

Enabling Knowledge: The Art of Nurturing Unknown Spaces

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Abstract

This article is both an exploration and a reflection on the process of generating knowledge from an encounter with the unknown. It documents what practising the 'ethics of the unknown' (Eeg-Tverbakk 2016) consisted of and what insights it led to in relation to two projects: 'Childism' (2015), based on documents from an informant who experienced child abuse, and 'Embodied' (2018), a performance lecture presenting both research and lived experience of involuntary childlessness. To reflect the fluidity, multi-directionality and, at points, messiness- of the process of practising the ethics of the unknown, theory and practice are not as rigidly separated in the text as the conventions of academic publication would normally require. The text alternates analysis, the voices of the authors, as well as sound files and images designed to offer experiential glimpses into the performances and the arguments. Theoretically, the concepts outlined are inspired by quite different strands of materialist thinking (object-oriented philosophy and new materialism). The research takes liberties when relating to different philosophical concepts that have proven to be useful in the practice of staging documentary material. We are not proposing a

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'method' but rather arguing along with Erin Manning for 'research creation', where methods have to be invented and developed for each project. As such, this article also places itself within the discussions on post-qualitative, non-representational and performative research.

Keywords: artistic research practice, unknown, methodology, non-method, non-representational methods, object-oriented ontology (OOO), performance, performance-lecture, new materialism, research-creation, epistemology.

Introduction

Research, art, and anything in between in the form of artistic research, are practices which, essentially, take us from encountering the unknown to one or more forms of knowledge. This article is an exploration, an interrogation – yet again a meeting with the unknown – of reflecting on the nature of such processes of knowledge generation. The argument is that the in-between, the uncertain, the place of doubt are generative of the most powerful new insights when the researcher allows them to unfold. This, however, requires first moving away from 'method' as a set of predefined steps for the handling of data and the elaboration of 'results'; second, by embracing the concept of an 'ethics of the unknown' which Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk is developing within the field of ethics and artistic research (Eeg-Tverbakk, 2016; Østern et al., 2021; Arlander, 2018; St. Pierre, 2011) in relation to research materials with which one is effectively co-creating. As will be explained in more detail, this in turn translates into caring, openness and patience towards the object of research, an interest in its unique idiom and silence. It requires the researcher to abandon authority, to be flexible in combining cognition with imagination, the senses, and bodily intuition. The knowledge that emerges also does not come as 'definitive', neatly packaged, but rather needs to be further nurtured while it bounces, fluid, shape-changing and change-shaping, back and forth between researchers (as it did, for example, in the very process of writing this text) and between researchers and audiences. In these processes it becomes difficult to define who and what shapes who. It is a process of shaping and of being shaped by materials over time.

In the following, we will write about two projects that developed through processes of uncertainty, not knowing what method to use or how to proceed, or what form they would eventually take, but that led to developing both theoretical insights and deeply felt reverberations among audiences that simply would not have materialised through more 'traditional' methods. One is a performance, *Childism* (2015), framed as a 'theatre-ting' (Eeg-Tverbakk, 2016) based on documents from an informant who experienced child abuse. The other is a performance lecture presenting Cristina

Archetti's research and experience of involuntary childlessness, i.e. not having children not by choice (Archetti, 2020). More specifically, we want to document what embracing an 'ethics of the unknown' meant in practice in either context and what knowledge it contributed.

To reflect the fluidity, multi-directionality and, at points, messiness, of the process of practising the ethics of the unknown, theory and practice are not as rigidly separated in the text as the academic publication conventions would normally require. We also combine – with the unexpected turns that characterise one's entering into a relationship with one's materials of investigation – the alternating voices and experiences of the researchers, open spaces on the page, an audio invitation to breathe, and experiential glimpses into the performances.

The ethics of the unknown and its thereabouts

The research that led up to the performance *Childism* was informed by artistic practice in the encounter between fiction and fact and in object-oriented thinking including references to object-oriented ontology and new materialism (Morton, 2013; Benso, 2000; Bennett, 2009). This developed into what has been framed as an ethics of the unknown indicating a profound listening practice, waiting for the material to affectively take part in the creative process, where the human body is considered one of the material collaborators (Eeg-Tverbakk, 2016). In this process there is a need to respect what cannot be grasped and understood. When dealing with narratives of trauma in the project *Childism*, these stories are considered co-creative materials with agency. Trauma theory teaches us that there are aspects of an experience that are lost to memory, which cannot be articulated but stay only as a physical sensation that can be triggered beyond control by certain sensorial stimulations (Caruth, 1996; Pollock, 2009; Ettinger, 1999, 2007). In order to meet and relate to such broken narratives, there is a need to listen and give time in order to sense aspects of things that escape representation. Finding ways to get in touch with and relate to this material, the artist/researcher as much as the audience needs pauses, silence, stillness, and patience. These practices have made us interested in what knowledge is lost when performing research through time pressures and the confinement of specific research methods (and publication formats), and in what can be accessed and understood in the gaps, the movements and the breaths between knowing and not knowing, when we are in modes of searching for and doubting where we are going and how to get there.

Humans can never grasp the entire reality of things. We can only experience an aspect of something, that which is revealed to us, because everything will always

withdraw parts of its reality from perception in a constant process of transformation. The concept of the withdrawn aspect of objects (and things) refers to object-oriented ontology (OOO), a philosophy that has inspired this research (Garcia, 2014; Harman, 2002, 2010, 2012; Heidegger, 1971/2001). In short, the ontology of objects implies that every object (including bodies, words, dreams, thoughts, objects, etc.) will always be transformed by whatever it stands in relation to at any given moment. Nothing can be captured and fixed in one frame or use value that serves human needs. According to Timothy Morton, withdrawn implies being completely out of reach and inaccessible (Morton, 2013). If we think of a story as an object, then each and every story articulates only parts of an experience, while other parts will be lost. Thus, each object carries something known and something unknown to us, implying that we can never understand or know something completely. Moreover, what is revealed and withdrawn is never static, but rather in constant transformative motion. There will always be a level of interpretation in the way we relate to objects, including what we call documents and facts, and as Morton explains, interpretation is connected to conceptualisation, thus creating what he calls 'real illusions'. When we see something, we think it is real. However, '[e]very seeing, every measurement, is also an adjustment, a parody, a translation, an interpretation. A tune and a tuning' (Morton, 2013, p. 33). To know that something is always partial and never complete. Knowing also implies not knowing.

As mentioned, this research is inspired by the concept of the *withdrawn* from OOO, as briefly outlined above. However, we would like to complicate the ontology of the object by introducing Silvia Benso's 'other side of ethics' in the relationship between humans and things. Benso (2000) is interested in how we relate ethically to things. She takes Levinas' ethics of the 'face of the other' to include the ethics in our encounter with what she calls 'the faceless face of things'. Like Heidegger, Benso differentiates between objects and things, where objects are what have been framed by human conceptualisation of things through language. Things remain partly unknown, not yet having found their form of representation. For OOO, *object* is the preferred concept that includes both. Here we think about trauma stories as *things*, using the thinking of the withdrawal of objects (as in OOO) in combination with Benso's concept of 'tenderness' as a way to ethically relate to what we see as the withdrawn aspects of the thing stories we work on artistically.

Silvia Benso introduces the concept of tenderness (Benso, 2000), advocating a way for humans to relate to things and perhaps gain another kind of knowledge through 'tender touch'. It is through the sensuous encounter between human body (as thing) and objects/materials (as things) that the transcendental may be accessed. The

concept of the transcendental is likened here to the 'unknown' aspects of things. Thus, we question whether what OOO (Morton, 2013) points to as beyond reach and inaccessible might still be sensed, however partly and fractioned, through what Benso calls tender touch. In this case through touching words with vocal cords and lips, breathing, listening and moving. It is not an attempt to frame, represent or capture the thingness of things, but rather to transcend what language can know and to stay with things in a different mode of commonness. This leads us to practice, where aesthetic form is another way of articulating research, and by relating to things through tenderness it is perhaps possible to enable a different kind of knowledge.

When you read about our dealings with an ethics of the unknown, you may see the contours of a method. However, it is not really a method, but rather what Erin Manning frames as a stance 'against method' (Manning, 2015). In her writing she talks, in this respect, about 'speculative pragmatism'; this always goes beyond method, since method is always a frame that limits new connections and movements, she writes. We have thus not even been trying to apply a method. We have aspired, in negotiation with our respective contexts, to *practice* (because it really takes practice) an ethics of the unknown; we have been researching how materials (personal narratives, objects, poetry, images, bodies, etc.) affect and move us, using our bodies as containers of knowledge we had not yet known, using our breath as a moment to sense inside and outside movements, and giving time to search for the sensed knowledge that occurs in moments of silence.

In further discussing *speculative pragmatism* (Manning, 2015), Manning explains the concept as a research method where everything 'starts in the middle'. It is speculative because there are movements not yet captured, and it is pragmatic because what is actualised also must be articulated. Speculative pragmatism is an approach that is interested in what escapes order and that pays attention to the knowledge that is invented in the flight of excess. Manning refers to 'research creation' as a concept based on artistic creative and interdisciplinary actions and compositions. It will always be specific to each place, space and connection. Thus, the method will be to articulate a method for each experience or project perhaps. In retrospect, the process that has taken place and developed may look like a method, Manning points out, 'but to repeat it will never bring it back. Because techniques must be reinvented every time, and the thought always has to leap' (Manning, 2015, p. 131).

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Silent narratives: *Childism*



Figure 1. Dancer Henriette Storer in the performance *Childism* (2015). Photo: Camilla Jensen



Figures 2 and 3. Dancer Henriette Slorer in the performance *Childism* (2015).
Photo: Camilla Jensen

Childism (2015) was a documentary theatre performance with an actress, a dancer and a dramaturg on stage. The performance dealt with oral documents of child abuse through spoken words, images, objects, breaths and movements. Throughout the working process, the artists involved were concerned with personal encounters with the documentary material and how it affected and worked on them over time. Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk, who was the dramaturg in the project, has known the informant for more than 25 years and thus the stories have grown into her consciousness over time. The dancer Henriette Slorer and actress Petra Fransson related to the narratives over the span of a year before meeting an audience. The actual rehearsal time spent together was much shorter; working around 20 days together in four workshops each lasting five days. In the time between the meetings, each of us involved related to these stories in our everyday lives. However, memory is performative, and the accounts of a childhood change, transform and affect our psychophysical bodies differently over time. Memory is a creative act, write Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (Plate & Smelik, 2013, p. 2). The archive is obsessed with storing memory. However, it often has problems containing memory in documents, because memory is spatial, embodied, and performative. Memory is 'intimately connected with making, with narrating, telling and writing – in short, with the act of

creation' (Plate & Smelik, 2013, p. 4). Remembering is performative in the sense that it acts out a relationship to the past in the present.

Instead of attempting to portray, represent, interpret or identify with the stories of the informant (impossible for those of us who had never experienced such abuse ourselves), which could have been yet another form of abuse, the focus was on how each individual involved related to the material. We were primarily relating to the documentary material, not so much to the informant herself. The narratives were treated as things with hidden aspects that were not accessible to us but that could still affect and transform when moving from the informant to the bodies of the artists on stage and, later, to the audience. Being in relation needs time, patience and listening. Relation is understood here as *a space between* where the relation plays out in ever changing, moving and transforming exchanges and the sharing of energy, thoughts, body contact, breaths, time, perception, understanding, silences, activities, words, gaze, dreams and visions. Spending time without a specific goal is essential, simply giving attention to what you relate to. Philosopher Silvia Benso emphasises, when speaking of *tenderness* in relation between humans and things, that attention takes place in a mode of waiting where you do not know what you are waiting for (Benso, 2000). Tenderness to her is based on touch. To touch experiences of trauma is precisely to move the body and be touched by sensations and words with breaths, vocal cords, tongue and lips.

The investigation dealt with questions of how to communicate stories of child abuse to an audience while avoiding sentimentality, pity and distance. We wanted the personal narratives to link to structures in society, raising questions of parenting in general, where issues of abuse could be discussed in relation to how adults in our culture relate to and separate from the world of children. There are especially three aspects we focused on which are emphasised here because they later played a role in the work on Cristina Archetti's performance lecture. The first is the work on movement (see images above) and body that dancer Henriette Slorer presented. She has trained as a contemporary dancer, which means her body is highly tuned to working with impressions, emotions and thoughts expressed through movement. Slorer did not attempt to re-present or illustrate the information she received from the informant, but rather worked on how the information affected her over time. Her movements were an expression of how she felt when learning about stories of child abuse, how she wished she did not know, how she wanted to purge this information from her system, and how it was impossible to do so. She undressed on stage to show the audience how the different body parts reacted when learning about the abuse. It was Slorer's own experience of listening and relating that was

communicated. What became interesting was when she performed for an audience of survivors of child abuse, they could recognise and identify with her physical language and sensations. In this process we discovered how the body can, without words, expose knowledge that grew out of Slorer's doubt and processing of information. It was knowledge that was unknown to Slorer herself until her movements encountered an audience. It is a knowledge that is impossible to articulate with words, but which can be seen and sensed collectively.



Sound recording from the performance *Childism*. Text: 'Her story'.
Click the icon to listen on Soundcloud.

The second aspect to highlight here was how words were used and performed. There was the challenge of how to speak about abuse in a way that was accessible to an audience and that also expressed some of the violence in a way that was representative. Working from the notion of an ethics of the unknown and thinking of the words as things, the artistic collective needed to relate to words as something we could not fully know the implications of. We needed to acknowledge that each word has a plane of potential when encountering audiences and specific times and places of performance that is impossible for the performers to grasp entirely. To find ways of giving space for the words to work in the relational space, we used breaths and silences in order to open up gaps between where aspects of the inaccessible, the unknown and the out of reach could partly surface. One way for the informant to tell us stories of abuse which she was not really able to articulate was to send us a list of words she called 'my story'. You can hear part of it performed above.

The third aspect to be drawn out of the work with *Childism* is how we related to objects and fabrics. To represent the (absent) child, the stage was at one point scattered with children's clothes. These are items that often trigger love and good memories in an adult audience. This feeling was disturbed when the clothes were treated violently, thrown around, kicked and even cut into pieces.



Figures 4 and 5. Childism (2015). Photos: Camilla Jensen

Sometimes it could be difficult to confront the topic of the performance. In order to give the audience a chance to escape and listen with another kind of attention, they were all given a little sewing kit at the beginning of the performance. The kit contained some pieces of fabric, yarn, some colourful plastic pearls, needles and thread. Many members of the audience chose to sometimes sew. The three performers on stage also sewed. In one section of the performance music was played while we silently sewed. This is also an old ritual and activity for women worldwide, in all cultures, where stories, often of abuse, have been shared while

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sewing, embroidering or knitting. In the performance, this became an activity without words, a pause to digest, reflect and sense what was not being said – the absent presences.



Figure 6. From the performance *Childism* (2015). Photo: Patricia Canellis

As a practising dramaturg, I am interested in opening spaces for sensing and experiencing what lies at the margins of the known and intelligible. In the best case, a performance like *Childism* as a work of art can, as Bracha Ettinger puts it, be ‘a working-through and bringing-into-being of that which cannot be remembered. An event unremembered – yet that cannot be forgotten – is located in a transsubjective border space’ (Ettinger, 2007, p.163).

‘Starting in the middle’: a conversation

In 2018 the then director of the Norwegian Storytelling Festival, Mette Kaaby, had the idea of developing a performance lecture based on Archetti’s research for the festival (Archetti, 2018b). Cristina was looking for new ways to present her research on involuntary childlessness, and Camilla was curious to share her artistic approaches

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to dealing with documentary material and text in a cross-disciplinary setting. The following is a reflective dialogue between us about that collaborative process.

Text message, 4 January 2018:

Sent by Mette Kaaby to Cristina Archetti, 17.48

Hi, I wonder whether you could step in at short notice to give a presentation to performance artists about storytelling. Tomorrow at about 10:30 in Oslo?

Email, 16 January 2018:

Fra: Tormod Carlsen <[email]>

Sendt: 16. januar 2018 10:02

Til: Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk; Mette Kaaby; Cristina Archetti

Emne: Cristina Archetti goes into the body

Hi friends

I have talked with Camilla this morning and I am happy to say that she is willing to be part of this project as a supervisor. And I am thrilled to say that we can go for this project!

Just to update everybody and clarify the terms, this is what we have talked about:

Cristina poses a unique story and knowledge of the issue of involuntary childlessness. She already had a great presentation of this, focusing on the academic investigation of the theme. However, her knowledge also contains what we could call an embodied wisdom, and hence also a need to investigate and look for a language for this embodiment. And basically she is looking for ways to use and investigate how this embodiment can be used as part of communication.

In the storytelling festival we feel this is extremely relevant and touches upon very concrete challenges that applies to storytelling in general, and

also political issues of 'telling the other story'. Hence, we have invited Cristina to take the risk of exploring how a bodily approach and investigation can lead to some sort of 'story', lecture, installation or performance for festival. Courageously she has grown herself into this project! Am I right that you have some experience with karate Cristina? Anyhow all of this is very new to her, and we have paired her up with you Camilla to explore possible approaches and strategies. Basically, we see it as an open investigation where some result should be presented in some way at the festival. In other words, there is also a task of considering how bodily wisdom is and can be staged - to develop a form and presentation for the festival. But we have given no exact restrictions on format, set-up and time.

[...]

Again, let me say that I am so happy that [sic] for this exploration.

Tormod Carlsen [Fortellerfestivalen's artistic advisor]

A text message exchange from a stranger on a Sunday evening in early January led to a phone conversation and to a chain of decisions Cristina would have never taken before. She said yes to preparing a new lecture for, of all people, a group of artists and stage performers in a handful of hours and, after that, said yes to delivering a performance lecture – with no background whatsoever in theatre and two months to prepare – at the upcoming Norwegian Storytelling Festival. It was the beginning of embracing the creative power of the unexpected. Referring to Erin Manning (2015) above, we started in the middle. Or perhaps in the centre of events when dealing with not having children, namely the body.

Cristina:

I leave my first supervision meeting with Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk feeling emotionally drained and exhausted, as if I had been 'in a car crash', as I tell my husband later. The meeting is tremendously inspiring. It is when she asks me: 'How does being childless feel?' though, after she repeats the question with an emphasis on 'feel', that I start crying, after a long pause, my voice breaking while trying to pronounce the words stuck inside me: 'It ... makes me feel ... more ... *mortal*'.

Camilla:

On my first encounter with Cristina, I realised I felt empathy in relation with her grief and her pain of feeling invisible in a society where the nuclear family is everything

social structures and politics are built around. I, too, was involuntary childless, had never given birth, but had still become a mother through adoption (which is another discussion about Western privilege). I had also recently worked on documents of trauma in several performance projects. Having worked in theatre for over two decades, first as a performer, I have experienced many days in rehearsal spaces moving together with other bodies, doing strange and sometimes uncomfortable things together, staying and moving in physical contact. This often triggers emotions, and throughout the years you learn to relax around moving bodies and the emotions that always circulate.



Click the icon to listen on Soundcloud

Cristina:

Camilla is clearly used to dealing with emotions. She is neither embarrassed nor concerned. She does not judge. 'If this happened during the performance, it would be completely fine', she tells me reassuringly. I appreciate this, yet I suddenly start wondering what I got myself into. I fear that this project is too personal, too raw, too far out of my comfort zone to manage. Camilla also suggests an exercise I can try out at a presentation I am due to give on this topic next week (Archetti, 2018a). I am going to walk in front of the audience to bring their attention to my body, she explains, enable them to become aware of it, *witness* it; then I am going to use breathing and silence to allow them to participate in the emotions and the meanings evoked by terms I associate with infertility, and that I am going to say aloud: 'It will only take a couple of minutes', she says. Then I can get on with the 'normal' presentation'. 'You do not have to do it if you do not feel comfortable, but you *could* try this out', she adds, gently encouraging, her slightly tilting head suggesting there is a discovery waiting to be made it would be a pity to miss.



Cristina, sound from the performance lecture *Of cross-disciplinary encounters* (Archetti & Eeg-Tverbakk, 2020). Text: 'Infertility', with audience.
Click the icon to listen on Soundcloud.

Camilla:

I learned a lot from seeing Cristina's presentation that day. I could witness the audience being moved by her walking, exposing her vulnerability that manifested in her body before speaking, and her words connected to her experience of childlessness. To allow the audience to relate to the speaker's body is contrary to a strategy of coping with or mastering a situation, it is to live in the vibrant material of a body, not knowing or being able to control what is revealed in the specific encounters of the moment. As an opening before the regular lecture, this seemed to create a space for the audience in which to relate not only to her words, but also to how they affected both her and their psychophysical selves, identifying as human beings. According to the feedback after the lecture, this seemed to have an almost healing effect on some people, and I keep wondering if this was due to the fact of an energetic exchange that was allowed when they were given a chance to witness how Cristina's experience moved her physically. It was interesting to see how the use of movements, broken words (not full sentences), breaths and pauses worked outside the art context with an audience used to, and expecting, what we could call 'clear facts' presented in a solely intellectual manner.

Cristina:

The performance lecture I am going to develop over the next two months is about embodiment. But what is this? What do feelings about childlessness *look like* in the body? It is on a freezing Saturday afternoon that I rush out to Vigeland Park, before it turns dark, to consult the portfolio of human emotions that are displayed there in Gustav Vigeland's sculptures. My feet are taking me out, I have my good Canon camera with me, but I am not sure of what I am actually going to take pictures of. How will I find an answer to my question? How will I know that I have found it, even if I come across it? Once there, though, my hands seem to know exactly what I am after. With my fingers numbed by the minus eight degrees temperature (I can't adjust the focus of the camera with my gloves on), they start taking pictures of the gestures and body postures that best represent my emotions. I am driven by what *feels* right.

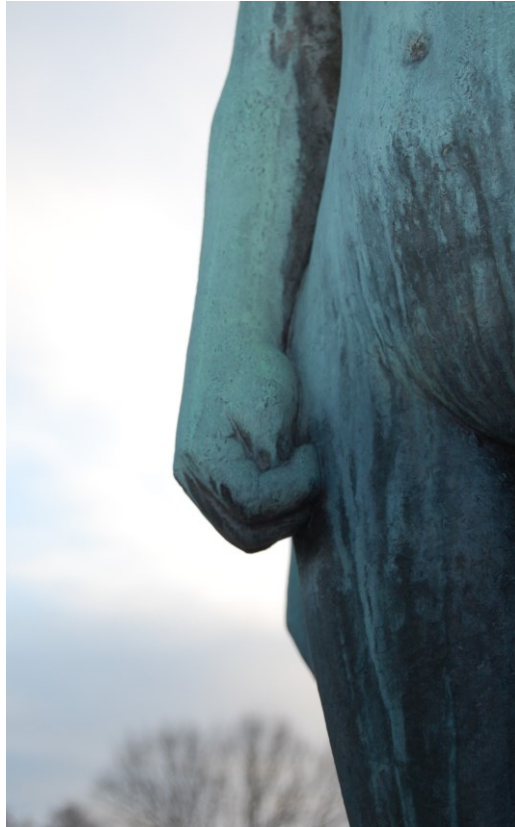
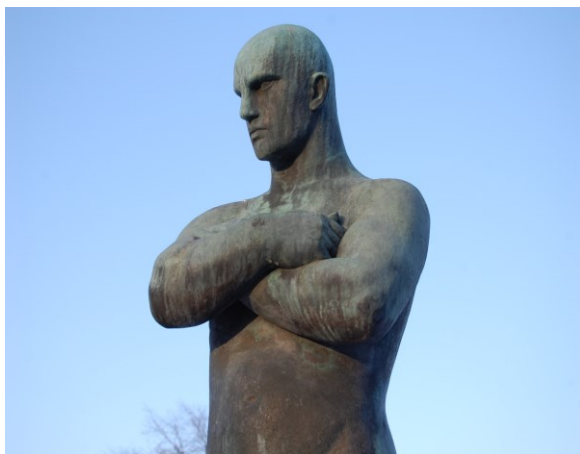


Figure 7. Sculpture at Vigeland Park. Oslo (2018).
Photo: Cristina Archetti.



Figures 8 and 9. Sculptures at Vigeland Park, Oslo (2018). Photos: Cristina Archetti.

‘Why are you so fascinated by hands?’ asks Camilla when I show her the pictures.

‘I was not trying to take pictures of hands’, I reply, slightly surprised. ‘But it’s true. They *are* mostly hands’, I have to admit, looking at the screen, at what is completely obvious, yet I had not noticed. ‘It is because the position and gesture of a hand say so much about one’s state of mind’, I add, trying to guess what my motives could

have been. 'You do not need to see the rest of the body. If you just see the hand, you know what the person is feeling', I conclude, feeling quite convinced. 'We could make a hand choreography!', Camilla suggests enthusiastically. 'If you felt compelled to go to the park and take these pictures, then this *is* important and we will find a role for it in the performance. We do not know how these hands fit in *yet*, but we will figure it out'.

Camilla:

Hand gestures, it turned out, are very expressive. The images and the hand movements were yet another way to explore the unknown. The movements and gestures express a vulnerability of the body: a soft, quiet, gentle and compassionate relationship to the world. However, hands also set limits, can perform harsh gestures and potentially be violent. The hands stretch outward to touch the world, simultaneously connecting inwards to emotions, thoughts, dreams, visions, grief, longing and belonging. I am still not sure what knowledge lies in the gestures performed by Cristina. Knowledge is not static: the hand gestures reveal and withdraw different sides at each performance and encounter with an audience.

Practising in the field of the unknown: *Embodied*

The experience of working on what would later become a performance lecture entitled *Embodied* (Archetti, 2018b) ignited a series of reflections, transformations – physically felt resonances, in fact – both in how I (Cristina) relate to theory and method, and in my attitude to reality at large. The thoughts, movements, breaths, words spoken, written, then rewritten but with a different meaning, have been expanding, like circles on water, changing nature and shape, and are still travelling.

For an academic researcher like me, trained to understand method largely as a pre-defined procedure for the gathering and processing of data (Babbie, 2017), embracing open-endedness, working *with* and *along* the materials of my investigation rather than *on* them, was in itself a radical leap of faith into the unknown. I had data previously collected through a variety of methods: interview transcripts, an autoethnography of my own experience, a content analysis of the representation of childless individuals in film, notes of participant observation on websites and Facebook groups dedicated to conceiving and to childlessness. I was now challenged, however, to enter into a different relationship with these materials: no longer was I the researcher *processing* them, the authority in charge of all the information I could *extract* from them and all that could be known *about* them. Embracing the ethics of the unknown, I gave up control and became willing to let the data 'speak' and to listen to, see, feel the unexpected.

More specifically, I can outline four ways in which practising the ethics of the unknown have enriched and complemented my research. *First*, as a tool of investigation: in a field of study like mine, political communication, which nearly exclusively relies on the analysis of what is being explicitly said or written, non-method enabled me to become perceptive to what was hidden, embodied, unspoken. As a result, I developed a new theory of silence for the 21st century that explains how suffering and pain felt inside the body – through intermediate steps that involve, among other things, the role of the media in the narrative construction of the body and the self – translate into silence, exclusion from public debate, and lack of political representation (Archetti, 2020, pp. 79–95; 2022).

Second, the ethics of the unknown supports, through engagement at both an analytical and an emotional level, a deeper *understanding* of reality, both for me as a researcher and for my audience. I realised, in fact, that I could have talked for hours about infertility, presenting a never-ending amount of statistics and figures. People would have nodded. However, they would have got nothing of the grief, comparable to bereavement and often unresolved for years, even decades, that comes with the loss, not only of a child who was never born, but of a whole imagined future. By contacting my own emotions and embodied trauma, I realised the devastating extent to which the experience of infertility affects all domains of one's life: from relationships – childless individuals tend to become over time isolated by losing the friends who become parents, for example – to one's attitude to work – the exhausting tendency to overperform to counter the widespread societal assumption that a life without children is 'wasted' – to everyday gestures – instinctively crossing the road to avoid a pregnant woman walking towards me on the pavement, for instance. When it comes to my audience, I invited them to share an *experience*. I did so by making them a witness to and participant in my own vulnerability, and by leaving gaps – like silences – which they could fill with their own words, thoughts, memories and imagination. What would have otherwise been an 'ordinary' one-way presentation or lecture was brought to life and became both immersive and interactive in nature.

Third, the ethics of the unknown is a tool of reflexivity. It helps identify, unravel and develop those connections within data for which coherent words have not yet been found. In this respect, it allows embracing a different way of working in which intuition – which always characterises the research process, even if this remains largely unacknowledged – is valued and respected. Eugene Gendlin, in this respect, has developed through his 'philosophy of the implicit' (Gendlin, 1997) a critique of the way the language we use tends to filter out, by default, all that cannot be explicitly documented and seen or measured, including bodily sensations. Squarely opposing

systems of thought that see language as the very limit and medium of all we can know, Gendlin identifies lived *embodied* experience as a primary source of knowledge. Although his argument refers to language at large, one can easily see how it especially applies to academic research. In fact, the scientific method as it is currently practiced still largely reflects the Cartesian separation between mind and body (Smartt Gullion, 2018: 70). The assumed 'superiority' of the mind is observable in the tendency to dismiss not only bodies (Johnson, 2017, p. 2), but also materiality at large (Latour, 2005). To redress the inherent bias of our understanding, Gendlin develops 'thinking at the edge' (TAE) (Gendlin, 2004; Krycka, 2006), a process of generating new ideas that exceed the limitations of language through tapping into our bodily knowledge. Although I had not come across his work at the time I was preparing the performance lecture, I can with hindsight see how, in practice, I tapped into my bodily felt sensations to guide me towards fresh insights that could not be contained by the (largely medical) language of existing research on infertility. Practising the ethics of the unknown, in this respect, allowed me not only to access my own silenced story of infertility, which I was then able to articulate, but also to unlock my own long-term reflection on the components of a whole theory of silence. I became aware of new knowledge I had *in* me, although initially I did not quite know what 'it' was or how to express it.

Fourth, the ethics of the unknown is a tool of change. In the case of infertility, as with other taboo subjects, breaking the silence is already in itself an act of resistance. Stories are constitutive of reality, thus performative. Both from the perspective of the teller and from that of the listening audience, whether through a poem or a performance, a story about a silenced subject can help heal and restore damaged identities, thereby leading to (at least a beginning of) social and political change (Denzin, 2003). Further to this, allowing myself to access my personal experience on a deeper level through breathing, movement, by connecting with bodily sensations, enabled me to reach beyond the existing discourse of infertility as a story of defective bodies and unfulfilled lives. It gave me the opportunity to weave a novel and alternative narrative: one of survival, resilience, and finding sources of meaning in life other than children. Breaking the silence with *fresh meanings*, in this respect, has the power to transform the reality we live in more radically. This is not limited to abstract thinking. It also has deep implications for one's well-being and even for one's relationship to the world that surrounds us. Numerous comments I have received after the performance lecture and the publication of the book it led to (Archetti, 2020) are from individuals who are directly affected by involuntary childlessness. Their feedback often runs along the lines of 'you gave me the words', 'this deeply

resonated with me', 'the way I relate to my infertility journey has changed', and 'it was like a form of therapy'. Many felt empowered to tell their own stories.

On open methodologies: Not knowing as a place of knowledge

What our research and artistic practice demonstrate is that the unknown is not an unsightly blank slot of 'ignorance' to be filled, conquered and written over by 'understanding'. It is a place of deep insight and knowledge, albeit a very fragile one, a constellation of materials, experience, embodiment, intuition we have not yet made sense of and which we need to approach carefully and respectfully, mindful of how it can be most tenderly nurtured.

What we have learned through the works we have presented is that, in order to approach the unknown, there is always something known from which we depart: a set of skills, assumptions, concepts, practices. The challenge is to stay open, attuned to developing and newly forming relationships without looking for specific outcomes. The ethics involved here concern how we understand our role as researchers(-artists) and artists(-researchers) in relation to our surroundings. Not knowing what we are looking for nor how to get there, we must abandon our role as the specialist, the 'knower', the one with an overview.

This is perhaps harder for researchers, whose position of authority comes precisely from having conducted an investigation according to prescribed scientific methods. Can traditional research, however, more deeply explore new pathways, allowing researchers to experiment, as part of their legitimate practice, beyond those methods? How can the 'specialist' be challenged by his or her own material as co-creator? Who is really forming what, what plays into each process of research, and in what terms can embodied knowledge and intuition also be acknowledged in scientific research? Can art become more deliberately and systematically incorporated into scientific research as an entry point to aspects of reality that are, in fact, neglected *because* they are not accessible through 'traditional' methods? In his book *Art, Disobedience and Ethics*, Dennis Atkinson claims that the force of art is that it is deeply affective, and that it generates 'new ways of making, seeing, thinking and feeling' (Atkinson, 2018, p. 30). These could be complementary to the rational understanding that dominates in science. The various practices of art making, Atkinson argues, do not attempt to control that force but rather, as a work unfolds, to open up worlds that beforehand were unknown and perhaps even unimaginable. It does so through 'a temporal point of invention and innovation, an opportune moment, where being is endlessly constructed' (Atkinson, 2018, p. 30). The force of art that Atkinson refers to, he explains with reference to Krzysztof Ziarek (Ziarek 2004) as a

'notion of force [that] relates to an on-going undercurrent, a flow of forces, that is pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive, but out of which emerges phases of transformation and rupture that work against accepted aesthetic, social and political forms of thought and relation' (Atkinson, 2018, p. 156).

The challenge of keeping oneself open, however, also applies to art. As practising artists know, there is a need to explore and continuously invent methods in order to discover other forms of expression. Like researchers, artists need to surprise themselves. To walk in unknown terrain where the process, or which path is chosen, is crucial for where one ends up. Referring back to Erin Manning and her thoughts on 'research creation' as a way to invent a method for each project to be investigated, we never walk exactly the same path twice. Manning's concept is rooted in creative and interdisciplinary actions and compositions. A chosen artistic method will always influence the aesthetics of an artistic work. Artists could to a greater extent challenge disciplinary methods and institutional demands, and train in inventing methods as a way to leap into the unknown terrains of exploration, sensations, perception and understanding.

For researchers and artists alike, as we have found out, it is frightening to let go of ego structures (and thus a degree of power) that define one's domain of expertise (and comfort zone) and to let oneself go into not knowing, into becoming a 'student', a 'novice'. For the post-capitalist individual oriented towards goals and productivity, it is perhaps most terrifying to wait without knowing what one is waiting for. We hope we have shown that acknowledging these (very human) fears is a first step towards overcoming them and gaining, as part of the process, not only knowledge of a subject, problem or question, but also of oneself.

In addition, our experiences, combined with living through the COVID-19 global pandemic, have changed us as researchers and human beings. Further to the work illustrated here, we have been moved to search for less anthropocentric views of the world. Through Karen Barad's (2007) 'agential realism', for instance, we have understood how the methods we choose, by establishing a clear-cut distinction between what (or who) is included and what (or who) is excluded (what she calls 'agential cut') do not just 'measure' the world we investigate, but also *create* it. That is why, as Barad explains, the way we produce knowledge (epistemology) can never be separated from what exists (ontology) and ethics. The ethics of the unknown, in this context, is thus also a tool of 'diffraction' (Smartt Gullion, 2018), the process of becoming aware of the way our methodological choices affect the shape of our investigation and reality, and of taking responsibility for it.

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