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Moving Matter: A methodology for material-led collaborations

Rob Kitsos and Meagan Woods

Interdisciplinary movement artists and educators Rob Kitsos and Meagan Woods share the process behind Moving Matter: material-led collaborative choreographies, a research-creation project that offers a methodology for rethinking the dynamism between raw materials, garments, and the body. Moving Matter steers the locus of choreography and wearable design away from human hierarchy to instead support truer collaboration amongst all moving materials, both human and non-human. In a challenge to normative structures where costumery operates 'in service' of dance, the textile designs for Moving Matter do not support the complete autonomy and freedom of moving humans; the wearables have striking characteristics of their own that limit what the human body can do. In establishing parameters, we intend not to reverse the hegemony of human-led design to human-suppressed design, but to re-recognize the agency of all matter through material-led collaborations that support distributed power and collective, innovative approaches to making. This paper details the artists' studio process and their methodology template for material-led collaborative process that can be adapted for practices within and beyond performance and art disciplines.

Keywords: dance, textile art, costume design, critical materiality, interdisciplinary collaboration

Introduction

In dance, the concept of 'material' designates movement phrases that are crafted through, on, and for the human body. Materiality factors keenly into textile design as well, specifically costumery that typically manipulates matter to dress and address the human form. As multidisciplinary artists eager to move away from human-centered practices across dance and costume design, we have been seeking epistemological reframings of the concept of material, asking how artists might push against Anthropocentric tendencies in order to find ways of diffusing power, impetus, and value across all matter.

The premise of *Moving Matter: material-led collaborative choreographies* is to steer the locus of design away from human hegemony and instead support truer collaboration amongst *all* moving materials, both human and non-human. This project is an ongoing collaborative process composed of studio research, new material generation for live and recorded performance, and art journal publications intended to make our findings accessible and adaptive for your own inquiries into material collaborations.

Our aims of this matter-driven research include: interrogating the human hierarchy in design processes; rethinking the dynamism between garments/raw materials and the body; applying perspectives of inter-being intra-activity¹ to the creative process; creating innovative new methods of dance making; developing and sharing a methodological template that can be applied beyond the bounds of performance and arts practices.

¹ Intra-action recognizes the permeability of all matter to be in co-happening in an interwoven dynamism that refutes our supposes of fixed and separated entities. Through her studies of quantum mechanics, Barad's seminal work reveals the emergence behavior of the smallest bits of stuff that co-create actions to enliven the complex web of existence we find ourselves embedded and moving within (Karen 2007).

Research framework

Moving Matter situates itself within an era where human activity has dominated and critically influenced our environment. Our research is in dialogue with contemporary and emerging theories such as Tim Ingold's emphasis on thinking through making (Ingold 2013), and Joanna Berzowska's critical materiality that calls for new methods of embeddedness through the design and research of innovative wearables. Smitheran and Joseph engage with theories of critical materiality as well, with wearable/dance crossovers that explore the interconnectedness of body and non-human material through Maori ontologies of matter (Smitheran and Frances 2020). New materialism and Jane Bennett's 'thing power' similarly posit the energy, autonomy, living histories and affective capacities of all matter, particularly non-human materiality or what might be deemed 'unliving' (Bennett 2010, 3–19). *Moving Matter* asks- what vibratory capacities of dancerly wisdom might seemingly still entities offer?

In a challenge to normative structures where costumery operates 'in service' of dance, the textile designs for *Moving Matter* do not support the complete autonomy and freedom of moving humans; the wearables have striking characteristics of their own- rigidity, weight, fragilities, mass- that limit what the human body can do. The wearables exist at times in a raw state, where considering them as garments feels too formal; these materials are in gesture with, on, and around bodies, rather than crafted for the body. In establishing parameters, we intend not to reverse the hegemony of human-led design to human-suppressed design, but to re-recognize the agency of all matter through material-led collaborations that support distributed power and collective, innovative approaches to making. Through a horizontal and rhizomatic way of working, where all materials and beings contribute, we are seeking new ways of generating movement that lead to a greater attunement to diverse forms of materiality.

Research process

Our creative team is an ongoing collaboration between the authors of this paper, Rob Kitsos (Simon Fraser University Professor of Dance and Interdisciplinary Collaboration at the School for the Contemporary Arts) and Meagan Woods (SFU MFA alumna and multidisciplinary artist), who invite different artists with varying disciplinary backgrounds to join the fold, depending upon each research chapter's focus. You'll find references to our collaborators' immense contributions throughout the paper and their detailed roles in our acknowledgement section.

We began this research-creation process with ... linoleum. Kitsos was interested in collaborating with an upcycled material that had unique choreographic potential and felt uncommon or underexplored in dance and wearable designs. Rolls of used linoleum were discarded at SFU and left for the landfill, and soon became the research focal point for the first chapter of *Moving Matter*. Lino (as we came to call it) resembles vinyl sheets of marley floors that concert dancers often move upon; there was something welcome in elevating flooring to a role of equal collaborator that immediately felt in keeping with our mission of toppling creative hierarchies. Subsequent chapters of *Moving Matter* have centered around plastic wrap and ice as collaborating materials.

Through our exploration of these guiding materials, we diligently notated our research procedures in order to form a methodological template that has been- and continues to be- revised and adapted for fresh settings of material-led research. Examples from each research chapter (lino, plastic wrap, ice) are cited below to describe our research-creation process, along with references to an SFU Interdisciplinary Studio course focused on composition and collaboration, where in spring of 2023 Kitsos guided undergraduate students to create their own designs using the material-led method template (M-LMT).

The template outlined below offers a brief overview of a six-stage process, with a fuller capture of each stage to follow. We have laid out the missions of each stage in a neat chronology here, but that does not mean that a rearranged order or overlapping of stages would be a disservice to your own material-led process; this method is meant to be both grounding and flexible. While our research has primarily focused on dance and textile design, along with sound and projections, we have built this methodology to be adaptive and applicable to fields across and beyond the performing arts that are also interested in human and non-human collaborations.

Material-Led method template (M-LMT)

- **STAGE 1 | EKPHRASIS:** Vigorously study and describe the material. Before touching or moving it, observe the matter closely, devotionally. Compile an ekphrastic collection of descriptions.
- **STAGE 2 | CONTACT/KINAESTHESIS:** Haptically engage with the material, noting its texture, mass, and feel on the body. Practice listening and following more than leading and deciding. Return to your ekphrastic writing and add new observations.

- **STAGE 3 | TRANSFORMATION:** Explore how the material can change compositionally. Fold, stretch, freeze, burn, blow, drop, crush, slide, etc. Document how and if the matter alters its form under various conditions.
- **STAGE 4 | ROOT:** Research the origins of the material- where on the planet is the matter derived from, how did it get here, what are the historical, political, and social contexts this material has found itself situated in, then and now? What are some of the cultural associations? How has it been used by other artists, designers, consumers?
- **STAGE 5 | DISTILLATION:** Center around key terms/images/patterns that resonate or consistently resurface throughout the process. What ideas speak to the spirit of the material, to the rising interests of this collaborative process? Sharpen and refine the pathways that are most compelling to the team.
- **STAGE 6 | MATERIAL GENERATION:** Explore, develop, and revise movement motifs and textile fabrications. Work back and forth between choreographic and wearables designs to emphasize an impacting approach across dance, body, and non-human matter. Consider other interacting material components, including sound, scenography, projections, lighting, location, architecture, landscape, and public engagement.

Methodology detailed

Stage 1 | Ekphrasis

Framing Terms: vibration, shape, line, surface, texture, scale, anatomy, weight, patterns, complexity, depth, active/passive, rhythm, gesture, resolution, symmetry-asymmetry, repetition, landscape, arc, smell, sound

*'The biggest challenge is not seeing what I want to see but seeing what's actually in front of my eyes.'*²— William Forsythe

*'For I came upon the glove-pod-rat-cap-stick with Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to practice 'the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.'*³
-Jane Bennett

Ekphrasis is a Latin term, derived from the Greek for 'description', 'recount', and 'tell'.⁴ Ekphrastic poets are revered for their vivid depictions of what they encounter. Before jumping to interpret, determine, alter, or even experience, just witness the material in the fullest sensorial way possible, pre-touch. This stage is so critical because it asks us before doing (anything), to notice. Do not skip this step. Allow yourself to sit in this stage of uncertainty about a material while you give it your full attention (Figures 1 and 2).

For the undergraduate studio class with students from dance, theater, design, visual art, film and music, the artists spent time individually observing objects they had chosen to collaborate with, writing long hand or on pads and phones. We also provided students with the list of framing terms (see above) used during the linoleum research to help stimulate frames of reference when analyzing the objects. Kitsos witnessed the

2 William Forsythe, *Thought in the Act, Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 43.

3 Jane Bennett, *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*, *Political Theory*, Vol 32, No3 (Sage Publications 2004), 350.

4 Oxford Research Encyclopaedias, Michael Squire, 22 December 2015, Oxford Classical Dictionary, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-2365#acrefore-9780199381135-e-2365-bibliography-0001>.



Figure 1. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Musician Daniel Weintraub in stage 1.



Figure 2. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Kayla De Vos in studio in stage 1.

students instinctively reaching out to touch the material; it requires restraint to just observe in this stage.

In preparing for sound generation during *Moving Matter's* plastic wrap chapter, Kitsos' musical collaborators, Westport Sunrise Sessions, expressed uncertainty about creating sound with and from this material. The ekphrasis stage changed that, as insecurities over creative direction dissipated during this first stage of the methodology. Suddenly there were striking descriptors, observations of physical principles, appreciations for intricacies, capacities, and limits that bloomed enthusiasm into five full days of research-creation.

Ekphrastic engagement in the lino chapter led collaborating theatre and video artist Alexandra Caprara to discover that the material's seemingly



Figures 3, 4, 5. Image credit: Alexandra Caprara. Rob Kitsos in image, lino material and notes from the grid pattern.

random grid pattern was actually a repetition of 19 distinct squares, which later led to phrase work, walking patterns, and topographical structures that operated around a meter of 19. Careful studies and digital sketching of the lino's micro indentations and grid patterns later inspired gesture phrases, projection designs, and fabric choices for wearables, all stemming from this first stage of ekphrastic description (Figures 3–5).

A key part of this stage is to know less and notice more about the material you are working with. This stage's framing terms offer properties to make further observations within, as a way of loosening our habitual way of seeing and analyzing material in order to spark a deeper, specific sensorial engagement.

Stage 2 | Contact/Kinaesthesia

Framing terms: any and all preposition as ways of relating and moving with the material: on, in, near, above, below, besides, with, through, against, around, etc., momentum, stillness, hold, drop, throw, expand, contract

5 Yvonne Rainer, A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or An Analysis of Trio A, Gregory Battcock, (ed.) *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 263–273 quoted in André Lepecki, *Singularities, dance in the age of performance* (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY Routledge 2016), 33.

6 Tim Ingold, *Making, Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (London

'... move or be moved by some thing other than oneself...' ⁵– Yvonne Rainer, quoted by Andre Lepecki

'In a nutshell, participant observation is a way of knowing from the inside.' –

⁶Tim Ingold

This stage introduces touch. With your hands and other surfaces of the body, feel the material on your skin and add to your ekphrastic descriptors what you can perceive through an embodied engagement with the material. Describe the material in terms of its texture, friction, weight, temperature, malleability, density, etc.

This stage also introduces locomotion, particularly movement with the material *and* you. Based on your ekphrastic awareness of the material, observe what qualities stay constant or change once the material is in motion. Listen with your entire being to the material as you move with it, noticing how it feels, sounds, looks, changes, resists, surprises. Engage with the framing terms below to spark new relational energies between

and New York Routledge
2013), 5.

bodies and other matter. Rather than attempting to generate large swaths of movement or designs, use this stage to uncover themes, scenes, shapes, or motifs that can continue to be explored in the next stages.

Bringing in a kinaesthetic engagement- through touching, holding, and locomoting with the material- allowed us to observe through and inside of the body. Our physical beings felt, registered, and worked to hold onto an understanding of the kinaesthetic properties of non-human materials. Bodies are the sites of discovery and the vessels of knowledge keeping throughout this stage.

In this stage, pre-designs for wearables also begin to emerge, meaning a gentle treatment of the matter- how raw and unmediated can the materials remain as you encounter them on/with the body? Consider inconveniences in your pre-designs at this stage; so often textile fabrications for dance are expected to be un-impeding adornments. What if you *do* impede the body? What collaborative kinesthetic initiatives come from bodies and matter that are both significantly impacting each others' locomotive potentialities? Woods was keen on such disruptions with the linoleum, and created wearables that restricted certain joint mobility, obstructed vision, and swallowed up the dancer's body beneath the weight and scale of a towering structure. Responding to an ekphrastic study of the linoleum's geometric patterning, Woods began with classic shapes and early on proposed a conical structure that wrapped around the whole body from neck down (Figures 6–8). This simple shape wound up offering a deluge of design possibilities later spanning from wearables, to projection design, to historical audio references all centered around the A-framed shape of a cone (see Stage 4|Root).

The haptic and kinesthetic experiences of stage 2 reinstated key terms we noticed in the ekphrastic stage and brought up new observations, as well. For instance, folding and unfolding the linoleum during the contact/kinesthesia stage became a major focal point in terms of how the material responded, the imprints left behind, and the capacities or inabilities for it to bend in certain ways. Folds and residue crease marks left in their wake emerged as a theme that we studied through movement on the dancers' bodies and in projection design. Motifs of triangles and morphing landscapes developed very early from Woods' cone design that appeared like shifting mountain ranges as dancers Anna Wang Albin and Sydney Bluck moved invisibly beneath the large sheets of lino. During the plastic wrap chapter, when unspooling the material we examined the light weight, smooth rhythm and impressionability of the wrap in motion, and how our bodies automatically adjusted to these qualities when moving with the material. Woods noted the initial 'burn' of melting ice on the body and the subsequent surrender of letting the body temperature meld with other contacting matter. This led to a choreographic study that matched both the intensity and resolve required of dancing with and near frozen matter.

Although some of the movement exploration during this stage happened *while* the dancers navigated wearing the collaborating materials, some of the kinesthetic research was intentionally separated and then combined later. For instance, Kitsos explored a method of creating rope-like tendrils of plastic wrap, that were made into fringe-y wearable



Figure 9. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Kayla De Vos with plastic wrap coils.

prototypes. Movement phrases that were derived from the ekphrastic observations of plastic wrap’s crinkling nature were then adapted as the tendril wearables were donned and affected how the choreography was experienced. For each plastic wrap movement section that was created, different plastic wrap wearables were worn in a variety of ways, sometimes to intentionally disrupt the potential flow of the crafted movement. There are benefits to working with the material on the body *during* simultaneous, integrated collaborative research and introducing complex wearables *after* the fact, as a means of practicing adaptive choreographies that might need to navigate the impacts of newly introduced material. Try both methods of kinesthetic collaboration- with design prototypes introduced during and after- as ways of sparking innovative methods of moving with matter (Figures 9–11).

Stage 3 | Transformation

Framing terms: fold, crumble, stretch, freeze, submerge, melt, burn, blow, drop, throw, crush, collide, pile, slide

7 Jane Bennett, *The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter* (Sage Publications, Inc), 364.

8 Tim Ingold, *Making, Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York Routledge 2013), 25.

*‘... the prospect of becoming more awake to the vitality of matter’*⁷-Jane Bennett

*‘... to borrow the words of Deleuze and Guattari once again, it is a question of “surrendering” to the material and then “following where it leads”.*⁸ – Tim Ingold

Stage 3 is in a way a combination of stages 1 and 2. The transformation stage is all about movement and change, *and* it’s about getting out of the way to observe. Unlike stage 2, where movement is co-composed by bodies and non-human matter, here we set up conditions where we become observers of how the material responds through its own autonomous properties. Some of the transformations felt bolder (lighting lino on

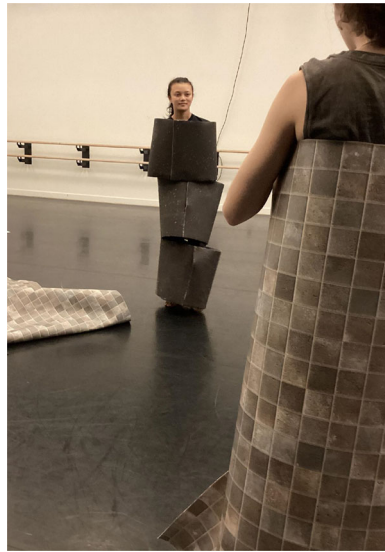


Figure 10. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Anna Wang-Albini and Sydney Bluck in studio.



Figure 11. Image credit: Beau Bridge. Meagan Woods and Anna Wang-Albini during Moving Matter Shoot.

fire or stretching plastic wrap to bloat its surface towards the brink of a rip) and some felt subtler (throwing, dropping or unrolling both lino and plastic wrap to augment their spatial footprint) (Figures 12–14). During this stage we gained a sense of the material’s chemical make-up and fungibility as different scenarios revealed the matter’s ability to shape shift. One of the initial goals of this stage was to explore matter that moves independent of human interaction.

Even as we tried to de-center ourselves in this research-creation process, the lino and the plastic were often the object to our subject, their movements caused by us. Could we observe matter’s metamorphic



Figures 12, 13, 14. Image credit: Beau Bridge. Material during Moving Matter Shoot.

capacities without our direct touch, without a heavy hand? Can humans support the conditions for a transformation of material as *the* choreographic act? Our answers to this do not feel firm.

Moving Matter is less intent on disproving this impossibility of removing our impact as we move (with) matter than on inching closer to that core invocation of shifting the emphasis of choreographic power beyond human limits.⁹ This work is about people moving and creating *with* other matter, acknowledging that while we cannot escape our human centeredness, we can treat this experiment of co-choreographing as something closer to mutual, to shared.¹⁰

We remain attentive and patient during this stage, tuned to the ways that different conditions invite materials to reveal their choreographic responses, even if those movements are slight, or even uneasily registered. In a challenge to the concept of inanimate objects,¹¹ we grapple with whether we must sensorially perceive a change in vibratory matter in order to declare that non-human matter is moving, is dancing. Perhaps our expectations of time (dance within the hour, linoleum, please) is a marking of our different scales of registration (the linoleum's dance of decay is happening, an hour an unfair amount of time to ask for change to be perceptible).¹²

Permitting time for materials' varying tempos was Woods' incentive in *Slowed Down Sun*, where a garment housed 24 fruit juice ice cubes that melted and bloomed over a wearable of upcycled white cotton/polyester fabric during the course of an hour. The body did not necessarily push the frozen matter to change, but it suspended the solid-to-liquid material so that its transformation could be witnessed. There was a slight reversal at play in agency in this work- the wearables changed quite profoundly and Woods, moving at a glacial speed in one contained spot, augmented in ways that might be called minimal, moving at a much less virtuosic rate than dancing bodies traditionally display (Figures 15–18).

We witnessed the transformational choreographies that happened on micro scales for the lino and plastic, as well. Conical roles of linoleum that were dropped from the ceiling landed in one big thud, then performed a shifty dance to settle into a form that could support sustained stasis. With the plastic wrap, the Westport Sunshine Sessions musicians spent a good amount of time watching the material unfold on its own after being condensed; the erratic crinkling and popping sounds (resembling rain) also became one of the main sound bites used in recording. Granted, this movement was due to the initial manipulation of balling the plastic up in our hands, but the resulting choreography was fascinating to witness, lending that vibrant energy of liveness, of complex unravelings driven by forces too complicated to predict.

9 Forsythe tackles this call boldly through his humanless *Choreographic Objects*, calling audiences to attune to the dancerly capacities of what otherwise be termed “inanimate” objects.

10 We think of Mel Chen's work in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* that underscores both our obsession with delineating the alive from the lifeless and tendency towards privileging sets of matter that give off particular vital signs of wellness or categorical conformity.

11 Bill Brown in 'Thing Theory' states: The question is less about 'what things are for a given society than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things (page 9).

12 Witnessing the dance of decay requires audience members whose lifespan outlives ours- there is still linoleum on the Titanic that continues to perform its motions of change.



Figures 15, 16, 17, 18. Image credit: Lisa Hibbert. Meagan Woods performing *Slowed Down Sun*.

- 13 Ingold talks about emergent form and the idea of connecting with ongoing change in action, which means letting go of the idea of agency before action, and yet still having a sense of movement forward (Ingold 2013, 25, 96). 25, 96.

There's something again about patience here in waiting around to notice the follow through of a set-up, blow, scenario.¹³ The transformation stage might offer revelations that are immediate, but it also asks us to stick around and lend our presence to dance and designs that reveal themselves in time.

Stage 4 | Root

Framing terms: origins, composite materials, geographic history, cultural, artistic, environmental, consumeristic, and design associations, found footage, found sound, pop culture

- 14 Christina P. Day, *The History, Art, & Design of Linoleum: Never Before, Forever* with Professor Christina P. Day, March 2nd 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QQuYZbWJl8>.

*'What I have learned: there is no such thing as neutral material.'*¹⁴-
Christina P. Day

This stage is about recognizing the complex ecosystems that materials, research, and creation all operate within.

Stage 4 has notes of Stage 1 in its quest to deeply study, but this phase captures knowledge of the material that cannot be gleaned with our immediate senses. The chronology of when to engage with the root stage is intentionally un-firm. We see pros and cons to saving this stage for now or starting it earlier: waiting to engage with rooting offers the benefit of fresh-eyed, early explorations of the material with fewer preconceptions, whereas researching outside of the studio ahead of time can bring you a more seasoned awareness of the matter's composition and history. We've found that beginning early on with research into how a material is made/derived has helped us feel more kinaesthetically engaged with its composition during stage 1 and 2, while waiting longer to research its historical contexts has helped us to feel less influenced or impeded. We're placing this stage here as a way to organize the missions of this step and to encourage initial discovery through play and interactivity, but trust when it feels time to learn how the material is made and to understand its positionality in our world of stuff.

These are the primary inquiries of the root stage: the history of the material's origins and route it took to get to you (or route you took to get to it); its engagement within our social, political, and environmental spheres; and its activity in cultural and artistic discourse.

As an awareness of a material's origin and history comes into focus, working with matter whose harvesting or manufacturing may be socially or environmentally damaging can further problematize a material-led process engaged with that matter. As part of our research-creation method, we've committed to using upcycled and second-hand materials always first and will then seek to minimize more harmful methods of procuring material. This is not at all perfect, particularly when we *are* curious about matter that has been born from a destructive history and whose complex stories we strive to pay attention to and collaborate alongside. How can we avoid being complicit in a climate crisis fueled by mindless material engagement, while engaging with that very material as a means of speaking towards that very crisis? We can't, and won't, be faultless in working with unsustainable, resistant to decay matter. Particularly when using plastic wrap that we have not been able to source second-hand, we have been torn. On one hand, we are contributors to a system that degrades our planet through extractive and destructive consumerist behavior. On the other hand, *not* collaborating with these materials excludes them from critical discourses of contemporary art practices that surround some of the most potent urgencies, and emergencies of materiality. Through *Moving Matter* we are constantly negotiating a balance of how to create art that interrogates the problematic through emergent matter, while tempering how much we contribute to those very problems. The root stage brings to the forefront these questions around sourcing, material responsibility, and the uncertainty of collaborating with matters of devastating, exploitive histories.

During the linoleum chapter of our root research, our inquiry into lino's chemical composition left us staggered by the possibility of safely eating this material that derives from linseed oil, its precise manufacturing obfuscating any anticipation of an organic lineage. The flooring also bore a wealth of history and complex nostalgia for 1950s domestic idealism. Rising to popularity during the post-WWII years, linoleum lined the kitchens of houses intent on preserving familial- and national- stability. These ideas led us to researching TV and radio advertisements lauding the benefits of linoleum in the home. From our twenty first century vantage point, dancing with the lino while conjuring this era of aspiring practicality, security, longevity, and control took on a sardonic tone. Our interest in layering the referential with the uncanny prompted us to design traditional wearables that were foils to their aberrant counterparts- Woods constructed both 1950s A-lined house dress replicas¹⁵ and then similar silhouettes made out of lino (Figures 19–20).

Similar to the lino work, all the collaborators watched videos on how plastic wrap material is made at the beginning of the research-creation process (very large machines melt pellets of petrol into a gigantic bubble that gets layered with other chemicals- rolled out in huge landscapes inside rolling machines that eventually get cut into very specific measured rolls and boxed). Studying this process brought up the eerie dichotomy of futuristic technology combined with the extraction of ancient fossil fuels, resulting in a material often used to preserve other matter as it promises to withstand centuries to come. These complex properties and expectations led to choreographic studies of what it might feel like to move in ways that are at once ancient and futuristic. We dug into old advertisements from the 1950–60s that introduced images of plastic

15 A-lined dresses echoed our original cone shapes and were also historically situated within the 50s, popularized through the emergence of Christian Dior's A lined silhouettes (Chanin 2020) Alabama Chanin, *The A Line: A Brief History*, Alabama Chanin Journal, July 16 2020, <https://journal.alabamachanin.com/2020/07/the-a-line-a-brief-history/>.



Figure 19. Image credit: Beau Bridge. Anna Wang-Albini during Moving Matter Shoot.



Figure 20. Image credit: Beau Bridge. Sydney Bluck and Anna Wang-Albini during Moving Matter Shoot.

covered furniture and perishables, which led to an exploration of encasing body parts in the plastic film as a way of both wearing the material and engaging with its intended purpose of keeping air and messes off of something worth protecting. Into the sound score we spliced old video and audio advertisements that were then layered with some of the team's original music tracks sourced from the ekphrasis and contact/kinaesthesia stages with the plastic wrap (Figures 21–23).

In our research we came across work by Christina P. Day, Professor in the Fiber Department at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD, who has worked with both linoleum¹⁶ and plastic wrap, and whose plastic layering technique reminds us of the color transformation studies in Woods' ice wearables. Day too '... was interested in [plastic wrap] for its material properties' and explored the intersections of material with the

¹⁶ Christina P. Day. *The History, Art, & Design of Linoleum: Never Before, Forever with*

Professor Christina P. Day,
2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QQuYZbWJl8>.

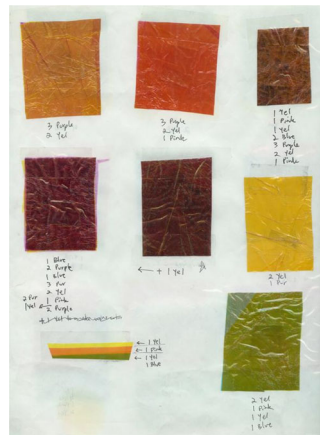


Figure 21. Image credit: Christina P. Day. Preliminary color collages, saran wrap.

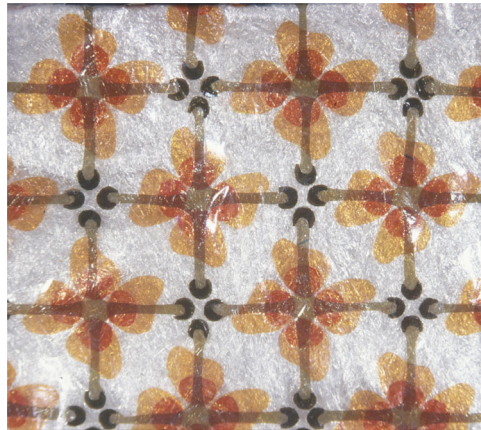


Figure 22. Image credit: Christina P. Day. Lattice (detail) Layered colored saran wrap, clear tape.

body and historical references to patterns, color schemes, and silhouettes. Her ‘formula’ sheet pictured in image #21 shows how each ‘resulting color is a composite of stacking the various colors of the original saran wrap on top of one another’. We also researched designs by Danika Oystrek, whose work with textiles, architecture and natural materials that are woven into fibers prompted Kitsos to press leaves between plastic as one might press flowers between a book, suspending organic materials in a delicate and damned embalment (Figures 24 and 25).¹⁷

¹⁷ Danika Oystrek, What is more than is known, Danika Oystrek 2022., <https://beigeandnature.com/>.

While our methodology template offers a guide for new material generation, we’re committed to recalling, acknowledging, and incorporating critical discourses around a particular material that has spanned different times and spaces than our own. This method of scholastic and creative ecologies of embeddedness correspond with Melanie Mitchell’s theories on complex systems, where dynamic, reciprocal shifts between entities create larger scale movements enacted through distributed



Figure 23. Image credit: Christina P. Day. Pattern play -composite image of dress and site documentation.



Figure 24. Image credit: Yutaan Lin. Work by Danika Oystrek.

¹⁸ Miranda Smitheran and Joseph Frances, *Material Aesthetic Collaborations: Making with the ecosystem*, International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts. (Taylor and Frances, 2020)

power, as well as Maori traditions¹⁸ of honoring whom we have inherited ideas and awareness from as we root ourselves in the present. Social and historical references can both ground and bewitch us, as pre-existing associations are conjured into new perspectives and arrangements with a familiar material that can conjure that dynamic feeling of (mis)recognition.

Stage 5 | Distillation

Framing terms: grouping (of ideas into studies or sections), releasing (ideas that don't fit into the world as well), clarifying (curiosities that are most prominent), determining (paths for continued exploration)



Figure 25. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Rob Kitsos in studio with plastic wrap.

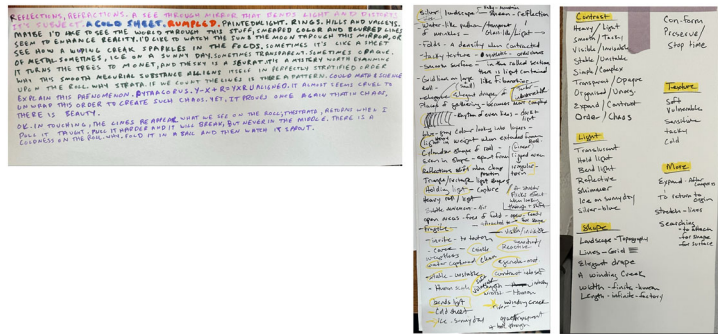
*'Only as the work nears completion can the pieces be charged, with reasonable confidence, to be the parts of a whole.'*¹⁹ – Tim Ingold

¹⁹ Tim Ingold, *Making, Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 69.

The distillation stage is a pause from making and researching. We review everything that has been explored in order to narrow the focus, decide on the most resonant terms and ideas, and prepare for where the research-creation will go next. This step cycles back over all the writing, notations, and recordings to get really specific with the ideas that most compel this collaboration. What qualities or curiosities keep coming up throughout this process? Are there avenues that have been given less attention but still seem ripe with potential? Stage 5 is inherently conversational and involves mapping and grouping ideas together. For *Moving Matter*, we used a project website to compile notes and videos, ordered sections by headings, wrote on big sheet paper, and circled, crossed off, and arrowed (Figures 26–28).

In the interdisciplinary studio class, students worked in groups to distill key terms and designs that seemed to resonate most with the nature of and their experience with the objects thus far. From that point, the artists mapped out the mediums they also felt were the strongest avenues for exploring their distilled frameworks- some chose to lead with images and projected media, while others explored gestural sequences with lighting, shadows and sound scores recorded from the material.

For the lino research, triangles became a theme we decided to run with, beginning with Woods' early wearable cone designs and then further inspired by A-line dresses created by Christian Dior in the 1950s, during lino's heyday. In Woods' study with ice, emphasizing the transformational properties of the material led to a distilled process of exploring what juices and fiber types collaborated well to reveal a slow melting process over the course of the performance. The 'unscrunching' quality



Figures 26, 27, 28. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Notes from stage 1 and 2 of plastic wrap.

of the plastic wrap became a major inspiration for the music score that went on to explore both the sound and the kinaesthetic nature of the plastic wrap as it transitioned from a compacted ball to a slightly loosened mass. The Root Stage led us to keep focusing on ‘casting’ body parts in plastic wrap, in the way that couches, meat, and other entities are covered in plastic to preserve them from being spoiled; we knew we wanted to continue exploring this idea of encasing limbs in plastic to create casts of ‘phantom limbs’ that could be incorporated into choreography, as well. Our root stage led us to learn how past collaborator of Kitsos, Nancy Tam, works with plastic wrap casts in her durational piece ‘... wreckage upon wreckage...’, where she encases herself in plastic and strategically cuts the form away to leave a shimmering shell behind (Figures 29 and 30).²⁰

The terms above feel particularly useful in how to proceed for this stage of distilling. Becoming exacting with our distilled terms or themes helped us to stay devotional to the specificities of each collaboration. The limits expelled by the distillation process can at times feel stifling, but they also thwart us from relying on our habitual patterns of making if we let our parameters get too wide, too loose. Stay with the motifs and themes you distill, keep digging into those exacting concepts, commit, and approach the following stage with a sense of devotion.

Stage 6 | Material generation

Framing terms: make, revise, edit, layer, reframe, sequence, risk, share, sensitivity

‘The creative struggle to pull images into being creates thick folds in the connective tissue between the beholder and the beheld, between us and the infinite. I would also include the agency of non-human perception, and also non-animal, organic perception, and even the perception of non-organic entities.’ –

²¹Laura Marks

20 Nancy Tam, *wreckage upon wreckage*, <http://www.nantam.ca/wreckage.html>.

21 Laura Marks, *Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics, or the Unthought at the Heart of Wood*, in

Technology and Desire:
The Transgressive Art of
Moving Images, ed. Raina
Gaafar and Martin Schulz
(intellect Bristol, UK/
Chicago, USA 2014).
PP 160.



Figure 29. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Kayla De Vos and Anja Graham in studio with plastic wrap.

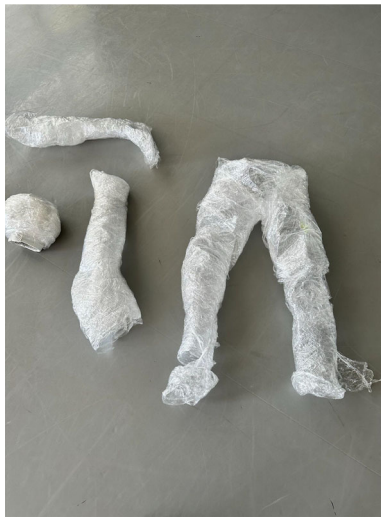


Figure 30. Image credit: Rob Kitsos. Casting shots of plastic wrap.

‘To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become part of who you are ... not that you know by means of movement but that knowing is movement ... to be taught by the world.’ – ²²Tim Ingold

22 Tim Ingold, *Making, Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 1, 2...

This phase is about generating new collaborative material, or really, it’s about crafting all that material that has already emerged by this point in the process, with the possibility of working towards a cohesive composition. As we continued devising and revising, our distillations from stage 5 lent us places to turn to when we felt stagnant or stuck. To dive deeper into our focus areas we would assign, or have someone choose, one of the distilled terms and make a short study based on the essence of that

theme. Sometimes this would generate a gestural sequence, a floor pattern, or a traveling phrase. We would then shape the study with other sections of material and see where it took us.

While digging into these distillations as grounds for material generation, we also worked with two forms of embodied echoing. First, we explored how the body moves when contacting the material. When trying to smoothly relocate the plastic wrap without it folding and sticking to itself, we tensed our muscles to preserve its delicate form. This mode of slow, careful, measured motion became a kinaesthetic language that we could then echo, study, and refine, even when we were not touching the plastic. The second form of embodied echoing came from ekphrastic observations of how the material moves in terms of its weight, surface area, edges, friction, etc. This echo is intended to be more than mere mimicry—we are striving to internalize the physical principles and qualities of that non-human matter and see how our bodies' typical impulses for movement generation might shift when leading with an embodied awareness or articulation of another matter.

Stage 6 is when we experimented in real time with the various disciplines at play. Designs for wearables, sounds, dance, and projections went through rounds of edits and drafts as makers experienced how each layering of material worked with all the other collaborating matter.

For this stage of the process, the interdisciplinary studio groups worked over two classes, testing ideas and recording material to use in their projects. The final works ranged from video installation to live performance. The students found ways to develop simple gestural motifs and lighting sequences stemming from key terms mined from the objects. One group used their object (a vase) as a speaker and produced live sounds through the vase during the performance.

Stemming from the lino chapter's distilled terms of domesticity, grids, security, and 1950s red scare/paranoia, Caprara developed images of kitchens overlaid with geometric patterns and dystopian atomic bombs that periodically plumed outside fabricated windows. Caprara also recorded the dancers' movement phrases and collaged these figurative images with their real-time performances of similar or disparate choreographic motifs to play with surrealist undertones of repetitive bodies in space. We also recorded sounds of the lino being dragged across the floor, dropped and folded, collecting many different textures and ambient sounds, and played different tracks while devising to see what sonic accompaniment suited each choreographic scene. After setting several sections of movement, sound, image and text, the team prepared for a shoot with filmmaker Beau Han Bridge to document the material for a potential film and future live performance. Closeup images of the lino, which started to look like skin, flowed into scenes with bodies reaching and shifting while surrounded by the material. Kitsos, Woods and Bridge decided to edit the lino video sequences together in a fine-tuning process of composing the qualities, dynamic shifts, narrative arcs, and visual rhythmic form of all the moving matter captured on screen. Typically left to one editor, the collaborative process of video editing in real time together meant that our collective subjective history in the process shaped the final work.



Figure 31. Image credit: Beau Bridge. Anna Wang-Albini during *Moving Matter* shoot.

The plastic wrap material is now being examined by the team for another video shoot, and Woods is crafting ideas for wearables that emphasize the distilled concepts we're leaning into, like preservation, light refraction, suffocation, and longevity. Our next chapter will explore wool, when Kitsos and Woods are at a residency at Cortex Frontal, in Arraiolos Portugal.²³ The process of movement, sound, wearable, and video generation will continue through these live, collaborative conversations between the team members for future chapters of *Moving Matter* (Figure 31).

Our Material-led Methodology Template is designed more so to prepare you to compose with material-led design practices than to offer a thorough or specific discourse of how to compose. If you are seeking composition templates or methodologies, we offer these as tools we have turned to ourselves during this stage: Kitsos, along with a team of collaborators, have compiled an entire database, *Mapping Collaboration*,²⁴ that offers a catalog of compositional strategies and games organized into categories. We also explored methods that make use of chance and randomization,²⁵ inspired by Peter Schmit and Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies*.²⁶ This system is a simple deck of cards, all with different prompts. Examples include 'breathe more deeply', 'a line has two sides' and 'distorting time'. Sometimes the more bizarre the prompt, the more interesting the outcome. When you get to a challenging place, you choose a card, take in the prompt, and keep building your idea with this new instruction or curveball.

Throughout this process, across all stages of our methodology, the concept of sensitivity has continued to emerge. This was something that came up with the musicians when studying plastic wrap. Sensitivity framed how they started to create sounds, individually and collectively. Sensitivity came up for several of us in the first stage watching the plastic float, before descending towards a surface that it could nestle into. Sensitivity came up for the dancers beneath the mountains of linoleum they wore, feeling for a new way of moving whilst donning this unfamiliar mass. Approaching material-led collaboration incurs sensorially rich activity, where receptivity and proprioceptivity all feel heightened in an exploration of the nuanced factors at play in these dynamic phenomenological

23 CórteX Frontal is a multidisciplinary cultural project created in 2015, managed by Associação Cultural CórteXcult and based in Arraiolos, district of Évora, Alentejo. Cortex Frontal- Artist-in-Residence Program brings together artists from different countries and disciplines. Located in Arraiolos, Portugal.

24 Rob Kitsos, *Mapping Collaboration*, 2020, <https://mappingcollaboration.com/>.

25 We think of choreographer Merce Cunningham, who famously used chance operations to determine choreographic shapes, sequences, and other media choices.

26 Brian Eno, *Oblique Strategies*, <https://www.enoshop.co.uk/product/oblique-strategies.html>.

studies. We folded these impulses into the research for this stage of creation, remaining sensitive to the material, to each other, to the collaborative energies we were discovering and generating together.

Conclusion + What's next

Moving Matter began with the inquiry: How can dancing artists become more attentive to moving entities that are not human bodies and thereby discover and create new movement forms? Our research has since explored and invited other disciplines and makers to participate in a future of design that pivots away from hierarchical models and instead integrates collaborative systems to navigate shifting social, political, and environmental movements. As human researchers, we welcome the challenge of de-centering power away from people in this work, recognizing that the shedding of autocratic agency can lead to groundbreaking discoveries in the studio, and for progressive thinking in humanities and social sciences at large.

'Inanimate' no-longer serves as a descriptor of non-human material in contemporary epistemes of materiality. Bennett's critical work on 'thing power' and new materialism presents the potency of dynamic entities that need not show a traditional pulse to suggest life. Karan Barad's groundbreaking work on the intra-activity of matter demonstrates how emergent, collaborative movements are created through and by the affective relationships amongst systems of matter. *Moving Matter* speaks towards these mindful integrations of choreographic, affective agencies of non-humans with humans, and extends these ideas towards research where the prominent role and impact of wearables leads to innovative new choreographic and creative practices. We want to contribute to these scholastic and artistic emphases on inter-connectivity, dispersals of power, and design networks that acknowledge the problematic, the complex, and the possible as we work through the Anthropocene.

There is plenty that we still feel curious or uncertain about: Are we still being too domineering in this process? Can we as humans ever lead less human-like? How can we give more space and agency for non-human matter? Are we pushing material to be irreversibly something different in a way that perpetuates colonialist harm? What does a performance, exhibit, or presentation of this work look like? Can this template help other fields and what tweaks or adjustments can we make room for so that it can be more widely and generously beneficial across disciplines?

Our curiosities, our research, our creations continue. We see this template as just that, a guide that can be adapted to best support the specificities of a collaborative team, while offering a grounding map to keep all matter moving at the helm of innovation. This template is vibratory material itself, an integral collaborative component in a method of leading with a reverence towards the choreographic potency of all moving matter.

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