

2022

**Beginning at the End:
Seven Reflections
on Artistic Practice**

MFA in Performing Arts

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ISBN: 978-9935-9530-2-5

**Texts and visual
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artists © 2022**

**Published by
Listaháskóli Íslands
/ Iceland University
of the Arts and FUKL**

**Editor:
Angela Rawlings**

**Book design,
layout, and cover:
Helga Dögg Studio**

**Art direction:
Helga Dögg Studio
Hjördís Eypórsdóttir**

**Typeset in
Helvetica Neue
and Dutch Roman**

**First edition, limited
to 100 copies.
Printed and bound
in Reykjavík, Iceland
by Litla Prent**

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MFA in Performing Arts

The MFA in Performing Arts proudly celebrates a space where the boundaries of art can be tested, expanded, and pluralised. This year, seven artists explore a series of themes that span from the everyday to the metaphysical. What ties them together is a shared sense of urgency to explore existential modes of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world.

This year we have been on romantic walks (with Amó), been cooked for and told family stories in a home kitchen (with Gunnella), been brought deep into our senses with the sand between our fingers and toes (with Helga), explored the poetics and politics of touch (with Kaisa), been hypnotised by the choreographic temporalities of continuity (with Sóley), experienced the fragility of our own memories (with Mart), and witnessed dance being taken into the places where it might be missed the most (with Vala).

Bridging the gap between our internal experiences and the external world, each artist creates a new space that plays between the two. This new space has a potential for you to discover something new about your surroundings or something deep within. I feel lucky to have been a part of it and it is with immense pleasure that I invite you to be part of it too.

**Welcome to the graduation works
of the class of 2022.**

We have been waiting for you!

Words

**Brogan
Davison**

Note

**A note from
the Programme
Director of the MFA
in Performing Arts**

What is so fascinating about an MFA in Performing Arts is the confluence of practice research and complementary writing. The 2021-2 MFA cohort of artist-researchers lays open their tacit and haptic knowledges in the artful essays housed in this publication. Readers will encounter the what (research questions), the how (analysis of process), and the why (conceptual framework) of each artist-researcher's creative process. Additionally, this year's group embraced the opportunity to experiment with literary-academic hybrid approaches to their complementary writing.

Anna Margrét (Amó) Ólafsdóttir imbues her text with playful thoughtfulness through epistolary writing and erasure as a form of writer-reader flirtation. Icelandic society is put under the microscope through two auto-ethnographic essays, as Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir interrogates the role of cookbooks in women's nervous breakdowns and Valgerður (Vala) Rúnarsdóttir takes the stage as The Dance Ambassador of Iceland to champion dance for bodies of all ages. Meanwhile, Mart Piirimees plumbs the vast depths of memory for dramaturgical purposes, making a strong argument for bubbles, blobs, and disappeared O's to grace his future pedagogy. Helga Arnalds and Sóley Frostadóttir offer different takes on earthly materials within their poetic prose, with Helga estranging the familiar through touch and memory while Sóley explores

terrain and temporalities. Finally, Kaisa Kukkonen proposes the permanence of touch through gently voiced and intertwined poetry, essay, and manifesto.

Readers: prepare your textual receptors for taste, touch, sense, scent, sight, thought, memory, being, meaning, listening, feeling, becoming.

Words

**Angela
Rawlings**

Note

**Sense and Sentence
Abilities: A note from
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Bio Anna Margrét ^(b.1992) graduated from the Fine Arts Department of the Iceland University of the Arts in 2019. In her second year, she studied at École Supérieure d'Art de la Réunion for one semester. After her studies, she moved to Helsinki where she was an intern for the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, working on the preparation for Takala's work at the Venice Biennale 2022. After studying at East Iceland's LungA School in 2014, Anna Margrét returned to the East in 2020 to work with children as well as to work on her own creative process in the magical surroundings of Seyðisfjörður.

In her work, Anna Margrét represents the consumer-driven society in which we live. By including mundane tasks in an art context, she explores how they appear in our daily lives. She wonders how the contemporary person creates their identity as demanded by a consumerist society's expectations, presenting these thoughts often in an ironic and comical way. Anna Margrét lives in Reykjavík at the moment where she is studying MFA in Performing Arts at the Iceland University of the Arts. Alongside her studies, Anna Margrét teaches children's courses at the Reykjavík School of Visual Arts and runs a pop-up crêperie she founded in 2016.

Words

Anna Margrét Ólafsdóttir

Essay

Nostalgia Lives in the Now

My dearest human spectator,

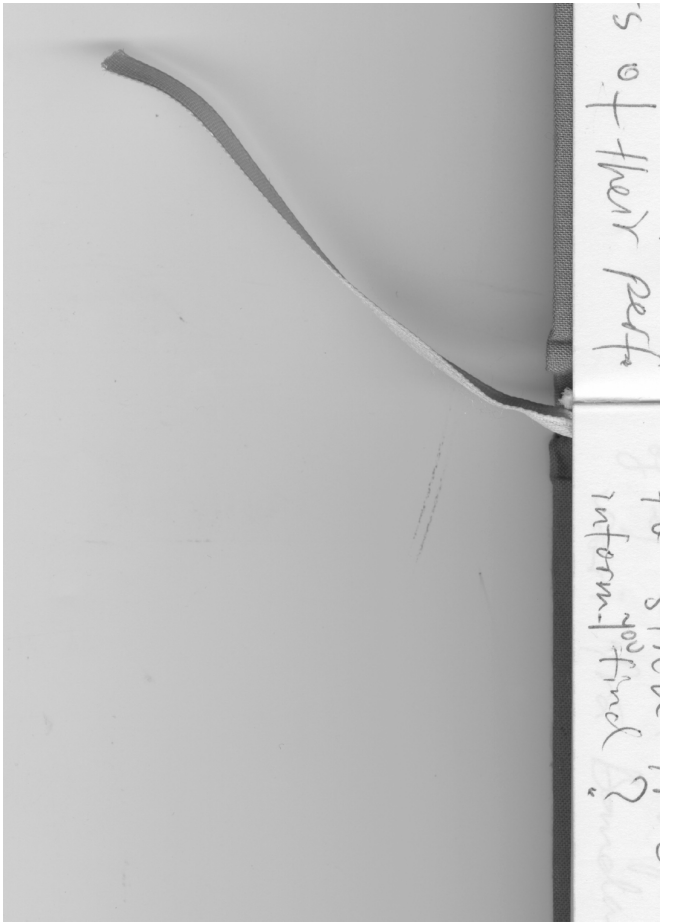
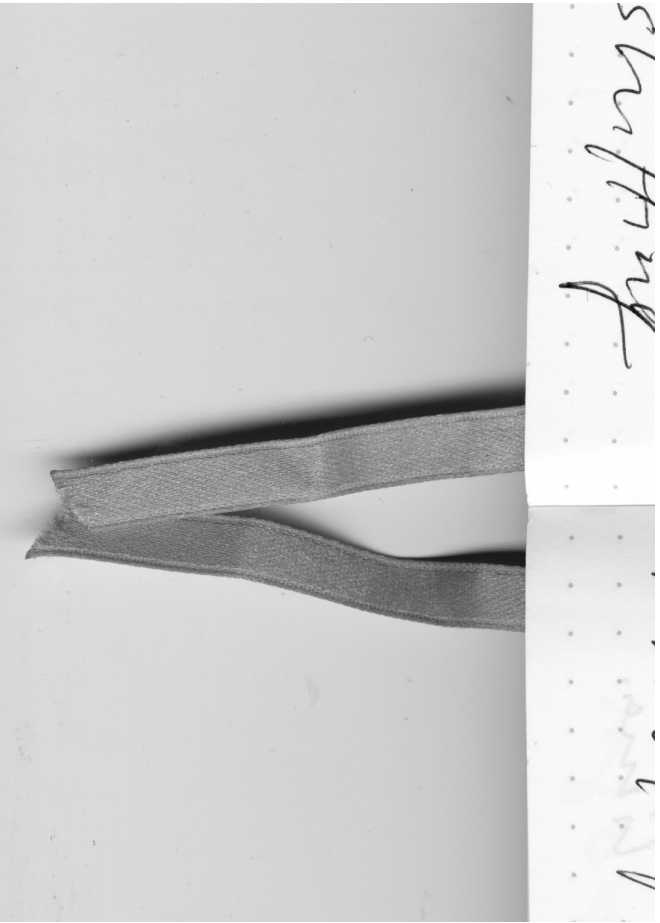
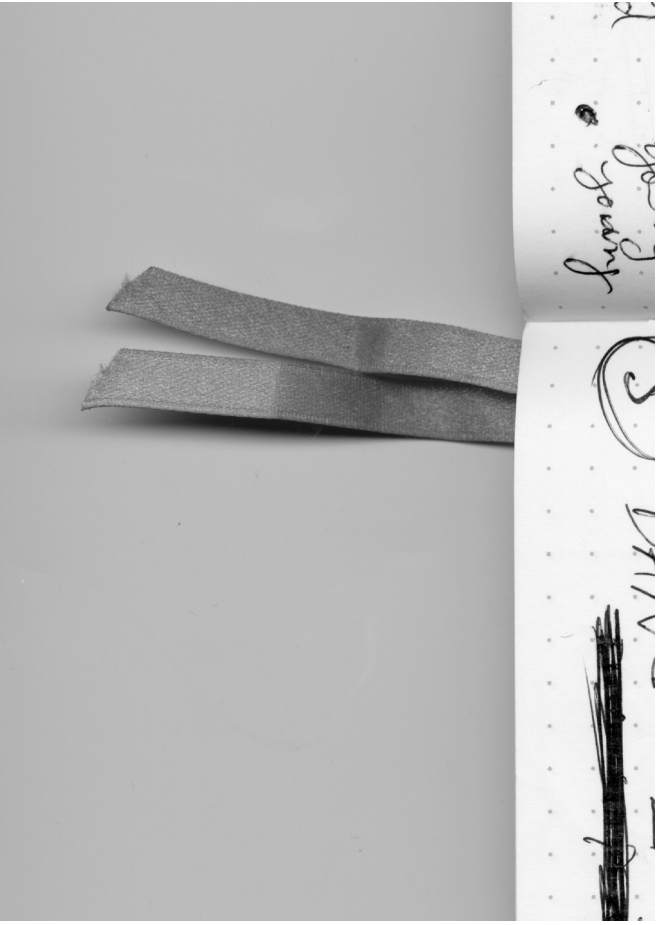
It has been too long since I wrote you. Thank you for your thoughts and questions in your last letter. They were very intriguing and warmed my heart; I look forward to engaging in my reply. Before I start my letter to you, I have to explain one thing. For the concept we are talking about in our letters, I find it so broad and overwhelming that I have decided not to mention it. Wherever I would mention it in my upcoming letter, I will have put a blank instead (), for I want you to fill in the gaps yourself. I have no further explanations at this point, so now I will start the letter and try my best to answer your questions and add to your thoughts.

Yours,

Performance art

Well, it all started out when hearing about relationships being un , or about people in relationships being un . When the artist reached out to me for assistance in this project, I thought about what I, in my part as *performance art*, could do about it. First of all, I had to ask myself: what is my role in the arts field altogether?

As you may know, *performance art* isn't the same thing as *performing arts*. I know, right? Well first I was like, okay, what does that say about me? But then I realised that, though today the walls between the art mediums are being erased more and more, I guess my origin lies in the field of visual arts. Therefore, the origins of performing arts lies in the theatre. Today, we can take the theatre



to the streets and put *performance art* into a black box. But theoretically there is a vague difference.

I'll try to explain. In my experience, I'm most often born out of a concept. An artist then follows the development of that concept throughout the process until they find a relevant time or space for me to be performed. By contrast, the foundation in *performing arts* often comes from a script, movement, or vision that the piece will have an audience, a final product. The idea might come from something that is born in a theatre space, with four walls as well as the fourth wall, you see what I mean?

Perhaps the easiest way to look at it is that performance art grew from visual arts, about seventy to eighty years ago, when female artists started owning their deserved space in that field. Women refused to take after men and use a paint brush; they used their bodies instead. And then performing arts grew out of the field of theatre, where directors, choreographers or other artists often try to deconstruct predetermined ideas and expectations about plays, dance pieces and music performances. Just so you have a small idea where I come from. But on to the project.

So, I joined this project after the artist realised they belonged in my field, *performance art*. From that moment, I have been a big part of it. It has been quite pleasant, because I enjoy the presence of people a lot and, as you know, this project or concept wouldn't work without people. But it's not only about people; it's about their ideas and from where their ideas, especially about _____, come. Like many artworks are composed of a situation, environment, or the connection to the audience that the artist creates, this one is also composed of social research and conversations. From there, the participant can enter the work and have its effect on it. These types of artworks that depart from human interactions or social contexts are often called *participatory art* or *relational art*.

And this particular work falls under those categories, and I along with it. This work is based on social concepts that demand the participation of others in order to become reality. Make sense?

This is the point when I introduce thoughts about society, because what is society without people? But then when people are influenced by society, who is the influencer? Is it consumerism or capitalism, issues or problems, local or global? Okay, now I went a bit too far. I didn't intend to zoom out to that extent; we are still talking about _____, no worries. But that is the thing,

_____ has no limits, has it? To zoom back in a bit, let me throw out some questions about _____.

_____ comes in all forms: between lovers, friends, with oneself, family, a stranger, places, habits, and dreams. Or what? Is _____ an action, a vision, an experience, or a way of life? What is the difference between love and _____?

Is love a feeling while _____ is an action? Is _____ private or public? Is _____ feminist?

Is _____ a concept that people think about every day? Is _____ considered silly or embarrassing? Is it becoming obsolete? Is it hidden? Has it mutated through the years? How far are people willing to go in their _____ gestures regardless of societies' expectations?

As *performance art*, I am truly willing to help people, other humans such as yourself, in becoming stronger in the field of _____. And that has been the biggest question for me and the artist. How can we support people in becoming more _____? But before we dive into that, we have to look at what thoughts people have on the topic already.

When reflecting on _____, you might think about some of the following: relationships, *The Notebook*, red roses, candlelit dinner, surprises, dating shows on reality television, or a long weekend in Paris. And why is that? So back to the part about society, consumerism, and capitalism. We live in a consumerist and capitalist society, and both you and I are very influenced by it. For me, *performance art*, I am often used to criticise these concepts as well as issues that follow their structures. And I guess for you, that you are probably sometimes conflicted about living in a capitalist consumerist society, right?

But let's go back to *The Notebook* and Paris, the city of love. Let's go back to 1762, to a time when I, *performance art*, did not yet exist, but my cousin *performing arts* was thriving with its ballets and operas. We're in Paris and the Age of Enlightenment is bringing us to modernity with its rationality, science, and technology. People have started to move from the countryside towards cities, working in factories, and building industries. Consumerism is on its way up.

Now let's imagine that we are walking through the 4th district in Paris, *Le Marais*. We stroll through narrow streets and, for some reason, we look inside a window where we witness a man sitting on a chair. He is overwhelmed by the rational structures rising around him. He starts to think about older times that weren't actually so long ago. He thinks about the cute farmhouses in the countryside, about nature, about the times when it felt like time moved slower. Talk about being nostalgic, am I right?

This philosopher, sitting on a chair in *Le Marais*, was far from being the only one with these thoughts. There were a bunch of English writers, French revolutionaries, and German philosophers among many others who also had these new set of ideas. In the next decades, a historical movement emerged. This movement was an ideology by which people remain hugely affected by still today, whether they realise it or not. These new ideas and mindsets were a reaction to the birth of the modern world: industrialisation, urbanisation, and consumerism.

The _____s felt that people were being alienated from nature, from their true selves, and from one another. They believed that modernity

had made men selfish, competitive at the expense of all, and that modernity had ruined a natural harmony in which people used to live. So, the wanted to go back to simpler times, and they started to appreciate nature, the natural world, human senses, and the imagination.

For writers and artists, passion became their drive; their works were the product of their passion. They emphasised the individual, the experience of human life, praised what each person was capable of with their own senses and their imaginations. For that reason, it's a bit difficult to call it a movement or a theory, but here we are, some two hundred and sixty years later, still trying to figure out what it means.

Now we come to the juicy part. What followed these passions were new ideas such as first falling in love before you marry the person, finding your true soulmate, sex being the ultimate act of love, and to live happily ever after with your spouse. These ideas still permeate our modern society and set up extreme expectations towards love. Maybe we wouldn't be here today, stuck with these ideas, if capitalism and consumerism hadn't taken these ideas and sold us products while selling the idea of .

Are you still with me? I hope you haven't started regretting having bought stuff for a purpose. That was never the intention with my letter. I just wanted to share with you some thoughts and ideas, to have a better overview of our topic.

So, after our walk down memory lane we come back to our question about how to help people become more like these people of this undefining era. I mean, wouldn't we all want to be more appreciative and satisfied without having to buy stuff?

My part, as *performance art*, has been very much influenced by the ideas of that particular era. The artist has been using these ideas to gather people in performative acts, to activate a certain mood in people. And this particular mood is based on sensing, individual experience and feeling, imagination, slowing down, connecting to others, appreciating nature, and noticing. The artist's hope is that, from that certain mood, participants will evoke some new ideas within themselves about . And that from that mood, they will trust themselves to act independent from the ideas and products that capitalism and consumerism have been throwing at us through the years.

That is where I come in, *performance art*, because at my core, I am neither non-refundable nor suitable for mass production. My only life is in the present. My ephemerality keeps the action in the present before I then evaporate. I can't even be recorded or documented because then I become a reproduction of myself and betray my own ontology. So, I intend to drag out of commercialism and influence it with my own strengths such as not being dependent on technology and mass production. You see, that way, each participant can find their own individual sustainable voice when it comes to , far from society's expectations. I also have to make sure that I bring with me to the artwork a simple and untrained form that still offers meaning to the participants. My role is therefore to hold space for the participants to have a connection with the work and the conscious or unconscious psychological closeness between participants. As you can see, I have a very subtle yet meaningful purpose. I would go so far as to say my role is irreplaceable, and that I am essential for the participants to be able to reach that mood but also essential for the artist to reach the participants. Hard work.

But enough about my part. The artist's role isn't easy either. In a gathering of performative acts, the artist holds the dual role of facilitator and artist while interacting with participants, who are also the only spectators of that performance. The participants are given freedom in how they participate, but the artist maintains power over the artwork. For it is the artist who gives the space for participation, while the participants have limited choices within that space. So, it doesn't really matter how they use that space for the outcome of the performance itself, for the space given to participants has a higher value to the artwork than how the participants use the space. That means less pressure for you, dear spectator.

Well, I think that's it for now. I hope I've managed to answer some of your questions or add to your thoughts. I'm looking forward to reading your next letter. Hopefully you can reach a mood until then.

Kindest regards,
Performance art

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The School of Life. 2016. *Alain de Botton on Romanticism*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPOulyEJnbE>.

Bio Mart Piirimees was born in Tartu, Estonia in 1997, in the Maarjamõisa maternity hospital, probably during morning hours. He is mediocreatly good at a lot of things and works on a lot of projects at once. With a Bachelors' degree in Interdisciplinary Art, Music, and Multimedia, he probably doesn't know to this day what he's *exactly* doing, except that his interdisciplinary heart lays in theatre, in performing arts. Mart is working towards a future where the performing arts are as up to date on revelations in the fields of cognitive sciences, technology, and critical thinking as are the worlds of internet content, movie-business, start-ups, and marketing.

Words

Mart Piirimees

Essay

Awareness of the Deeper Levels of Memry as a Promising Performative Tool

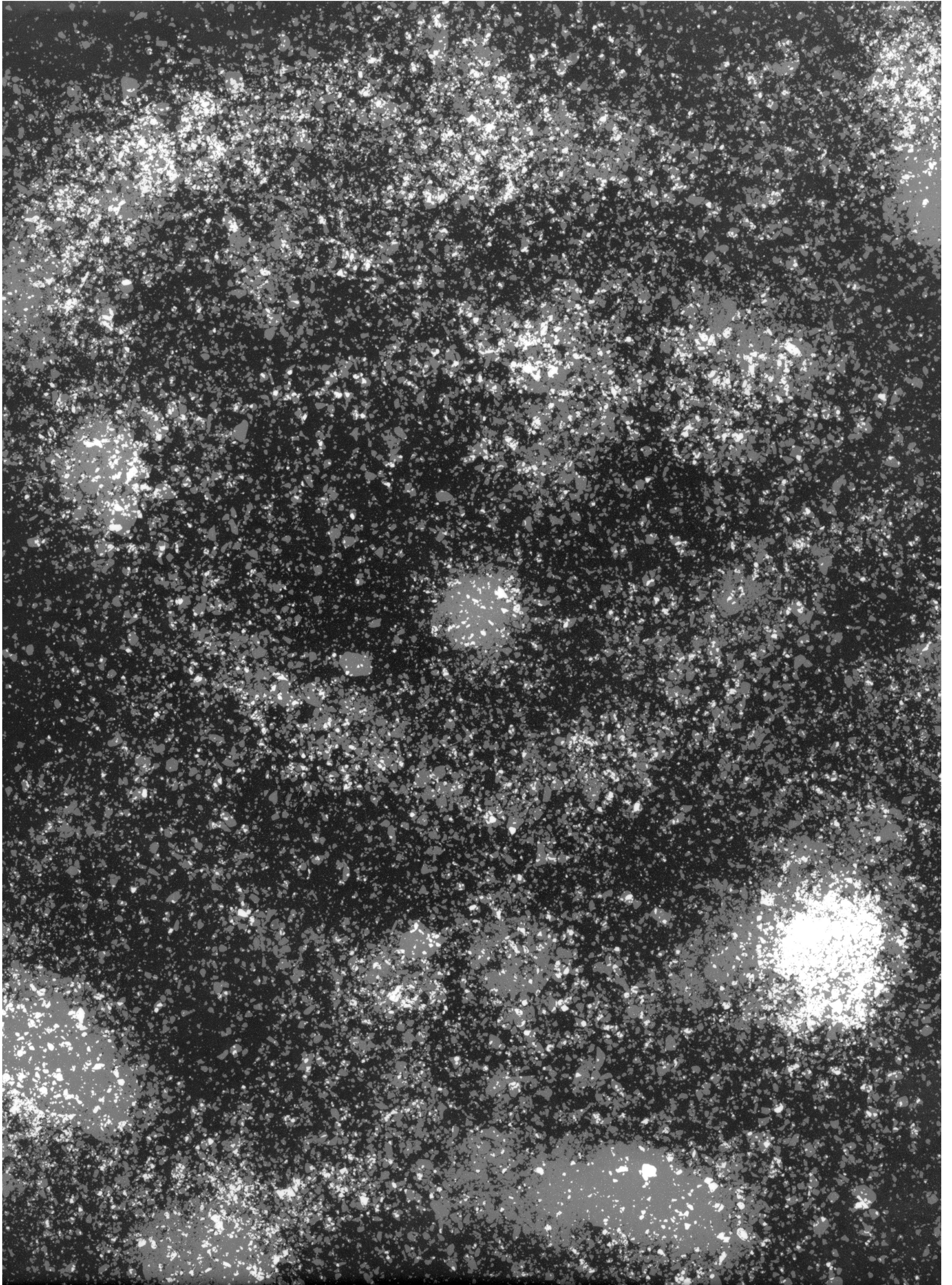
Memry as Intro

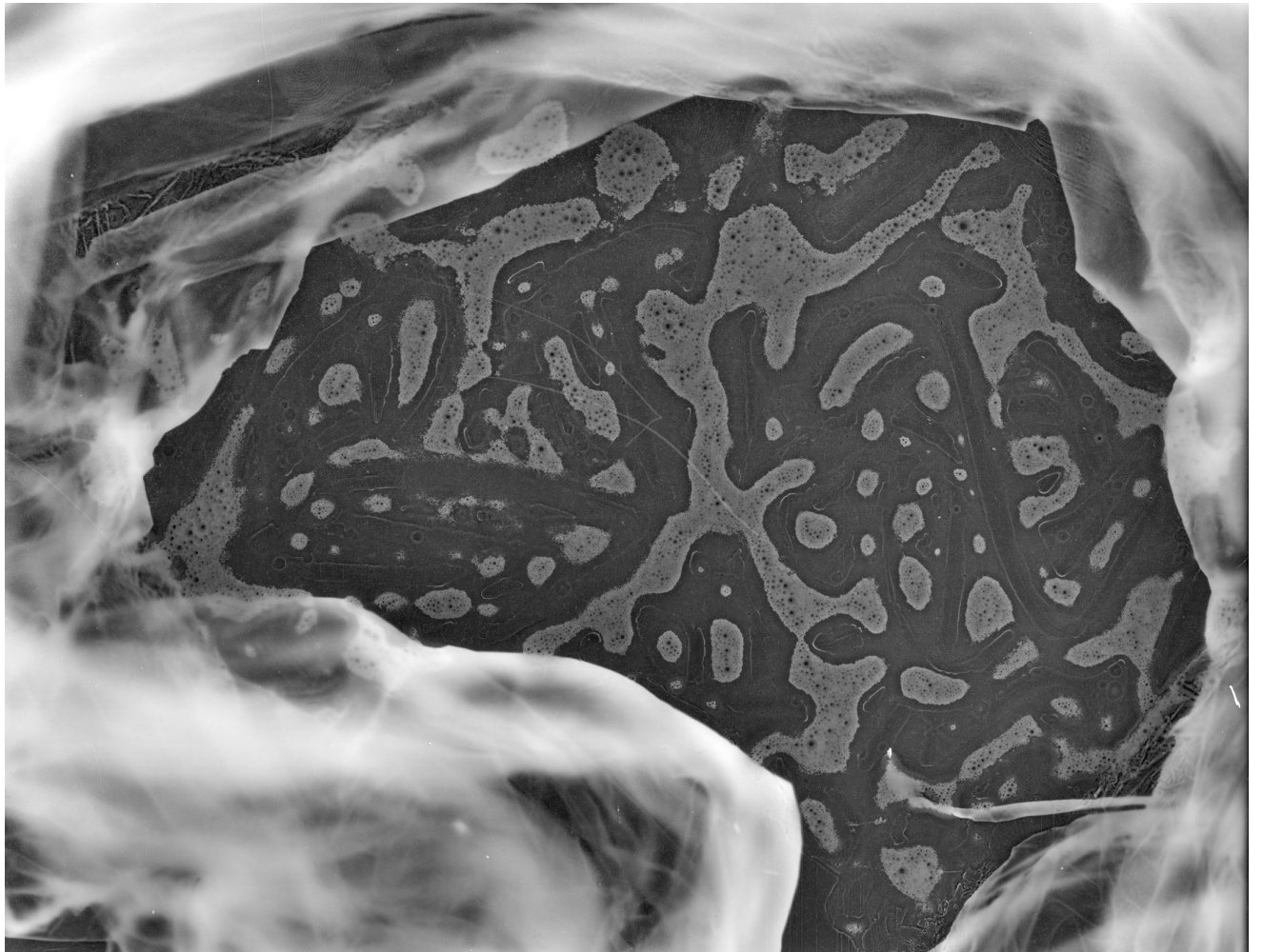
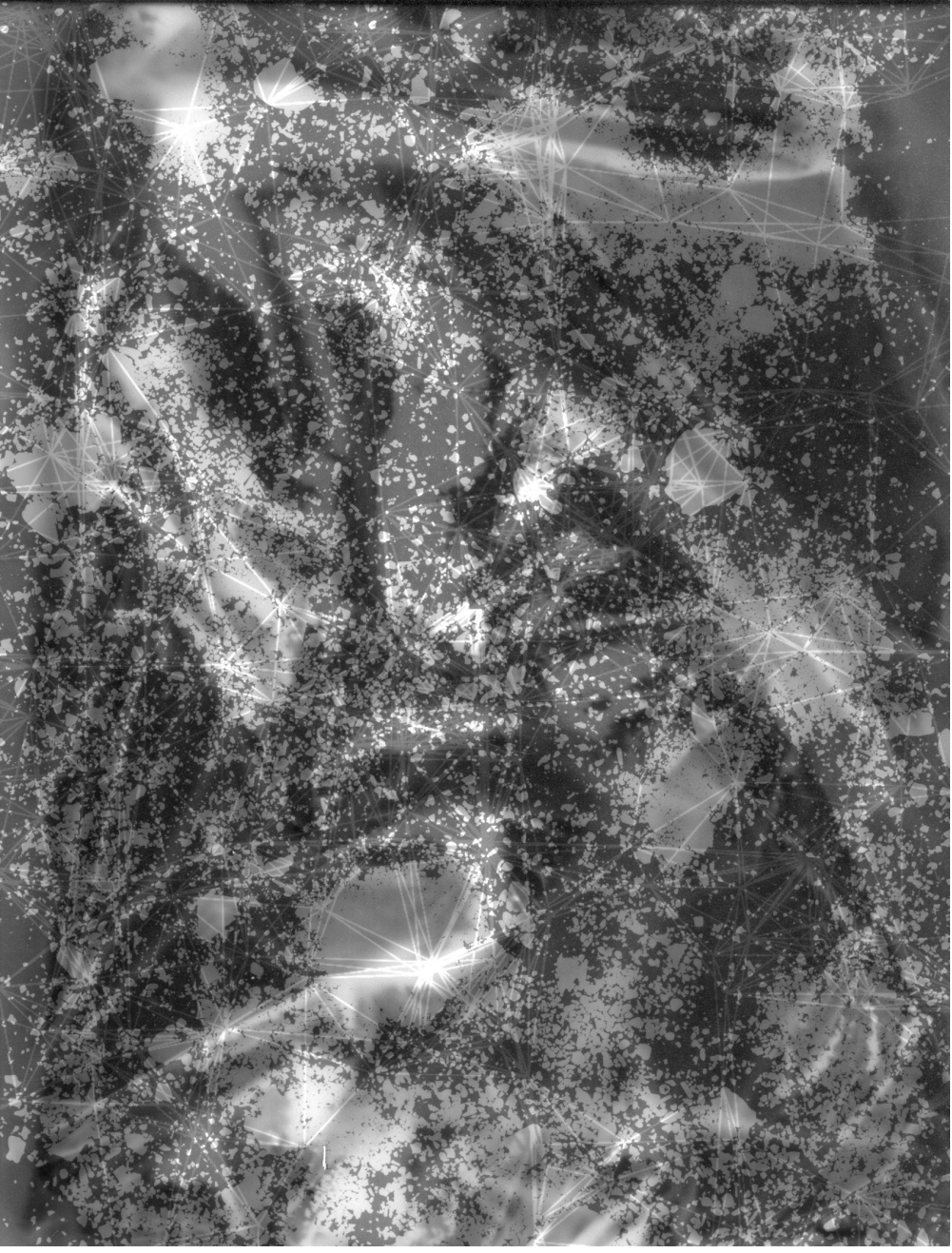
What if I remember wrong? What if the belief that I've got it all under control, that I am aware of why I am what I am is based on wrong causal associations? I've been suspiciously looking at how my memories continue to define me. And lately my memory has been getting worse. If I remember wrong, am I wrongly defined? Do you remember how to spell "memry"?

This essay encompasses the contexts, concepts, and process of my practice-research project *Memry*. In this project, I've submitted myself into a constant flow of theoretic material on the topic of memory, through scientific and philosophical

lenses, and a constant artistic praxis. This has resulted in many visual, auditory, and text-based works, culminating in a lecture-performance in August 2022.

Despite being a consistent topic since the start of philosophy itself, the concept of memory has only recently become a relevant and recognised area of philosophical research in its own right ^(Bernecker and Michaelian 2017, 1). I am convinced this novel relevancy should and will flow into some, if not most, modern artistic processes. To become a better director and teacher, I want to understand the processes by which humans perceive, remember, and imagine.







My research questions, poking the back of my head for about nine months now, are as follows. How can I create art that viscerally provokes association and disassociation, similar to remembering and imagination? What kinds of control might we have over ourselves, our perception, our imagination, and our memories?

Memory as Blobs and Bridges

I feel as if I'm a stretchy being, hanging in the air, and dozens of my stretchy limbs are attached to dozens of peculiar, big, heavy bubbles. I'm stretched in between the bubbles and doing my best to pull them closer, to relieve the stress on my stretchy limbs. Some bubbles contain different levels of scientific research on memory, from behavioural psychology to neuroanatomy to cellular neurophysiology. These scientific bubbles are sometimes as far away from each other as they are from any other bubble. In some bubbles, there are philosophers; archivists argue with constructivists about how memory could and would work. The constructivists share some bubble-space with neurological bubbles while archivists rub against old, wrinkled psychology bubbles.

There's a giant bubble filled with nihilistic philosophers, stuck in an endless loop of distrust towards reality due to the unconfirmable authenticity of memories. I don't like that bubble, but I'm holding onto it, just in case. There's also a group of colourful bubbles that clash with and flow into each other. These are full of artists, politicians, prophets, and influencers who chase after details befitting only their own biases. And finally, there are art and theatre theorist bubbles, who mostly stay close to the psychology bubbles that work on relatable human behaviour and get their concepts of memory from looking at the actions of people and imitating that behaviour. My stretchy limbs hold onto the bubbles, shaking under the stress while the bubbles reverberate.

Actress Bella Merlin, the author of *Beyond Stanislavski*, reminds the reader of a term used in acting theories—*affective memory*, which “implies that the imaginative remembrance of things past can cause present-tense changes in an individual's psychology” (Merlin 2001, 10-11).

I believe we can agree that awareness on how our brains work will give insight on how to enhance artistic methods of communication. The legendary theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski and subsequent theatre theorists have based their methods and systems on noticing and playing with the potential logics behind human behaviour. Basing art creation on psychology has

yielded amazing results¹ so far; now let's start looking deeper. For acting methodology, focus on behavioural psychology might be enough, but for artforms that deal with designing an environment, a visual, and/or an experience, I personally feel like we need to move deeper through skin and behaviour. I need to, if not understand, then at least be intuitively aware of the processes by which a person may perceive, sense, remember, and imagine. I need a theory that makes sense of the bubbles to which I'm so stretchily attached.

For my project and research, I choose to *believe* one theory (amongst many)—a theory that our memories are part of a meta-hierarchical network of thoughts and actions—nested hierarchies of mechanisms within mechanisms (Craver and Bechtel 2007). Our abilities to remember, to imagine, and to take present action are all intertwined and part of that network. We have an unfathomably large quantity of different types of cells in our brains that, as themselves or in groups, can be traced to real-world objects, sensations, knowledges, and everything else we perceive and sense.

When I eat a grilled cheese sandwich, the blobs of cells that indicate the taste of bread, the smell of melted cheese, and the concept of grilling are all triggered. An electric current passes from one blob to another, strengthening the bridge between those cells. That strengthening of bridges between blobs demonstrates the concept of association which, in large quantities, informs a definition of memory. That activity of electricity, moving around and strengthening bridges, is memory.

Functionally (and greatly oversimplifying!), a neuron is specialized to (1) conduct an electric current down the length of its axon, or output projection, and (2) transmit that activity to all other cells, neurons or otherwise, with which its axon is connected (Bickle 2017, 41).

The 'blobs' of which I speak can be neurons or groups of neurons or groups of groups of neurons, et cetera. The bridges are axons that, when used, lower their resistance to future activity. I'm simplifying how it works but, in short, this process is called *long-term potentiation* (Bliss and Lomo 1973). The unconscious association between boredom and yawning illustrates a bunch of strengthened connections. Once yawning is triggered, so can be boredom, and vice versa. The conscious visual association between a whiteboard and math formulas is another bunch of strengthened connections which are, in turn, probably lightly connected with the boredom-yawning association.

I can create new associations by imagining bread and something absurd along with it—a loaf

1 I suspect the seed of memory-work was implanted in me by seeing Florian Zeller's great psychological play "Father," performed in Estonia by Theatrum and directed by Maria Peterson. Zeller's psychological texts are incredible examples of how to display the distorted inner-worlds of characters on stage.

of bread, straight from the oven, half-buried in the sand dunes of Venus. If I can consciously associate blobs with blobs, I can consciously create new memories. Creating a convincing memory (for myself) of actually being on Venus and picking up the sand-covered loaf would require a lot of time and imagination, but it sounds logical that, ultimately, I can convince myself it's a real memory.

Long story short, there are two approaches to memory. The traditional archivist approach claims that we 'save' a memory and when remembering is due, we 'load' it, snatching it from an endless scape of memory-containment-shelves. The constructivist approach claims that remembering and imagining is reconstruction of reality; memories consist of many interconnected elements of reality and these individual elements can change (Berneck-er 2017, 51). Through that understanding, delivering information through art as a communication method can be enhanced. Understanding and utilising new details about how audiences associate is, if nothing more, a useful tool.

Memry as Practice

These discoveries, especially the rising concept of controlling our memories, is what I've been seeking for application to my artistic research practice. We know from behavioural psychology that humans learn from the past by remembering and prepare for the future by imagining, both consciously and unconsciously. But now we can begin to understand precisely how to affect that ability to associate. For example, if the systematic processes of remembering and imagination are closely linked, could performance makers potentially modify the memories of an audience by calling on an action to remember an event and showing them modified/changed documentation of the event? Could this be accomplished by using suggestive and manipulative questioning methods?² This whole bubble-system of research and its discoveries have guided my praxis of creating visuals, auditory experiences, and the performative culmination of the *Memry* project. There are a lot more conceptual discoveries that stem from this base of 'understanding' the nature of a constructivist memory system, and there's still a lot of unawakened potential.

I've come to realise the possibility of how much our memories could change, be distorted, or be outright fictional. Memory could play a main role in the concept of consciousness and our sense of time (Droege 2017, 103-113). Most of our skills could have a source outside of our conscious memories. Patients with a common variety of dementia, anterograde dementia, can still increase their

efficiency and skills at tasks even if they don't remember ever doing that task before.

Global amnesics [sic] cannot recall having performed the tasks before, even as their performance improves.... Typically, they confabulate common explanations when asked about their later performances, e.g., "I'm just good at puzzles like this" (Milner 1958; Bickle 2017, 37).

We work to find probable causes for why we are like we are, but if we don't remember the cause, we can't connect ourselves to anything with causal logic.

These scientific explorations on memory provide clues to address my research questions. As is apparent, we potentially have control over our memories, as they change constantly due being part of a *plastic*, blobby, fluid-like system. To provoke associations within an audience around the topic of memory, and to do so viscerally, is a matter of applying the logic of our memories (made from bridges and blobs) to methods of creation. There's a lot of ethical rationale to develop before delving too deep into memory-manipulation but, as I suspected, awareness of how memory works can create more opportunities for art-making methods. A logical frame of thought such as this is a great theoretical base for devising performance and practice-based learning.

By using live-feed videos in *Memry* to move the performer out of the Black Box, the philosophy of space and time can change, as it does within memories. The audience may witness connection issues between the camera and the video, an allusion to our fluidy and blobby brain-networks not always working in service of our well-being. Distorting, breaking, and manipulating visuals and audio can create liminal atmospheres—something that could remind us of an uncertain feeling that reverberates between reality and dreams, present and past, knowing and not knowing.³ Messing with the audience's pattern recognition abilities can lead to intentional uncertainty that the creator can then satisfy by resolving that uncertainty. This may be similar to the musical strategy where discomfoting chords are later resolved, causing ease in the listener. I enjoy when the arts-bubbles wobble in close proximity to bubbles full of scientific studies and technological advancements. I intend to inspire other artists around me to prefer that too.⁴

2 "False Memory" by Cara Laney Thede and Elizabeth Loftus (2018) goes into detail on the topic of intentional distortion of memories and implanting new and impossible memories through suggestive action.

3 "Everything At The End Of Time," a 6.5 hour album by The Caretaker, is absurdly effective at guiding the listener towards an eroding, uncertain mind. The artist portrays the progressive stages of Alzheimer's disease through the miracles of audio-work.

4 Brecht wanted his actors to act "for an audience of the scientific age." If properly applied, modern knowledge and science "[could] perform for art and specifically for the theatre" (Brecht 1964).

Memory as Cause and Conclusion

Imagine a time-traveler who jumps from one scientist to another, explaining to them the potential horrors of someone taking control over humanity if they continue their research on memory manipulation. That sort of time-traveler changes the past to change their present. Maybe the scientists encounter other, and more effective, time-travelers: books. That time-traveler creates opportunities to learn from possible futures to change the future.

Recently, my dad told me, "Hope prepares us for opportunity. For a hopeful person, an opportunity is natural; that's how it should be. A hopeless person won't even enter an open door" (R. Piirimees, message to author, 13 May, 2022).

To be more prepared, we remember and learn from what surrounds us. To be even more prepared, we imagine future scenarios, to learn from what hasn't yet happened. It's not about talent, skill, or creativity; it's about *the ability to make associations*: to see animals in clouds; to believe it's not raining when it is (Moore 1993); to come out of the cinema after watching *The Matrix* and glance around distrustfully; to be a conspiracy theorist; to relate with a seemingly crazy person who is eating cigarettes at the bus terminal; to see hope where there is none, and to see nothing where there is hope. To be an artist is to remember and imagine, to associate and disassociate. To cause and to affect. 'Cause why not?

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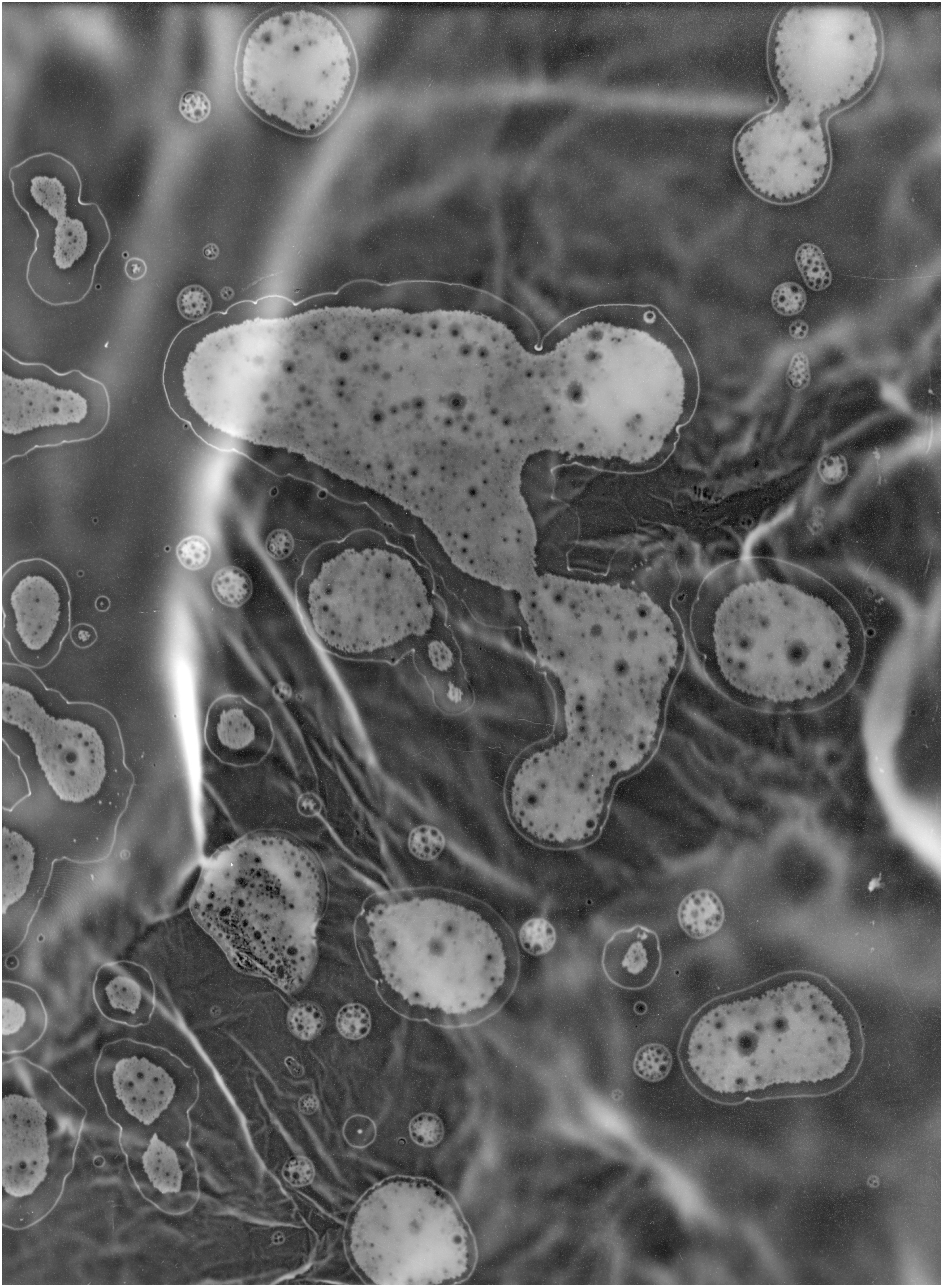
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Bio Kaisa Kukkonen is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher based in Finland. She works with the poetry of movement, politics of touch, and somatic practices. Her background is in dance, words, and performance.

Words

Kaisa Kukkonen

Essay

Touch Stays

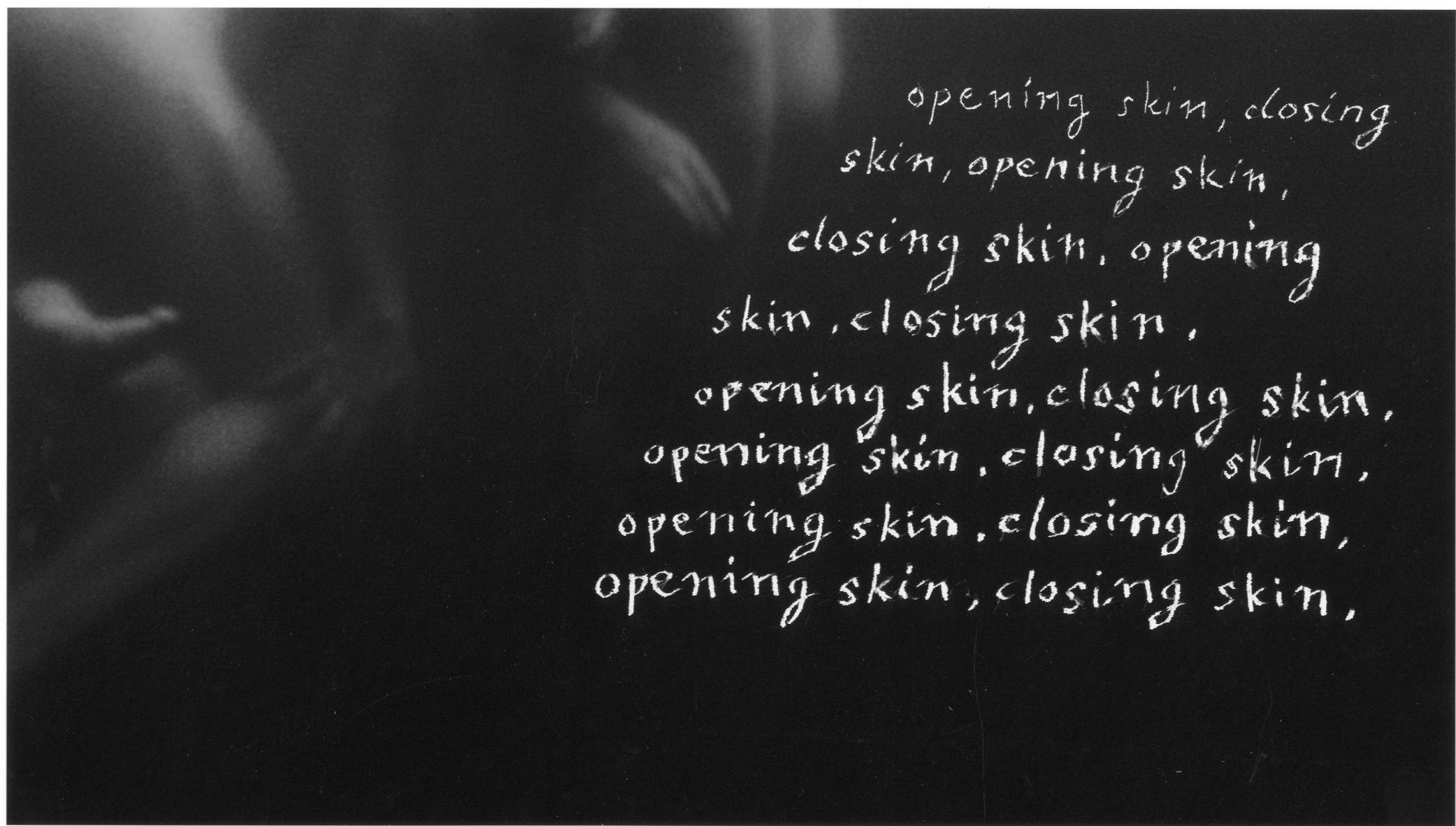
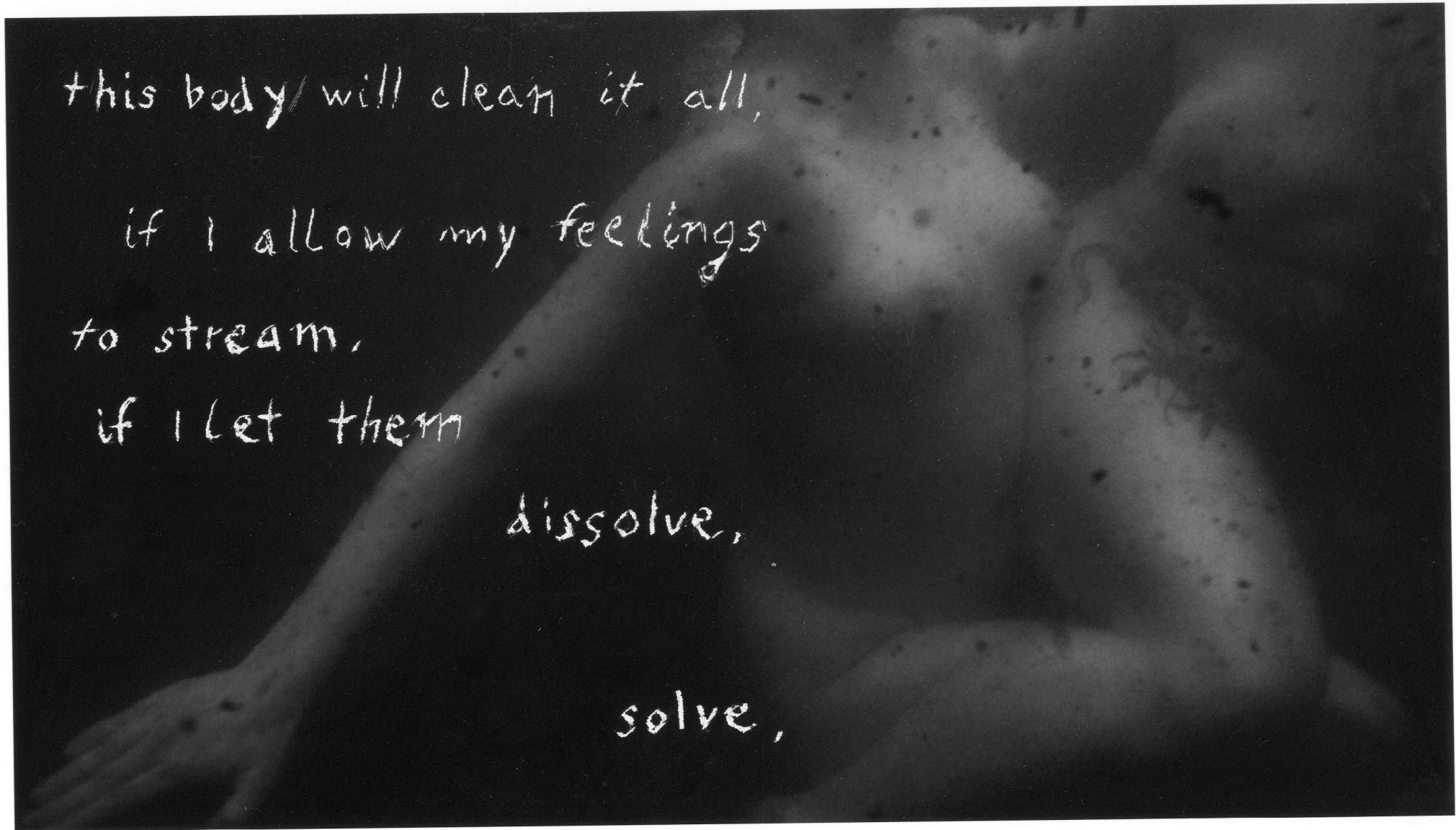
Touch Manifesto

Touch is a superpower
Touch goes through everything
Touch reveals the hidden
Touch reminds of
Touch is a process
Touch is an intra-action

Touch happens all the time inside all of us
We create touch, we co-create touch
We intra-act inside each other and co-create
this multi-sensed reality
Boom.

Touch organizes attention
Touch demands attention, intention?
Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones,
your neurons, your cells and sequences

Before touch, there is space in-between of us
Before touch, the space is like a thick pillow
Before touch, there is a direction
Before touch, there is an intention
Before touch, there is reaching towards
Before touch
tension, wish, attention.



Above: *Stream*. 2022.
Below: *Skin*. 2022.

In this essay, I write through the process of the poetic movement performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* (working title) which is structured as a book. The process spans over a year and intratwines many people, friends, lovers, and colleagues together with thoughts, projects, and play. I am very thankful to all of them, especially to Katarina Huber, who has been my partner of magic throughout this year and in the final performances.

I write in the first person because I let this project under my skin, inside my organs, flowing through my words and my blood. This project is not me, but part of me that has been hiding for a long time. This is me-visible, me-poem, me-chaos, me-bodymind.

How can a performance reveal the permanence, non-ephemerality, and accumulation of touch? How does such a performance affect the audience's experience of response-ability¹ and activate care for their surroundings, others, and themselves? How can the experiences of consent, touch, pleasure, and play on the body be translated and made visible to the spectator or even felt inside the body of the witness?

I wish for the audience to leave my performance with reflections on their own effect on others and vice versa. How is my touch the source of care, the activator, or the cause of trauma? This is something I aim to make visible through various performative, poetic, and visual actions as well as in this essay, showing the process of making, collecting, gathering, and accumulating connections, materials, knowledge, experience, methods, ideas, insights, and learnings.

Holding Meanings—Reaching Towards

Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us ^(Le Guin, 1986).

With my words, I'm holding, touching, giving a place to be, a place to arrive and to rest, to nest. A word touches. It gets born in my guts, in my belly; it touches the insides of my stomach, moves up slowly or quickly with abdominal muscle pressure, starts to become sound at the vocal cords that flap to create soundwaves as the air passes them, caressing the powerful root of the tongue, wrapping around it, poking my teeth from behind, and finally opening my lips. Sound touches my insides first and then caresses the world, tickling via the air everything and everyone—

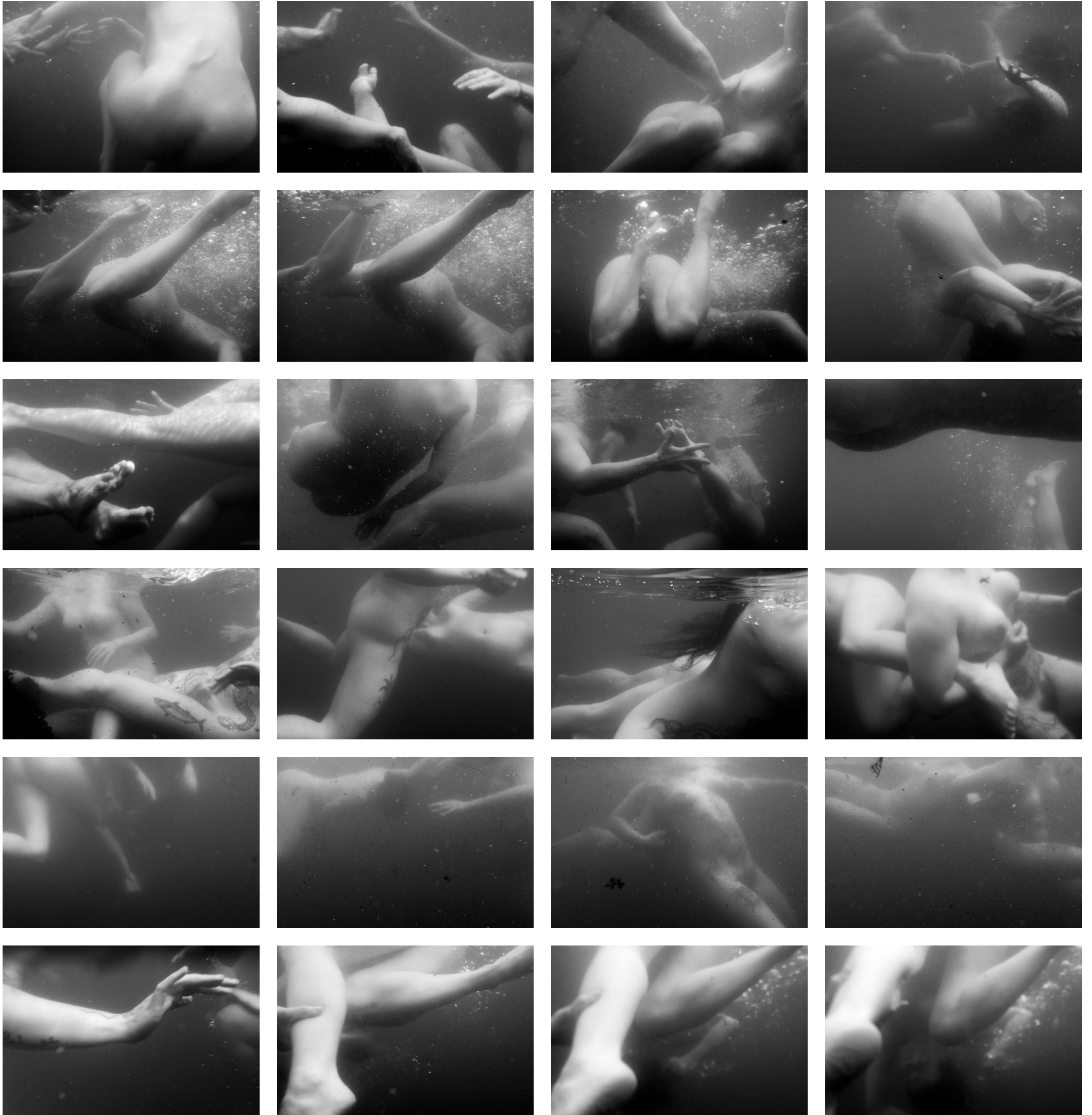
their skin, their hairs on their ears, going in, continuing the journey in their imaginations, enveloping their stories and worlds. Some words are swallowed, sucked back inside; this silencing holds meaning. Some words are shouted at others to hurt or to express pain, as swords creating more hurt. Words can be medicine or words can be violence. Words accumulating, piles on piles forming on our bodyminds, sonic tattoos of wordsounds, echoing in memoryskin, layers, and layers, and layers.

Skin is an envelope that contains the organs, soft tissues, fluids, and holds us together; we can choose what we include to be inside our skin. In my poem *Touch Manifesto* I write: "Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones, your neurons, your cells and sequences," meaning that all touches are recognised by the body, since the skin as a boundary is porous. In the resulting performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* of my practice-research, we can choose what we take in and what we take part in. During the performance, audience is invited to collect pages in the order they wish to form their own book, novel, or bundle of medicine. The pages of the book represent the different parts of the performance and can work as memories of the experience. I give an opportunity for audience members to get a symbol of permanent touch on their bodies, a small point of a tattoo that is done by my collaborator and performance partner Katarina Huber during the performance. It becomes a symbol of the accumulation and permanence of touch.

In my previous written work, a Master's thesis for Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts entitled *Noticing Power Relations when Teaching Touch in Contact Improvisation*, I talk about touch as the first sense and companion of movement; touch and movement support each other ^(Kukkonen 2021). This means that being touched is never a passive experience; nor is watching a performance about touch passive as it might activate processes in the bodyminds of the audience. In the performance, Katarina and I use movement to make the effects of touch visible.

Intra-action is a term I use when talking about touch. It describes the encounter between two or more entities where agency, the ability to act, emerges—"the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" ^(Barad n.d.) according to feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad. In intra-action, the change takes place inside both together; there is no separation.

¹ Derives from responsibility with the different spelling highlighting one's ability to respond. "When electrons meet each other 'halfway,' when they intra-act with one another, when they touch one another, whom or what do they touch?—In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability (Barad n.d.)."



Collection. 2022.



Above: *Holding 1. 2022.*
Below: *Holding 2. 2022.*

Do I talk about violence or care? Do I show the negotiation of consent and give examples or do I bring forward trauma-activating stories? In *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway argues that “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges... It matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 2016). In *Take This Touch Inside Your Body*, I bring forward the care, the safety, and the accrual of safety rather than the trauma, and show how I got there.

We come to existence by touching. “By rubbing against the world, I define myself to myself” (Juhan 2003). Author and bodyworker Deane Juhan writes that there is no one-way touch; it always contains both directions. In the work of Barad, the binaries of active-passive, leader-follower, and subject-object are dissolved with the wording of intra-action and response-ability. Touch happens inside things—matter, discourse, and bodies. According to Barad, “Touching is a matter of response. Each of us is constituted in response-ability. Each of us is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other” (Barad n.d.). In this rewriting of responsibility, something more queer, chaotic, mutual, and messier can happen. Response-ability makes space for courage and bravery (Beaulieux 2019).

I invite you to touch, to witness, and to enter. My invitation demands your response. I want to organise spaciousness and clarity around decisions. In a performance with an audience, my invitation implies time and clarity for them to know what is expected. Contact improvisation dancer and teacher Nancy Stark-Smith said that “[t]ension masks sensation” (Koteen and Smith 2021); I wish to create space where tension can be freed for more sensation.

Listening Consent—Gathering Trust

Inside the movement practice, Katarina and I establish safety and accountability. We have decided to stay with the trouble and keep connected even if mistakes happen. Philosopher and artist Erin Manning writes about reaching out, already asking the other to “become a medium of expression... This multidimensional movement of desire is violent, for it presupposes a certain demand, a decision, an instance of response-ability” (Manning 2007). Manning emphasises that as we reach to touch, we touch what the other will become in the process of the touch. Reaching to touch is a risk—relating to the unexpected with someone we don’t know,

connecting the boundaries of skin to the shared unknown. The title picture of Melanie Bonajo’s video installation *When the Body Says Yes* is a screenshot² of many people spooning each other, in layers. I connect this image with my work’s aim to show the layering of touch, how all its sedimentations are still there, seeping through the layers. Another connection my performance has with Bonajo’s work is the topic of touch, consent, and the understanding that we, as humans, are lost in knowing what we want; we don’t dare to ask even when we know. In both Bonajo’s work and my own, the audience reflects on their own experiences of touch by seeing the performers go through processes of negotiation and interaction.

Author Brené Brown writes about trust, shame, and leadership. In her book *Daring Greatly*, she tells a story about a jar of marbles collected in relationships with people and how every little moment of connection either puts more marbles in the jar or takes them away (Brown 2015). Trust accumulates in small actions and moments and needs time; all of it can be taken away with one action.

Balancing Between Waves of Excitement and Walls of Resistance

Am I writing about waves, weight, and gravity? Intuition and gravity pull, push towards something, letting things fall in their places, like books on a floor. Books fall. Do words fall in their places? Cycles, patience, listening to the weight, listening to the rhythm. With relaxation, weight, knowing when to take the wave—not too early, not too late. Having the energy to fall when it’s the right moment, the right place for it. In a dance, the strength of the pull, pushing towards something, moves us forward.

Resistance makes up the landscape in which the flow of a river can run; it gives shape and structure for the waves, the flow, and the excitation. Boundaries create friction; I can feel my body of water, my body of excitement rub on my surroundings. If there would be no walls, the waters would spill all over the landscape.

My methodology for this creative process has been to follow waves of excitement and intuition in a sustainable way. To feel the waves, I practice improvisation, playplay³, listening, patience, rest, somatic movement practices (especially authentic movement), and Body-Mind Centering®, a movement and therapy approach to embodiment using movement, touch, voice, and mind (Hartley 1995).

² *When the Body Says Yes* is a video installation by Melanie Bonajo shown at the Venice Biennale 2022.

³ Playplay is a word created by the artist group pupucollective as a reaction to the terms from the sex-positive scene that are made by connecting a word to the word “play” e.g. fire play, bondage play, pet play. Playplay is based on free association, following intuition, improvisation, and joy.

I have also introduced alternative methods to my process, as I have been drawing for the first time in my work, doing automatic writing, layering images, and writing poetry to accumulate pages and make connections visible.

I felt the flow and weight of intuition in choosing my mentors and collaborators for this project. How I found Katarina to be my collaborator and a mentor was especially magical. In September 2021, they opened a sex-positive space called Spektrum Reykjavík which offers space for rope practice, yoga, bodywork, healing, and relational work. I contacted Katarina and felt a pull toward them right away. I appreciate the way they communicate their needs and are open to hear mine, which informs the groundedness of our work together.

We meet regularly to practice and to have conversations. Our meetings start by checking in and end with checking out. In these sessions, one person speaks and the other listens without interrupting. This helps to acknowledge the feelings that are present, which enables us to concentrate on what is happening in our moment of encounter and practice. Before each movement or touch session, we negotiate boundaries and wishes for touch and distance. We work with different themes, topics, and timeframes.

Throughout this year, we have organised and taught workshops about hugging, pain, and the spectrums of touch. This work has woven into the performance process as a gathering of trust, experiences, and knowledge. In the performance project, Katarina's role is to perform and support, providing time and conversation by bringing their own professional and personal experiences about healing and energy work, touch, and consent. I have assumed the role of driving force as the project is part of my studies in the MFA in Performing Arts. My role is to organise and plan the meetings and keep the project moving forward.

I use the concept of praxis to explore the permanence of touch. I practice different theories of intra-action and response-ability as well as practices of consent and communication in movement and in the performance. The practice itself is theory, creates theory, and is not separate from it (Nelson 2006).

The images I chose to support this text are shot as video underwater by Dan Farberoff; I manipulated screenshots to fade out the element of water. The images present one side of the process, how an experienced reality differs from the story of an image. These pictures show the effect of touch as energy on the body, even though the situation of filming was not similar compared to when Katarina and I met in the studio to move. In a still image, what remains visible from the original experience? Words can change the experience of seeing an image of an experience, and the experience of seeing touch can be changed with words.

Letting Go

I discovered the non-ephemeral attribute of touch and the accumulation of that permanence through my praxis. This accumulation and permanence are found in the layers and cycles of meanings that are present in our bodies through experienced touch. I believe performance can reveal the accumulation of touch and open the process of what's happening inside of a bodymind. The means can be various, but I believe primarily in creating spaces that allow multiple ways of being while creating space for myself as a performer. As I can't control what happens inside of other people, I can only give impulses, meet them halfway, and trust they make the same journey towards me or, in this case, the performance. For me, it's about letting go of judgements and helping others do it as well.

I wish to make clear that sensing, or seeing a performance is active, like being touched is actively receiving. In performance, through experiments, it's possible to get closer to that with attention. Together, we can create a laboratory-like space where we look at social behaviour, where there is time to feel what is happening in-between of us and inside our bodies. In the performance, I want to show mistakes, that it's okay to be messy and chaotic. It's about practicing together.

In the performance, I show the negotiation of touch as a way of keeping the process open and transparent. Through this process of writing, I become aware of the meanings of words and how they affect everything. In the performance situation, the kind of verbal cues I use likewise affects the experience of the audience.

I poke around structures that give me safety; I test what I need in order to stay response-able. I enjoy having a space where I can relax to the unknown, not be in a state of panic, and yet, riding the wave. This year of working on a project on touch has been important for me, as I have built up trust in myself and gathered self-confidence. I am aiming to accrue a sustainable way to work with art and performance, and I have realised this could be possible when I connect projects with life, meaning, giving importance to what is already happening in life and making that part of the process.

Touch is a pillow; we are under piles of touch. Opening and closing skin, breathing, porous boundaries. I want to see an increase in awareness of touch in others and to nerd about it more myself. Touch accumulates. Touch shows my boundaries. Connecting with others makes me me. I respond, act, react, and intra-act differently according to who I am with. Being in touch with my environment affects me-waves, me-weight, and me-gravity.

My Gentle Manifesto

Wearing clothes for the weather is ok
Sitting on the floor is ok
Staying home is ok
Going out is ok
Taking time is ok
Being here is ok
Noticing, no, yes,
Using simple words to say complicated thoughts,
and using complicated words to say simple
thoughts.

To get out of breath is ok
To make mistakes is ok
Noticing, no, yes,
Not reacting anymore, yet responding still,
Never staying still.

Still is ok
Being amazing is ok
Shining is ok
Taking space is ok
Being brilliant is ok
Using magnificent words for small things,
noticing there are no small things.

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Acknowledgements

In intra-action, conversations, and collaborations with (not in any particular order): Katarina Huber, Dan Farberoff, Synes Elischka and Vilma Riitijoki (pupucollective), Angela Rawlings, Mart Piirimees, Kerly Ritval, Brogan Davison, Meeri Mäkinen, Nita Little, Helga Arnalds, the Atlantic Ocean, whales I haven't seen but I know exist, trauma therapy, Contact Improvisation community, the war in Ukraine, Covid-19, Instagram, loneliness, aloneness, Tinder, bad dates, good dates, lovers, the best kiss, Improv Enthusiasts, pools especially Nautholsvík.

Original photos by Dan Farberoff.

Bio Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir (Vala) has been working as a dancer and a choreographer since graduating from the National Academy of the Arts in Norway in 1998. Among others, she has worked with choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Damien Jalet, and Erna Ómarsdóttir on various projects and toured with their work around the world. Vala was also a member of The Icelandic Dance Company for years and has been actively working within the independent dance scene in Iceland. She has choreographed for the Icelandic Dance Company (ID), Reykjavík Dance Festival (RDF), and The Reykjavík City Theater, to name a few. Her latest choreographic works are *Derringur*, a project choreographed with children in four places around Iceland and *Abbababb*, a musical film for children, which will be released later this year. Vala has twice received the Icelandic Theatre Award for her choreography. She is currently occupied with the aging body and how to bring dance back to life.

Words

Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir

Essay

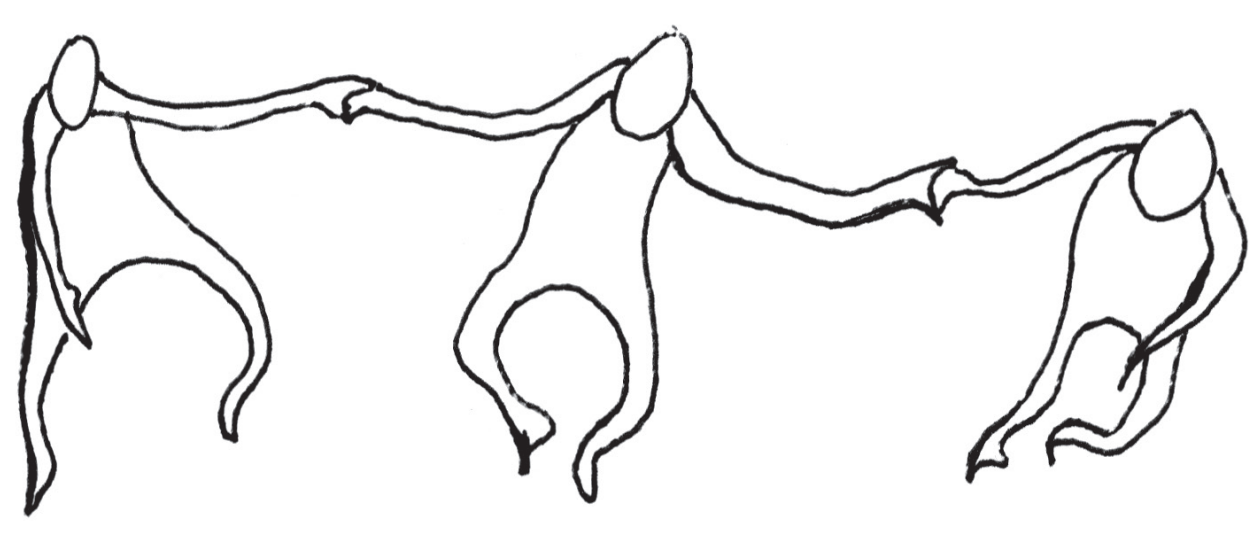
Let's Dance —until your Last Dance

What are you going to do when you retire from dancing?

I started to get this question long before I had even begun working as a professional dancer. Forty has often been considered the age limit for dancers in the field of contemporary dance in Western society. That threshold has always been in the back of my head, even though I was sure I would dance, long as I had the passion for it. Then, after I turned forty—and was still passionate about my dancing—those thoughts came again to my mind. I looked around and realised that many professional dancers had disappeared from the professional dance scene. Where did they go? Did they all stop dancing?

Stop dancing? Will I stop dancing? When will I dance my last dance? What if we don't stop dancing? Is it possible that we might be happier and live longer if we don't stop dancing?

When my mother, Lára, took her own life at the age of fifty-eight, the world completely changed for me. Suddenly, my closest person on earth was gone and was never coming back. For days, weeks, and months, this was a nightmare from which I hoped to wake up. I found it ridiculous that life continued like nothing had happened; buses kept their schedules, stores were open, and people would go to work, parties, and cafés. When the



phone rang, I hoped it was her calling me. The following months and even years later, I sometimes thought I could see her in the audience when I was on stage performing. This loss was a complete shock for my system and changed my view on life.

My mother struggled with her physical and mental health and wasn't able to cope. I remember trying to get her out of the house to move, just for a short walk around the neighbourhood, or even just in the garden, without succeeding. I believed that if we would make it out there, she would feel better. But this was a difficult task and she didn't make it far from her house those last months. This experience has made me think from a different perspective about movement and dancing—and how movement affects us. I strongly believe dance can be healing and people will be happier in life if they dance.

Movement and simple physical training have, of course, for long been considered a key factor to maintain good physical and mental health. The Directorate of Health in Iceland has published ten pieces of advice to maintain good mental health. Two of these ten advise to “[m]ove daily, it lightens the mood” and “[k]eep on learning as long as you live” (Landlækni, 2014). I believe dancing is an excellent way to stay active and maintain your physical and mental health in good balance.

In the 1940s, Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) emerged for the purpose of improving health and well-being (Association, 2020). Although studies on DMT are relatively new, this approach is not new to the human race. Throughout history, dancing has been part of rituals all over the world and was already used for healing very early in human history. It has been used for celebrations and in rituals for transitions such as birth, death, puberty, and marriage.

Why did we stop dancing and when are we going to start again?

Vikivaki, the traditional Icelandic social dance, is a circle dance performed in a large group along with singing. The dancing itself is rather simple and the main focus is on the singing. The dance was first mentioned in *Crymogæa* in the early sixteenth century, so it has been assumed that Vikivaki was at least in the Icelandic culture from as early as the fifteenth century. In the centuries that followed, the church ran an organised campaign against dancing, as it was seen as the seed of the devil, related to sexuality, bad behaviour, and drinking. The interference from the church is thought to be the main reason why Vikivaki died out in Iceland in the late seventeenth century (Guðmundsdóttir, 2009).

After this violence against dance and finally its death in Icelandic culture, it was kept alive through storytelling. Those stories are usually about the forbidden dance and its hedonistic influence. One example, *The Dance in Hruna*, revolves around a Christmas dance in Hruni held by the priest of Hruna. Una, the mother of the priest, tries to bring

an end to the dancing without succeeding. She goes to get help but, as she exits the church, she meets the devil, who speaks:

Hátt lætur í Hruna
hirðir þann bruna
svo skal dansinn duna
að drengir megi það muna
Enn er hún Una
og enn er hún Una (Sveinsson, 1944)

When Una comes back, the church has disappeared into the earth with everyone inside of it who was dancing. Apparently, if you listen carefully, you may still hear the howling from the earth. There are also stories associated with elves and hidden people who kept the memory of dance alive in the Icelandic culture. In those stories, these parallel worlds represent the free spirit with their moving bodies.

I'm sure that the death of dance in Iceland has had a subconscious effect on how people see dance and movement in our society. Through centuries, Icelanders grew into a strong literary nation and the written word became a powerful cultural force. One might assume that kinaesthetic knowledge was left in the shadow of this strong force.

But why has dancing been considered so dangerous? Why have authorities throughout history been so afraid of those uncontrollable and unpredictable bodies? Dancing is still prohibited in some countries, nine in total, mostly on religious terms but also to prevent “chaos” like in Sweden, of all places. There, “spontaneous dance” is not allowed; bars can apply for special permission, but this law has been in use since the 1930s (Bosque, 2022). This makes me think about what kind of activism dancing can perform. Dancing activates; it has the ability to move people and people can be moved by it. This might be what authorities have been and, in some places are still, afraid of—that people are unpredictable and in control of their own actions; they are free, and they can do anything. Like Pina Bausch once said, “I'm not interested in how people move but what moves them” (pinabausch.org, n.d.).

I believe we are finally recovering from the long-lasting violence against moving bodies in Iceland. There are a few pioneers who have done incredible work to bring dancing to the people. There are too many to name them all, but I would like to point out the work of Hafdís Árnadóttir. She is the owner and driving force behind Kramhúsið, a multi-cultural dance house in Reykjavík. She started teaching dance sixty years ago and is still giving classes a few times a week to some of the same ladies who started taking her classes more than half a century ago. Kramhúsið is a moving powerhouse, which offers diverse cultural dance classes for people of all ages, attracting and empowering them through dance. In the book *Kramhúsið, orkustöð í miðbænum*, Hafdís explains the need for physical classes when she first started teaching. “We were a few that started school at



the time for example; Bárá Magnúsdóttir og Sóley Jóhannsdóttir, because the demand was enormous. There were no aerobics or gyms at the time in Reykjavík, and tired mothers were desperate to go out when the kids were in bed to dance in the evenings (Björnsdóttir, 2014).”

Now in her eighties, Hafdís is still creating a venue and environment where people can incorporate dance in their everyday routines. Through my research, I’ve interviewed her and been to her classes, which were just as challenging for me as for those older ladies in their eighties; it gave me a sore body the next day. Despite her age, Hafdís is still going full steam ahead. She remains a big inspiration, an ongoing study of dance and life itself, still dancing and learning.

To reflect life in the arts, we should present all the colours of the spectrum: different shapes, ages, sizes, genders, and racial identities of human beings. If not, we’re in danger of creating a small, limited window into the world. Fergus Early, an older professional dancer, wrote in his essay *The Beauty of Reality: Older Professional Dancers* to

[i]magine a novelist limiting her or himself to writing only about young people between the age 18 and 35, each character weighing not more than 60 kilos (woman) or 80 kilos (man) (Early, 2013).

This is not only seen within the dance scene; after actresses reach their middle age, we see them appear much less within theatre and films. Western film history has been dominated by male directors, so stories have mainly been told through the eyes of men.

The history of professional dance in Iceland is very short and the only existing professional dance company, Iceland Dance Company (ID), was established in 1973 (id.is, n.d.). Through the years, most of the company’s dancers have been young and athletic, although recently things seem to be diversifying. The latest ID production, *BALL* (2022) by Ásrún Magnúsdóttir and Alexander Roberts, has a much greater variety of dancers, who come from different dance backgrounds and have a wide age range, from twelve to eighty. This is a nice transformation towards a less youth-oriented environment within stage performance.

When we look at Western modern dance history, we can find an interesting and dramatic relationship between aging and moving. After choreographer and dance pioneer Martha Graham last danced on stage at the age of seventy-six, she went through a deep depression from not dancing and seeing young athletic dancers dancing her choreography, which she had danced before with her husband.

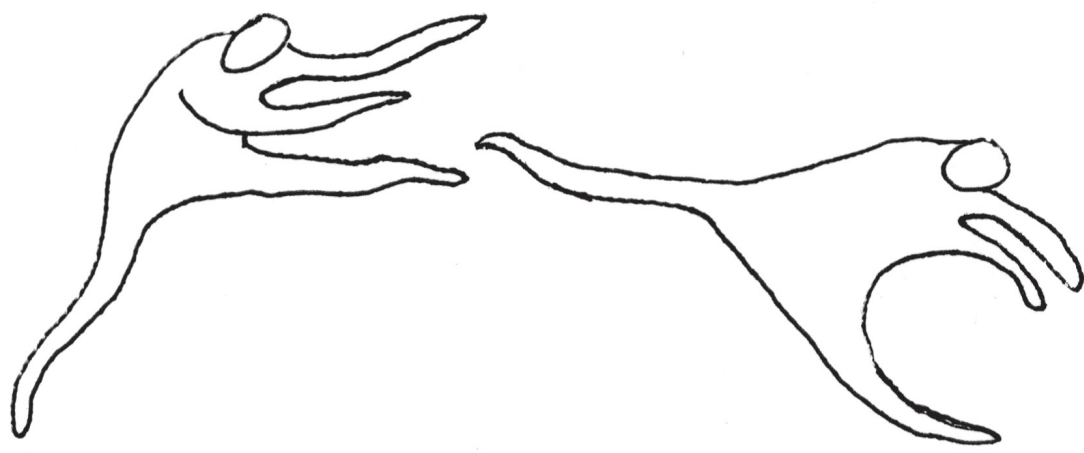
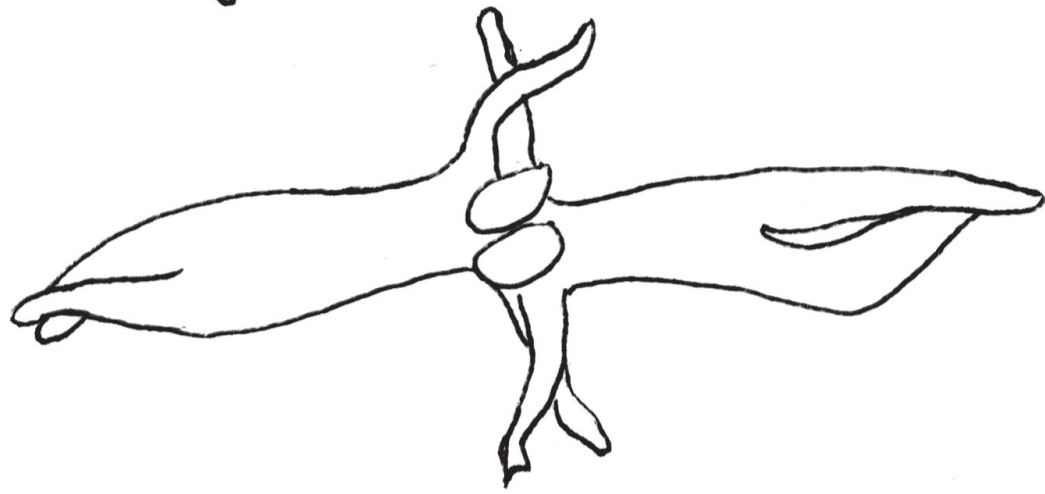
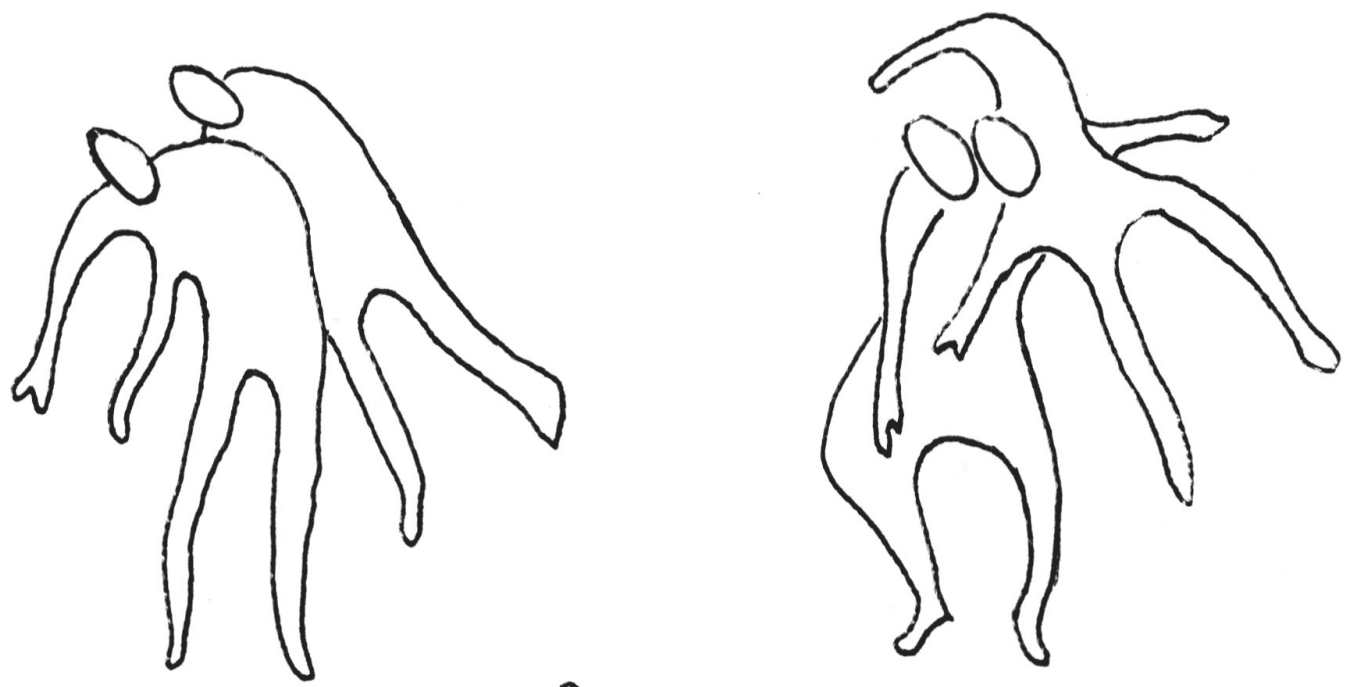
I had lost my will to live. I stayed home alone, ate very little and drank too much and brooded. My face was ruined, and people say I looked odd, which I agreed

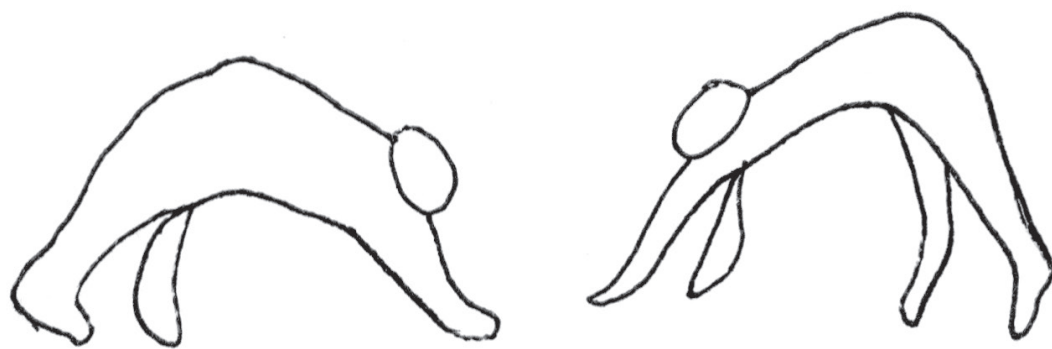
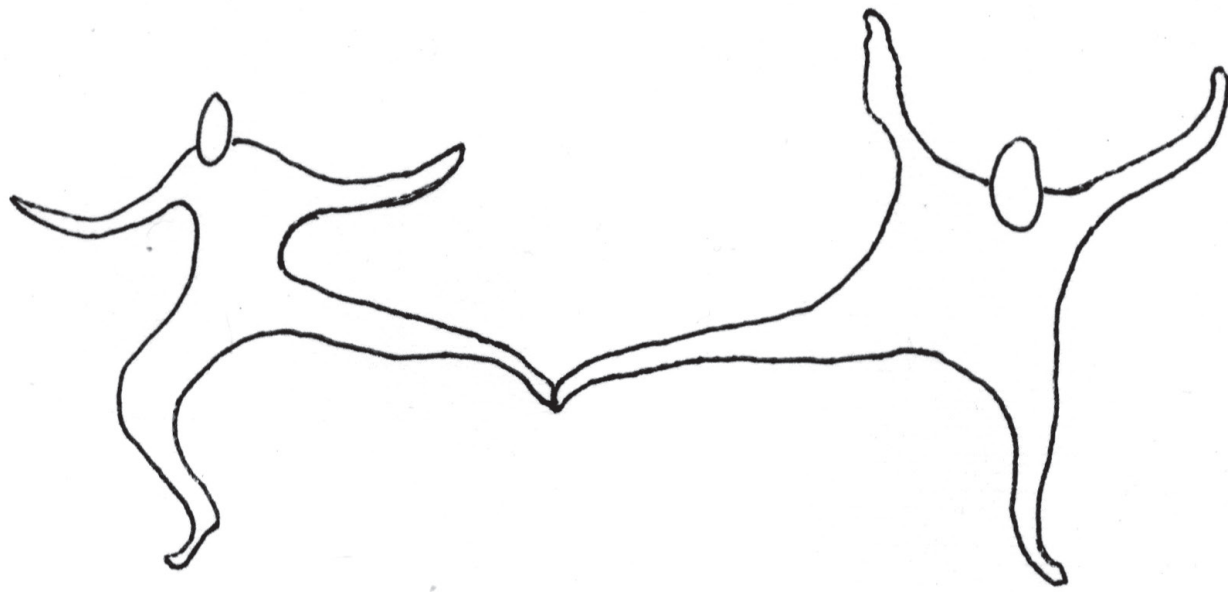
with. Finally, my system just gave in. I was in the hospital for a long time, much of it in a coma (Graham, 1991).

For me, this shows clearly that moving helps to maintain mental health and it’s also not less important for people to keep on doing what they love doing. It would be interesting to look deeper into the mental health of dancers when they stop dancing in their middle age. It seems often to be a complete shock to their physical and mental systems through both the lack of movement and stopping something that they have been doing their whole lives and, maybe in some cases, giving up something that they are not ready to give up.

Choreographers who perform their own work, like Martha Graham did, are in a different position from dancers who only perform other people’s choreography. The performing choreographer usually has a longer active, on-stage career as the power of casting is often in their hands. It’s worth mentioning a few other female artists who worked with dance their whole lives, created a big volume of work, and in which they performed way past their “prime years.” Pina Bausch, Trisha Brown, and Mary Wigman are all extremely important female artists and great pioneers within Western dance history. Another important thinker and artist, Anna Halprin, worked within dance until she died at the age of one hundred. She dedicated her whole life to dance and its healing power by addressing social issues and connecting people to nature: “I want to integrate life and art so that as our art expands our life deepens and as our life deepens our art expands” (annahalprin.org, 2016). I wonder if it had something to do with her moving body and her approach to life that she lived this long.

For the last decades, numerous choreographers and dance groups have celebrated diversity and developed work with casts of different ages and from different backgrounds. So hopefully this is slowly changing, and dancers who want to keep on dancing and performing will have the chance to do so. Some countries have been developing DMT, using the power of dance for public health. The UK leads this field in Europe, as it boasts programs such as “Dancing for people living with Parkinson’s,” which is a new initiative to strengthen the role that dance plays in improving health and well-being (Dancing, 2022). This seems to be a great way to activate people who are struggling with illnesses and to give an inspiration to older bodies and minds, where dancing is used as a healing process and to maintain physical function and social activity. Not only can dance be healing, but dance can also nourish the body and spirit. People can experience a different connection to oneself and others through dancing. It’s a different kind of communication than people might be used to. Within dance lies a knowledge that cannot be expressed through verbal or written language.





The Dance Ambassador of Iceland?

Throughout my career, I've been equally occupied with dancing in big productions around the world and doing projects in Iceland. The projects in Iceland have been of all sorts—choreographing for theatre productions, Icelandic Dance Company, films, commercials, students, and doing my own work onstage and offstage. I've created performances in small fishing villages where the local people have been encouraged to participate as performers in the work. I've also worked a lot with children in small towns around Iceland where I've given classes and given children the opportunity to create their own dance work under my supervision. I think I've always been drawn to work with different groups and not only professional performers. I've been exploring ways of communicating movement and finding different ways to encourage people to move and dance.

Maybe it's been a subconscious action, to bring dance back to life, to make it a part of our everyday life. I always try to find dance in everyday moments, to see those hidden choreographies that are all around us, to see the world dancing. I never felt that I had any specific working method but maybe it is exactly this, that I am doing all those different things and spreading the dance vibes back into the national spirit. Jokingly, I was asked if I was going to become The Dance Ambassador of Iceland, but after giving it serious thought, I think that's a brilliant idea. So maybe I will.

When I started the MFA program, I wanted to go through my movement vocabulary and body memory from all my years of dancing, basically since I was born. I had planned to work on a solo project as I've never created solo work. But then I thought there must be a reason for me never having worked on a solo, as I get so much more out of working with other people and creating work with a group. Since I was at this turning point, around forty, and those thoughts came back to my mind about the relationship between age and dancing, it became the main focus of my research. I had a strong urge to work with people of older ages. I conducted some interviews with dancers of all ages, including retired dancers. I also held meetings with two of my favourite performers: Árni Pétur Guðjónsson in his sixties and Harpa Arnardóttir in her fifties. We had

wonderful discussions about aging and moving and shared improvisation from those discussions.

Lately I've offered free dance classes to seniors in Reykjavík which has also been such an inspirational journey. I've been extremely fascinated by those people of older ages who are dancing, to realise how dancing affects their quality of life and increases their lust for life. This has been an exploration where I've been able to deepen my understanding of movement and how to communicate this knowledge even further. I guess this is a never-ending journey, ongoing research for The Dance Ambassador of Iceland.

I believe I'm one of the lucky ones, as dancing became my passion, obsession, and, later, my profession. Through the years of working as a dancer and a choreographer, I've learned to listen more to my body and develop my physical understanding through my history of movement and dance. I've learned that whenever I don't move for some time, my body becomes weaker. Then, in some instances, I've injured myself. I've gained an understanding that movement/dance is required for my physical and mental health. I'm addicted to dance; it's part of who I am. I'm happier, more movable, more flexible towards life in general when I'm able to dance and stay in good physical health. I believe I'm a better mother, lover, friend, daughter, artist, living human being when I move and listen to the needs of my body.

It's a gift to be here, to be able to participate in this journey, to be a part of this flow, this life cycle. It's also a great gift to be able to grow older; the lucky ones are the ones who grow old being happy. I get the chance to grow grey hairs, to experience the body changing from being younger to older, and I am lucky enough to meet all the challenges that life offers. By allowing ourselves to connect to our bodies through dance, we are more in control over our bodies. We are in power. Through this, we might grow happier as we age. Who knows? Through this, we might even become more in tune with the universe and possibly become a better society. We can't know when we will dance our last dance in this life. We might as well keep on dancing, enjoy every dance we dance, and dance it like it would be our last.

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Bio

Helga Arnalds is an award-winning cross-disciplinary artist based in Reykjavík, Iceland practicing across the boundaries of performance, visual theatre, and installation. Her work often focuses on the animation of materials, the inner sensing of both performer and audience, and *The Process of Magical Metabolism* in the creative journey engaging with all of the senses. Helga holds a BA in Fine Arts from the Icelandic University of Arts, and a BA in Puppet Theatre from Instituto del Teatro in Barcelona. She has developed an internationally recognised body of visual-theatre work which tours extensively in Europe and Asia. Her stage works include group performances *The Girl who stopped the World* (2021), *LIFE a Mudpie* (2015), and *With Naked Eye* (2010), as well as solo performances *The Monster my little Sister* (2012), and *Leif the Lucky* (2001). Helga is a certified trainer in the method of “Focusing” developed by Eugene Gendlin, a process grounded in experiential listening and interacting with innate bodily felt knowing. Helga is the founder and artistic director of 10 Fingers Visual Theatre. She is also a co-founding member of — JustArt— an artist-initiated production and research platform in Aarhus, Denmark—and Big Body—a network of artists and scholars from the Nordic countries working in the field of visual/performing arts and environmental philosophy, which also organises public gatherings for knowledge exchange.
www.the10fingers.com
www.justartworks.org

Words

Helga Arnalds

Essay

The Nature in Everything

We think more than we can say.
We feel more than we can think.
We live more than we can feel.
And there is much more still.

(Gendlin, 1971)

Connecting the External and the Internal

My background is originally in puppet theatre and later in visual arts. The core of puppeteering is giving an inanimate object soul (anima) through manipulating or “animating.” The object does not have to be a puppet. It can also be a shoe, book, or even materials like soil, sand, or water. In essence, being a puppeteer is an approach

to materials. It is a way of transforming and giving them new meanings and ultimately bringing them to life.

In my MFA in artistic research, I have continued working with materials, increasing focus on the sensorial experience. When working with natural materials, I have been curious to explore if it is possible to bring into the performing space the same deep, sensorial experience that people sometimes have in nature. I have researched what is needed to create the conditions for the audience to connect with the nature within themselves, allowing a different approach to reality through the materials with which they are engaged.



This creates a space where they can dwell in their senses and imaginations with the material.

My final project, *Inasand...*, is an interactive participatory piece for adults, a sense-making experience of collaborative creativity activating the senses. The project becomes a space where researching, experiencing, and interpreting are brought directly to the audience, connecting the external and internal through the sand.

Seeing like Sand

Environmental philosophers have been studying how people interact with nature, looking in various ways at how people experience and value the natural environment. I use the term “nature” and “environment” in parallel, aware of the theories that have pointed out that the idea of nature as a romantic idea, a wilderness, a place we go to can get in our way of really connecting with the natural environment. The environmental philosopher Stephen Vogel encourages the reader in his book *Thinking like a Mall* (2015) to give up the concept of nature. He argues this “might actually mean an improvement in the quality and rigor of our thinking about the human relationship to the environment we inhabit” (Vogel 2015, 9).¹

In the Icelandic language, the word *náttúra* / *nature* has several meanings. It is both representing the natural environment, the nature of things, and also *libido* or sexual desire. To be *náttúrulaus* is to have no nature or to be *impotent*. I find it interesting to see how the natural environment is, in this way, connected in our understanding to the creative force within us, without “nature,” we are “impotent.” Further to this, Iceland-based philosophers Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir and Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir suggest that “instead of not using ‘nature’ as a term we should stop thinking about nature as a concept and as a physical reality outside of us, and rather focus on sensing and experiencing nature from within our bodies.” They point out that “this is perhaps the only way for us to understand ourselves as natural beings that are a part of the Earth’s ecosystems” (Jóhannesdóttir, Þorgeirsdóttir 2015, 41).

A few years ago, I had a deep, hard-to-define experience in a theatre setting, watching the dance-theatre piece *Han-e og Hun-d* by Aaben dans theater group in Denmark, directed by Catherine Poher. At one point while watching the performance, I sensed the whole history of evolution happening in my body. In a split second, I understood viscerally how everything from the first cell of life to what was happening in front of me came together inside me and how everything everywhere is connected. I got curious about what precisely evoked this embedded experience and it stuck with me as a question to pursue in artistic research contexts.

According to the philosopher Ronald Hepburn, ‘metaphysical imagination’ is a part of aesthetic experiences allowing one to see things from a bigger perspective for which one lacks the words or concepts (Hepburn 2004, 128). Hepburn’s metaphysical imagination could throw light on my experience during the dance theatre performance and how the notion of the connectedness of all life is embedded in our cells. When realising the cells contain the story, it becomes real—not just something outside of you.

American ecologist and philosopher David Abram argues in *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* that humans have for thousands of generations viewed themselves as part of nature, and related not only with other people but with animals, plants, and natural elements such as mountains, rivers, winds, and weather patterns. It is only in some recent cultures that these natural elements have been considered “inanimate.”

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese... We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human (Abram 1997, 35).

The non-human environment is talking to us all the time, yet we have forgotten how to listen. Can we retrain ourselves in hearing the subtle whispers in the animated world around us?

New Zealand artist Kate McIntosh works across the boundaries of performance, theatre, and installation in her participatory theatre piece, *In many hands*. The audience participates in a game, sitting at a long table side by side, passing objects to each other—bird skulls, stones, feathers, etc. reflecting each participant’s body, skin, hands, sense of smell, and their connection with the natural environment (McIntosh 2017). This kind of work gives an opportunity for a different view of the world than the usual anthropomorphic.

Robin Wall Kimmerer proposes through a mixture of science and indigenous ways of knowing how people may learn to live and think differently through communicating with something often not noticed and taken for granted—moss.

[I]f there’s anything that I’ve learned from the woods, it’s that there is no pattern without meaning. To find it, I needed to try and see like moss and not like a human (Kimmerer 2003, 76).

1 There Vogel is reacting to the ideas of one of the pioneers of environmental philosophy Aldo Leopold to “*Think like a Mountain*” (Leopold 1).







The Danish-Icelandic artist Ólafur Elíasson was working with similar ideas to Kimmerer in his artwork *Riverbed*, filling an entire wing of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark with stones, forming a riverbed. In an interview with RUV, The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, he commented, “Outside we take nature for granted. And when we take it for granted it is like we don’t see it” (Elíasson 2014).

Learning ways to listen becomes increasingly important and the arts can be a powerful tool for translating the concept of nature as solely outside of ourselves as we can see through Poher’s, McIntosh’s, and Elíasson’s art and hopefully mine, too. For me there is a conjunction between the animated materials and the animated Earth, and I wish to create a space of illogical timelessness where we can think like sand sensing its real logic.

Process of Magical Metabolism

For the last three years, I have been learning techniques to contact the knowledge of the body, often difficult to put into words. These techniques are borne from the “Philosophy of the Implicit” developed by philosopher Eugene Gendlin—Focusing and Thinking at the Edge (TAE). Focusing is the practice of inviting a bodily felt sense to form bringing with it symbols or meaning inaccessible to us until connecting with the body. TAE is a set of steps to develop a fresh use of language and a new kind of theory to speak about something in one’s field.

During my research, I came up with the theory of the Space of Illogical Timelessness (SIT)—a creative space where everything is possible with no pre-determined ideas, opinions, critiques, or time pressure. It is an inner condition—a conscious space of daydreaming. The first step is to focus on what the body brings you as implicit knowing. What came to me was a memory of myself as a child and my deep understanding of daydreaming.

The next TAE step is to open up the language and find out what I really meant with the word “daydreaming,” as I noticed that I did not mean the standard definitions of the word. I could sense that what I knew as a child was not to avoid reality or escape from the present but to sit still and be completely in my senses, resting in a space of not knowing. In later TAE steps, the term *Process of Magical Metabolism* came to me when finding words in my private dictionary. According to my new SIT theory, the Magical Metabolism is the creative process that happens inside the Space of Illogical Timelessness. This is a metabolism just like the splitting of a cell. The cell is a part of a larger whole with its own built-in laws and logic, just like the creation of an artwork. We can trust that what is created is exactly what was supposed to be the outcome of the creative metabolism. This is the space from which I create.

Embodied Critical Thinking

Alongside with my artistic research, I have been attending an interdisciplinary program *Embodied Critical Thinking* (TECT), organised by the Univer-

sity of Iceland, the University of Ljubljana, and the University of Groningen. The program introduces various methods of situated thinking in an environmental context. According to neurobiologist Francisco Varela, science cannot rely solely on the study of cerebral activity to understand the functioning of the mind. Claire Petitmengin, a researcher and philosopher, developed a Micro Phenomenology interviewing system enabling researchers in cognitive science to collect fine-grained descriptions of lived experience (Petitmengin n.d.). In the appendix *The nature of Nature*, you can read a short excerpt from a micro-phenomenological interview using Petitmengin’s system, conducted between Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir and me on my experience of sketching while walking in the woods in North Iceland. Through the interview, I realised that I had been searching for ways to bring this kind of sensory experience in a natural environment into my creative work for some time.

When working alone in the studio, I am in the roles of performer and witness at the same time, sometimes using video documentation. I have been making small video performances using clay and choreography, based on the methods of Matteo Fargion. Together with Lior Soltz, an MA student in music composition, we made improvised music and visual performance poetry working with paper, ink, water, movement, and shadows. I have noticed a certain development in my work for the last ten years with the aim to not tell, not explain, only hint and sketch so that the audience can ‘draw.’ First when starting to use materials⁽²⁰¹¹⁾, I went from the figurative to the more abstract. Then with the performance LIFE⁽²⁰¹⁵⁾, I proceeded from narrative storytelling to the more visual /poetic, non-verbal form, and now in these studies more into performance art as with Matteo Fargion and Michikazu Matsune. I took that further in the collaboration with Lior, adding corporeal listening in an improvised performance piece. Now in my final piece, I am taking the next step forward, removing the performers from the stage and leaving the material alone in the spotlight.

The Logic of Sand

When I was a child, my father often filmed my sister and me with his 8 mm. camera. For years, these films have been inaccessible for technical reasons, a bit like my father’s own memories are gradually becoming out of reach to him. I wanted to work with these images and memories and started by transferring the material to a digital format (another kind of magical metabolism). I was drawn to a sequence my dad had taken of my sister, my mother, and me playing in the sand on the beach in Holland. I processed the sequence in an endless loop like a memory that goes through my mind again and again. I remember this trip to Holland as a journey full of first-time experiences—first time abroad, first time fresh strawberries, first time pizza, first time train, first time beach and bath in the sea. When I was working on the videos, I felt that

I wanted to invite viewers into this world of memories and perceptions with their own memories. I realised that the sand had to come out of the video and become tangible. I used the Focusing technique to sense into the work. I felt that listening from the space, standing outside of the work, and dwelling inside of the experience of it helped me to let go of what I was trying to say. Instead, I listened to what the work was saying. From there I could simplify, being present rather than explaining. In the end, the work is very open for the receiver. My memories from the beach are not the main focus; instead, the experience of the beach is brought to each individual.

The sand is placed in a black-box theatre with light and soundscape. The audience is invited to engage with the material in silence, creating a state of playful waves in the mind, wandering together with pre-sensing, bringing awareness into the body. People come together and experiment with their own senses, dwelling in close contact with natural materials, allowing themselves to sense the imagination that is deeply rooted in their bodies and hopefully hearing the subtle whispers in the animated world. I was pleased to hear some generous comments from participants that indicated that my experiments were heading in the right direction: "I was experiencing the unexplainable;" "... I was more focused than I have been in the last month in that half an hour, in my body, in myself, aware, listening, all my senses were really activated;" and "You are doing the work that needs to be done in the time of climate crisis. How are we relating when there are wars going on? How do we really focus our attention in non-normative ways?"

The Girl with Blue Hair

To do artistic research feels to me like sitting with and re-sensing myself. Through my work with Focusing and TAE, I am realising that a five-year-old daydreaming girl with blue hair has been accompanying me in all my creative work. She knew how to lay and look up at the sky totally still until she turned into a cloud. I have not been aware of her presence for many years. Now listening inside her space of illogical timelessness, I understand more clearly the real logic: how to merge with my surroundings. How to be a plant or a cloud. With that motionlessness knowing, I feel I am moved forward. In that state, I understand that when I bring what is outside inside, it expands. When I close my eyes, I see farther. The girl has blue hair which she had just painted with blue oil paint—her first conscious artistic choice.

The nature of Nature

- H I stand on a path. I see trees and snow all over. Sun is shining. A glare on the stream. Spruce trees and some birch trees. One of the spruce trees has lost all the needles on one side.
- S Can you describe it when you hear the brook?
- H Yes. I walk closer and as I get closer, I feel the sound coming from the right ... I do not quite know what it is at first ... It is kind of a hum ... then it becomes clearer ... it mixes with the vision ... there are big glitters ... like a finely woven pattern ... it's like a golden sound ...
- S A golden sound ...
- H Like humming ... when I hear and feel this I stop and close my eyes ...
- S You stop and close your eyes ... Can you describe the sound?
- H (Silence) It's kind of many, many, many waves or almost like you get a feeling for small pebbles ... like a fresh murmuring ... there are tones that are also high, cutting sound which I connect to the glares, and then a rocky base ...
- S You said that when you heard the sound, you had somehow managed to connect and stopped being so numb. At what point did the connection kick in?
- H I hear the sound first and do not know what it is and I keep walking so I feel like it happens when I see the stream or I realise that this is the stream and I stop and close my eyes. When I connect hearing and sight, it's like this fog washes out.
- S The fog washes out when you connect hearing and sight ... Can you describe what it is like?

- H Yeah it's like ... like a blanket, like when you're in a soundproof room, an airless soundproof room ... dusty ... and then when the sound comes to me and I realize that this is the water ... then somehow it is opened ... like it is not closed space anymore ... it's opened and the fog and the dust gets out ... and there is oxygen coming in.
- S And how do you sense this oxygen?
- H Basically like nutrition ... like a light tingling ... very fine.
- S Light tingling ... Where do you feel it?
- H It is starting in the lungs and chest, then spreads to the hands and down the legs and then up to the head. (Silence) I also start to breathe deeper ...

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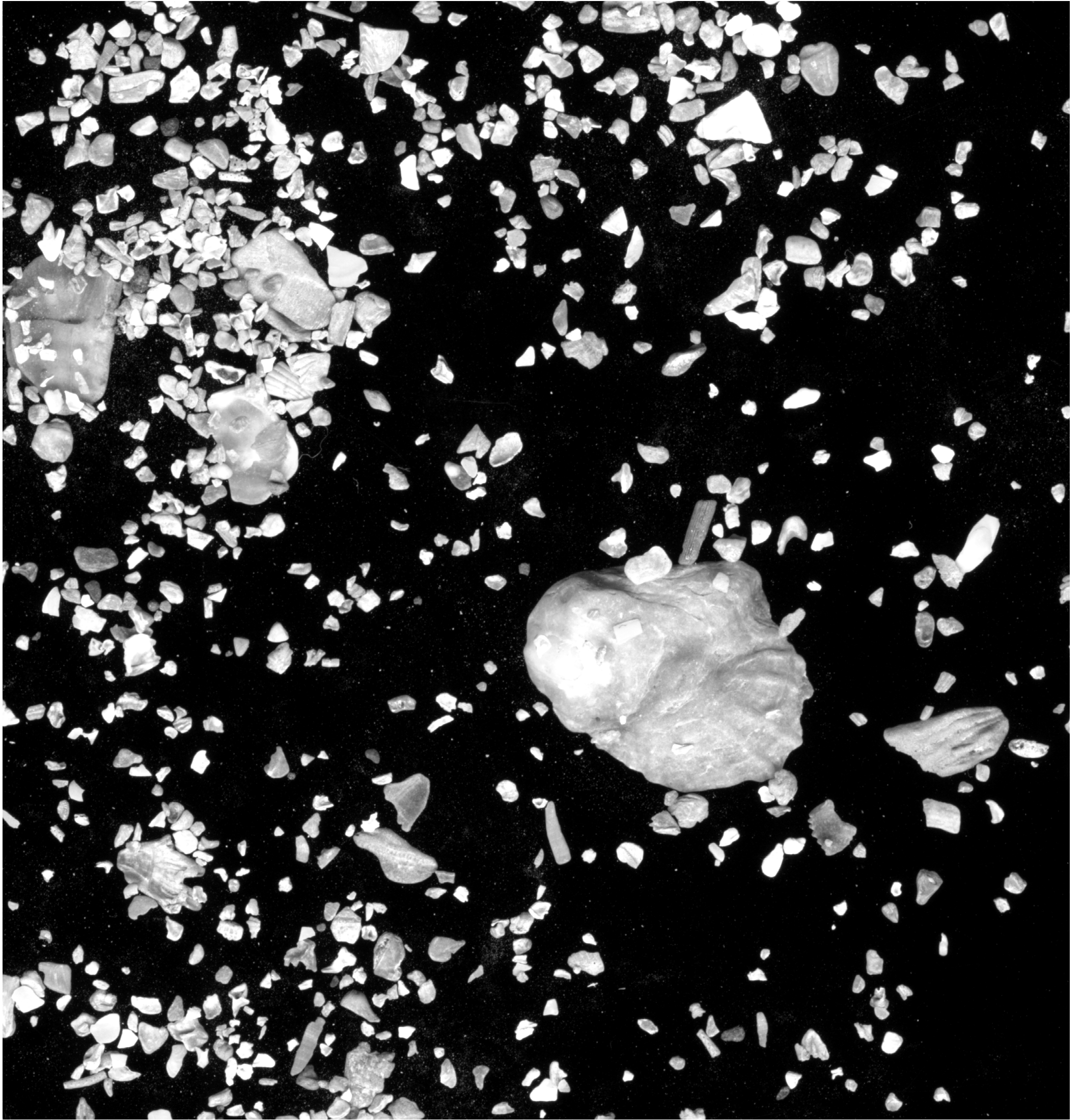
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Acknowledgements

Profound thanks to my mentors: Angela Rawlings, Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir, Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir, Sigríður Sunna Reynisdóttir, and Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir. Deep thanks also to Brogan Davison, my MFA programme director and supporter; Beatrice Blake, my Focusing mentor; Baruch Brenner and Dana Ganahar, my TAE mentors; Rene Baker, my "listening to the material" mentor; Hallveig Thorlacius, my life mentor; Kaisa Kukkonen, Mart Piirimees, Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir, Sóley Frostadóttir, Anna Margrét Ólafsdóttir, and Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir, my co-students in the MFA program and supportive crew; Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir, soundscape support, and Egill Ingibergsson and Valdimar Jóhannsson, my technical mentors.







Bio

The environmentally friendly, whole-hearted, and real-life multidisciplinary artist Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir was born in Akranes, Iceland on May 21, 1982. People who are born on May 21, 1982 have an astrological sign of Taurus. Taureans' life pursuits are emotional and financial security, with a secret desire to have a happy, and wealthy life. People of this zodiac sign like gardening, cooking, music, romance, and working with their hands. They dislike sudden changes, complications, and insecurity of any kind. The strengths of this sign are reliability, patience, practicality, devotion, responsibility, and stability. As weaknesses, they can be stubborn as well as some other traits not worth mentioning.

Gunnella was baptised Guðrún Erla but, in line with her unconventional upbringing, she was never called by that name. At a young age, she started to express her creativity through dance which led her to become an actress and a performing artist. From directing musicals to writing a TV series, from acting onstage and in movies, it is obvious that Gunnella has a holistic way of creating and approaches each project with the principles of being grounded, bringing forward her past experiences, and believing that the mind, body, and voice are one.

Words

Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir

Essay

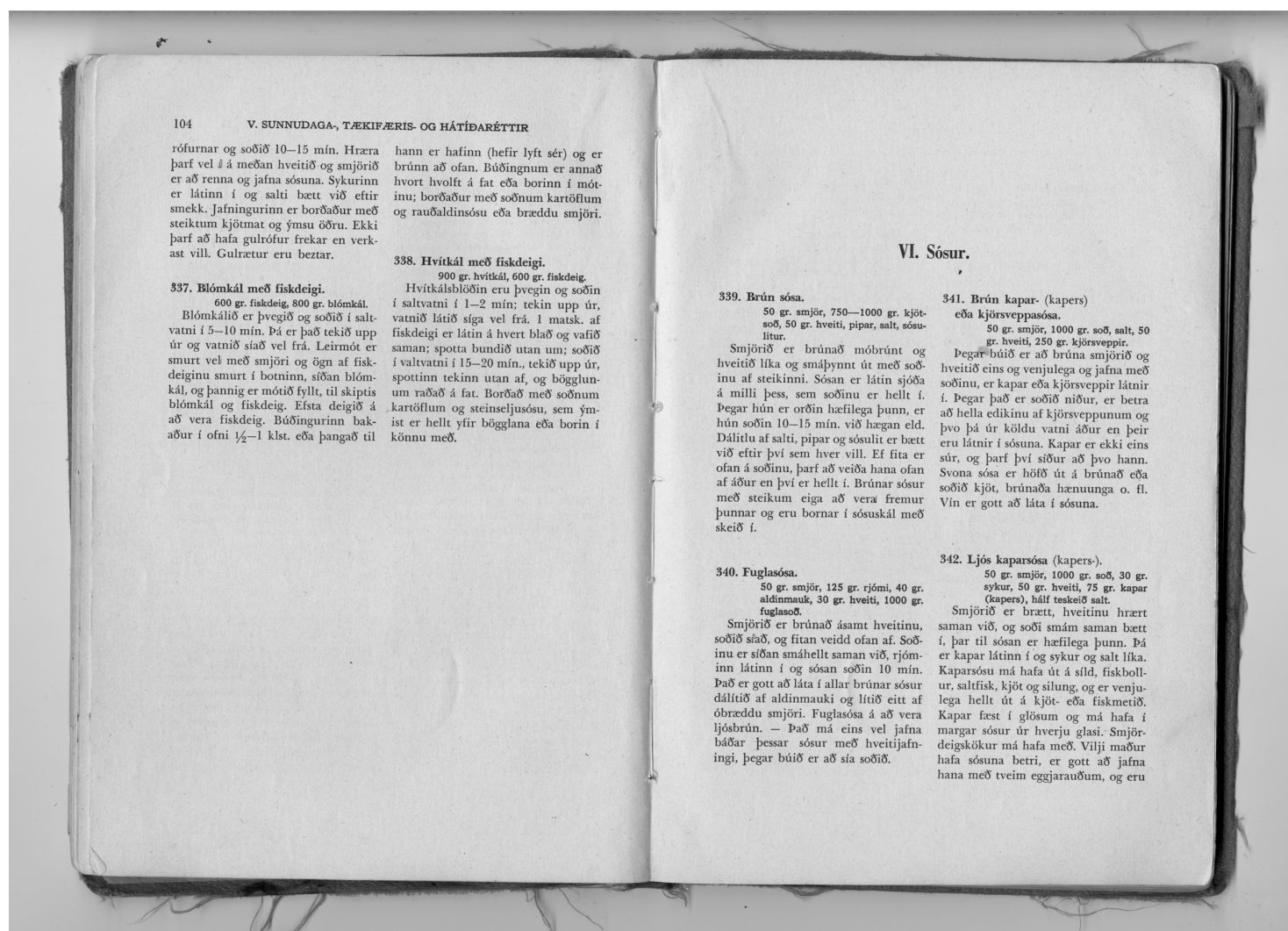
Hvað ef sósan klikkar? What if you mess up the sauce?

From the kitchen, I want to look at the impact of Icelandic society on women's nervous breakdowns. Are cookbooks history books? Could they maybe tell us more than how to cook?

I'm a woman but I really don't like to cook and hate to bake even more. I do make really good soups and sauces when I do them by heart, but God help me and everyone else if I have to make something from a recipe. From where does this pressure on women having to be "good" in the kitchen come? Has it always been that way? What has influenced this in modern life—TV? Radio? Or did it come from cookbooks? Were cookbooks the Instagram of my grandmothers' generation?

**Hi! Welcome, what a surprise.
Please come in and have a seat.**

What if you mess up the sauce? is a theatre performance where audiences get to witness a live broadcast of a cooking show. This is documentary theatre, spiced with a little bit of fiction. My grandmother, Gunnella Jóhannsdóttir, is one of my inspirations for this research and performance, as she has all her life competed to improve her social status by being a "good housewife" and an expert in sauce-making. She agreed to go to a cabin with me for five days where I interviewed her about her interests in cookbooks, her nervous breakdowns, and the pressure of being



Above: Brown sauce on a platter, sourced from *Hjálpar kokkurinn, Súpur og sósur*. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir. ©1980 A/S HJEMMET.
 Below: Cookbook / Matreiðslubók. Með heilsufraðilegum inngangi by Jóninna Sigurðardóttir, Akureyri 1945. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir.





Hagkaupssloppur. Creator and photographer: Óli Páll Kristjánsson. ©Ljósmyndasafn Reykjavíkur.

a good housewife. We also drank coffee, flipped through cookbooks, had wine, and cooked together. Her eighty-year-old documented voice is a big part of the performance.

If you know how to make a good sauce, then you know how to cook. When making a meal, the sauce is the main thing! It is just like if you were going to buy yourself new clothes and make yourself pretty and you put on your new dress but did not do your hair, then you're not really nice. You just have that dress on, but you haven't even cleaned yourself (Jóhannsdóttir 2022)!

Is the pressure of being a “good housewife” submissive to the career woman or does the modern woman possibly need to be both a career woman and a good housewife? Beautiful and in good physical shape? Does she possibly need to pay even more attention to the “fashion” of cooking than was previously necessary? Does she need to know how to cook Keto, LKL, Vegan, gluten free, and sugar free? Is she also taking care of the kids, the dog, and the sourdough starter? Does she make time for her spouse, friends, relatives, and attend the Cocktail Club? Does she have time for the gym, the laundry, the children's sick days, and all that the third shift (mental load) has in store? Does she need to be sure to share the right content on social media so she can entertain her “followers” and make sure that her reputation is steadfast?

Can I get you something to drink?

As research on the history of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows, women's lives revolved primarily around the home long into the twentieth century.... Cookbooks play a big role here. Cookbooks are interesting sources about people's lives. Such books have generally been used in dietary research but are now increasingly being used to study the role of housewives and how it has changed over time and space. Therefore, it is interesting to see what these books told their readers about how the “good” housewife should go about [their duties] and see what effect the books have had on women in the twentieth century. (Hólmarsdóttir 2018).

Sigurbjörg Elín Hólmarsdóttir is a historian and my sister. We were not raised together and had almost no contact before 2011. The generation of women who inspired me are not related to her, so it was truly amazing to find out that she wrote her Master's thesis on female images in cookbooks and how they changed from the first around 1800 to the books published in 1980. I only found out when I told her about my artistic research into Icelandic cookbooks and women's nervous breakdowns.

In Sigurbjörg's research, she relied mainly on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social stratification. He was a French sociologist, anthropologist, philosopher, and public intellectual. Bourdieu developed theories of social stratification based on aesthetic taste in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

I believe that women could gain a better social status and empower themselves by being great housewives (Bourdieu 2014).

It sounds like something from the past. But guess what, my family believed that! I am born in 1982 and I was raised up to do exactly that. And I am reminded of that every time I invite people to my home for dinner or a party. Especially when guests come to my home uninvited, then I really feel the pressure! But before we go deep, let's stir it up and taste a bit of the history of Icelandic cookbooks.

Einfalt Matreiðsluvasakver (For Noble Housewives), published by Mrs. Assessorinna Marta María Stephensen, was the first cookbook published in Icelandic, printed in Leirárgörðum in 1800. The book was published under the name of Marta María Stephensen and it is the first book to be published in Icelandic under a woman's name. Her brother-in-law, Magnús Stephensen, published the book. Now he is considered to be the author, as he says so himself in his biography.

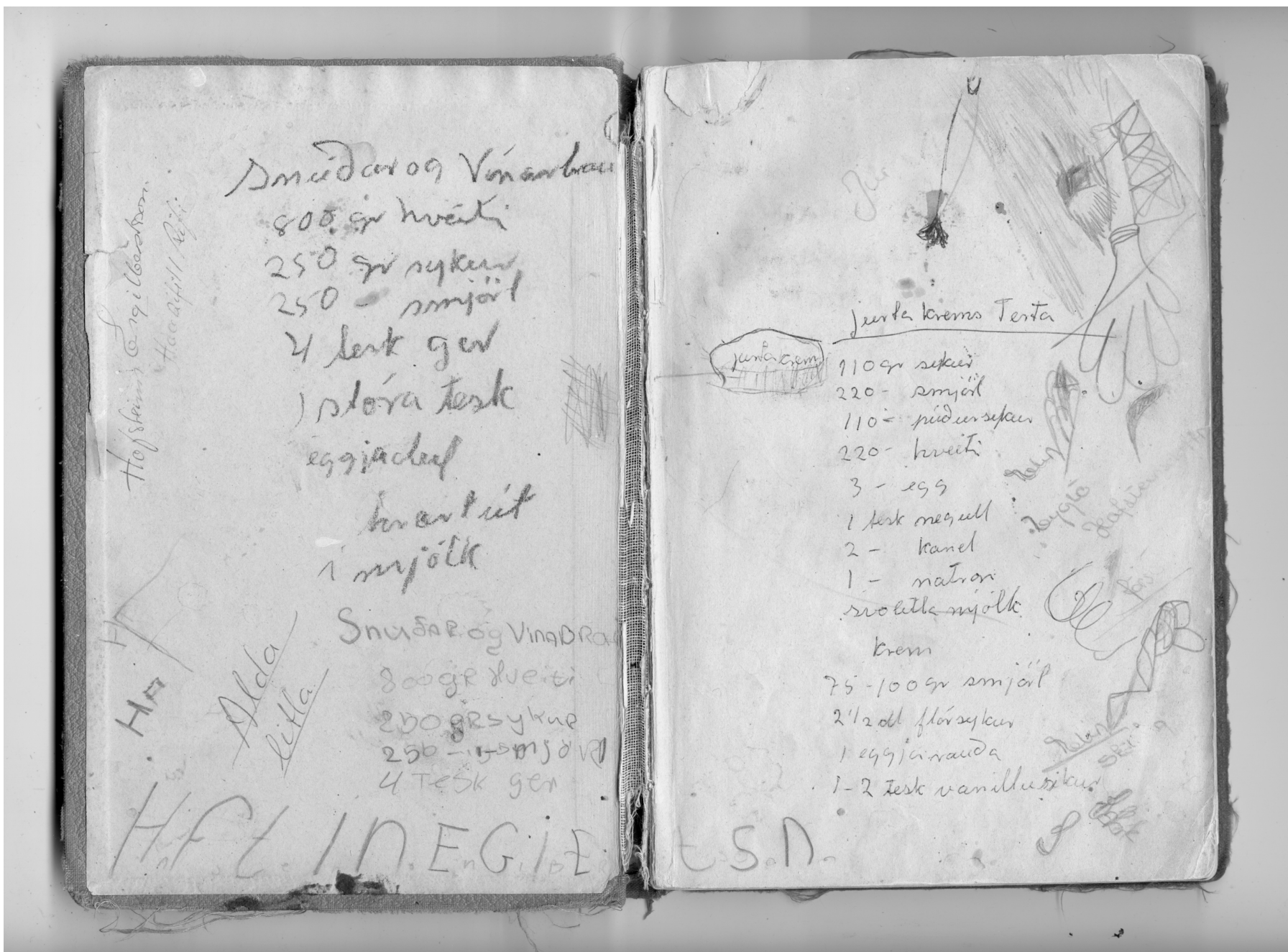
Kvennafræðarinn (The female educator) is a book about cooking, housekeeping, and more by Elín Briem, published in 1888. She was the headmistress of Kvennaskólinn (The School for Females) á Ytri-Ey in Skagaströnd and founder of Hússtjórna-skóli Reykjavíkur (Housekeeping School). Both were boarding schools where women learned to be good housewives. The book was one of the first Icelandic cookbooks and had a great influence on Icelandic cuisine and women.

If asked what Icelandic book had played the biggest part in improving the way of living and how to be a proper housekeeper in the home of Icelanders, the answer would be unequivocal; *The female educator (Kvennafræðarinn)* cookbook is not entirely a proper name, because *Kvennafræðarinn* is about much more than cooking, about all household chores, and it is true to say that from *The female educator*, any average woman can learn most of what housekeeping is (Lárusdóttir 1926).

I'm so sorry for the mess. I have just been so busy!

But why am I looking into the effect of cookbooks on women, leading to nervous breakdowns? Before I answer this, I will first describe how cookbooks enter the lives of women in Iceland and dictate what good behaviour should resemble.

When I was a little girl, I realised that in order to impress people, I needed to behave well—



Above: Sauce jug, sourced from *Hjálpar kokkurinn, Súpur og sósur*. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir. ©1980 A/S HJEMMET.

Below: Cookbook / Matreiðslubók. Með heilsufræðilegum inngangi by Jóninna Sigurðardóttir, Akureyri 1945. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir.

say the right things, dress the right way, move the right way. Be diligent, fun, and prudent. Be charming, smile, and know when I should talk. Show my talent, sing and dance, but not too much! Be proud but not too proud. Know how to read, write, calculate, recite poems and verses.

I also learned how to be responsible—responsible for myself, for my development, for my studies, and, around the age of twelve, I should be able to take responsibility for the home. Wipe, vacuum, scrub. Wash laundry, fold it. But not just any way.... When you wash the laundry, it needs to be categorised: white 90°, white 40°, black 40°, gray 40°, multicoloured 40°, towels and coloured rags 60°. The dryer damages clothes; hang up the laundry. Use a shoulder strap. Shake the laundry beforehand and stretch it. If it is crumpled, fold it and let it rest for a while so that it is pressed.

Household rules extended beyond the laundry to cleanliness and cooking. Keep your home clean; it's admirable. Dirty homes are messy; do not be messy. Learn to cook, cook healthy food, cook good food, cut the peppers correctly, do not waste the food. Keep the food beautifully so that it is tasty. Cook enough food. Do not overcook. Enjoy cooking. Check out cookbooks. Don't have this cookbook? You must own this book; it is so ingenious! It is so important to be original in the kitchen. Know the right ways of doing things. Have fun cooking! You are better at what you enjoy. Do not always cook the same thing. Have you ever tasted this sauce? Here, taste the sauce. I do not know what I put in it; I just added something! Need more recipes? Borrow my book! Remember to return it; I put my name on it. Don't you have this book? I'll give you one as a Christmas present!

For many years I received Hagkaup's cookbooks (the orange ones!) as Christmas presents. I was never asked if I was interested in them. I'm a woman; I'm supposed to have cookbooks. Do I like to cook? Not at all! Do I use these books? Not at all! I do not use recipes; I cannot tolerate recipes! Hagkaup made them for seventeen years and I received them all. How ironic is that! As these books are a big part of Icelandic culture, I will be looking into them in the performance and of course their terrible orange covers will have a huge role on stage.

Oh, look at me, I'm a mess. Allow me to jump into something more comfortable!

Another thing made by Hagkaup that I have to mention were specially made robes for women. They were called the Hagkaup's Robes and became very popular as a kind of uniform of Icelandic housewives in their time.

Hagkaupssloppur is a garment made of knitted nylon that was sold in the store in the sixties and into the seventies. The robes were long and patterned and it was possible to get them buttoned or with a zipper. They were handmade in Hagkaup's

sewing room at Bolholt in Reykjavík from imported material from Germany. By the time the production of the gowns stopped, two hundred thousand robes had been sewn and sold in Iceland. Fun fact: the population of Iceland was only two hundred thousand in 1970 ^(Alþýðuflokkurinn 1985).

I am so lucky to be able to borrow one Hagkaup's Robe for the performance. Since they are a big part of Icelandic female history, I feel I need to wear one.

Ohh, if I knew you were coming, I would have baked!

Balancing one minute then her rope got too thin. Searchin' for solid ground to turn her life around. No stranger to the struggle, she knows how to recover. Won't let the fall do her in, she will stand up again. Pardon the miss, she's got a right to have a nervous breakdown ^(Anderson 1994).

In 2016, I had a nervous breakdown. After a difficult period with a number of shocks, my body gave up. My mother has had a nervous breakdown. My grandmother's mother had some nervous breakdowns and so did her mother. My great-grandmother was repeatedly institutionalised in Kleppur (Iceland's mental hospital). What was it that affected my female ancestors and me? Do we have defective DNA or is there something from our environment that affects the nervousness of women in my family or the nervousness of women in general?

In the performance *Er ég mamma mín / Am I my mother*, written and directed by María Reyndal, she really goes into a family story told in two different periods with an emphasis on the influence of each generation on the next. "Is it possible to break away from the roles? Or will you always be your mom?" ^(“Er ég mamma mín?” n.d.) I really feel this is a sibling work and almost the same story told in a totally different way.

There is no single explanation for a nervous breakdown. It is usually when stress becomes so unbearable that the person ceases to be able to perform the activities of daily living. Reasons for nervous breakdowns are:

- Poor sleep, or difficulty relaxing.
- High persistent workload.
- Traumas, recent or old that have not been resolved—e.g. death of a family member/loved one.
- Divorce/breakup or difficult life changes.
- Financial difficulties ^(“Taugaáfall” n.d.).

I believe that this topic is particularly relevant now in line with increased attention and conversations on the “third shift.” Unpaid responsibility, supervision and job management in the household is



Choron sauce and chicken, sourced from *Hjálpar kokkurinn, Súpur og sósur*. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir. ©1980 A/S HJEMMET.

typically named the third shift or the mental load. It's time to take a deeper look at what gender equality is and whether we really are all equal. Do women have same rights as others or are the old values, the old influences of the cookbooks still pervasive in Icelandic society?

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Toro Sauces, sourced from *Gestjafinn*, a magazine about food. Creator: Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir. ©1996, Gestjafinn 3.tbl.

Bio Sólley Frostadóttir works as a choreographer and editor. She graduated with a BA in Contemporary Dance Practices from Iceland University of the Arts in 2017 and an MA in Editing and Publishing from the University of Iceland in 2021. In her MA studies, she specialised in art magazines, artist books, and other publications. Sólley works across disciplines and has presented her work in Mengi and Kúlan at Reykjavík Dance Festival, Reykjavík’s Children Culture Festival, Midpunkt, Gerðarsafn, Reykjavík Art Museum, and Ásmundarsalur.

She is currently finishing an MFA in Performing Arts at the Iceland University of the Arts. In addition to her work as a choreographer, Sólley has taught ballet, choreography, and dance history. In 2020, she published the first edition of *Dunce*, an annual magazine on choreography and performance art, in collaboration with Print & Friends. Sólley is partaking in the project Goethe Morph* Iceland in 2022 as curator of documentation and contributor of an artist statement.

Words

Sólley Frostadóttir

Essay

Continuity and Other Temporalities

expansiveness

vibration

frequency

terra(i)n

containment

pendulum

metronome

Duration, tempo, rhythm, pause, continuation, repetition are terms familiar to choreography and music. There are ways to make them coalesce and resonate, enhance or diminish the content of the work in question. Various temporalities exist in nature as well as in social constructs. I place a metronome on the rocks, right by the shoreline. The day is windy and gray, the waves riding at a steady pace, similar and dissimilar to the metronome. I am interested in the meeting point of human-imposed patterns of movement and rhythm with natural elements, comprising layers of continuity—e.g. an uninterrupted state maintained over a period of time, acquiring an endless quality. A few questions have informed this year of artistic

practice. In essence, these are simple ones that lie at the root of what performance is all about—the meeting of audience and spectator, in whichever format applicable. The other questions are particular to the theme with which I am engaging.

- What is created in the moment of encounter between audience and performer?
- How do the elements within the work engage with each other?
- How does continuity challenge ephemerality?
- How does the dramaturgy derived from Merleau-Ponty’s *four states of being* give shape to the concept?



Untitled, clay sculptures. 2022.

For my research, I adapted Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *four states of being* for dramaturgical purposes. The philosopher named them: *world-being*, *thing-being*, *imaginary-being*, and *conscious-being* (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 7). I will introduce the dramaturgical method and trace through works¹ that will appear as visual material and in textual format. They are derived from the creative process which layers and accumulates over the course of a year. The works that coexist with the text are:

- *Dip*, a risoprinted photograph of a coloured dip in the ground;
- *Pull*, a video performance of a body slowly bending down; a video/audio sketch of clay continuously spinning, taking on form until it morphs into something else; and a three-part video installation partnered with unfinished clay sculptures.

Dramaturgical curve

My access to a universal mind via reflection, far from finally discovering what I always was, is motivated by the intertwining of my life with other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of other durations (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 49).

It seems that many thinkers dwell on the fact that we must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, or “to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 49). Such were the words of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel according to Merleau-Ponty. Or perhaps Meno's question in Plato's dialogue: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (Solnit 2005, 15)

Being in the world prompts us to conceptualise our place in it. While Merleau-Ponty did not define these four states of being beyond naming them, I would like to propose definitions that I will use as a dramaturgical methodology for my work in making. My hope is that by alternating between these four states of being, a dramaturgical whole can be accomplished through a balancing act of the four elements. If I notice that one kind of being lacks in a work, I will give more attention to that in particular so as to find the whole, though not by any means to say that all elements need to be equally presented in each work. Using this purely for my creative process, I would like to propose these definitions of the four terms for these works in particular.

World-being: landscape, volumes, dips and curves, clay (sculptures), light, earth/soil, intervals, terrain.

Thing-being: handmade, haptic, tactile things, clay sculptures, remains and ruins.

Imaginary-being: where the work meets the audience, the audience's collaborative imagination in the reception of the work and the making of its meaning. The sub-conscious reading of images, as well as the response to video projections.

Conscious-being: the body onstage and the audience in the space, the consciousness of their own presence/existence as well as the physical manifestation of the material and the performers.

Parable

Without knowing otherwise, I thought I was wearing a shiny pearl necklace over my coat. Reaching for the necklace given to me moments before, I grabbed ahold of a blue, glittering pearl that slid from my fingers, followed by yellows, pinks, and greens until I held only a transparent plastic string with a single pearl tied to it. The remnants were few and I envisioned the colourful path I must have left behind. I unlocked the door to my apartment and, as I took off my jacket, felt the last remaining pearls roll down my back. The mood that arose from the absent object was as genuine as if the necklace had truly been around my neck. In this moment of realisation, there was a shift from imaginary being into conscious being.

Continuity

Humans, though, are also able to harness wild forms of energy, and it has been transformative. We are who we are because we outsource our energy costs, enabling us to escape our environmental limitations and extend our physical capabilities (Vince 2020, 17).

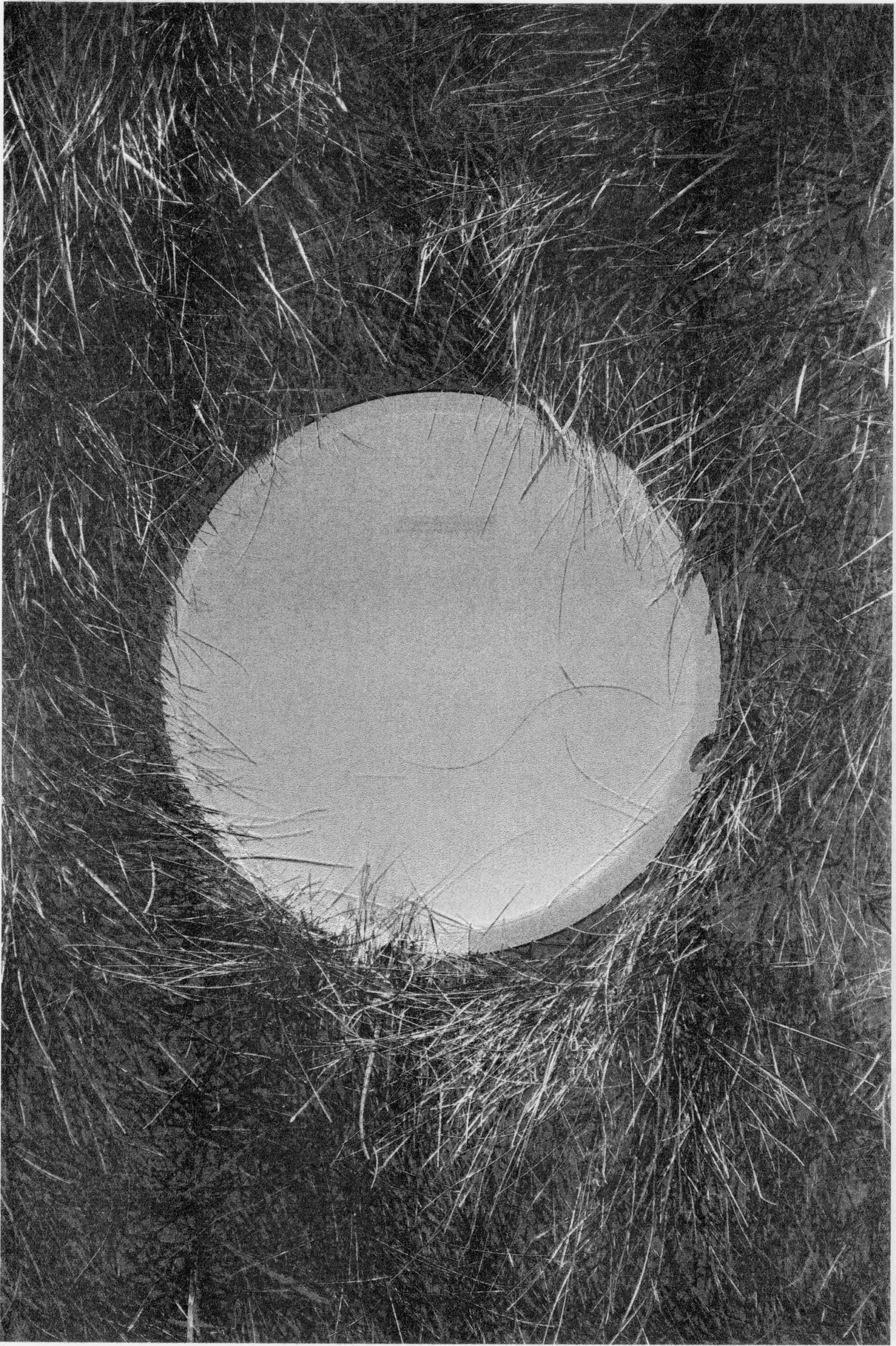
The permanence in clay making. The turn of the wheel spinning continuously, offering endless possible variations. Shaping, drying, dissipating. The clay turns in my hands, soft, mellow, mouldable. I would like to keep it turning, endlessly shapeshifting, endlessly constant. Constant in its state of transformation, never acquiring meaning. The desire is for something out of our reach. Maybe the continuous cannot be achieved by people alone. The combination of a person's craft and a pottery wheel or other similar mechanisms might be needed, this meeting of the manual and the mechanical.

¹ Works by the author, 2021-2022

21/30

"Dip"

Estey Foshadell, 2021



Dip, risograph print. 2021.



Untitled, clay sculptures. 2022.



Untitled, installation—video, audio, clay. 2022.

Speculative Manifesto

S.omeone take the bait

P.profit the people

E.xtend the pathway

C.ul-de-sac

U.nnerve the inner fragmentation

L.ateral is a change in perspective

A.ll aboard

T.tenderly clash with the other

I.nvite them in

V.venture towards

E.nter

Relying on continuity in order to maintain the work. Humans might be incapable of a continuous, steady rhythm; our rhythm is erratic and conditioned. We begin and are wired for the processual, conclusive. The longing for continuity could stem from a desire for an endless, infinite living—a life without closure.

As I walk by the shoreline, I listen for continuous sounds, audible, predictable sounds that hold certainty, yet remain true to natural rhythms; there is inconsistency in their constancy. Waves hit the pebbles on the beach and pull out away from the shore, alternating in a breath-like manner. My footsteps, whooshing through wet snow, create a continuous rhythm that could go on and keep me going, for the sake of maintaining the motion. Stops and starts can be challenging, transitions with different possible outcomes.

What if we never have to start, never have to end?

I envision a scene of people gathering, bodies within landscape, an installation where human beings situate themselves, find their place. Will the people seem to invade the landscape or do they become an integral part of it; how does each of us perceive the presence of the people? Do we see them belonging, or do we think they swallow the surroundings?

A Human Scale of Time Representation

Holographic motion from left to right, motion from an outer realm, resembling the movement of a pendulum, swinging with a downward pull, gently from side to side, similar to meditative states of mind, shifts in inner energy levels. The continuous motion of a metronome, balancing out left and right sides of brain or body. The field of perception can be blocked when we close our eyes, but that does not apply to the ears:

There is no such thing as an earlid. The ear is always open, always supplementing its primary materiality, always multiplying the singularity of perception into the plurality of experience (Kim-Cohen 2009).

We are immersed in soundscapes all the time, sounds that have rhythm. Humans have found ways to measure rhythm and to create systems of time tracking. These devices have specificities—the metronome, the hourglass, the kitchen timer, the clock. Devices designed to maintain a steady pace and have the capacity to organise time, giving shape to something that is amorphous and thus to create an illusion that everything is not happening at the same time.

I place a metronome on a pillar by the ocean, a collision of temporalities taking place. A boat passes by at a steady pace, the waves move according to the rhythm of the sea, the clouds drift slowly. Everything coalesces in a moment of multilayered sound and movement until the wind knocks the metronome over.

Halt

A short while ago, I dreamt that I was walking through a city square. It was a busy time, people crossing at a quick and steady pace, in all directions. I felt a pull towards the left side of the square where people were stuck in place, where the energy had stagnated. I lost the feeling in my body, one limb at a time. I felt a pull and kept moving slowly towards this place I did not want to go through. At some point, all feeling left me and I fell. The next instant, I sat atop a high wall overlooking a square, three travellers beside me, telling me of their wanderings, of discoveries in faraway places, their identical beards attesting the duration of their journey. My perspective shifted. I had been immersed in the ongoingness of the square but could then see it from afar, the patterns all the more clear.

Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing (Solnit 2005, 22).

I woke up with a heavy feeling, a sense of ongoing dread in the core of my being. Standing up felt tiresome, too much of an effort. My sense of balance was distorted I noticed, as a wave of vertigo ran its course. What stirred within me seemed to be finding its way to the surface and, as it did so, it evoked discomfort in all sorts of different places that seemed disconnected but bore resemblance in the fact that those places allowed for movement, and could potentially give in—in between the ribs, under the clavicles, in the diaphragm. I needed time to recuperate, to reassess and rest. I was taken aback when I noticed I could not keep the same rhythm going. There was the sense that everything had come to a halt. My inner rhythm had shifted. There was nothing but slowness, in mind as well as feeling.

In her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit brings an interesting perspective about what it means to get lost and what that entails. According to Solnit, the blue of the horizon is always blue precisely because of the distance between us and it. Once we reach it, it loses its colour; the same could be said for the blue mountains that are not blue in close proximity (Solnit 2005). The distance maintained between us and the thing for which we look has an aura of promise; it is appealing because it can neither be found nor contained.

Solnit describes the notion of the wandering man in shamanism as such: “It would seem that under certain conditions of mental stress an individual finds life in his accustomed surroundings too hard to bear” (Solnit 2005, 19). And it is after awhile of maintaining a certain state of stress that the individual goes wandering. A halt is called for after long periods of sustained stress—that is, when the duration of an unsustainable rhythm is maintained. There is a need to meet with the unknown in order to renew oneself and to readjust the

patterns. Furthermore, stepping out of the familiar brings about a change of pace, a shift in rhythm. Wandering does not entail a plan, no roadmap and no endgoal. Wandering, like our erratic rhythm, has no fixed course.

Thoreau is playing with the biblical question about what it profits a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul. Lose the whole world, he asserts, get lost in it, and find your soul (Solnit 2005, 15).

The halt, it could be said, is in contrast with the continuous. There is a pause, a breath held in, a shift in the diaphragm—the diaphragm being an organ that is affected by our inner rhythms, heartrate and breathing. It is in this convex mound that rhythm is felt. Expanding out, shortening, holding, releasing. Inner temporal shifts intertwine and can be contained in the diaphragm. If the pause is inevitable, a definite part of something that is ongoing, the pause might be an invisible counterpart coalescing with the continuous in order to form a whole, the hollow which gives shape to the volume.

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Untitled, monotype print. 2022.





Pull, film strip. 2021.

