Gallaccio and Yoshihiro Suda.

In relation to my own work, the metaphor of interconnecting thread allows a sense of freedom and journey of discovery. My studio and related research are closely aligned in developing my understanding of interconnection, through my studio process of making and continuing experiences of looking at and interpreting others artists' work.

Introduction

... there is a thin line of me, wavering and not strong that wants to learn the language of beasts and water and night. My whole self is in hiding, not daring to get too close, for the fissure smokes and belches and there are hands reaching over the edge towards me...¹

¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (London: Granta Books, 1997), 43.

In ancient Greek mythology a ball of thread enabled the navigation of a labyrinth. The idea of a continuous thread guiding a labyrinthine journey is a fitting allegory for assessing my own artistic choices, materials and methods. My process of translating an element from the everyday into an artwork is conceptually held in the thread, as a signifier of an encounter with an immediate moment of existence.

Metaphorically speaking, at any given time I can look down at my hands and see the thread that is always held there. It connects my present sense of time and space to other people in the present and to those who have been here before. The red thread conveys deep human emotional currents and formative connections between lovers, families and friends. The thread links us to the wider world; both present and past, as we are all tied to history, in both our individual and collective memories. My thread also maps the interconnections between choices I have made, so I may find myself retracing to a fork in the journey to reassess a path not taken. The structure of the labyrinth emphasises possibilities and tangents, reflecting the ways that memory interacts with the imagination. This flexibility of memory is central to my work and to my concept of the thread.

Carrying the awareness of this thread throughout the everyday sometimes feels like a heavy burden, but I have come to realise that to abandon it is to lose my way. Retaining the consciousness of the thread is about practicing patience and resisting the urge to rush, instead seeking deeper levels of understanding before taking action or declaring an opinion. It is important to provide myself with sufficient studio time to experiment with the fusion of initial conceptual ideas and selected materials, whilst remaining open to the intriguing possibilities of the accidental in the artwork's development. While my experimental studio processes might occasionally result in failure, it more importantly opens up considerations for future works and indeed aids the empathetic interpretation of other artists' practices. As my studio and external research have run parallel, each developing and informing the other, the metaphors of the thread and the labyrinth have become significant in both.

One of the first times I combined thread as a material, with this conceptual metaphor, was over ten years ago in a modest site-specific installation, during an *Introduction to*

Sculpture class. Torn ribbons of red fabric, trailing tattered dangling threads, were placed to mark the watercourse from a storm water drain, through the rock-shelf and into the ocean at Bronte beach. I remember feeling quietly satisfied with the work, even though I couldn't say why. My teenage vocabulary could not explain why such a simple intervention, using discarded everyday materials in the overlooked location of a storm water drain, seemed profoundly complete. Even as my attraction to mediums and techniques has shifted over the years, my conceptual interests have remained much the same. It is almost as if these threads have crystallised inside my psyche, as a way of approaching and representing cycles of nature, the passage of time, my personal observations and responses to such patterns of existence.

The word *thread* has a variety of meanings and metaphorical interpretations, each chapter of this dissertation teases out a slightly different approach. The thread that signifies one's choices on life's journey was first spoken of as the *clue* in the ancient Greek myth featuring the Cretan Labyrinth. In *Chapter 1, A Thread in the labyrinth, reflecting on Ariadne's tale*, I consider this story and how it has been explored and embellished by philosophers, architects, poets, artists and writers over thousands of years. My *Life-support, 2007-8*, installation is cited as a cyclic labyrinthine tunnel enveloping an interconnecting red thread.

Threads, in various guises, play significant roles in mythologies and folklore from all over the world. *Chapter 2 - Threads, webs and narratives*, expands from the single thread of the Grecian Fates to the numerous threads in weaving tales and the web of Grandmother Spiderwoman of the Americas. Threads of childhood memories are spun like open-ended narratives throughout Louise Bourgeois' artwork. Eva Hesse's haunting, dangling, rope-like sculptures seem to indirectly reference her life story. My work, *Dancing with Silence, 2008*, features a grid of mirrors, reflecting the movement of a decaying leaf as it is suspended in a spider web, alluding to several possible narrative interpretations.

In *Chapter 3 - Tracing scars, cracks and ruptures*, the thread is considered as a line or trajectory. Doris Salcedo forces her viewers to walk a precipice, inviting them to consider a personal sense of responsibility for society and history. The work of Lucio Fontana, the first artist credited with cracking open and slicing into the artwork's

surface, similarly invites viewers to experience his artwork like a journey, guiding the gaze beyond the artwork's surface through to the other side. Richard Tuttle also uses lines in various dimensions, tracking the trajectory of his gestures, suggesting possibilities in shadows and transforming elements of the everyday. In my work, *Unfurl*, 2007, the slices through layers of aluminium wire gauze, open an escape from the rigid delineations of the manufactured grid. I consider my *Wall whisper*, 2007, works in relation to my experiences tracing Salcedo's scar on the floor in 2008.

Chapter 4 - Interwoven Memories explores how threads of interconnection still exist within disconnection and dislocation, as people are emotionally joined to each other and the past is tied to the present. Mona Hatoum's balance of the personal and intimate with the universal, reflects a sense of emotional yearning and connection. Simone Mangos, as an Australian artist living in Berlin, is also geographically displaced. Her work reveals layers of associated memories within found objects, conveying a sense of compelling connection to place and history. *I wanted to tell you*, 2006, is a work based on the single remaining letter of hundreds sent between my Nana and my mother. My process of tracing this letter explores recreating a tangible relic of their emotional connections.

Chapter 5 – Witnessing time in a reflection of nature, regards the thread as signifier of the viewer's encounter with a unique moment of time and space, mirrored by the growth and decay of organic flora. Anya Gallaccio's installations exploit the inherent disintegration and gradual decay of fresh cut flowers, and the growth of common weeds and vegetables in unexpected places. My *Mirror, mirror*, 2007, work addresses a similar idea of decay, conceptually linking roses to feminine beauty and the aging process. Yoshihiro Suda poetically mimics flowers and weeds in his sculptures, which are cunningly presented to manipulate the viewer's interaction with his work.

Thread, as a concept of interconnection between people, time and space, is a core theme that runs through all my work, regardless of the visible material presence of physical thread. Similarly, the selected artists each specifically address different interpretations of memory and materiality in their work. Currents of recollection and storytelling run through this paper, springing initially from the Greek myth of Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth. These narrative threads touch on the magic of

fairytale, suggesting that infinite possibilities can be discovered in elements of the everyday. My conceptual thread is not just a tool for direction, but it also acts somewhat like a torch, illuminating the depths and shallows of my investigations and indicating further possibilities.