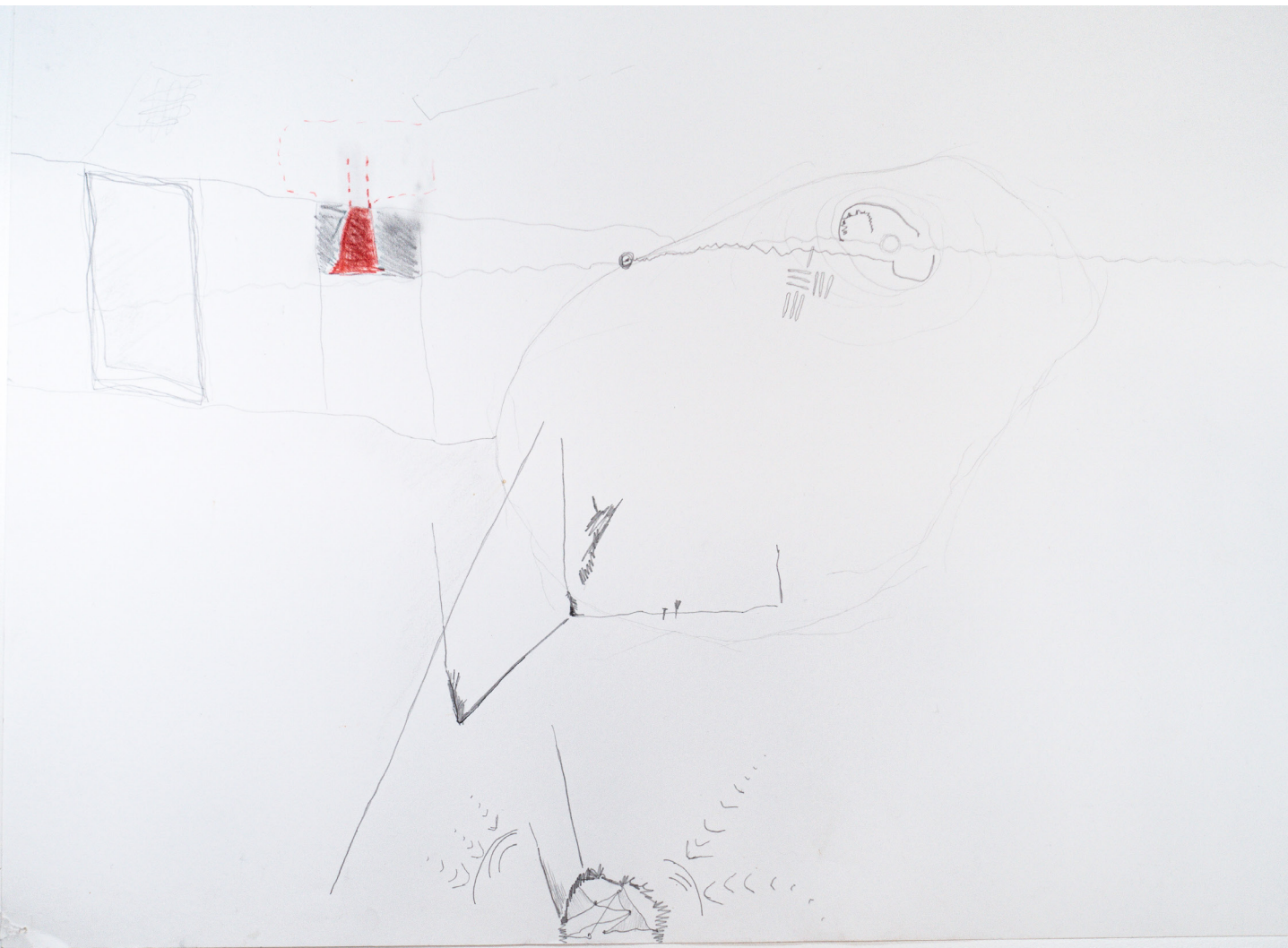


I GIVE THE DOOR A NOD



Els van Houtert

To friendships, both with humans and *things*.

And to Lisa, because you are the most skillful
phenomenologist of the everyday that I know.

Written component master thesis.

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (MA) at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria.
Institute of Fine Arts and Media.

Els van Houtert

Vienna, December 14, 2023

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Front image: Els van Houtert, *I give the door a nod*,

2022, pencil on paper, 420 × 594 mm. Graphic design: with huge help from
Francesco Dipierro. Thank you, Franz!

~~Phenomenology as Religion.~~
~~Experience as Religion.~~
~~..as a ritual.~~
I give the door a nod.

Els van Houtert

I saw a man in pyjamas walk up to a tree,
stop, regard it, and change his posture.

— Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion*

I GIVE THE DOOR A NOD

Intimacy in its most everyday sense.
In its most embodied sense.
In its most-sense.

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Preface

(or: How to read this bundle?)

This text presents a dialogue between the different voices—ideas, opinions, reflections, stories—involved in this ongoing research. It is a timestamp of a research in flux rather than an argument or conclusion to the following research questions:

How do I relate to things—the material world around me—on an everyday basis, and how do these encounters shape my everyday lived reality? (And: can I cultivate myself to be more attentive to this relationship in my everyday life?)

Since *how*-questions require descriptive and situated answers rather than conclusive and general ones, since my life is at least as ongoing as this research, and since these questions (especially the latter) are dependent on practice, they are *guiding questions*. They bring up new, more detailed questions—e.g.:

How do I perceive a thing through my senses?

How does this bodily exploration change the way I perceive the boundaries of “me” and “not-me”?

How does framing my focus on everyday material encounters in this research influence my material encounters outside of it, that is, in everyday life?

—or even contradictions—e.g.:

How can dissolving—disappearing—into the material evoke an existential sense of self and rootedness?

How do I and the thing become another being in our togetherness?

In this research, two main disciplines are woven together that play an essential role in my personal research development. First of all, there is the field of *religious studies* describing how the concept of religion is understood—and not understood—in the Modern Western cultural context (i.e., in a way that often ignores religious *lived reality*).¹ Arguably, this logic has caused the Modern Western (hu)man to ignore or dismiss the intimate relationship between humans and the material world over the long run.² Secondly, and in response to the above, the method of (*micro*-)phenomenology is used to study the everyday encounters between human and *things*. As I am a product of this Western cultural logic, and as I wish to unlearn this perceived radical separation from myself and the material world—and instead learn to be materially intimate with it—this research focuses mainly on my own subjective experience. In short, this means that in this research, my body—as it relates to *things*—is my main medium, and these *things* I encounter are my research partners.

The findings of this phenomenological research form the foundation of this text. In this bundle, these descriptive sources can be divided into two types. Firstly, there are the everyday experiences that are titled with a colon (e.g., “: 5am”). Secondly, there are texts that draw from phenomenological encounters with *water* (in white and grey). Throughout this research, water proved to be an essential and recurring entity. These descriptive experience-texts are recognizable by their different background than the main text.

After analyzing these first-hand experience texts, I detected what can be divided into four research findings. However, these themes are highly interdependent and overlapping. They form the main sections of this thesis as *leitmotifs*: (A) Unnaming;

1 In Modern Western discourse, the term religion is often (wrongly) limited to institutionalized (Abrahamic) religion, whereas originally it was meant as a more comparative term for different stories, rituals and morals regarding the (mysteries of) lived life. In this bundle, I stick to the latter understanding of the term.

2 One could say it is forgotten; one could say it is ignored. It could be both since intentional/political discourse strongly influences how we learn to perceive reality (Bennet, 2001).

(B) Dissolving; (C) Rooting; (D) Fetishizing. These recurring motifs are formulated in participles, to emphasize the participation of all the involved beings (this includes us, human as well as other bodies—as we learn throughout this work that *things* also participate).³ These motifs, or sections, are alternated with different types of *interferences* that function to introduce, instruct, or interpret the context of this research.

Regardless of the chronological structure of this text, which is ordered based on the recurring motifs, there is no *real* beginning or end to this research. Therefore, one could read the text in a different order or from another starting point. For example, one could read the sections in different orders; read the water text in one go as one chapter; read the intermezzo at the very beginning; or jump in somewhere randomly. As experiences are fragmented and this research is unfinished, there is more than one way to take it in.

Due to the investigative nature of this bundle, it contains many different voices that are sometimes subtle, sometimes strict, sometimes sensual, other times concrete. They are meditative, speculative, contemplative, contradicting, or self-destructive. Human voices, humming voices, wet voices, deep voices, body-voices, first-person-singular voices, first-person-plural voices, distant voices, dreamy voices, dreary voices. They try to express or grasp a thought, an afterthought, an after-after-thought, an emotion, a sensation, a silence.

In this bundle, just like in the world at large, these voices act and react to each other. Sometimes they disagree, fight, fly, fart, flabbergast. Sometimes they sing: a gospel, a death-song, a capella. Think about it: We often have a whole parliament of voices debating in our heads, that then leave us through our mouths, our actions, or by dissolving into thin air. By collaging these voices into this text, I try to stay true to their coming and going in everyday lived reality.

³ A participle is a form derived from a verb, used in English as an adjective to express participation in the action or state of the verb, or combined with an auxiliary verb to construct any of various tenses.

This bundle is an invitation for you to come near, *or inside*, my body and let me land into yours, dear reader, because we are porous. The different voices that will pour in and out of this text mirror this porosity.

First of all, there are the main voices of thoughts and reflections on topics and theories. Thoughts that sometimes intend to convince, criticize, philosophize, dream, play, experiment, wonder, or question. This writing includes not just reflective, but also descriptive writing of phenomenological relationships with *things*.

[Sometimes, these voices are supplemented with afterthoughts, or after-afterthoughts, to provide more dialogue or introduce new—open—ideas or questions.]

Then there are:

*Wet, watery voices,
that seep through this bundle's pages
and form a story by themselves*

And:

: voices expressing experiences

Furthermore, there are auditive voices.

To hear these, click on the icon.



And lastly, there are the foot-voices.⁴

That's all you need to know, welcome!

4 To provide literary sources or more reflection on or background information about a (research) topic.

: 5am

Vienna,
January 28th,
2023

It's 5am. I wake up with a scratch in my throat. "Must. Drink. Water!"—that feeling. Meanwhile, something heavy presses on my lower abdomen, making it sing (a feeling I had already described many times in my phenomenology-exercises).

It is the middle of the night, so I have to encourage myself: "Come on, soon I will crawl back here, satisfied." With my right hand, I reach over my chest and fold the two layers of duvet off to my left.

By pointing my right shoulder forward while I lean on my left elbow for support, I raise my stiff upper body. I roll onto my side, fold my legs a little further, and push myself onto my knees. Slowly, I crawl on my knees to the end of the mattress—on the way, I grab my tea glass from the bedside table—until I unfold my right and then my left leg, and my feet touch the floor. I push myself up and shuffle to the door. While I hold myself, my arms wrapped around my waist, not willing to let go of the coziness of the bed, I hoist myself up.

It's darker in the hallway. I can't distinguish a thing. Feeling my way along the corridor, I place my tea glass in the towel cabinet opposite the bathroom door. Peeing first. I walk into the toilet, sit on the seat with a thud, and bend over, still hugging myself. The toilet seat is cold, and I struggle hard to stay cozy and warm enough not to lose my sleepiness. It's a short pee that smells surprisingly strong. But as fleetingly as the scent came, my thinking about it vanishes, and I continue my nocturnal expedition.

One last stop before going back to bed. Feeling with my right hand, I aim for the glass in the cabinet. Instead, I hold what I recognize as my swimming goggles. As I continue, my knuckles bump into the surface of the glass. A tinkling sound as my ring touches it. Well oriented this time, I grab again and pick up the glass. I turn around my axis. My left hand effortlessly finds the door handle to my other side, and I open the door. Meanwhile, I move my right hand forward, and in one fluid movement, the same knuckles that just bumped into the glass they are now holding, land on the light switch.

Suddenly, I feel very moved about having immediately found this light switch. Over time, I have embodied my house to find all the places on autopilot. There was a time when I didn't know this house well enough to find the light switch blindly in one go. An awful lot of practice goes behind the fluidity of this minuscule, instinctive movement. Yet a crucial movement, as it enables me to carry out the following steps smoothly. I can never go back to when I did not know when I did not embody this proceeding.

After throwing last night's tea bag into the bin, I fill my glass. From walking back to bed, lying down, folding the covers, taking some gulps of water, and putting the glass away, I hardly remember a thing.

Introduction

We experience non-stop in our everyday lives: We hear our alarm clock, hurt our elbow as we reach out to snooze, we wonder what day it is while our dream is still seeping through like a ghost. We tiptoe to the kitchen, the cold floor touches our feet while we smell the coffee getting ready. We hear the mocha, taste our first sip of coffee, the toothpaste, the sweet rinsing water, a drop drips down our chin onto our shirt, we think: “Shit, a toothpaste stain!” and we feel how our shirt gets wet. We put the key into our bike-lock. We squint our eyes against the sun while we feel the sun on our cheeks while we paddle while we engage with traffic, etc., etc. The day has only just started.

Mundane, we might call these moments, as they usually go unnoticed amid the business of everyday life. To consciously notice all the *things* we engage with would drastically slow down our life.¹ To notice how we engage with them would stop us from

¹ The term “*things*” here refers to the material domain—i.e., bodies that are physically present and distinguishable by our perception—with which we build everyday relationships. This *thing* should not be considered inanimate, as that understanding is a cultural bias, not a universal *reality*. One could also replace the term for “bodies” or “entities”. In this work I will do that at times. However, sometimes I find these terms too narrow to include materiality like actions, sensations, space, or performance. A *thing*, after all, can be *any*-thing. Besides, I wish to challenge our understanding of a *thing* as radically alien, and I advocate for seeing it as a companion instead. This bundle intends to provide examples in which the animacy of, and our relationship—even fusion—with *things* becomes visible.

getting anything done altogether. Or, as micro-phenomenology expert Claire Petitmengin (2006) points out, we often do things “pre-reflectively” in automatic pilot or through “implicit skill.”² I.e., without being conscious about *how* we do what we do. “As our cognitive processes are the most personal and intimate things about us, we think we are familiar with them, and cannot imagine for a moment that any particular inner effort should be necessary to become aware of them (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 234).³

Not only is each action or engagement with a *thing*, with the material world, a world of smaller actions and engagements in itself, and are these again worlds of even smaller actions and engagements—to drink a sip of tea, we have to bring the cup to our lips; to bring the cup to our lips, we have to hold the cup with a certain tension, fold out our lips, be careful with the heat; to fold our lips, we have to squint our lip-muscles; to be careful with the heat we have to squint our lip-muscles, etc.—; each encounter is also unique. Even if you drink the same tea from the same cup in the same place as always, the experience is different each time.

I say all this to emphasize how useless it might seem at first sight to pay full attention to each experience individually: If we did that, we would lose the general flow of our lives (and also, we would notice how experiences can never be singled out). However, at the same time, I want to illustrate that there is an enormously rich world of interactions in every single moment of our lives that might deserve more attention than it often tends to get (at least in the Western capitalist *attention economy* in which I find myself).⁴ There is much to know, learn, and appreciate about our everyday experiences.

I am interested in the alternative attitude that a focus on the senses and our everyday experiences demands: an attitude that is meditative and that makes us wonder how it is that we are part of this entire ecosystem of *things* that mutually influence each other and exchange information with each other. That this information is often not rationally digestible underlines for me the value of the focus on the phenomenology of everyday experience; it complements the more explanation-oriented character of the society I am part of.

2 The discipline and method of micro-phenomenology will be further explained later in this introduction and in “Instructions to the (micro-)phenomenological method” (see *supra* p. 46).

3 Later Petitmengin exemplifies by writing that “I am aware that I am writing, but am entirely absorbed by my objective, and not reflectively aware of the means I am employing to achieve the objective” (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 234). Further on in “Intermezzo,” I explore such a reflective consciousness of writing (see *supra* p. 76).

4 In *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell (2019) explores the “revolutionary potential of taking back our attention” from companies that use our attention as a commodity and, more generally, from the neoliberal/capitalist attitude of productivity, efficiency, and success (p. xxiii).

“...the society I am part of.”—I am a white woman born in 1990, in a village in the (Catholic) south of The Netherlands. I grew up in a “secular” middle-class home, where religion was regarded as dogmatic, outdated, and indoctrinating. I went to university, first to study Cultural Anthropology in Amsterdam and later to specialize in Religious Studies in Groningen. During this time, I traveled, studied, and lived in different places in Latin America. Currently, I live in Vienna, Austria, where I study at an Art University. I say all this to be transparent about my background and the society which I am critically evaluating in my life and this work.⁵

[When I say “we,” I am referring to those who, like myself, also consider themselves part of or influenced by this Western worldview. However, when it comes to my micro-phenomenological inquiries, I prefer to use “I” since I do not want to assume that what works for me, as an antidote for characteristics of this Western worldview that I criticize, works for others.]

This society is often called “Modern Western,” although it is not modern, since we have never been modern. Besides, it is not Western because “west” is a cardinal direction that is impossible to pinpoint on a round and spinning globe, but which—ironically—is used to refer to the North Atlantic hemisphere from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In the end, “Modern Western” primarily refers to the legacy of (European) colonialism in the globalizing world, which has largely defined the language many of us speak, the truths many of us seek and the values that often dominate global politics.⁶

After studying anthropology and religious studies—taking the outsider perspective by looking at the lived realities of others—I decided to turn the glance inward. From being a stranger to *them*, I turned to estranging myself from myself. This bundle is a product of a perennial research of my embodied “being-in-the-world” that started during COVID-19 lock-down in 2020 and extended and transformed into this moment of writing.⁷ Using myself, my daily life, and my body as a research location, I explore how I, Els, perceive and interact with my everyday material reality.

Through the method of (micro-)phenomenology, I became a student of my everyday

5 In her book *Bodies of water*, Astrida Neimanis (2019) refers to Audre Lorde, who argues that critical theorists write too often from a “we” perspective, and thereby they tend to ignore differences. Neimanis also mentions Adriene Rich, and observes that: “[T]o write ‘the body’ is too abstract a gesture, notes Rich. Her choice is to claim the body as my body – as specifically hers with its own politics of location: ‘To write “my body” plunges me into lived experience, particularity”’ (p. 28).

6 Although the term is complicated and has many hurdles and nuances, I refer interchangeably to the West, (Modern) Western Culture, Western society, in this text and by distinguishing between Modern/modern and Western/western, I distinguish between noun and adjective. I take these terms to refer to Europe and its colonial legacy: i.e., the places and spaces that have been culturally, logically, economically, religiously, and institutionally imperialized and shaped by Christian, Colonialist, Enlightened, Secular, Capitalist European culture, both on national levels as well as global institutional level. For the purpose of this work, this general definition suffices. See the work of McNeill (1997) for a short history on the concept of “the West.” See Latour (1993) for a more in-depth discussion on problems of dualizing between “modern” and “nonmodern” and ascribing the former to “the West.”

7 A term initially coined by Martin Heidegger to emphasize how existing, relating to the world, is an activity (Wheeler, 2011).

relationship with *things*. Micro-phenomenology is a research method that draws from the philosophical discipline of *Phenomenology*: the study of how things appear to our consciousness.⁸ *Micro-phenomenology*, originating in cognitive science, is a methodical form of phenomenology that explicitly focuses on meticulous aspects of experience. In other words, it is designed to explore and describe our lived experiences *very finely* and include them in scientific investigation.⁹ My micro-phenomenological self-study led me to experiment with various methods to express my experiences intuitively. Through the repetitive practice of, e.g., writing, drawing, and sculpting, I learned to prioritize getting in touch with *things*.

[I refer here to touching *with all the senses*, not just the haptic, and not just to the activity of touch, but also of letting oneself be touched.]

[Or, maybe, this is actually all the same thing.]

To experience this touch requires the suspense of naming things, or, put differently, to unname them: as long as we name and thereby objectify the things we perceive, we stop ourselves from getting to know them in the situatedness of our lived reality—see: (A) *Unnaming*. Therefore, using the (micro-)phenomenological method, I don't wonder what it feels like to be cold; instead, I wonder what "cold" feels like *at that specific moment in time*. That is, in its situatedness.

[Or: on the skin of my forehead in the night bus Vienna-Düsseldorf when the dampness from my thermos flask reaches my nose and forehead, settling there, and cooling down by the winter air.]

[The answer: "My forehead contracts. A thin metal film emerges, roles down over the bridge of my nose, cuts the corners of my nostrils, and stays there" (Research-diary excerpt, February 26, 2023).]

When I unname what I perceive, I realize that I do not perceive myself and (*things in*) the world as radically separate entities, but instead, I find that—to a certain extent—the world and me, we penetrate each other. Through this intimate encounter—made possible after unnamings—I lose a little bit of "myself" to the no longer so radically "other" world: we melt together—see: (B) *Dissolving*.

[However, this melting has a limit: I don't dissolve completely, I still am aware that this body, which is co-sensing, penetrating, and, at times, morphing with other bodies, is me.]

These phenomenological exercises—initially unintended—slightly reprogrammed my awareness of being-in-the-world: I started to experience a sense of rootedness in the world. A floating rootedness that looked different each time depending on what it was I rooted into. This act of rooting myself into my everyday life and finding a home in it became a kind of ritual practice for me, and I started to recognize the ritual potential in every mundane situation—see: (C) *Rooting*.

8 Mostly the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, less the Phenomenology as it is known of Martin Heidegger. For an introduction to each, see also: Beyer (2022); Toadvine (2023); Wheeler (2011).

9 See also Micro-phenomenology (2016).

This ritual aspect brings me back to my master studies in anthropology of religion, I learned how the Western European (and my) default way of looking at religion is through the notion of “belief.” This emphasis on belief is a cultural bias originating from the Christian/Protestant and later the enlightenment mentalistic attitude that is fundamental in Western worldview.¹⁰ During my fieldwork prior to my master thesis, I started to explore alternative ways through which “religion” can be understood and studied, namely through its material and performative embeddedness into everyday life. After I graduated, the notion of the “fetish”—where *things* are recognized as animated, i.e., they are reached out for, or touched—has stayed with me, and has helped me to *ritually frame* my own relationships with *things*. Through this material—not symbolic—reaching out, I found a form of ritual practice that enables me to cultivate myself to be more attentive to this relationship on an everyday basis—see: (D) *Fetishing*.

All in all, I see this project as spiritual and political: By focusing on the *how* of my experiences of and engagements with the world, I bring to the fore the relational aspect of being-in-the-world. This focus on experience and the relationship between people and their material surroundings grounds this project in the subjective “now,” which implies a level of intimacy that in written form is commonly saved for novels, (private) diaries, and poetic texts. In that sense, this bundle is a personal, intimate, and sensual record.¹¹ It is thus also feminist, post-humanist, anti-capitalist, and holistic. It intends to counteract the colonial, patriarchal approach in which man sees himself as rising above and in complete control over his environment. The more personal and contemplative writing in this bundle—which is fluid, embodied, and relational—serves to critically complement hegemonic academic writing (the latter, which I try to reduce to a functional minimum that suffices for critical reflection on social and conceptual biases and thought structures). Doing so, this bundle intends to celebrate how “life-as-lived is always in excess of life-as-imagined” and theorized (Van de Port, 2015, p. 84).¹²

10 In “*Situating where “we” began*,” I elaborate extensively on the historical cultural and conceptual trajectory that the notion of “belief” has made in the Western context, and how it influenced its perception of reality (see p. 22).

11 I suspect those who generally put effort in educating themselves about feminism and critical theory will recognize this point right away. Nonetheless, for those who are not aware, writing about the body from the body is a feminist act. It is an act of determining one’s own body, it is not just an act of being sensitive to a female body—a body that is systematically suppressed—but it is also an act of *any* body being systematically suppressed (in dualist, ableist, queerphobic thinking). Writing from the body is also an act to determine what is allowed to be written and written publicly (by academics and in the media). Putting things “out there” is as much an act of taking ownership and of self-validation, as the decision to keep things private can be. “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (Cixous, 1976, p. 880).

12 “Life-as-lived” includes the fragmented chaos and contradiction of everyday life and can be opposed to “life-as-imagined,” i.e., how we would reflect upon ourselves and our lives and build coherent stories around this.

This bundle should be considered a timestamp in an ongoing research in which I am my subject, and my body is my primary medium. The *things* I encounter—big or small—are my research partners. As a result, different experiences are collected, documented, and presented in different shapes and forms, including text, sketches, drawings, and images of performances and (sculpted) objects. By presenting a part of this collection in this bundle, I intend to tell stories of situatedness and searching and engage in a dialogue between being, becoming, and belonging.

Situating where “we” began.¹

Religion, belief, and anti-fetishism.
An introduction to how the Western
understanding of the term “religion”
has shaped the current Western way
of thinking about and relating to the
material world.

[Disclaimer: This research, just like me, and perhaps you, reader, is situated in Modern Western society (Europe, to be more particular).² This (re)search for relationships with *things* directly responds to the Protestant and enlightenment biases foundational to the current Western way of thinking about and relating to the world. The background insights that this text provides elaborate on recurring critical reflections that are woven through the rest of this bundle and form part of my motivation to start this research in the first place. However, it is not a requirement to read this text. If you would rather skip this more academic text and dive right into the micro-phenomenology of everyday lived reality, you may. To do so, I suggest you jump over this inlay. You could keep it for a more suitable time, or, more specifically, read it before “(D) Fetishism”.]

1 Recall that this investigation is mainly done from an “I” perspective and that a “we” perspective often ignores differences” (see “*Introduction*,” p. 16). Nevertheless, “[w]hile ‘we’ is insufficient, it is also in many ways inalienable” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 29). As mentioned in the introduction, this bundle is not just personal; it is also political and critical. I address and include you directly, reader, in case you may identify with or recognize the cultural context that I lay out in this situating chapter. It also explores a “we”-ness that is posthuman by considering other-than-human beings, *things*, or bodies, as part of “us.”

2 See Haraway (1988).

I don’t do metaphors. What I mean by that, is that what is written here in this bundle is not supposed to represent another underlying, symbolic meaning. You, reader, are not supposed to read the last sentence of this book, close it, and ponder upon the deeper meaning of it. Certainly, you may and perhaps you will, but it is not how I intended it. Meanings are also not what I am after in the first place. At least not in a symbolic sense, only in a *lived—sensed—sense*. Do you know what I *mean*? Let me explain the notions of metaphor and symbolism and why I advocate moving away from them and instead move toward an embodied, relational, spirited way of being-in-the-world.

To explain how symbolic thinking can keep us from an embodied way of being-in-the-world, I would like to go back to an essential source of the dualist distinction in Modern Western thought between the immaterial, symbolic, metaphoric on the one hand and the material, animist, fetish, on the other. This source is the Christian Religion and legacy. During my religious studies, I often wondered: What is religion? What is spirituality, mysticism, and esotericism? What are these concepts differentiating from? Culture? Science? Reality? The everyday life? To become important as a concept, I figured that the term “religion” must have been introduced once people started to notice that there was more than one way of dealing with questions about reality, the world, and its mysteries. Why would you think of inventing a concept such as “religion,” if you know only one truth, lifestyle, tradition, (set of) deity(-ies), and one set of answers that help you cope with the world’s mysteries? To do what? To distinguish the way you deal with life from *life itself*? Your deities from your dinner table? To make a distinction between drinking tea and drinking tea *in a special way*? Indeed, it was when people became aware that other groups of people had different answers, theories, deities, rituals, and objects through which their world made sense that a concept such as “religion” became useful. And yes, this *is* how the term got its meaning: Through Western European colonialism, “religion” originated as a comparative term.³ Nowadays, in Western European discourse, religion is often one-on-one identified with institutionalized Abrahamic Religions and opposed to the secular.⁴ However, the way we think of religion in current times, in fact, the way we understand reality, is still highly influenced by the legacy of Christian (Protestant) thinking.

Let me clarify this.

³ See Meyer (2012) for a discussion of the genealogy of religion and comparative religious studies as an academic discipline.

⁴ “According to common European apprehensions, religion is—or is supposed to be—about belief in a transcendent God, about inwardness, and ‘immaterial’ values, world-views and meaning-making, to which ‘outward’ manifestations are held to be secondary” (p. 7).

Since “religion” as a comparative term originates in the awareness of different worldviews due to colonization, and since colonialism and missioning worked hand in hand, the major party involved in determining the concept of “religion” was Christianity.⁵ This is something to keep in mind as the term “religion,” to this day, assumes the intellectual superiority of “the West” over the rest of the world.⁶

Fetish

As Christian missionaries had a sense of superiority over their assumed inferiors, they tried to impose their traditions on other people. They did this by comparing the core elements of their Truth to the truths of the people they encountered on the other continents. For these missionaries, Religion was about personal relationships with the Christian God. This relationship was seen as immaterial, where the soul was distinguished from—merely residing in—the flesh of the body (which was, in turn, residing in the physical world). All materiality was, in that sense, dismissed to the worldly domain. In contrast, the good Christian was supposed to be independent of this worldly domain, as religious life transcends it, and is eventually supposed to free the self from this material world (by living according to God’s rules).

One of the main characteristics of this Christian attitude that distinguished it—and still does—from the worldviews that the missionaries encountered is, as Birgit Meyer (2012) phrases it so fittingly, its “mentalistic approach”: i.e., its emphasis on transcendence over immanence and belief over fetish. In other words, it opposes a material approach to religion. Materiality was thus seen as a mundane matter. The distinction between the spiritual and the mundane itself is a very (post-)Christian one, as is the dualist distinction between spirit and body, fetish and transcendence.

19.03.2023

I’m trying to write, but I can’t concentrate. There is
a glowing bowling ball tumbling around in my belly.

It presses onto my pelvis. Now and then, it melts and
shape-shifts into a family of venomous snakes. They all push against my lower back as if trying to get out. But the place is tightly locked, and they get frustrated, so I get frustrated. The pressure is getting stronger and radiates electric shocks from my sacrum through the center of my hip—where it does a little dance—and on through my leg all the way down to my knee, where it fans out in all directions like a firework in slow motion.

Meanwhile, my abdomen is on fire. Thick logs of firewood lie heavy within me. They are way too thick to properly fit on my pelvic floor and pinch into my muscles and skin.

5 As a more situated approach to the idea of “worldview,” Donna Haraway (1988) coined the term “worlding,” to emphasize the continuous negotiation that goes into making reality.

6 Distinguishing religion (“belief”) from the *real world* (“reality”) is a Western thing to do, just like distinguishing “Culture” from “Nature” (Latour, 1999; Blaser, 2013).

To emphasize the difference between Christians and the people they were intending to convert, Meyer explains that the term “fetish” was initiated by Portuguese colonizers in West Africa. The missionaries saw how people made sacred objects with their hands and how these objects, in turn, were “believed”—a term we will critically evaluate later in this chapter—to bear actual souls. The term “fetish”—coming from the Latin *factitius*, i.e., “what is made”—was used by the missionaries to refer to “objects that have been made by human hands and yet are held to have some life of their own” (Meyer, 2012, p. 15). For the missionaries, this animistic view was odious, even blasphemous: As we know, “mere matter” will never bring us closer to God, according to them. For the Christian missionaries, “fetishism” was defined as “an irrational attribution of life, agency and will to a ‘mere’ thing” (p. 16). “[T]he use of the notion of fetishism marked a superior position of knowing better, refusing to be under the spell of a mere object” (p. 17).

[Note the emphasis Meyer puts on the distinction between the heathen “being under a spell,” like being bewitched, versus the proper Christian “*knowing* (better).”]

Like the way the term was later linked to other domains, such as commodity (Marxism) and sexuality (psychoanalysis), it was negatively connotated with material *dependence*. In Religion, they would say, the emphasis should be on the mind, on knowing; there was no space for other spirits, let alone for objects, besides God himself.⁷ The Second Commandment of the Reformation refers to the iconoclast saying: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth,” thus the notion of “fetish” became a blasphemous act (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Exodus 20:4).

Modern Western ideas about Religion, Belief, Objectivity and Secularism⁸

The popular understanding of “secularism”—where religion and state and the public domain, are supposed to be separated—often disregards a crucial point: Both

7 For example, Meyer explains how materiality is crucial for the Ewe people in Ghana. For them, the evidence of God needs a material vessel. Religious acts are, for example, carving an artifact in which the spirit can enter and manifest itself. For the missionaries, this was seen as evidence of fetishism and superstition because of the involvement of the human hand and object in religious manifestation. This could not be real Religion, since God creates his manifestations without any human interference.

8 See Asad (2013) for a thorough reflection and critique on the notion of “secular” and how it relates to the biased secular notion of “critique.” See also Knibbe (2020) for a more specific reflection on the biased “secular” and “critical” approach to the *sociological concept* of “religion,” as opposed to understanding religion as a *lived reality*.

Enlightenment and secularist thinking are rooted deeply in the mentalistic and anti-materialist character of Christian logic.

The Enlightenment movement emerged as a critique of Christianity by advocating the human mind's ability to understand the world independently of the interference of an all-knowing and almighty God. It was the human, in that sense, who took over God's chair. From his archimedean point—i.e., the “God's eye view”—the enlightened (hu)man would now get a grip on the world with his ratio by taking an “objective” viewpoint (distancing himself from the material and the “subjective,” often associated with femininity).

However, what becomes clear here is that despite the enlightened Modern man's aspiration for independence from God, he is still the very product of the mentalistic approach originating in Christian logic.⁹ The effect of this Christian, more specifically Protestant, bias is evident if we consider that religion for a long time was predominantly expressed through the concept of “belief,” persisting not only in religious studies but also in post-Christian, supposedly secular Western European society.

[In the Netherlands, it is common to ask someone if they are “a believer” or if they “believe in something” if we want to find out whether they are religious or spiritual. It is not expected to evaluate someone's religiosity, for example, by asking them how many ritual practices people perform, especially not when performed outside of church.]

The separation of belief about reality from reality as is, can be seen as a core characteristic of enlightenment thinking or, as Bruno Latour (1999) calls the modern enlightened thinker, “iconoclast”—referring thereby to the anti-materialist attitude of the enlightenment thinker, as well as to the Protestant influences on this attitude. The modern Iconoclast separates “fact”—e.g., the mere stone with his scientific properties—from “fetish”—e.g., the notion that this stone has agency—and links the former to “reality”—i.e., the domain of objective science, epistemology—and the latter to “belief”—i.e., the domain of religion or, more broadly, culture.

What this analysis shows us, more than anything, is not that the fetishist is proven wrong or to be just a “naïve believer” in something that is “unreal” or “imagined.” Instead, it shows us that the Iconoclast—precisely because he believes in belief, and thereby conceptually distinguishes “fact” from “fetish”—refuses to live in a reality where objects hold agency just like humans do. As a result, Modern Western man has created a story in which he stands in a position of mastery over, or freedom from, the material world (and, according to their Truth, he puts people who believe in other cultures or truths in an inferior position). In terms of Jane Bennett (2001),

9 Even the emergence of the “objective” study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) is a product of this continuous mentalist approach (Meyer, 2012).

this could be called the “disenchantment tale”: the self-told tale of the modern man that “figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert ‘matter’; it construes the modern West as a radical break from other cultures; and it depicts the modern self as predisposed toward rationalism, skepticism” (p. 7).

The origins of this disenchantment lie in the colonial character of the Western *Nature-Culture divide*, where Nature is seen as a unique reality “out there” that Cultures try to understand but never fully can. A tricky thought structure through which Modern Western man has put himself in a superior position by acknowledging that he is the only one who “knows” what is knowable and what is not. By claiming this “objective” or “true” knowledge as scientific knowledge, and by opposing it to cultural knowledge, the Modernist thinker claims authority over reality and assumes a superior position over those who “believe” in their cultural perspective: Hereby, the self-claimed “Modern” Westerner performs a form of colonialism over knowledge where ownership is claimed over what is “real reality.” Although I do not want to dive into epistemology, I address its holy place in Western perception, as the illusion of “objective truth” is closely linked to the refusal to see *things* as agents.

[As Latour (1999) points out, by making a hard distinction between what is believed and what is real while at the same time fighting hard to prove that the fetish is merely dead matter, the Iconoclast refutes not the idol but himself. He projects “belief” onto the other because he fails to perceive an alternative reality where a ‘mere thing’ could have agency. Ironically, by trying so hard to prove himself right, he acts on the agency of the stone he seeks to diminish. Thus, following Latour’s strain of thought, the self-acclaimed Modern has, in fact, never been modern.]

From Symbolic/Metaphoric to Fetishist thinking

The material aspect of religion was not just refuted in Protestant Religion and academic discourse; also, in secular social discourse at large, it was ignored.¹⁰ This does not mean, however, that there was no material aspect to religious *lived reality*. It merely illustrates how (the materiality of) lived religion was primarily *dismissed from the public sphere*, as Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) would say. It should not come as a surprise that I emphasize that Secularism is an illusion: An illusion that looks down on religious practitioners and puts the “non-believers” in a superior position—or,

¹⁰ Moreover, this created a dualist and hierarchical notion of “real” Religion vs “unreal” superstition. Beneath “privileging [transcendence] over immanence, subjects over objects, representations over ‘the real thing,’ and spirit over matter [...] lies the assertion that ‘true’ religion can only occupy the abstract spaces of metaphysics and ‘belief’” (Whitehead, 2018, p. 228).

actually, those who believe in science—as more “objective” and trustworthy people.¹¹ Besides that, it also falsely assumes the independence of Christian influences in our Modern Western thinking and behavior. The ideology to be to be “freed” from the material world and “from the chains that bind all other cultures, since they can, at will, pump out of existence whatever entities restrict their action [...]” (Latour, 1999, p. 277). However, besides that freedom being an illusion, would it be something we should want at all?

The notion of “belief”—firstly, used to emphasize the transcendental, direct relationship first with God and later to distinguish between an objective fact and a naively believed fetish—made Western society look down on *things* as inanimate. Along with the separation of fact from fetish, there is the distinction between metaphoric/symbolic and the real, the embodied, or the fetish. Having loosened his ties with *things*—by standing above them, assuming ultimate power over them—the Iconoclast has become incapable of understanding his relationship with *things* any other way than metaphorically or symbolically.

Metaphoric or *symbolic* thinking suggests the notion of being freed from the material world. In metaphoric thinking, material cannot have actual agency and thus it cannot influence us. It can merely be a *representation* of something else, something transcendental, such as a thought or a Truth. For the Modernist, a symbol bears some poetic quality that puts the subject (human) to decipher and mentally grasp what that other “thing” (object) is *standing for* and what it *represents*. This way, material remains “mere”—lifeless—matter, for even when it is holy, it is only so in its *symbolic reference to/representation of* the divine.¹² This symbolic thinking is opposed to an animistic, or fetishist, way of relating to *things*: one in which the relationship with the *thing* is seen as an agent. The fetish *embodies* an agent or, in other words, is animated, immanent. A fetish actually carries, *is*, the entity.

To give an example, I draw from my anthropological research with the Camino Rojo, a spiritual community in Uruguay. During this research I learned how:

11 By dismissing religion from the public sphere—of which the Dutch pillar system is an excellent example as the after-effect of iconoclasm in the 16th and 17th century—the ideology of Secularism distinguishes between the reasonable and the emotional, between objective and subjective. The latter of the two dichotomies is regarded as useless or even too misleading or manipulative to participate in public debate.

12 Victor Turner, one of the most influential anthropologists of religion and ritual—and a very inspiring one—overlooked his own culturally biased way of symbolic thinking: Ritual, to him, was a *symbolic* set of actions that represent a subject’s transition from one “state of being” into another (Turner, 1982, p. 24). “However, speaking in analytical terms such as “symbol” or “metaphor,” one may at best misinterpret the people one is studying, or at worst presume an implicit hierarchical structure in which the researcher is placed subordinate to the researcher” (van Houtert, 2018, p. 50).

[A] conversation with fire is [...] not a symbolic interpretation of crisping sounds, flickering flames, glowing embers and figurative plumes of smoke.

[I]t is not a metaphorical approach to profane, soulless, and otherwise perfectly scientifically describable phenomena produced by the chemical reaction between oxygen and fuel. Rather, it is a *real* conversation with fire: it is a conversation between two real and intentional beings. (van Houtert, 2018, p. 111)

How people from the spiritual community conversed with fire challenged me to understand this fire as a *real* and *intentional* being that was part of people’s lived reality and the network of beings they have relationships with.

As a product of the attempt to free ourselves from the material world by separating fact from fetish, reality from belief, and Nature from Culture, we ignore (or do not allow ourselves) the animistic, or fetishist, relationship with the world around us.

[After all, “To call a ritual “symbolic” or “metaphoric” but a therapeutic session with a psychologist “pragmatic” or “functional,” depends on a culture’s endorsed ontological notions of what is and can be called reality, and what is usually dismissed as “mere imagination” (p. 51).]

[Or, as Knibbe (2020) phrases it, “we tend to call phenomena ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ when they mess up the modern dualisms of matter and spirit, nature and culture, subject and object” (p. 254).]

To challenge this, we must challenge how we relate to *things* in our everyday lives. If we consider an “object” a companion, how would it change our perspective on other *things*, bodies, and entities in the world?





(A) Unnaming

- (B) Dissolving
- (C) Rooting
- (D) Fetishizing

Imagine a world where you have no name. Where the *things* around you don't have a name; a table is no "table," a tree is no "tree," a fish is no "fish." We would distinguish different *things* or creatures from one another by focusing on our encounters with them, on our situated experiences.

A table would become a hard, flat surface, rough or smooth, matte or shiny. Possibly, this surface has some scratches. You might enjoy resting your elbow or another part of your body on it, or some *thing* you were holding in your five-fingered grippers. It is standing on four (or one, or five) long line-shaped objects made of the same—or perhaps a different—material.

A fish becomes a shimmering being that moves through this curious thick texture that is cold (or perhaps not so cold), and that tastes salty, or iron-y, or sweet to your tongue. The creature has two small round pearly balls at each side of its end—or beginning.

These round balls look a bit like the ones you have, too, with which you observe this creature. If you dare—and the creature dares too—you might stick out your branchy body part—or another body part—to touch it. Then, you would notice that the creature is smooth and slippery. You might feel a soft relief on its skin.

If we tried to relate to the world while having lost our categorizations of it, we would be bound to our first-hand experiences. Whether we want to communicate those experiences to others or whether we want to engage with them first-handedly, we would be left with our senses as our medium. We explore how *things* feel, sound, smell, taste, look, and how they move, stand, and relate to their environment.¹

¹ That is not to say that we don't still distinguish between a multitude of *things*, because if we would go radically without concepts, we may be unable to distinguish a table from its environment. I am also not assuming that experience is not in a way thought or cultured; I recognize a shape as a table because I have seen tables before. Instead of throwing away categories altogether, I am curious about what remains when we postpone applying our learned concepts and categories to the world we perceive and instead focus more on how the world appears to us, our lived reality.

: a back against a wall

The cold wall feels like something fluid. Something penetrative. It is as if my back and wall become one and the same while at the same time a manifold of little plates penetrate me from behind in different levels and depths. It is no longer clear which shape and depth I have. How far I continue as a body.

In my experience, it never stops, ever.

Or rather, immediately.

What I certainly don't know (and what I thus have drawn wrongly in the drawing) is whether what I call a "wall" actually continues to exist beneath, above, beside me, and beyond the places where I touch it with my back.

The sense of touch with the wall is as a certain cloud, an aura; in the middle, it is stronger than at the periphery, but there is no clear edge to tell me where the touching starts or stops. Actually, when I think of it, that is, when I concentrate on what I feel, then it is impossible to feel as a separate being.

When I really focus on where "my back" touches "the wall," it becomes obvious that there is no separation, no beginning or end, just pressure.

An area of pressure, touch, I call it; a concentration of attention that has perhaps a denser core than periphery but has no ending in width or depth. All I know is that I don't know how far it expands or whether, when, it stops.

A connection with a “hard” surface causes more pressure and, therefore, more a feeling of endlessness.

Where I’m not clearly touched by the wall—or where I don’t feel the endlessness strongly—I’m touched by an elastic, flexible, tar-like, syrupy surface of fabric with medium pressure. I feel part of a sponge; a thick membrane.

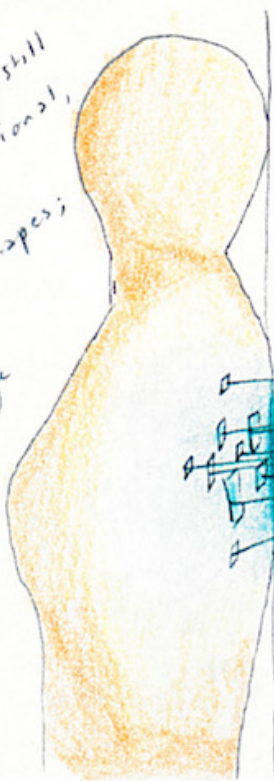
Where I’m not part of the sponge-like membrane, I am wind. Air.

Where I’m not clearly touched by the wall—or where I don’t feel the endlessness strongly—I’m touched by an elastic, flexible, tar-like, syrupy surface of fabric with medium pressure. I feel part of a sponge; a thick membrane.

Where I’m not part of the sponge-like membrane, I am wind. Air.

NB:
colours are still
very conventional,
so are shapes;

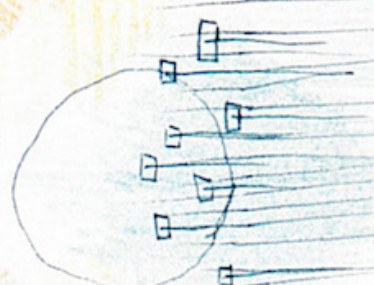
knowledge
is
sensational-
based



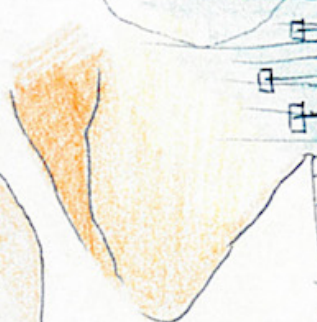
Tewijl een hande nuur juist eerde
vaelt als iets binne'dringends,
vloerbars, alsof nger nuur één
worden tegeltyktyjd drukken allenast
plaatjes in verschillede lagen/diepten
naar binnen, Plaatjes die iets
weg duwen. Het is niet
meer duideligh welke vorm/
diepte ik heb. Hoe ver ik door-
ga. By ngs water stopt het niet;
nooit, of juist meteen. Wat ik
in elk geval niet weet (en dus
fout getekend heb) is of



dat wat ik een
'muur' noem eigen-
lyk wel door-
bestaat boven/
under my.



Er is wel een
soort 'aura' van
de verbinding die
in het centrum heftiger



is dan van de
randen, maar dat
zegt niks over
wat daarbuiten
bestaat...



Actually, if you think of it, that is, if you ^{as a} concentrate on what you feel, then it is impossible to feel separate-being. To really focus on where "my back" touches "the wall," ~~and thus~~ but it becomes obvious that there is no separation, no beginning or end, just pressure. An area of pressure, "touch" we call it; a concentration of attention that has, perhaps, a denser core than periphery, but no ending in width / depth. For all I know is, that I don't know how far it expands or if ^{when?} it stops. It might stop right here as far as I can tell. A connection with a "hard" surface causes more pressure and therefore more the feeling of endlessness. Paradoxical, for a - what we

SOUND-DISTRACTIONS I know as - clearer, more concentrated
At the moment it is only sound that makes me aware of a beyond (I have my eyes closed). Birds, cars, voices in the distance, a squeaking chair. But it is because I know what these sounds are, therefore I can imagine the space around the distance of my capacity to feel: hear: the distance of / what exists. Or of where exists, better said. ^{from attention and causes} a feeling of endlessness ^{stronger}

Where I'm not touched by the "wall" - something with high pressure ~~where~~ where I don't feel endlessness strongly - I am touched by an elastic, flexible, [stretching] surface of fabric ^(my "vest") - something (Spongy, tar-like) with medium pressure; [where I feel part of or bigger sponge; a thick membrane - endlessly thick?]. Where I am not part of a sponge-like membrane, I am wind. Air. Space in its lighter form. I am actually

In her short story *She Unnames Them*, Ursula K. Le Guin explores how Eve strives to unname all animal creatures from their qualifying names as dogs, cats, fish, etc. Having unnamed the animals—who didn’t all accept her idea at first and whose different reactions function as metaphors for different types of people in the story—Eve notices how this namelessness changes her interaction with the creatures she then encounters.

“None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one fear.” (Le Guin, 1994, p. 332)

What appears is that the encounter with what we would have previously objectified as “fish” becomes an act of reaching out through the senses: A space is created for being open and curious about how you experience this being that you encounter. Shedding the label applied to the “other” means shedding the radical distance from this particular creature. A distance that is the inevitable consequence of naming something. Recognizing another creature primarily through its given category, Le Guin clarifies in her story, prevents us from a more fundamental getting-to-know-one-another. The emphasis on cerebral epistemology—and the ignoring of *embodied* forms of knowledge—that is prominent in Western society, explains why by labeling and naming, the Modernist Man tries to master the world he lives in. (And by attempting to master it, radically separates himself from it.)

In response to this emphasis on mastery and epistemology, one could read Le Guin’s *She Unnames Them* as feminist², anti-colonial³, and queer⁴: By letting go of names and categorizations, creatures are not only given the right to self-determination, they are also invited to explore themselves and others in their wholeness as *fluid* and *changeable*. They are invited to be curious about the interrelation between them-

2 A problem of some feminist movements, as well as of the phallogocentric worldview they criticize, is a dualist attitude in which “the other” is entirely dismissed. I don’t intend to essentialize or dualize the feminine versus the masculine in this text, nor reduce them to biological differences. Therefore, I consider the patriarchy and its phallogocentrism as something that *historically* dominated the Western worldview for many persons, not solely or all male persons.

3 By anti-colonial, I mean to oppose the act of dominating over a subjugated “other,” by taking authority in the naming, categorizing, labeling, or paternalizing this “other” (not just human “others,” but also animals, Nature, stories, realities, etc.). This does not mean that this other is deprived of their agency—merely that the colonizer behaves as if that is the case.

4 “[‘To queer’] means to disrupt or make something ‘strange,’ twisting or unsettling meanings, pushing the invisible into the spotlight. These techniques are seen to have the potential to transform normative (taken-for-granted) assumptions” (Johnson, 2014, p. 1618).

selves in their situated encounters with others (rather than through predefined labels, a notion of separation, and the idea of a static “I.”)

Even though it is Eve who suggests and performs the unnaming, it is up to the animals to agree with it. And once unnamed, there is space for egalitarian and curious relationships and exchange rather than of control and power.

[What is more, Eve unnames herself from “woman.” As she leaves Adam, he naively asks her what time dinner will be served.]

The attitude of Eve is similar to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) suggests in his *Phenomenology of Perception* as a “return to the [lived] world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world” (p. 66). Merleau-Ponty suggests that “to return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (p. x). Phenomenology, thus, is the study of how *things*—the world—appear to our perception. The phenomenological method requires a certain openness to the world and a suspension of the “natural attitude”: the culturally learned attitude with which we explain or conceptualize the world. This moving underneath the conceptualized world “of which knowledge speaks,” can be done through the act of “bracketing”: withholding any judgment concerning the true nature of the *thing*—the “object”—or even whether it really exists.⁵

What do we find, in this world without concepts? The “pre-objective,” Merleau-Ponty calls it: It is what we perceive before we objectify “it.” The “pre-objective view which is what we call being-in-the-world” (p. 9). For example, it is when we perceive three long lines that are connected to each other in a certain angle, *before* (or without the intention that) we label this *thing* as a “triangle.” Or, when we perceive little dust particles floating inside a bright, tube-shaped part of air coming from the corner of the window and into the room, without being preoccupied with what it is that we see. What you may *know* you are seeing, is what you call a “sunbeam,” but pre-objectively, we suspend this knowing and merely pay attention to phenomenological description of what we “originally” experience. The perceived appearance *before* we “assume the truth or validity of any statements we may know about it” (Kullman & Taylor, 1966, p. 116).

One could say that the phenomenological attitude, by bracketing away the objectification of and thereby the distancing from *things* as they appear to our consciousness,

⁵ See Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) and also the work of Edmund Husserl on the terms of “bracketing” (or *epoché*) and “natural attitude” (Beyer, 2022).

demands a certain attitude of opening up to touch (both passive and active). This welcoming attitude for touch thus takes place on an eye-to-eye level rather than from a bird's eye view, and it is experimental and curious.

When I go in the water, we work together and exchange. Melt at some places. I am not capable with my mind to recognize or describe what is exchanged, or changed. But I sense it with my body. I know that we share, at this moment, more than usually. I trust that marks are left, memories are activated, remade. Children are born.

This suggested attitude may seem solely subjective at first, and subjectivity indeed plays a central role—an eventual role—in this text and research, written from the subject's experience—me, Els.

[Although, at times, the question comes up, “Who am ‘I’?” and “Where do ‘I’ end?” “Does ‘Els’ + ‘pullbuoy’ perhaps equal—morph into—‘Elsbuoy’ or ‘Pullels’ when they float in the water of the Stadthallenbad?” (Research-diary excerpt, November 10, 2023; see *also* “(D) Fetishizing,” pp. 104–106)]

This subjective writing shouldn't be understood as reinstating a radical subject/object distinction. As we see in the examples in this bundle, experience is shared and relational. It leads to different bodies performing together and sometimes even becoming one new body. I would argue that a focus on subjective experience is helpful because by looking at our subjective experiences, we learn to better understand—in an embodied way—our everyday relationality with the world around us. We learn how the “I” may not be such a strictly separate entity from other bodies after all.

Unnaming in the way Eve intends it, challenges the phallogocentric worldview of “[...] self-sufficient Man” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 100). One could argue that the act of naming and categorizing the world inevitably keeps us from building intimate relationships with the world. This is what I am aiming for when advocating the act of unnamings: It is not a romantic fantasy of throwing away concepts entirely (and thereby blindly falling into a self-refuting trap); nor is it my intention to dualistically oppose a rational and an empirical way of being-in-the-world (or a masculine and feminine way, for that matter). Instead, I call for the *suspense* that the act of unnamings carries, the return to the pre-objective. Suppose we question our names and concepts of *things* and our experiences. Suppose we unpeel the easy, broad, general concepts away and become more detailed about what is behind the particular

moment of an experience of, say, “coldness.” In that case, we can focus on how these *things* and experiences appear in their situatedness. We can obtain a curious, flexible attitude towards penetrability and openness to touch and to being touched. How does the world play you? Surprise you? Unname you?

[Once we are radically open, naming and unnaming are reciprocal and, ultimately, the same thing.]

: a sun

I sit, legs pulled up, in the sun. I try to concentrate on how the heat of the sun comes to my awareness without thinking in categories like warmness, and I realize that at a part of my leg that is covered with my pants—the inside of my upper right leg, a few centimeters from my knee—my leg’s surface expands, swells up, and presses outside. At the same time, there is a pressing, swelling surface draped over my leg, that wants to press outwards and into my leg (I call this surface “my pants”).

The two surfaces press towards one another. Meanwhile, I feel little injections, tickles, moving in-between these pressing surfaces. As if thousands of microscopic little creatures walk, try to wiggle themselves between these two layers. These creatures have microscopic needle-legs, by the way.

The sun on the part of my cheek right below my right eye: as if minuscule needles press outwards through my skin, while a thick, vicious substance drips through these needles. It could also be a spongy substance that sticks to the needles, moving back, and forward.

Im sifting, benen opgetrokken, in de zon.

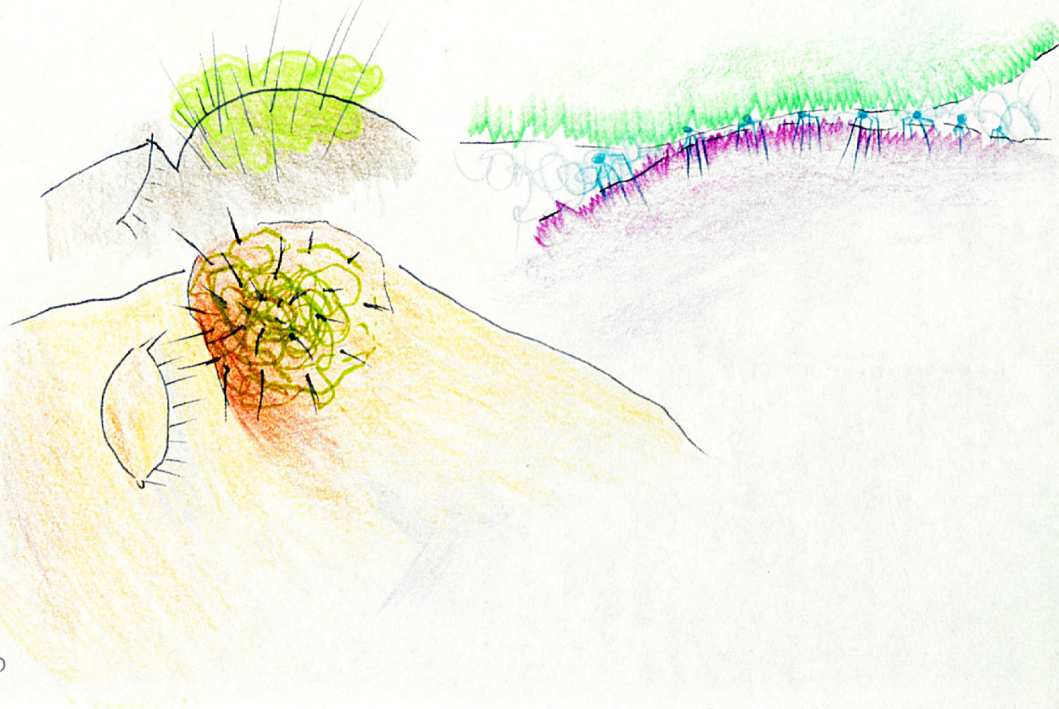
Ik probeer te voelen hoe de waanste van de zon
vervoert, onder in het geroien te denken van
wat waanste is. Dan besef ik me dat een deel
van mijn been, bedekt met mijn braen (over
van op staat, hoewel is de waanste van de zon niet
direct voel; alleen (vis) de waanste van mijn braen).

Het voelst alsof mijn been, afsluit op de oppervlakte
van mijn been, uitzet / opwekt / naar buiten drukt.
Tegelijkertijd ligt er een drukkende, zwakke
'oppervlakte' aan mijn been heen gedraaid (mijn
been, van je achterstunne zeggen) die ook (minste
willen uitzet. De oppervlakte duwen elkaar tegen.

Tegelijkertijd wil ik kleine prikkels, kleine beetjes,
tussen door sloof er dwarsende microscopische beetjes
lopen, zich tussen die twee oppervlakte proberen te
wringen. Die beetjes hebben trouwens microscopische
naald-pooljes

De zon op het stukje huid / wang rechtsonder mijn
rechte oog. Alsof er ^{mini}naalden door mijn huid naar
buiten fringedruwen en stropige substantie rilt door

die naalden heen beweegt. Het kan ook
spansachtig zijn, wat in de naalden heen, zachtjes
mijn huid raakt en heen en weer duikt



Instructions to the (micro-) phenomenolog- ical method

It seems that the more frequent we have an experience, the less attention we pay to them. How often do we really notice how we open our front door? Even though it is a repetitive experience for many people, each time we perform this action, it is slightly different from all the other times. Significantly different. After looking at it in more detail, we may become aware of variable sensory inputs such as the temperature of the key in our hand, a passing neighbor saying “hi,” sounds in the background, thoughts that cross our minds, and the pressure we exert while pushing against the door.

We don’t pay much attention to these particularities, for if we did, we would reach an impasse. Many of our automated actions are functional precisely *because* we do not have to reflect on them. But this does not mean we are not constantly experiencing, and there is thus always something we could pay attention to if we want to.

According to micro-phenomenologist Claire Petitmengin (2006), a few factors make it hard for us to become aware of our subjective experiences. It's hard to stay focused on our experience, since we are not trained to do this, and so our attention easily drifts elsewhere. Often we become more absorbed in the objective of our experience (the *why*), rather than the experience itself. Or, we confuse our *representation* of the experience with the actual experience, meaning that we focus more on what we *believe* that happened than on what actually occurred. When we do manage to tune in to the actual experience, we may struggle to find a particular focus or dimension, wondering "what should I look for?" Furthermore, we may struggle with the degree of precision to go for or finding the right words to express our experience. Lastly, and perhaps most insurmountably, we don't (and never will) have real-time access to our experiences. *We can only get there through retrospection.* Even when we want to describe an experience that happens "now," we need to step out of it in order to re-enact and describe what just happened. Try it, and you will notice: as soon as you start looking for the words that describe how your feet are touching the ground, you can no longer fully feel how they are touching the ground.

I often hear people say that they cannot recall what they did, when they try to remember if they did something that would have been on automatic-pilot, such as turning off the stove. Perhaps this implies a certain lack of trust in one's senses.

[And perhaps this may have to do with the low emphasis that lies on the senses in Western European society. I would speculate and say that this, in turn, has to do with the mentalistic Christian, and later Enlightenment, legacy.]

However, the micro-phenomenological method presents some tools that can help us tune in to and describe our (past) experience *as well as possible*. We might do some of these things already naturally: If I ask you to relive how you locked your front door today, the first thing you probably do is close your eyes to close yourself off from visual input and distraction so you can play back your leaving the house as a mental image. Perhaps you recall some particular sounds from the moment you were in front of your door, or you think of the temperature change you sensed from going outside. When you are back at this point, right before closing the door, you are in an "evocation state": You did not just go back in time through your cognitive memory, you have instead returned to your *embodied memory*; a "re-enactment" of the past experience" (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 244).

Having arrived at the evocation state of the moment you were about to lock the door, you can zoom in on a specific element in your experience that you remember vividly. You relive each of your senses: How your body was positioned, what you saw, whether there was a sound. Did you feel something in your body? Was there a specific thought that occurred in your head? And from that point, slowly, you advance, perhaps with each sense separately. What happened next? What did you do? How did you do that? What did you feel/see/hear/taste/smell? Through practice,

and especially through the help of an interviewer who can help you stay in the evocation state, you can get remarkably close to reliving the experience and unpacking it more detailedly.

To go into this phenomenological attitude, that is, to be more attentive of the way our bodies relate to the world around us, it helps to keep in mind the following modes of experience as introduced by Astrida Neimanis (2015): perception (i.e., the senses with which we experience the world); mobility/movement (i.e., the way the world shapes our movements); sociality/sexuality/affect (i.e., how we are affected by and driven towards certain engagements with the world); viscosity (i.e., how our inner body responds to what we experience); transcorporeality (i.e., how experiences enter or exit our body; perhaps from an experienced “other” body).¹

Furthermore, exercises that Neimanis suggests to help us tune in to our experiences (drawing on works of Samuel Mallin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) are:

Mute or amplify various senses (by exchanging our focus on different senses).

Pay attention to space and distance and to the way our perception is influenced by it (and how this changes when we change our proximity to things).

Study the positions of our body and how this position shapes the way we relate to the world. (We could experiment with changing our position, perhaps even in an uncommon way.)

Play with language and let language play with us. (E.g., do not take adjectives for granted: How would we perceive a sip of tea on our tongue when we would label the sensation as “cold?”)

Challenge our established knowledge by studying “the other.” (Think also of what was discussed in “(A) Unnaming.”)²

To give it some practice, I invite you, reader, to tune in to your experiences. If you allow me, I will induce an experience with you, and I would like to guide you through the experience, paying attention to different aspects of the senses, aspects that would usually go unnoticed.

To continue with the exercise that starts on the next page, I recommend you to use the audio link if your setting allows you to. If audio is not an option, I suggest reading slowly, line by line, and try not to read ahead.

¹ This paraphrase enlists the elements that I found the most relevant to this research and exercise.

² In Phenomenology, language “stretches to accommodate experience [not the other way around]” (Neimanis, 2014, p. 41).

⇒ *an exercise*

If possible for you, I would ask you to slowly get up (if you are not already standing), shake your body a bit, and find a wall that you can stand against with your back, or, if a wall is not available, try standing or leaning against another object.

Close your eyes and take a few breaths.

Pay attention to how air passes through your nose into your lungs.

Notice how you fill with air and then empty again.

Where does your body move?

Notice how your breathing influences your contact with other materials.

You may open your eyes again and scan your environment.

See what is in your field of view; notice shapes, colors, proximity, and movements.

Try to see everything in your view without focusing on anything particular.

Now, while staying in your position, try to focus on one *thing* you can distinguish in particular.

Zoom in.

Zoom in even more.

While you stay zoomed in, notice what else is in your field of view.

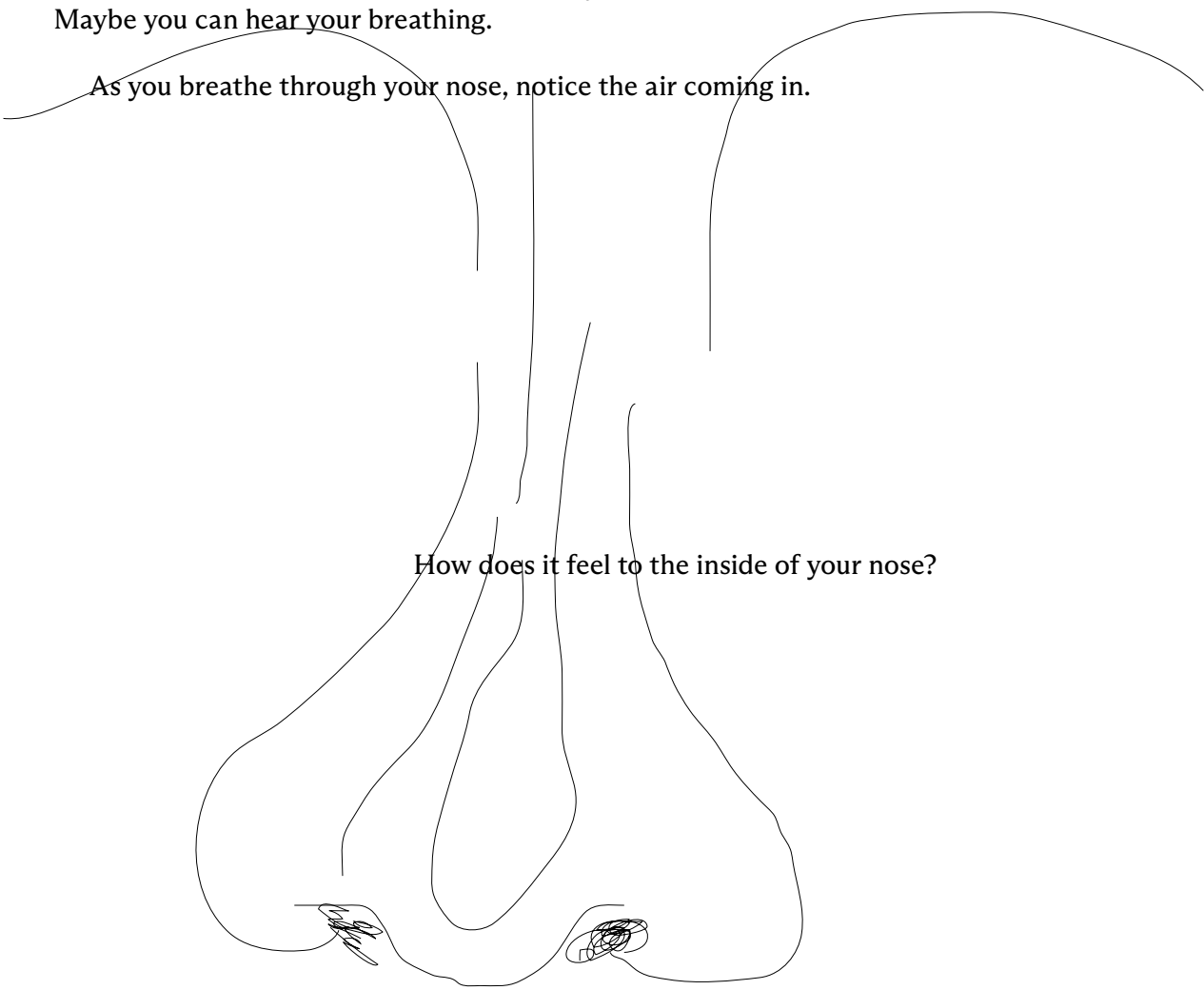
Let go of your visual focus on anything particular and bring your attention to the different sounds around you.

Try to observe how the different sounds are coming from close or afar, how they are quiet or loud, edgy or consistent.

Observe how the sounds move with respect to you and each other.

Maybe you can hear your breathing.

As you breathe through your nose, notice the air coming in.



How does it feel to the inside of your nose?

How does the air smell?

Slowly move your head in different directions.

Try to notice if the smell changes.

You can subtly bring your nose closer to your body.

Does the smell change? And the way you feel the air enter your nose?

Bringing your head back to the initial position, does the air change again?

Now, bring your attention inside your mouth.
Walk through your mouth with your attention.

How does your mouth feel on the inside?
How does your tongue lay in your mouth?
What does it touch?
Is there anything that you can taste?

Slowly move your tongue in different directions.

What do you sense?
Do you taste something different now?

Open your mouth wide and close it again.
Feel your face and neck.

Now, notice how your entire body is positioned.
Notice where your body is in contact with other surfaces.

Feel where your body is resting on something.

How does this contact feel?
Where do you feel the contact most?
Is there a point where you do not feel the contact anymore?

If you had to describe it, does the contact have a color?
A shape? A direction? A sound?

Slightly change the contact point.

How does your perception of the contact change?
Take your time to finish exploring, before you come back to this text.

Is there an element in the exercise which you would say you experienced most vividly?

⇒ *Space to write up a vivid element of the exercise.*
(Meticulously, roughly, or stream-of-consciousness-style.)

⇒ *Space to draw the exercise*

(In any way you like: freely, abstractly, or very specifically,...)

My whole body protests. It clinches onto itself. Sweaty hands are folded, knees stiffened, and jaws are widely opened in a lock. I am in the dentist's chair.

A hole in my tooth needs to be drilled first and then filled. My head buzzes while doom scenarios flicker, and fear rules the household of my stomach.

Spats of liquid—is it my saliva, or are they spraying water into my mouth?—jump out of my mouth and onto my face.

It is ridiculous, but it reminds me of summer and water sprinklers in Viennese public gardens.

And suddenly, you are there, and my heart jumps. Slightly dishonestly, for I'm not only glad with the very thought of you, but also with the not-thought of where I actually am. You drag me out of the chair and into you. I recognize a similarity between the fear of leaping into the dentist's hands, gear, chair, and leaping into you. How cold will it be? Will it hurt? Will I survive?

Still, I would much rather give in to you than to this dentist situation.

The sounds of the machines make it hard for me to concentrate on going into your cold stream, on remembering what this feels like. I can only get as far as knowing what it was like with words and some visual memories, but I can't reach the other sensory parts of the memory.

Perhaps because besides the distraction of thinking about this horrible situation, together with the pulling of my head and the buzzing sounds that come from within and without, it becomes rather impossible to tune in to physical memory. I go inside a million times, but all I feel, hear, and think of is, "When does it stop?", "Will it hurt?", "Will I survive?"

*I'm sorry for possibly slowly losing you.
Forgetting you.*

23.05.'20

XX.XX.XX



(A) Unnaming

(B) Dissolving

(C) Rooting

(D) Fetishizing

*Oh porous
membranes...*

I [...] went to Adam, and said, “You and your father lent me this—gave it to me, actually. It’s been really useful, but it doesn’t exactly seem to fit very well lately. But thanks very much! It’s really been very useful.

[...]

I’m going now. With the . . .” I hesitated, and finally said, “With them, you know,” and went on out. In fact, I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining. (Le Guin, 1994, pp. 332-333)

How am I being-in-this-unnamed-world, where things have no name? How does the world, its *things*, play me? With “world,” I mean everything I would regard—at first sight, first *sense*—as “not me.” At the same time, when we focus on our experiences, we learn that it is sometimes not that easy to distinguish where the “I” stops and where “the world” begins. To be aware of a world, there must be sensory contact with it. A manipulating back and forth. It’s a wrestling game.

When I concentrate on the sensations through which I perceive the world, it seems like there is no clear boundary between “me” and “not me.” That is, it is more a membrane-ish situation. A situation of syrup-like porosity.

When I go in the water, we work together and exchange. Melt at some places. I am not capable with my mind to recognize or describe what is exchanged, or changed. But I sense it with my body. I know that we share, at this moment, more than usually. I trust that marks are left, memories are activated, remade. Children are born.

: the breeze

Laying a layer over my neck and back like a hand, almost touching but not quite. It can't be easy to be so careful and precise, striking each hair on my leg without missing a single one of them.

A tiny ball ticks on my shoulder and then dissolves into a liquid. It is clear where it started but not where it went.

All around my breast? Did it disappear into nothing? Did it enter [me]?

It surprises me, and before I can catch it, it's gone.

[...]

It makes me aware of where my hairs are. Where my body is. Instead of imagining the shape of my head, I learn the end of it.

Even though it spreads out, there is no reason to think there is an end or a limit to it. Or that it won't go inside me. Does it spread inside the same direction as it was spreading on my surface? Does it leave me again or get stuck behind my skull?

Is it carrying the sound of that bird? Bringing it inside my body, whistling my bloodstream?

laying a layer over my neck and back like a hand almost touching but not quite.
 It is not easy to be so careful and precise; striking each individual hair on my leg
 A tiny little ball ticks on my shoulder and then dissolves into a liquid

It is clear where it started but not where it went.
 All around to my breast?
 Did it disappear into nothing?
 Did it enter?



It surprises me and before I can catch it it's gone.

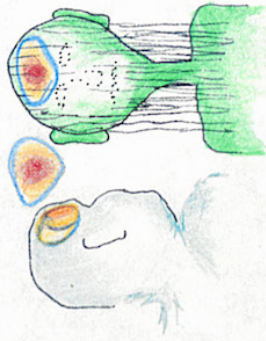
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 that there is an end or a limit to it. Or that it won't go
 inside. Does it spread inside the same way, direction, as it
 was spreading on the surface? Does it leave me again
 or get stuck behind my skull?



Is it carrying
 this sound of
 that bird? Bringing it inside.

The sound can be inside or outside my skull



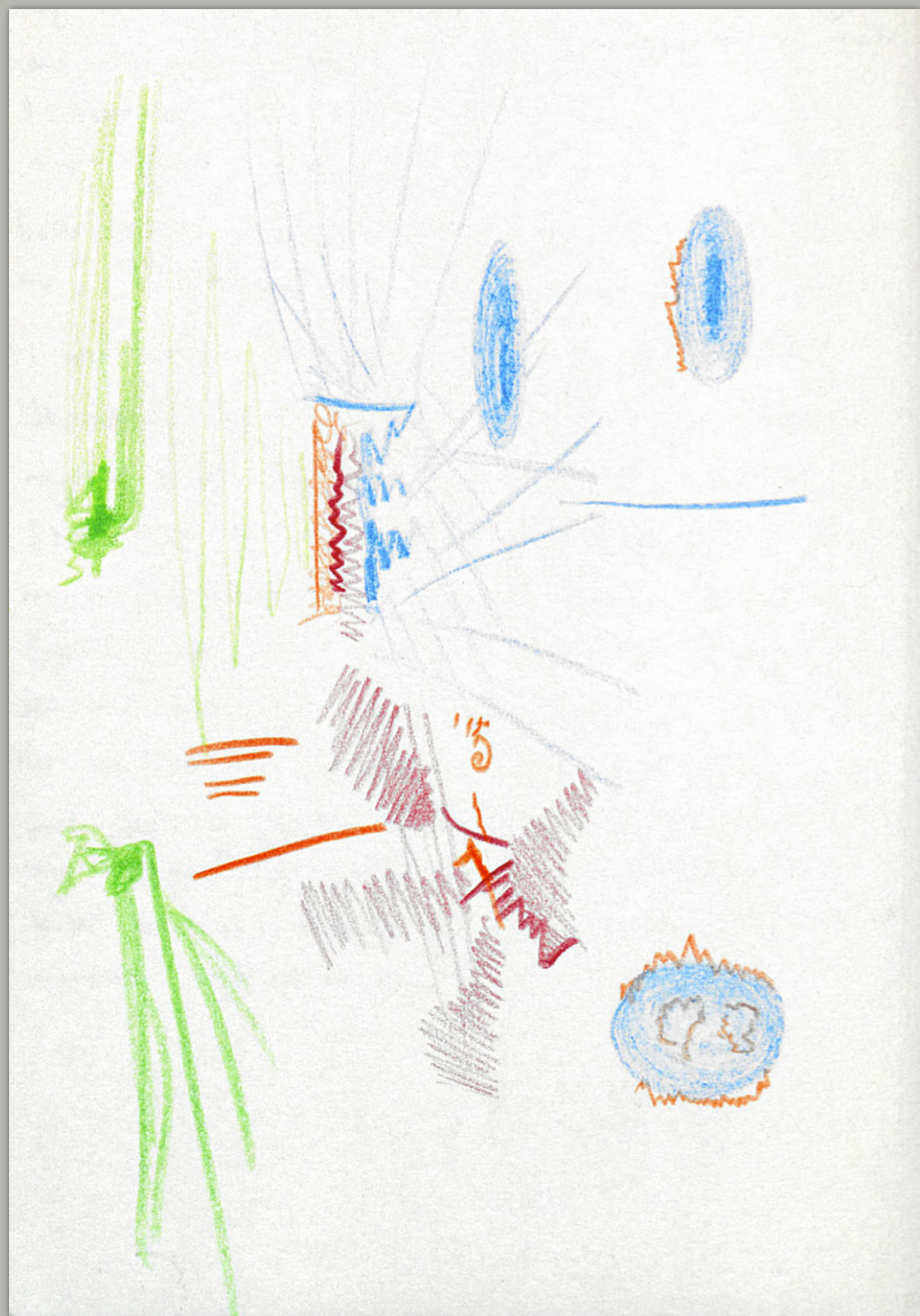
From behind me, a blanket covers my back and presses against me until I start pressing back. A wrestling competition of pushing and being pushed and no-body who can win. The wrestling area becomes a being in itself. Vibrating and sizzling and it has a heartbeat. My back-side is a heartbeat.

While the back-side expands and fades into the wrestling area, and then into the blanket (which I know is the sun), something cuts me in half. My arm is sliced lengthwise by a cold knife. The pit of my elbow is now evaporating into nothingness → everythingness. And then it suddenly turns into a sharp-cut surface, an ice-cube. Hard and smoking.

There is a seemingly consistent sound that could be a mass of people—a crowd far far away cheering en-masse, non-stop, for a never arriving hero. Timelessly, I hear a softer rolling of stones.

One over the other, all separate and going in their own directions though pushed by others as they, cling-clang, involuntarily move ahead.

*Because they are pushed by others who
are pushed by others who are,
involuntarily,
pushed by something.*



With the notion of “hydrofeminism,” Astrida Neimanis (2012) emphasizes how “transspecies” or “transcorporeal” feminism is essential in the critical times we live in. She suggests a phenomenology of water, as water is the material that connects us: we are all bodies of water.¹

Water is what “flows through and across differences” (p. 102).

In her appeal for a phenomenology of water, she addresses the membrane-ness of our bodies: We all absorb water and excrete it, each creature in its own way. In other words, we are porous. In this porosity, the distinction between the self and the other, human and non-human, between “things” in the “world,” blurs.

*Because of the water in and outside our bodies, we are flexible.
Because of water, we can move.
We can touch because of water.*

We can feel how porous we are, and how we co-enter—or merge with—the world around us.

¹ “[M]ore than this, water disturbs the very categories that ground the domains of social, political, philosophical and environmental thought, and those of feminist theory and practice as well” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 111).





What do I need to exist...

Vienna, 31.05.23

Academy of Fine Arts.

Drawing course by Veronika Dirnhofer. (Fig., p. 63, 64, 70).

We are asked to ponder over and draw with our bodies the following question: "What do I need to exist?"

An inside world and an outside world, and the porosity in-between. Being able to be touched and to touch.

Being able to perceive stimuli, to dissolve into the world. Because without that, I don't know that I exist. So, actually, my awareness of "being" depends on *being in touch*. Not on knowing.

"Knowing" is the domain of words, the concepts that follow from experiences. But first, there needs to be something to discover, to experience. Apart from the debate on what comes first—the ratio or the empirical—for me, it is about concentrating on the dexterity of experiencing. Why has my society made "knowledge" its main subject? To keep in tune with agreements, protocols, diagnoses, rules, goals, explanations, and solutions (supplement further as desired)?

But the contact domain, that is where we can allow for an openness for surprise. Where we learn to appreciate the not-knowing.

[...]

I find myself writing on the cocoon of paper that is around my body, but not touching it. Not touching it. I move my hand, the pencil tells me where the paper is, but the paper is not pushing back. If the paper becomes my border, I don't know where I am.

I am porous and I want the paper to penetrate me, and I want me to penetrate the paper. For that to happen, I need to move and be moved.

Yet, in order to feel touch, or even to become aware of porosity, there needs to be friction.

(Research-diary excerpt, May 31, 2023)

I swim on my back at around 4/5th of the last lane. At a certain moment, a person passes and propels a wave of water into my nose. It stings.

The stinging sensation activates a wave of distant memories:

As a 7-year-old in the pool, this stinging sensation used to annoy me, frighten me even. Lying on my back, I find myself back in that village-pool. I am vaguely positioned somewhere at the left side, near the deep end. Floating in and above a dark blue square. A snow-white, almost dazzling space closes around it: I don't see walls, tiles, people.... just a blurry dark-blue rectangle within the snow-white space and some vague shadows of starting blocks at the short end of it.

Now, at 32, floating on my back at the very end of lane 9, and simultaneously being a 7-year-old inside the dark-blue rectangle, a third version of me is hovering a few meters over that rectangle of blue looking at the 7-year-old from above.

The annoying pinching makes me wish the school class comes to an end. Makes me long to walk out of this dank blue and into the bright, towards the other rear end of the pool. I long for those showers that I can't recall.



I am still a body that resists total dissolution. I am “viscous”: neither fluid, nor solid (Tuana 2008). And as I dissolve into the world around me I become aware of my own existence. My border. I experience at my border not an end, but the other.

[Do I reach out in order to emphasize my border, or for it to dissolve it?]

I’m starting to realize how this research gives me a sense of rootedness. It is a form of *ritual framing*, one could say. My experiences bind me to the world, make me rooted as the world is rooted in me. The idea of self gets lost into the idea of the world. Although it has a different shape and form each time, there is a sort of existential, even spiritual, reason why I do this: It provides me with a sense of meaning. It is a counterpart to the rushed society that sometimes weighs so heavily on my chest.

An antidote to the ridiculous demand my society puts on its people.

An antidote to the necessity of knowing who I am, where I come from, who I want to become, and to the idea that the latter is completely dependent on *me*.
(No pressure.)

...intimacy...

In the midst of the rush of everyday life, I can “use” my experiences and tune into them to turn my gaze elsewhere.

My experiences are always accessible to me.

They are always for free.

They can never be owned by anyone else.

07.09.23

Let there be a porosity between you and me. I invite you into my skin. I tell you about what I live.

By inviting you, I take ownership: I make the ultimately private, public. I do it for me.

I do it for you, too.

Let us celebrate our porosity and be intimate.

115

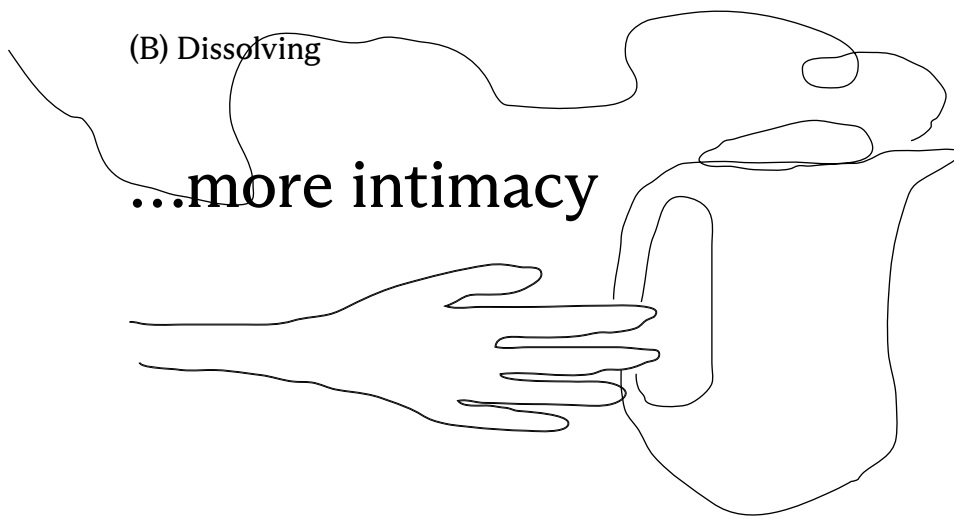
["I make this ultimately private, public." (see fig. above)—In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) critically states how "the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized. [...] Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before" (p. 50).]

In his research on suicide (1897/2005), Émile Durkheim basically concluded that one (of the four) types of suicide—"anomie"—is preceded by social isolation and lack of intimacy.

So I wonder, could the lack of intimate relationship with the world explain the slow suicide we are currently in? Is this why we kill ourselves by being inattentive to our environment? In the end, nature will persevere. It is our own existence that we should be worried about.

"What do I need to exist?" An inside world and an outside world, and then the porosity in-between. Being able to be touched, and to touch" (see "(B) Dissolving," p. 65).





...more intimacy

At first sight, experience may seem a very individual event. A private, intimate contract between us and the world around us. But at the same time, experience is something we all share; it binds us as human beings to each other, as well as to the world around us.

[Also, experience is often collective, existing between different persons whether these persons are human, or *things*.]

This shared experience factor goes beyond class, gender, abilities, tradition, belief, and the society we are participating in. Without aiming to make universal claims about how people (should) experience and what they need, or even how many senses we have, let's agree that we all have access to our experiences (perhaps with the exception of people in a coma).

I argue that sharing our most everyday experiences with each other would be one of the most intimate things we could do. Why? It is what we live through every nanosecond of every day, and yet what, even for ourselves, often remains unnoticed and is taken for granted. Yes, we may tell each other things we define as "intimate" too, such as our dreams, fantasies, desires, or fears. Still, the very way we experience the world, we keep to ourselves.

[Perhaps because it is something we usually don't share with others, it feels exposed when we do so.]

One time, I interviewed my father about how he prepared his tea. As we peeled off layers and layers of how he manually turned off the water cooker just before the water boiled, carried the cooker to the sink, and filled the teapot; the way he tilted his right hand slightly for the water to pour out, while his left hand was holding the pot; then, pouring the boiling water, slightly tilting the pot away from himself, we discovered that there was a certain tension in his arms. The hot steam circling upwards from the water cooker felt dangerous. The tension in his tightened underarms corresponded with the precarious action he was undertaking: Although it never crossed his mind as a thought, he knew *in his body* that the slightest carelessness could potentially make this simple action end fatally.

[Although he put it into perspective in his reflection that it would not actually be fatal, looking at his physical experience and the tension in his underarms, his bodily sensations certainly told him it could.]

To communicate or share our experiences, we depend on language and categorizations. Even if we want to avoid or unname straightforward concepts, as they may be too general—for example, if we want to explain a sensation of heat without using/settling with the term “heat”—we will always come up with another analogy, such as a sensation of “creatures [with] microscopic needle-legs” (see “: a sun,” p. 44).

[...] The water comes in and touches my tongue. HOT! “Hot”? A knife runs through, digs a hole into my tongue. My blood is the water. They become one and the same thing as the border is lost and my mouth fills with liquid [...].
(Research-diary excerpt, February 26, 2023)

Is it possible to omit language? Can I express to you what I feel through a drawing or a gesture, or even just by touching you? And not in the form of a representation or metaphor, but *actually* transmitting the experience to you? Does the object, drawing, gesture, and touch carry the experience in itself? Can I transfer it to you by putting the bottom of my left elbow on your ear or letting all our toes and fingers touch? Or maybe just by standing close to you? And will we notice it when the experience is being transmitted? And does an experience count as shared when my experience is “written” somewhere into your body, even if we are not conscious of it? The fact that we cannot cognitively understand or grasp it, does not mean that this exchange of information between bodies is not happening. Maybe we just do not know how to look for it.

There is a creature in Octavia Butler's (1987/2000) *Lilith's Brood*—formerly known as *Xenogenesis*—called the Oankali. Instead of arms and legs, this entity has tentacles, some of which function to tune in to other bodies and transfer experiences and knowledge directly from body to body without the mediation of consciousness or language. They cannot control what they share and what they do not. Information is exchanged automatically between the bodies through these tentacles.

“Let me share what you feel,” she said. [...] “[G]ive me something of yourself!” Nikanj pressed the back of her neck with a sensory hand—warning pressure. It would give her something then. They stopped walking by mutual consent and faced one another. It gave her...a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or...tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling.

Extinguished.

A half known mystery, beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise.

Broken.

Gone.

Dead.

The forest came back around her slowly and she realized she was still standing with Nikanj, facing it, [...].

“That’s all I can give you,” Nikanj said. “That’s what I feel. I don’t even know whether there are words in any human language to speak of it.”

“Probably not,” she whispered.

(pp. 225-226)

Intermezzo [⚡]

23.01.2021 — Joni Mitchell, from *Talk to me to Jericho*

My body is my instrument,
it is my medium.

I register what I perceive in my flesh and bones.

My experiences mix with memories of old ones. Memories are incarnate. They are recognized physically, first of all; not just through the eyes, but through the whole body before they come to the mind.

Bodily consciousness (and, often, mental unconsciousness); the body absorbs, registers, knows, and eventually responds to the “new data.” Memories locked in a certain place in the body are unlocked, and start playing with the body-system, interacting with other unlocked memories and with other—new—experiences

[...]

I think that this is where *healing* can play a role. Getting to know your body is getting to know what is stored in it.

[...]

This means that even though one might not understand what exactly is going on or what causes a certain bodily effect, to recognize the effect in itself can help to heal [...] pain.

For pain becomes a phenomenon and part of you as a whole.

I lost my thread of thought; I wanted to get to a point, but I got distracted. It is funny how illustrative this experience is: I tried forcefully to grasp what I wanted to say, and thereby, I lost it. I started to dig in my head, thinking backward by trying to follow the line of thought from further in the past, hoping to automatically arrive where I had arrived before and to pick up from there. I couldn't get there. I closed my eyes, pressed them closed, tried to shut away from the background sounds that tapped me on my head and kept me from digging deep. I even got a little irritated.

But now I remember not what I wanted to say, but that I wanted to work with myself as a whole; that there is more than only the mind that I can trust in. My body is here, too, to help me get to the memory. After a little internal struggle—I had to find the courage to let go of the strain of thought—I can let it all drift away. I cut the thread and focus on sitting there, on my body. This feels good. I feel at home. And now I realize this, I suddenly remember what I wanted to say: that maybe the most essential step in making room for bodily consciousness is to take a modest attitude with the mind and to remember that not everything has to be fully and immediately understood by our mind. There is much more to rely on. I look at my hands while writing this, and I feel them. I caress them from within. I love them, and they know.

I recognize their strength and power, and a bulky sensation bubbles up from my diaphragm. It fills my chest, fills my throat. How could I have neglected this for so long? I realize that I look at them as my workers, as things—tools—I carried with me all this time, but in which “I” do not actively *live*; reside. Now I realize that, though they may be tools—very *handy* ones for that matter—they are my home too. They are me, there is no they.

It is striking how much of my perception, my sense of self, is physically home in my chest and head and sometimes in my shoulders and belly (depending on how I feel). But my hands have never been locations where my consciousness has resided. When I look at this screen, I see what I write; my eyes are in my head, and I even think I feel my brain above them, thinking. Do I really feel it, or is this just because I know—I learned—that my brain is at the top of my head? Do I locate my thinking in my head because I know that biologically, my thinking organ is there? Or do I literally sense the activity of that organ? Is there another type of thinking organ in my hands? In the end, when I look a little bit lower, from the screen to my hands on the keyboard, it is my hands who are putting this all on paper.

Sometimes they make a mistake. A type-o or a spelling mistake. [...] Is my brain working, collaborating, with my hands, or is it “merely” sending messages and assignments to its *servhands*?

[...]

I never thought that these little exercises or attempts of living in the body as a whole, as a home, would play such a role in reprogramming the way in which I see and know my body. But apparently it is not so hard to reprogram the *mind-set* (or, better said, to shift from mind-set to whole-set).

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Direct bodywork

What does intuition mean? Direct perception independent of reasoning
immediate apprehension

...in philosophy:

an immediate cognition of an object not inferred or determined by a
previous cognition of the same object

any object or truth so discerned

pure, untaught, non-inferential knowledge

...in Latin: contemplation → to gaze at, contemplate

Over time, this “without reasoning” perhaps got more emphasis than the
“directness or gazing or focus on bodily perception.” Intuition became a mys-
tery because the body became a mystery.

Intuition may often be understood as not verifiable, not scientifically provable,
not arguable, mysterious, superstitious, ... sometimes even *feminine*. Why?
Because we are supposed to shut off from bodily consciousness and knowl-
edge. Our body is just a cover, a physical space to reside in, the home for our
mind. We have to take care of it, keep it fit and healthy, not because we are it,
and it knows things, but because we have it, and because it carries and feeds
the thought-organ inside it that knows things—the diamond. The body is to the
mind what plants/the earth are to human beings: food, soil, tools: ‘dead’ *mat-
ter*. Dead in the sense of being spiritless. Without consciousness.

My arms are swelling, knocking, vibrating, dancing. I love them.

.....

25.01.2021 - Odetta - *Tomorrow is a long time*

The first steps are doubtful. They bury the possibility of return. Is it fear that makes me want to return? What is the difference between the difficulty of starting to write and starting to go into a river? Or, better asked, what are the similarities? When I go into the river, I might find the cold too uncomfortable. But as long as I'm not too far in yet, I could still decide to return. When I start to write, the first lines are the first steps. They determine the direction that I (apparently) chose, the way in. Therefore, I hesitate. As I continue to write, I become aware that the other possible ways of writing—of going into the water—are shut off more and more with every step. (Though in reality this may be incorrect, I can still go everywhere?)

When there is no flow, every sentence may go in different directions. This is a valid—though perhaps unconventional—way of “going in.” On paper, one can explore as many different ways as one wants (with words, that is, because the borders of the paper still define limitations). Meanwhile, the physical room has walls and obstacles to walk into. Thus, the consequences of going every way are much more significant (e.g., one must clean up the mess, be careful of valuable objects, or not hurt oneself—assuming one wants to avoid pain).

Having said all this, I still haven't decided yet what way I will go. Perhaps I won't go anywhere at all; perhaps I like it here, wading through the shallow water, taking turns, not going much deeper, nor going out.

There is the sound of the keyboard.

There is a sun. That makes hanging here more comfortable, on the borderline of 'in' and 'out' of river and text. My hands dipped in, playing with the keys, then withdrawing to rest on my lap.

-toilet break-

Now I *really* went out. And the tea tastes too sweet. Suddenly I don't like it here and think I will try to enter another river.

[...]

I notice this drought coming from the left below, cooling the left part of my lower back and the bottom of my left upper leg (at least that part that is not touching the chair), my upper calf, and my heel. Suddenly, a forgotten memory comes to my consciousness: I remember now that I dreamed that I had almost lost my toe! I had a nasty cut in the toe of my right foot. I must have walked into some glass or something in the pool as I was busy playing a ball game because I only realized my injured toe once I was long out of the pool. Dirt had come into the wound, and it started stinging and glowing and beating (I actually feel nauseous remembering this part). I looked at my right foot, the before-last toe, and it was sliced in half horizontally, right beneath the bone. Somehow,

the boneless lower part was still straight and not dangling down. I saw bones and whitish tissue at the bottom of the upper part. Nasty, “this doesn't look very good,” I thought. I tried to fit the two halves onto each other as precisely as possible, like a puzzle. For then, I hoped, it would be possible for my blood to continue streaming and the toe could heal correctly. Then, the broken cells caused by the cut would naturally glue back together, and over time, the skin would grow together and close around the wound.

I had to go to the hospital for further treatment. I tried the airport, but there I saw a crowd of people so big that I could not distinguish anything: no direction or space. So I decided to go for the train. I did not have a ticket, but luckily, a guy with a laptop sat beside me and offered to help me. He was handsome and had kind eyes. He knew everything about getting tickets: he even knew some special discounts for people who don't have a car or take planes. We tried out different possibilities, determined to find the cheapest ticket. For some reason, his laptop was standing left of him on the bench while I was sitting to his right. This made it slightly unhandy for me, because I had to lean over him to get to the keyboard. But I liked it because I liked being close to him. Although he must have wondered why I was searching for my return trip when I hadn't even arrived yet, I'm sure that he also didn't mind me hanging over him. He smiled. If I hadn't woken up right there, we might have kissed.

27.01.2021 — the echoes of Bob Dylan's - *Ballad of a thin man*

I miss what I never had, a religion, tradition, something that fills me with more than myself.

28.01.2021 — Kate Bush - *The kick inside*

I brought you from my dream. I didn't realize that it was a dream until now. There is a void between being with you and sitting here behind my computer to write. It felt so good to be so very close to you. I mean not just close, but glued to you. Like sisters (again). I wonder if it has ever been like this in reality. There is so much to heal. Sometimes, when I think of you, the skin around my throat tightens, pressing against my Adam's apple. From there, a connection is made between my nose, which starts to sting, and my eyes, which start to become watery.

Are you ever in a similar situation?

Is the hurt penetrating that cocoon you built around you a long time ago?

Are you even still that person with cocoon and all? I can't say I know you; I can only guess. But I'm quite sure you're still beautiful.

[...]

29.01.2021 — frustration — Caetano Veloso - *I feel a little more blue*

As they lay lightly on the keyboard, the tips of my fingers are sizzling, electric. They feel the same way my mouth often feels after eating raspberries or kiwi: a buzzing, tickling sensation of presence knocking on the door of my consciousness; “hello, I’m here, and I’m going to irritate you!” I have no idea what causes this. A chemical? A neurological reaction to a particular taste/feeling? A psychosomatic link that I made at some point in my life? The sizzling of my fingers travels through the bottom-end of my underarms. A heavy stream presses on the lower skin, moving back and forth from the elbow, through the pad of the palm of my hand that lies right above the wrist, and extending to my pinky fingers. More lightly, it passes through both hands and fills the fingers with sizzling electricity. And something similar—I’m unsure if it is the same thing—zooms through my shoulders. It zooms through the part of tissue between the shoulder ends and the neck, from the shoulder top towards the back: That tissue that is often tense and would be the first body part to grab when you massage someone.

I imagine a massage now. Thumbs pressing into my flesh. Yes, now I know it more certainly: it is that same sensation I feel in my mouth after eating kiwi or raspberries. Is this what we call “tension”?

Now, another prickling sensation gains my attention. It tickles through my belly. It’s a bit like the start of a laugh or the end of an orgasm. I know this feeling very well.
-be right back-

[...]

When I go in the water, we work together and exchange. Melt at some places. I am not capable with my mind to recognize or describe what is exchanged, or changed. But I sense it with my body. I know that we share, at this moment, more than usually. I trust that marks are left, memories are activated, remade. Children are born.

12.02.2021 — Fleetwood Mac - *Emerald eyes*

Everything I do is part of one thing. The same thing. Even the things that other people do are part of that same thing.

I wrote earlier that “I miss what I never had, a religion, tradition, something that fills me with more than myself.” I guess I was missing this. Not that I feel connected to a larger whole, a God or so... Or...do I...?

It is more that something inside me is calling for attention, and I’m giving it this attention in all kinds of ways. And every time I do so in a different form—reading, writing, drawing, swimming, cycling, drinking—I realize that the same thing

is calling, and it is the same food I am giving it.

It is not about a specific outcome; it is only about the process. I thought for a while that I needed to find out how to give this experiment a platform—how to exhibit it, communicate it, pinpoint it—but maybe it is all about *not* giving it a platform. About letting it be exactly what it is: a flow—a stream.

A river?

toilet break: Every time one visits the toilet, one comes out a different person

[...]

.....



Imagine you are in a lake,
not extremely cold, just a little colder than you.
It tickles your shoulders and neck.
It strokes your skin each time somewhere different.

While you drift on your back, your nose is slurping the air. Heavily
And since your ears are covered with water, you hear your breathing taking place in your entire head. Or rather, it is as if you live inside your nose. It is nearly the only sound you hear. Except for these little electric, under-water angel-crickets that chirp from the bottom of the lake. These unusual sounds—the sporadic chirping of the crickets far, far away, and the sound of your head breathing deeply and slowly—tell you: You are living at a different speed, slow motion.
It is not standing still, but a life-span is passing by right now at this very moment:
A slow moment of an entire life.

As you float there, a new image comes up.

[...]

You imagine a river. Extremely cold this time, much colder than you.
You are trying to get in and trying to do so graciously.
But the stones keep rolling away from beneath your feet, disturbing your balance. It is a wrestling game where the different powers around you try to break your balance. They try to pull you down until, eventually, you have no other choice than to say, “I give up, I give in.”
But you didn’t give in just yet. You still think you are stronger.
Having found a position, you concentrate, convinced that from this point

And the ropes, tightly closed around your ankles, pull you away.

Besides, there is also this pressure against your belly, pushing inwards.

Combined with that pull at your leg, even a little shift of attention is enough to bring you to the ground.

Only then, as you swim against the current, do you find your balance. Your collective speed. The right effort and the right letting go.

.....
 ~~~~~

I feel refreshed, cleared of it all. I'm ready now.

## PART ONE

## PART TWO

All that anything or anyone ever does: search for balance. Like the drawing taped to the wall. She seems to be casually hanging there, but I bet it isn't easy.



### PART THREE

Wrestling. At all times, everything is wrestling with everything. And that is how these words become visible. And that is how they become meaningful to you.

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#### 17.02.2021 — Patti Smith - *Ain't it strange*

[...]

Exactly a year ago, I was almost certainly sitting right here, looking through the same window at the same tree. The tree has aged, though, I can tell. It is a year older, but somehow, it really got older. It must have gone through a lot, maybe a trauma or an important transition phase. A bit more...sober, I'd say. Less romantic, perhaps? More an attitude of "take me as I am, I don't care." And also more gnarled/robust. I wouldn't say a grandma, but for sure, a grown-up tree. But hey, what would you think? A year has passed. Look at yourself. Look at me; we have aged as well.

aged, changed, grown, developed, matured, antiquated, worn, ripened,  
evolved, advanced, cultured, grayed, moth-eaten

Ok I'm exaggerating but I'm trying to make a point; in the above, one should read:

wrinkly, calm, robust, detached, connected, dim, chiseled, glowing,  
transformed, wise, patient, callous, bland

If still unclear, what I mean is:

three-dimensional, quiet, grounded, immaterialized, unified, transparent,  
slippery, vibrant, ramified, honest, silent, impenetrable, air

[...]

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#### 18.02.2021 — a candle

I placed a candle between my hands. With every breath-out through my mouth, the flame gets excited. Excited, probably not in the human-centric sense, like looking forward to something, or sexually aroused, just excited in a physical way—activated. The longer I look at it, the more uncertain I become about the length of the flame. I cannot find its end, it is as if I am drawn into an optical illusion. Or another world. (Actually, I sometimes see two flames.)

As I look at this three-dimensional little space, vaguely tear-shaped, I know I will never walk around in there. Not only because I would burn, but my feet are also too big to walk there. And yet, I imagine myself as a tiny me who exactly fits in the aura of the flame—standing on the wick. I would instantaneously be an angel: Only angels deserve such a bright, illuminating, and soothing shell. It reminds me a bit of the shell I sometimes imagine to build for myself when I feel exposed. Or at least, it reminds me of the shell I would wish for myself in those moments.

Funnily enough, I have tried to draw fire and flames so many times in my youth, yet I never looked into a candle like this before, really seeing it. Many times, I looked into a big fire, yes, overwhelming and impenetrable. But not this little flame, serene and—though solitary and inaccessible—transparent, open. There is something special about the tip; the edges are quite rigid, but the tip transitions smoothly from flame into everything else. Soft as the tip of a fluffy paintbrush. I feel the urge to paint with it \_\_\_\_\_



During COVID-19 in 2020, I started to work with these explorations in the form of a writing exercise. Each day I would schedule some writing time to write in a stream-of-consciousness kind of way, in which I would mostly focus on my consciousness of my presence “in the now.” As I brought my awareness to the act of writing, and the conversation between hands and head during the act of writing, I felt like I was rooting myself in the world.





- (A) Unnaming
- (B) Dissolving

# (C) Rooting

- (D) Fetishizing

## Experience

I desire to dissolve completely into my sensory experiences, so much that, at a certain point, it doesn't matter anymore where I am going, where I was, or who I am. I desire to reach the point where nothing has a name anymore; I have no name anymore. A point where there is no longer a clear distinction between where I stop and "the other" begins. If I really pay attention, I cannot know where I end; I only know where I touch.

## Existentialism

As Knibbe & Fedele (2012) once phrased it, a ritual practice is "experienced as something that works" (p. 7).

Works for what? For me rituals are about rootedness. Just like making a home a home is about rootedness.

I'm starting to realize how this research gives me a sense of rootedness. It is a form of *ritual framing*, one could say. [...]

Theoretically, I know that my arm is leaning on the chair's handle because I know this *thing* here is "a handle," and I know that what is positioned on top of it, is "my arm." I feel the touch, at times even so strongly that one could almost describe it as a minor form of pain. But can I truly sense that exact point where my arm ends and the chair begins?

No, I rather notice the entity of pressure. It is a presence that is concentrated somewhere to my right-middle. But where is the "me" in this whole thing? If I close my eyes, it could just as well be that "my arm" is 2 kilometers long, and that *somewhere*, at *some* place, I feel *something*. The pressure is stronger in one location, almost painful, but it draws a little bit upwards. A vibrating electric signal, like a cloud, and then it dissolves.

Process is about rootedness. Rituals are about rootedness. I desire to dissolve, merge, with the world around me, with the *things* I spent my everyday life with. I desire to dissolve entirely into my sensory experiences, so much that, at a certain point, it no longer matters where I am going or where I was, who I am. What I find in this practice of dissolving, is rootedness.

Although my emphasis lies on dissolving—losing myself in my senses—the kind of rootedness that I find in this praxis is completely existential. It is my form of meaning-finding. I am clinging to it, drawing it, thinking about it, ritually framing it, writing a thesis about it; meanwhile, it is defining me, justifying me, that I do this, and reminding me that I am. A contradiction, dualist thinkers would say, or a both-and situation, so the non- or anti-dualist thinker would say.<sup>1</sup> I don't mind contradictions; I find them more genuine and real, than solid theories. But in a dualist world, they are contradictions nevertheless.

Although it has a different shape and form each time, there is a sort of existential, even spiritual, reason why I do this: it provides me with a sense of meaning.

It is a counterpart to the rushed society that sometimes weighs so heavily on my chest.

An antidote to the ridiculous demand my society puts on its people.

An antidote to the necessity of knowing who I am, where I come from, who I want to become, and to the idea that the latter is completely dependent on *me*. (No pressure.)

(see "(B) Dissolving," p. 68)

1 In *On Value. The Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology*, Luis Dumont (1980/2013) argues how, as part of the "individualistic" Western, worldview, oppositional concepts are regarded as mutually exclusive, whereas in "holistic" worldview, they can oppose and yet belong together. See also Michael Lambek's (2015) thoughts about existential anthropology, for an interesting thought experiment on dualist—"either/or"—and non-dualist—"both/end"—thinking.

“Phenomenology” is a way to analyze or make sense of what it means to be human. “Existentialism” is another. But how do we sense like a human, I mean, *really* sense; on a daily basis? What *things* are contributing to this *sense*? And how? When we just *are*; when we go about our days, engaging with whatever we have to engage with—our bedsheets, alarm clock, toilet seats, the water we drink, the door handle we lift, the stairs, the pavement, and our bike-pedals, the rain, our raincoat, our shoelaces, bed, sheets, the alarm clock—there is no such distinction between existentialism and phenomenology; religion and ritual; religious life and everyday life. When we go about our daily business, there is only *lived reality*.

[We should call] into question the category-thinking that prevents us from continually refreshing our sense of the nuanced complexities of life as lived. [We should refuse] to reduce lived reality to culturally or socially constructed representations, and [be determined to] explore the variability, mutability, and indeterminacy of that lived reality as it makes its appearance in real time [...]. (Piette & Jackson, 2015, p. 4)

## Ritual framing

Could it be that by distinguishing between religion and the profane, the spiritual and the mundane, ritual and everyday life, we are preventing ourselves from having meaningful relationships with *things*? What if a ritual is not apart from, but *part of* everyday life?

Catherine Bell suggests the term “ritualization” as an alternative to ritual, to emphasize its processual aspect. She defines ritualization as “a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (Bell, 1992, p. 74). “Ritualization” emphasizes process and relationships, because “[t]he strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment” (p. 93). But what if we remove the “symbolic” and the separation between the “privileged/distinguished” and the quotidian? Can the quotidian be the ritual? Maybe ritualization is an agreement between the involved parties, it is a kind of *becoming*.

In an everyday ritual, we are dealing with (open-ended) performances of becoming; “rituals are first and foremost devices for directing attention” (Utriainen, 2020, p. 197). And as we ritually frame our everyday lives, “a ritual may become like a wave or pulse of ritualizing that comes and goes in the midst of one’s everyday chores, bringing about subtle—and often also significant—changes” (p. 201). These techniques are collaborations. What we can do for ourselves to activate this becoming, is to direct our attention to our techniques and collaborations with other bodies, amid the complexity of everyday (modern) reality. To focus on ritualization as an aspect of, rather than a separation from, everyday life “[sheds] light on the sometimes quite subtle ways in which moving in and out of the ritual frame makes it possible to regulate the often delicate balance of enchantment and disenchantment” (p. 195).

# : here/now

Vienna, 04.10.2023

Micro-phenomenological interview with D.  
She told me to “come to the here and now”  
and tell her how I had arrived...

*I closed my eyes and leaned back. I sat with my back against the chair. At first, I had a thought in the line of: “Ah, there is no pressure. I can take my time to find this here and now.” So I kind of traveled a bit. Journeyed a bit through my body. Then I arrived inside my ears.*

I am aware of a sound. There is the sound of a car passing from the back to the front on my right side, and on the left side, I hear my neighbors talking.

And, while hearing this, I realize that ...

I am not traveling towards *it*;

*it* is traveling *through* me.

The sound from the car comes straight from the side, and the sound of the voices comes from the front corner of my head but then a few meters away.

The sounds are crossing each other. It is as if they are on a road going through me, from both the left and the right side. Then they go out of me again on the other side. All this while, I also hear empty space.

I continue to travel, to look for the here and now. I continue by going inwards.

Inwards by paying attention to my body and by ... sort of pulling my eyes further inside. And while I do this—I don't know where exactly my focus lies—suddenly, my attention is caught by...

...by some very clear sense of presence that suddenly is there.

This happens as I am breathing out.

As I breathe, I suddenly feel a big pipe appearing. A metal pipe of about 10 cm in diameter. And the pipe moves with my breath all the way through my body, or... it kind of suddenly emerges inside my body and moves all the way down through my chest, through my stomach.

It is always at the front of my body, parallel to my spine. And it is straight. It passes through my vagina, through the chair and through the floor and further down. I don't know if it goes further down forever, or if it stops somewhere, or if it goes down into the earth, but it is metal, and it is dark. Almost black or dark gray.

It is matte, not shiny, and its walls are very thick. Actually, now that I come to think of it, I'm not even sure if it is hollow at all.

There is a downward movement, but it could just as well be the solidity of the pipe itself that I feel filling my inside. If it were hollow, something would move through it, and that something would go down like syrup. But thicker. Not only sliding along the sides of the wall but filling it up completely.

The pipe starts at my chin. It almost exactly follows my air pipe, but then it stops at the bottom of my chin. It is partly inside my body, in my neck, but it is also a bit bigger than that. Part of it is situated outside of my neck, at the front.

It feels a bit like this pipe is always here. Always has been. It feels like a grounding mechanism. And it is hEAVVVV like “Bwuvvvvww!” Almost an orgasm, a wave. But not a wave that ends or disappears: It grows like a plant. Very quickly, it grows out of me through the chair and whatever is beneath me. Piercing the ground and the stories underneath me. I’m pretty sure now. It goes through everything.

Meanwhile, I’m also still aware of the sound. And there is another kind of movement, of ... another kind of pipe, perhaps. A horizontal movement that goes out from the sides of my head to my left and right. Approximately where my ears are. It is just as wide as this downward pipe, but transparent.

It is made of air. It is still a pipe.

Maybe a different thickness of air. Maybe a little bit more pastel, light, yellow,

but transparent. It is a cloud that doesn't have clear borders, but definitely the direction and shape of a pipe.

I'm stable because I'm fixated by this, you could say, anchor that rolls through and out of my body.

And this is what I immediately recognize.. I recognize this as the here and now.. I just know. It is present, and I know it: "There it is," and I also know that it is always there. It doesn't just disappear.

I am simply not always aware of it...it is a bit like something that needs to be initiated first. Activated.. And then, suddenly, Pfffwww!! It is present.

*And I realized that all the while I felt this, I drew in my eyes a little bit. As if my vision traveled backwards from my eyeballs into my head and down and maybe even through the pipe. So it is something I saw, but I also didn't really completely see it.*

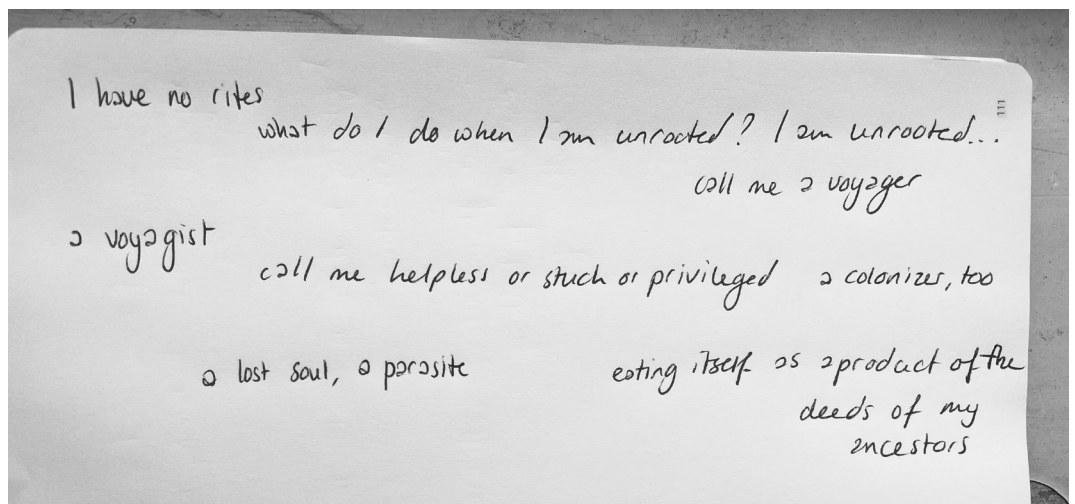
I'm learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I'm just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I've had many lessons, and I'm better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I'm still afraid. I can't quite control my directions yet. (Octavia Butler, 2009, pp. 3-4)

In May 2021, I participated in a session of the artistic mentoring program called "The Octopus Programme," for which a storyteller from Palestine was invited to read to us. I recall that her storytelling was mesmerizing, but what stuck with me most was the conversation we had afterwards, about the body and the role of the body in storytelling. The storyteller told us an anecdote of how, while she walked to her appointment that morning, she noticed that her head was "floating": it was everywhere; it was in the clouds, drifting away from her body. She felt disordered by this and required some kind of "rooting," she said. So she walked up to an orchard, rather intuitively, and rolled around in the open space of dirt between the trees, and so her head returned to her body, and she felt weighty and grounded again.

Hearing her story, I felt like something inside me was awakening. This kind of intuitive, embodied, knowing what the "me" needs and finding it in a relationship with the direct environment of "me" was exactly what I—me, Els—was looking for. However, I could not pinpoint how to go about finding it. I needed to find a frame, a format of "to do's," that could be my ritual practice.

Much later, I realized:

I won't live in the illusion that I will at some point find what I am searching for. Still, I know that throughout the search, I will have spontaneous, meaningful encounters with people and things. Moments in which there is a little overlap between the experience I am searching for, and the actual experience I am having. Sometimes, this will happen while reading a text, hearing a song, being with a person, or when I am with other non-human bodies. Bodies that my society taught me to think of as mundane and spirit-less, but that are actually fundamental agents in experiences of rootedness. (Research-diary excerpt, May 27, 2021)



The thought of music almost makes me cry.  
It prickles in my eye, a ball starts to form in my throat.

My nose stings, my eyes sting, get wet.  
 My vision unclear. I breathe through my mouth now.

My nose is almost blocked, my throat expands, and my  
 mouth cramps, shrinks. Water wells in my eyes.  
 And then it fades again. An almost-cry.  
 My mouth relaxes, my nose is snotty, my throat back to  
 normal size.

But hey! Some water gathered in the corner of my right  
 eye. It is preparing to drop down. Balancing on its toes. Wig-  
 gling but not falling.

The thought of this again moves me, settles into my stom-  
 ach, rises to my throat, my nose, my eyes  
     new water is arriving  
                             my nostrils expand, the view gets  
 blurry  
     face shrinks  
             snort  
                 Teardrop.

I sit back, face squeezed, a drop forms.  
 Every time I write about it, it draws back.  
 And so I'm edging  
 the tear to  
 drop.

Dear,

*I miss you and our confidential bond. I miss the routine of surprises we built up together. I am a bit sad about the thought that I probably won't see you again. Or at least not before we have both changed. And what we have will never be the same and will never be of the same dedicated and impulsive intimacy as it was this first time.*

*Today I thought I saw you twice. I recognized you in this one place and then again in the sound of your multiple voices in another. You are still so fresh in my memory and dreams that it makes me look for you. I sense a little gap inside my chest where I had made some space for you. A space where I found a sense of completeness that was new, exciting, romantic, addictive. A space that grew big in only a few days, which is now a lurking hole of loneliness and nostalgia and missing you.*

*The days we spent together showed me another side of who I am, what I like, and what excites me. To find you back in this other river today was a revival of the addiction; it gave me again the hope that tomorrow there may be a next time, a new chance to meet. But tomorrow, it will probably change again into pain and sorrow and the realization that I must say goodbye, again. And perhaps for good. I don't want to acknowledge yet that here we are; I will have to let you go. I will miss you.*

*Will you come into my dreams tonight?*



- (A) Unnaming
- (B) Dissolving
- (C) Rooting

# (D) Fetishing

As you may remember from “Situating where “we” began” (p. 22) the term “fetish” came from missionary times when the act of seeing the material world as animated “violated distinctions between human-made fabrications and God, between subjects and objects, between spirit and matter, between construction and reality” (Meyer, 2012, p. 21). In recent times, the meaning of the term “fetish” changed to a more “secular” form. From an accusation of an inanimate object that people worship because they believe it is inhabited by a spirit and has magical powers (in missionary times), the term “fetish” now has a more psychoanalytical—often disapproving—meaning, namely as a kind of (sexual) pleasure and obsession linked to a particular object or thing. Still, these days as well as in missionary times, a fetish is regarded as unwanted, as it suggests that a thing has power over us. And we cannot let that happen, can we?

Or.....can we? What is so wrong with the fetish?<sup>1</sup>

If we would let go of that rigid distinction between subject and object, spirit and matter, construction and reality, can we acknowledge that the material world has agency? And that the material world around us shapes us as much as we shape it?

1 Or the “factish” as Latour also calls it: He sees the fetish and the fact as deriving from the same thing, the “factish,” which was brutally split by the Modernist iconoclast into “fact” and “fetish.” Since I take fetish as a reality, it is for this work unnecessary to emphasize the term “factish,” since eventually they are the same thing.

Or, when we look at it from a more contemporary, secular—sexual—perspective, is it so refutable that a thing can play with our desires and our lived reality? Is it really a good idea to banish the “fetish” from our lives? If so, why? Perhaps so that we can liberate ourselves from (our potential dependency on) the things in our life-world. But what are we left with when we are liberated?

Maybe at first, we feel more “individual,” more of an “I.” And possibly, at first thought, this may be desirable as it evokes a stronger sense of independence and existence. We feel in control when we can manipulate the “things” around us—these mere, soulless objects—to our liking. We can use “the world” to our liking and invent new names for what we find in “it.” But who are we, when are liberated from the material world, the flesh, our desires? What are we left with?



Can we say that water is the  
body that carries us and that "us" is  
not a multitude of "I's" but rather something  
radically own ~~as~~ a semi-object?

Is there Elsbury ~~swimming~~  
~~in~~ the water

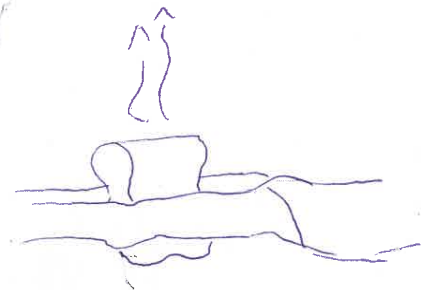
us is propelling

A hand

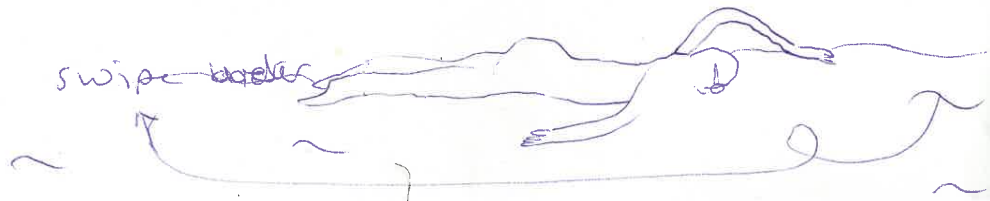
pushing



2 pull up



2 swipe under



[I have to think of Michel Serres' (1982) "Theory of the Quasi-Object."

"Being or relating, that is the whole question. It is undoubtedly not an exclusive one. I still shall not decide whether the parasite is relational or real, whether it is an operator or a monad" (p. 224).

"This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. [...] Ball isn't played alone. Those who do, those who hog the ball, are bad players and are soon excluded from the game. They are said to be selfish [personnels]. The collective game doesn't need persons, people out for themselves. Let us consider the one who holds it. If he makes it move around him, he is awkward, a bad player. The ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Skill with the ball is recognized in the player who follows the ball and serves it instead of making it follow him and using it. It is the subject of the body, subject of bodies, and like a subject of subjects. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance" (pp. 225-226).

I think this description helps. Not in order to redefine and distinguish an "object" from a "subject," but instead to practice unthinking this radical distinction. Because when we touch and engage with other bodies—whether with a ball, a pull-buoy, a water-cooker, or a bedsheet—we become a new body, something between an "I" and a "we." A singular entity, a new body, transformative and new properties and skills. ]

Whether or not we have ever *really* managed to ban the fetish from our lived reality is beside the point. What *is* the point is that we have denied it as such. We have condemned the fetish's existence and repressed it from our consciousness. Can we welcome fetishes back into our lives? Can we open up (again?) for intimate relationships with *things*? *Should* we? If we would, this could improve our relationship with the material world.<sup>2</sup> If we pay more attention to our relationships with *things*, we can slowly bring a sense of affective fascination into our daily lives. Especially for the Western human, it might lead to a state of "being enamored with existence" and the world (Bennett, 2001, p. 12). Something that might have gotten lost with the Modernist stories of disenchantment, secularization, and being "freed" from the material world. By naming the world and seeing it as "mere" matter, we (pretend to) "free ourselves" from it: we detach ourselves. This, in *my* lived reality, feels more like unrootedness than like freedom.

Therefore, besides the recent material turn in academia (where "material things" and "material phenomena" became prominent research topics), I advocate for a material

2 In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett (2001) argues that: 1) Modern life is not disenchanted (it is just often thought or pretended to be), and that: 2) it *should* not be disenchanted, for disenchantment, as through enchantment, humans will experience a stronger, joyful, connection with, and consequently responsibility and generosity towards the material world in which they find themselves.

turn in our *everyday lived reality*.<sup>3</sup> A *fetishing*. Amy Whitehead (2018) describes that to fetish is “to apprehend beloved [things] with the senses and to be invited into creative [...] relational engagements with [them]” (p. 224). And therefore, Whitehead argues, “to touch,” is “to fetish”: an attempt to reach out to *things* in a sensory way. To touch with our senses and, more importantly, to observe how other bodies are touching us.

[With touch I mean to reach out through *all* our senses. Not just haptically, but through all the senses. An open attitude of reaching out, for intimacy.]

To touch is an “active relating,” says Whitehead (p. 224).

## Because when we *touch*...

To touch is to gain full-bodied knowledge. If we touch *things*, we can exchange and change, for “[p]ure touch gives access to information” (p. 229). To touch is not only to reach out, but it is also being reached out to: letting oneself be touched.

*When I go in the water, we work together and exchange. Melt at some places. I am not capable with my mind to recognize or describe what is exchanged, or changed. But I sense it with my body. I know that we share, for this moment more than usually. I trust that marks are left, memories are activated, remade. Children are born.*

## ...we meet

When we meet, we change. As Michel Serres (1985/2016) puts it:

We only ever experience mixtures, we encounter only meetings. The pure body [...] is more than improbable. [...] I embrace you: here and now our contingency creates nuance on nuance, mixture on mixture. [...] I embrace you as brass and leave you as bronze, you embrace me as argentan, you leave me as vermeil. [...]

<sup>3</sup> By rethinking the distinction between human/thing and subject/object, the “new materialist” movement as well as the “ontological turn,” has acknowledged the importance to pay attention to the relationship between human and other-than-human actors. See for example: Barad (2007); Haraway (2003); Mol (2002); Stengers (2011).

You embrace me mottled, I leave you shimmering like watered silk; I embrace you as a network, you leave me as a bundle. We caress each other along our contour lines, we leave each other with various knots, in embraces that have changed shape. (p. 28)

We are porous membranes open for change and exchange. Each time we meet—*really* meet; that is, when we unname and dissolve and root and fetish—we give and are given some part of “the other.” We, “I,” become a little bit “them,” while “they” become a little bit “I.” If we would let ourselves be enchanted, if we dare to be intimate with *things*, we notice how the assumed “I” becomes a little bit less isolated and static. “I” is viscous: “neither fluid nor solid” (Tuana, 2008; see *also* “(B) Dissolving,” p. 68).

## ..we change

I don’t do metaphors. What I mean by that, is that what is written here in this bundle is not supposed to represent another underlying, symbolic meaning. You, reader, are not supposed to read the last sentence of this book, close it, and ponder upon the deeper meaning of it. Certainly, you may and perhaps you will, but it is not how I intended it. Meanings are also not what I am after in the first place. At least not in a symbolic sense, only in a *lived—sensed—sense*. Do you know what I mean? (see “*Situating where “we” began,*” p. 22)

What if we would, in our everyday way of being-in-the-world, not make a distinction between religion and everyday life, between subject and object, between nature and culture, between fact and fetish? Often “we tend to call phenomena ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ when they mess up the modern dualisms of matter and spirit, nature and culture, subject and object” (Knibbe, 2020, p. 254). But when we acknowledge our intimate relationship with the world, our everyday life can *be* our ritual.

Let’s assume, as Jane Bennett suggested, “that the contemporary world retains the power to enchant humans and that *humans can cultivate themselves so as to experience more of that effect*” (p. 4, emphasis mine). Let us cultivate ourselves by accentuating the enchanted moment and by becoming aware of things we weren’t paying attention to before.

Let us establish an intimate relationship with *things*, with the world around us, and instead of seeing ourselves as free from and in control of this world, perceive it as a

companion or a *partner*.<sup>4</sup> The idea is not to feel responsible for “saving” the world but to feel responsible for investing in our intimate relationship *with* it.<sup>5</sup> A responsibility that, most of all, we owe our (porous) selves.

We can do this by taking a phenomenological attitude that makes us wonder about *how* we are part of the world. By postponing our making sense of the world and instead concentrating on our *sensing* the world. We can try to learn “how to do nothing”<sup>6</sup> and to be the “man in pyjamas” (Forti, 1974, p. 9; see also *epigraph* p. 7). See it as a form of ritualization practice for the everyday. The everyday when we:

[T]iptoe to the kitchen, the cold floor touches our feet while we smell the coffee getting ready. We hear the mocha, taste our first sip of coffee, the toothpaste, the sweet rinsing water, a drop drips down our chin onto our shirt, we think: “Shit, a toothpaste stain!” and we feel how our shirt gets wet. We put the key into our bike-lock. We squint our eyes against the sun while we feel the sun on our cheeks while we paddle while we engage with traffic, etc., etc. The day has only just started. (see “*Introduction*,” p. 16)

4 Artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle (2015) are working on a series of “Ecosex Manifestos,” in which they advocate for seeing the earth as “our lover,” and creating a more intimate sustainable relationship with it.

5 This includes to love our monsters: In “Love Your Monsters,” Latour (2011) points out that we should not assume to be the savior of the environment but rather take our responsibility in the relationship we have with the world. This includes the monsters that we invented and that may have caused damage. We don’t need to assume a saviors attitude towards the world around us (which we screwed up), but rather we should live with it in a relational, intimate, way.

6 In *How To Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell (2019) writes: “the first half of ‘doing nothing’ is about disengaging from the attention economy; the other half is about reengaging with something else. That something else is nothing less than time and space, a possibility only once we meet each other there on the level of attention. Ultimately, against the placeless of an optimized life [...], I want to argue for a new ‘placefullness’ that yields sensitivity and responsibility to the historical (what happened here) and the ecological (who and what lives or lived here)” (p. xviii).

# *Situating a beginning: retrospection*

I once wrote that “I miss what I never had; a religion, a tradition; something that fills me with more than myself.” (see “*Intermezzo*,” p. 80)

One day in February 2019, I was visiting a friend—also an anthropologist—in Berlin for a few days. I told her about my artistic projects and interests, and she told me she had just returned from an intensive interview course in a technique she called “micro-phenomenology.” As my friend was still looking to improve her interview skills, we scheduled an interview session for the following morning so she could practice.

The morning of the interview, I had breakfast—coconut yogurt with berries and muesli. I had never eaten coconut yogurt before, and I was unsure whether I liked its taste. After breakfast, I went to do some yoga to land in my body before the interview. But the coconut yogurt I ate was so heavy on my stomach that I could not properly do my yoga moves. So, after I tried for a while, a little bit frustrated I decided to stop the yoga practice, lay down, and wait for my friend to come for me. We decided to have the interview about this experience.

When I want to describe my experiences, I tend to tell what I *know* about them instead: “I am full; my stomach is full because I ate too much coconut yogurt. I taste coconut and a creamy taste in my mouth. I wouldn’t say I liked the breakfast; it was too much and heavy. Now I am nauseous. What I feel

and taste—something I dislike—is caused by what and how much I ate.” But as [friend] continued to ask me questions, we got deeper into the experience. The awareness shifted from what I knew—that it was coconut milk, heavy, too much, that I was full—to how this felt: the sense of creaminess in a specific part of my mouth that continued to glow all the way down into my gullet and belly. What does ‘full’ feel like? Heaviness, fullness, fluidity, liquidity, tumbling movements in my stomach. There was a sense of gravity in my belly, as if “..there is a bag of water inside my belly, pressing on my spine, tumbling whenever I move.” (Research-diary excerpt, February 2019, Berlin)

This experience never let me go and, although I didn’t really know what micro-phenomenology was at the time, since then, my own “micro-phenomenological” experiments—through writing, drawing, and clay—never left me.

Looking back, I realize that, for me, being an anthropologist does not (only) mean excitement about trying to see the world through the eyes of others. It means experimenting with my own perception, letting my world be turned upside down while trying to make sense of it and rooting myself in it.









## Self-Interview: Going into Danube, Nov. 05, 2022

**Events descr:** I come on the way, Laura, later Jan, Paula & Amalia  
 ±14:10 chitchatting w. Laura & Ivonne while waiting Bike part  
 Jan & P. arrived, bit of chitchat & soon preparing:

But over to bag facing Danube, take towel & bathing suit  
 Take of coat & scarf → shoes → pants → underpants; take on bathing suit  
 take of sweater → t-shirt; on swim arms; off bra through t-shirt  
 zipper. Talk about not having any shoes; Jan neither Ivonne → Laura  
 → Jan → me

Talking & watching others so not completely sure when I feel the water  
 "cold but not that cold" = thought Soon I pass through others,  
 going deeper Ivonne says sth about mud and that now it gets difficult  
 (because she has to bend <sup>down</sup> if avoiding the mud.) I think: I don't  
 mind the mud & continue. I see the mud / waterplants. Step w  
 right foot feel weed untill all the way up to ankle I kind of put my  
 weight then here because I think that was it. But I sink in  
 few more centimeters, surprisingly. faster transition than I calculated  
 makes me first really aware of the cold now passing lower belly few  
 more steps and I decide to sink in: bend knees slightly, ass  
 back; lean forward, sink in while pushing off legs. Quicker  
 movements w. arms, catching breath. Turn to face others & sun.  
 I see rest is not yet in. Standing <sup>triangular</sup> wet hands &  
 all hands up in air <sup>bit of arms</sup> to each other,

Going in w. head  — feeling mostly cold on  
 collar bones!

Talking less & feels

Heading back closer to them.

J&I go out.

Heading all the way to L, facing her and the  
 long extension of Danube



Respiration: through sands & talking, through density  
certain silence / screenness. Close to surface view →  
aware of body of water. L/R Right edge of my view  
mostly wrinkles on water, endless extension of drizzle,  
shimmering sunlight on water

08-05 weather report

the 'outside' temperature makes me realize where the 'insides' sits and tries to expand. Inside penetrating outside

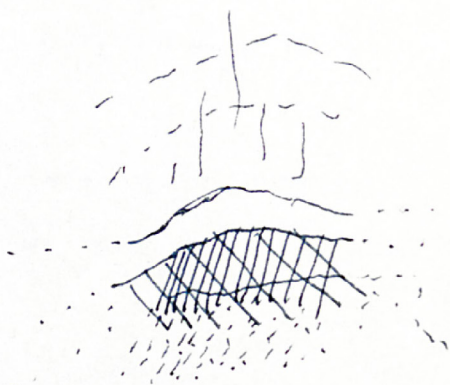
skin penetrating space. Rubbing the air

My hands get moisty, but what does it feel like?

When the wind passes, the air in my hand changes into a hard piece of metal. Even between my fingers it is now filled.

tingling, expanding "arms"

sweaty palms



?  
no end, only direction

pushed away  
pressure

door beginning

the sound of summer day, sunny weather is children and  
cars in the streets, guitar from a window near door, even  
cars far away for there is no interference of wind or  
rain cancelling it out. A loud motorcycle. Batting  
bird wings and a soft crunch of a breeze through the  
leaves of a tree. A fly trying to get through but  
stopped by the glass of the window.

Knisping stones beneath the wheels of the cars and  
a squeaking train on rails far away

Everything sounds dry and I smell how my skin  
is getting moistier and moistier. Not everything is dry.

But the tree must sweat too, no? And the child and  
the bird. The street and the fly.

The look of my skin is florescent and shiny, silky.  
even the back on my lap is sweating now.

## Communicating with trees

### symbolic

interpreting shaking branches  
or moving of leaves

directions

activity

### POSITIVIST

building a scientific  
'knowledge'; anatomy;  
photosynthesis;

Human centred

interpretation /

imposing

### SPIRITUAL

Just knowing. No one can say it is  
human centric just because their human  
mind does not understand / can't explain.

BUT

totally dependent on thrust

PREOBJECTIVE EXP.?

Same? Just other connotations. → more based on  
sensorial perhaps.

What about LSD?

11-05 → translation (IN THE RAIN)

The sound comes first. Even when it intensifies, it is something you first hear and only ~~then~~<sup>afterwards</sup> you feel it. The drops as icegrains: hard and cold. I wouldn't call it wet, rather cold. Small shocks that ~~disappear right away~~ then disappear, transform, replace. Only when the wind joins, I can feel that I am wet, for it activates the presence of a layer that is not familiar to me, that isn't part of my usual me

On the face it feels different, much more intense, like little pats or knocks. More playful too, and sweeter / funnier.

The knockings on my surface slowly thump through my body. At my fingers I even feel a little movement of the entire being: the thump pushes them down each time.

Always down, never up. For the thump always comes from above. But I only know that the drops are really <sup>fall</sup> falling (and not just appearing out of everywhere, ~~as~~ it being a coincidence) when the drop (the small bullet that seems solid) slides down my body. <sup>↑</sup> Then I know it is water.  
leaving a trace

The tree and I are under the same circumstances, experiencing the same thing and at the same time not, for probably the tree does not feel(?). Still, it should be fun, all that shaking at your ends. & A little vibrancy and turmoil does a tree good. Especially ~~here~~ at places like here, where it is often dry and hot.

And <sup>very</sup> slowly it wanders away, out of town. And the wind behind it a moment later. I hear them leave in the distance.



And the sound remains shortly while the swallows already returned. And I wait until the last remaining bit of wind dries me up.

Experience is movement, I realised. In that sense it could be that the tree also experiences - even if it wouldn't have senses like we have them - for example through the entering/exiting of things/substances like water or ~~other~~ juices. Density changing through e.g. temperature. Is the trunk rather a skin layer or a callus layer?

What is the equivalent of the 'face' for the tree?

It should be sensation-interce, with a lot of entrance/exits, pores, movability, flexibility, delicacy.

I would think it could be the leaves ~~Not~~ based on knowledge in biology, but because they are so delicate.

Also relief, movability, flexibility are characteristics

Would the leaves be the erogenous zones?

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# Image-index

Cover photo (front and back), *I give the door a nod*, 2022, pencil on paper, 420 × 594 mm

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p. 45, *a sun*, 2020, notes/sketch from diary

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p. 59, *the breeze*, 2020, notes/sketch from diary

p. 61, *[no title]*, 2020, sketch from diary

pp. 63, 64, *What do I need to exist I & II*, 2023, drawing exercise, photo by Veronika Dirnhofer

p. 67, *tile*, 2023, ceramics, glaze, oxide, 190 × 190 mm

p. 69, 2023, diary notes

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