For the Love of Reality:
Social Sculpture as Self-Experiment

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Contents

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Abstract

This practice-based PhD project encompasses a self-experiment in 'social sculpture' – a phrase coined by German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) to designate an expanded concept of art. Emancipatory and transformative in nature, it involves developing the perceptive, imaginative, reflective, and communicative capacities associated with art in a more traditional sense and applying those to navigating life itself. To me, this implies living with the attitude of an affected, socially engaged researcher: one who, with curiosity and care, seeks to understand and, where possible, improve the world they find themselves in, confronting internalised and external forms of oppression. My interest in social sculpture intersects with questions around the scope of human agency, as well as what helps and hinders creativity and learning. Therefore, I have been drawing on a number of theoretical angles, from Transformative Learning theory, psychoanalysis, and pragmatism to feminism, queer theory, and systems theory, to inform my research. From September 2019 to September 2020, I took my own experience as a starting point for an auto/biographical investigation into how this expanded concept of art could work out in practice: How could *I* be a creative participant in shaping my own life and society – both full of challenges – as a work of art? What practices could support me on this quest? And how could my findings be of value to others? I documented the self-experiment in auto/biographical Thinking Pieces, exploring creative nonfiction as an approach to tracing my learning process in a way that does justice to the depth and complexity of lived experience. This resulted in a number of essays, letters, poems, and short films, which were published on my blog, artistsofsociety.com. The research outcomes manifest on two interconnected levels: as embodied in my personal learning and engagement with the world around me, and, drawing on the 'processing process' of working with presentational methods to make sense of my experiences and share them with others, as an emerging social sculpture-inspired approach to life-research as soul-work.

Acknowledgements

Knowingly or not, countless people have contributed to this research by making their appearance in my life. Thank you, fellow humans, for sharing experiences with me, for talking to me, and for showing me what the world looks like through your eyes.

A special thank you

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Prologue

For the love of reality

> What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life.

(Cixous in Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 2003, p. 3)

I am writing in the awareness that I am trying something odd. I attempt to share observations, ideas, and reflections that emerge from life using a specific format and a particular kind of language. The idea that my writing *represents* the world – including my inner world – is illusory, for my words create reality in turn. This text has a beginning and an end, it is linear. And yet, it will not enter you as such, even if you read it from beginning to end. What will stay with you is at best a rough overall shape and some details that, for whatever reason, resonate with you. They are not necessarily what I deem most important, or what academic conventions deem most important (i.e. research questions, hypothesis, methodology, conclusion). What stays with you is what matters to you. It is the dynamics of attraction, relevance, and curiosity that determine what you learn and what you remember of what I am about to share.

This text as text creates the illusion that it is closed – a finished piece. However, reality is not linear, nor is it closed or finished. The reality I try to describe – life – is continuously unfolding and always becoming. It only happens in the present moment. The work of this writing – its raison d'être – takes place as I sit here, at my desk – NOW – the action of the writing helping me to formulate my thoughts. It also happens when you read this text – another NOW – when the thoughts I had come alive in you, become your thoughts. And it happens when I talk about this writing/thinking in other situations – yet another NOW. This text is like a drop, expulsed by a wave, distinct from the sea for a moment only. For another moment, it makes ripples in all directions as it is already disappearing, being subsumed again. What I care about is this flow and the meaning it creates on the way.

I only care to a limited extent about this writing as a finished piece that ticks certain boxes. It is important because it helps me in the process of making something out of my life, and because it serves as a catalyst for my being in dialogue with you. But I hesitate to say it contains any new knowledge, because I think all knowledge is recycled. It is mine, but it is not, for knowledge is a sea we all inhabit. I believe this sea is not to be colonised and mined for precious gems, ripped out of context to adorn our greedy fingers. Instead, I see myself as an active part of this living

organism, using my metabolism to take things in, transform them, and pass the fruits of my labour back into the cycle. Everything I describe here refers back to a reality that is always in movement and that is always being co-created. I want to do justice to this reality as best as I can, because I love it. It is home.

Let me demonstrate before I explain.

Notes from real life
16 October 2019

Hold me, darkness
You promised!
That I could fall
That I would be safe
That I wouldn't lose myself

I feel battered, vulnerable, dislocated
Wondering what happened
What I have become
Am I still me?

I am scared
For things are getting harder
Since my name and body
No longer match
Along the lines
Of gender normativity
Cognitive dissonance
From now on
Always in the room

I walk against walls
Of preconceptions
The spell society functions by
Unaware of the collective illusion
That must be defended
For dear life

Strange to be a monster
In other people's eyes
An it, inhuman
A threat to order
So easily disturbed
By my liquifying winds

I am the storm
But I am also being tossed around
Like a seed from a tree
On its way
To an unknown destination

Dear fellow human
Treat me kindly
For I am not here to fight
I have come to entice
To make you forget
What you think of me
And show you
Not a monster
But something more beautiful
Instead

I pick up your thoughts
Like silken threads
And gently weave
A pattern that's new

Look in my mirror
Can you see
How much nicer you are
Like this?

Fig. 1: *Notes from Real Life (2019).*

Introduction

What you are about to read is the reflective commentary on my practice-based PhD research, undertaken in the School of Arts at Oxford Brookes University. The practice consists of a self-experiment in social sculpture, conducted over the course of one year. The experiment has been documented in auto/biographical Thinking Pieces, employing a creative nonfiction approach to produce a number of reflexive essays, poems, letters, and short films. These Thinking Pieces can be viewed on my blog, artistsofsociety.com, before or alongside the reading of this commentary. They are listed with links on pp. 41-42 and referenced throughout (e.g. see *Letter to an unlikely lover*). The commentary itself describes my research process and methodology, provides theoretical context in as far as it has been relevant to the practice, analyses the findings of this enquiry, and draws out its contribution to new knowledge.

Social sculpture being about the art of living, as a subject it is as broad as life itself. Not bound to any particular discipline, it potentially overlaps with enquiries from numerous fields. My interest in social sculpture intersects with questions around what helps and hinders human agency, creativity, learning, and the transformation of society towards a more satisfying, just, and sustainable status quo. Addressing and overcoming internal and external forces of oppression is part of that. To inform my research, I have been drawing on a number of theoretical angles, ranging from Transformative Learning theory, psychoanalysis, and pragmatism to feminism, queer theory, and systems theory.

The roots of social sculpture as a metaphor, however, stem from the arts. The German artist Joseph Beuys coined the term in the 1970s, saying that 'every human being is an artist'. By that he meant artist in an expanded sense: a creative shaper of one's own life and of society. If people were to develop their creative capacities, so he argued, they would be better able to perceive the possibilities and limitations of any given situation and find ways to shape it more appropriately. This could be as concrete as how they set priorities, shape their relationships with others, engage in their workplace, and interact with larger social structures and issues.

My self-experiment ran from September 2019 until September 2020. During this time, I have been exploring what it means to be an artist of society in a world full of challenges. This period coincided with significant changes in my personal life. I left behind my Oxford-based research context of seven years, moved to Berlin, ended a long-term relationship, came out as transgender, and embarked on an exploration of polyamory. It was also when Corona hit and any sense of normality got interrupted on a global scale. Many existential questions were raised.

I have been drawing on presentational methods such as writing and filmmaking to make sense of my experiences, trace my own learning as it happened, and create a number of Thinking Pieces. This 'processing process' accompanied my efforts throughout: an approach to pursuing social sculpture-inspired life-research, it could be of value to others.

Being the main participant in a case study of my personal attempt at living with the ideal of a better world, I have been able to chart territory that would have been difficult to get to had other research participants been involved. All along, I have been sharing my enquiry in the public domain, to ensure that it remain part of a living, dialogical process. In that sense, questioning traditional research conventions and experimenting with alternative modes of investigation – ones that value the first-person perspective, prioritise reflexivity over generalisability, and acknowledge that knowledge grows among people and appears in many forms, has equally been part of my enquiry.

A note on the title

For about a year, the working title of my PhD was 'Attempts at Social Sculpture: A Self-Experiment in Emancipatory Life Praxis'. Apart from it basically saying the same thing twice, there was something about it that didn't speak to the richness of the experience of what has felt like a kind of quest. My new title, 'For the Love of Reality: Social Sculpture as Self-Experiment', tries to capture some of that richness. I am aware that it features language that is contentious in academic discourse. Therefore, some epistemological deliberation seems in place. The way I relate to these concepts is from a phenomenological, pragmatic perspective: my love of reality is an experience so strong that it has motivated me to dedicate myself to an ongoing enquiry into how to live life well. Love being a mobilising force to do with care, desire, awe, and joy, in this context it means the opposite of giving up on the search for meaning and purpose and succumbing to nihilism, cynicism, and relativism. Which brings me to the assertion that 'reality' is something real enough to be worth caring about.

Reality to me means that which I know about the world and myself through experience. I know this knowledge is evolving because I learn, and I know it is partial because whenever other people share their experience with me, it adds a new angle. But that doesn't mean that experience is merely subjective and relative. After all, we are in and of this world, and whilst some experiences may be unique to our lives, many others are not. Social sculpture relies on this intersubjective dimension of experience, as it is about the permanent process of finding appropriate ways of existing *together* (together including other-than-human beings and the

planet itself, our home). If it wouldn't be for our being embedded in a shared experiential texture, there would be nothing to look at and work on together in the first place. At the same time, if it wouldn't be for our differences that keep on stirring up the pot, there would be no need for such an ongoing enquiry into how to make things better.

No-one can feel for me whether there is a value to engaging in this struggle – only I can decide and only I can do it. Therefore, social sculpture at large can only be made up of countless self-experiments, that together could create something new that is more than the sum of the continuously evolving parts. But what is the basis for making that commitment to seek meaning and answers to the question how to make the best of this living on earth together? What evokes that love of reality that makes it seem worth it? Jung had something to say about this:

> No one can know what the ultimate things are. We must therefore take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: 'This was the grace of God'.

(Jung, 1970, p. 346)

I concur with Jung in as far as God can be seen as a placeholder for the ultimate awe-inducing mystery of existence, for the answer that can never be known. And also, I *do* think that being on a quest makes for a more interesting and exciting life.

Overview of the chapters

1 The basic premise: LIFE = ART = RESEARCH
The research questions are being introduced with some background regarding how I arrived at them. I go deeper into the notion of social sculpture and its context, and what it means to me. Also, I set out the need for this research and its contribution to new knowledge.

2 Towards a methodology for embodying and sharing life research
This chapter gives a picture of the development of my research process from April 2016 and of the auto/biographical context in which it evolved. I introduce and discuss strands of enquiry that became the base for the final project: my year-long self-experiment in social sculpture. Some of these are methodological, others are linked to questions around agency and impact.

3 The question of agency

The question of agency is central to the project of social sculpture. I guide you through the theoretical background that has shaped my understanding of it – from social sculpture philosophy to Transformative Learning theory, psychoanalysis, alchemical psychology, and systems theory.

4 *In* and *about* life: multidimensional artistic research

This chapter provides an overview of my practice-based enquiry from September 2019 onwards, covering the period of my self-experiment. I reflect on my creative process, the Thinking Pieces, and my collaboration with Allan Laurent Colin. The different ways of sharing my work and the feedback I received are being discussed. Finally, I reflect on how my approach to life-research could be adapted for the benefit of others.

5 The limits of radical honesty

Certain parts of my self-experiment made it into the public realm, whilst others didn't. I take you through questions that emerged along the way: How did I navigate this selection process? What got left out and why? And what does this say about the practicability of an ideal like radical honesty – and about the practicability of ideals in general?

6 Conclusion

Auto/biographical reflections on the self-experiment journey are followed by an exposé of my emerging social sculpture-inspired approach to life-research as a form of soul-work. Questions around the validity of my methodology are being discussed in the context of its epistemological foundations. Subsequently, I offer perspectives on the possibilities and limitations of one's agency as an artist of society. I close with how I find myself relating to social sculpture at the end of this research project.

1 The basic premise: LIFE = ART = RESEARCH

In my worldview, research is the activity that turns life into a stage of creative inquiry and action. It is a form of emancipatory life praxis. The kind of life-research I am after is radically transdisciplinary in the way that life is transdisciplinary. It is radically practice-based in the way that life is practice-based.

The premise of my research is that LIFE = ART = RESEARCH. LIFE = ART is a distillation of the theory of social sculpture as put forward by the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) (Beuys and Harlan, 2007). Social sculpture is a radical, expanded concept of art. It is emancipatory in its assertion that people can develop the perceptive, imaginative, reflective, and communicative capacities required to become creative co-shapers of society. The outcomes of this creative process are not artworks in the traditional sense. Rather, they manifest in a person's skill to navigate life and its challenges, in their readiness to learn, and in the choices and interventions they make. An attempt to reconcile the value of creative, emancipatory, and critical practice with life itself, the idea of social sculpture can be loosely located in the wider field of socially engaged practice as mapped out by Woods (2015).
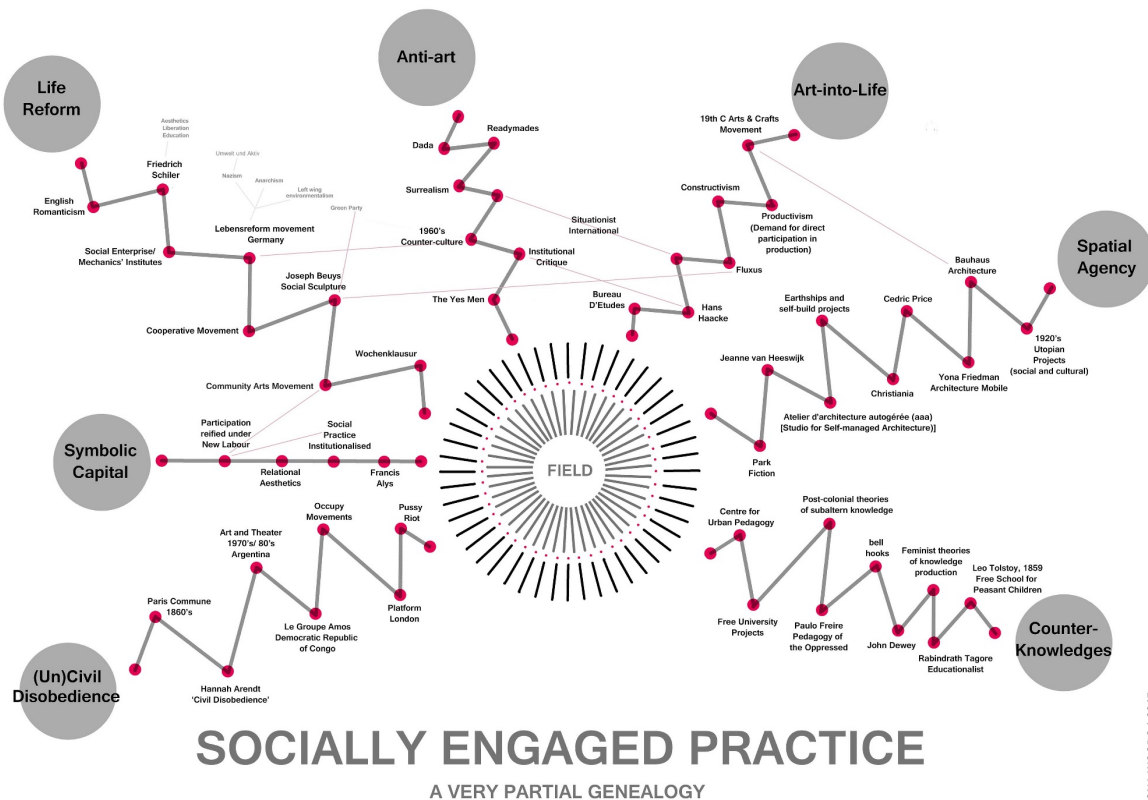

Fig. 2: *Socially Engaged Practice: A Very Partial Genealogy (© Woods, 2015).*

In the frame of social sculpture as I understand it, the creative subject is an artist of society. They take their own experience and agency seriously. At every point in their life they try to ask: how can I live this moment in the most appropriate, response-able, and connected way? The emphasis is on *try*, because LIFE = ART is an ideal. By implication, ideals never fully manifest. They can be signposts and inspirations, reminding of possibilities and guiding everyday actions. Exposed to reality, what remains of ideals are humble, imperfect, and incomplete attempts. However much I have learned in my life, I cannot do anything but improvise and make something up in the moment – over and over again. How does this lead to the notion that LIFE = ART = RESEARCH? Being an artist of society implies living with an attitude of curiosity – like a researcher lives with an attitude of curiosity and seeks to understand and, where possible, improve the world they find themselves in.

The guiding questions in my PhD research have been:

- ♥ What can social sculpture look like in the reality of everyday life?
- ♥ What are the scope and limitations of the transformative agency of an artist of society?
- ♥ How can one live with an ideal, without idealising it?

The journey it took to arrive at these questions involved different research designs (see chapter 2). However, even though it wasn't linear in the sense that I followed through with my original proposal, I can see how they were there all along – even years before I embarked on this PhD.

I first came across the idea of social sculpture when writing the thesis for my BA in Fine Art in 2012. It immediately resonated, since I had been wondering about the value of an artistic mode of being for society all the way through my undergraduate studies. When I learned of the existence of a world-wide unique MA in Social Sculpture at Oxford Brookes University (further referred to as OBU), founded by Prof Shelley Sacks – a student of Beuys – I applied. After graduating in 2014, I stayed on for five more years, working with Sacks on projects of the Social Sculpture Research Unit (2012) (further referred to as SSRU) and teaching Creative Strategies on the Master's. I started my PhD in 2016.

Sacks' attempt at developing a pedagogy based on the principles of social sculpture (Sacks, 2011) taught me many things, especially with regards to understanding the creative process in an expanded sense. Yet, much of the work emerging from the study programmes at OBU – however diverse – appeared to be a version of participatory, process-based, and socially engaged art. Whilst valuable in its own right, what I have been after is a more holistic approach

– one that considers how the idea of social sculpture can permeate into the entirety of life. And so I embarked on a year-long self-experiment, exploring the premise LIFE = ART = RESEARCH from an auto/biographical vantage point. This journey brought up further questions:

- ♥ What practices or processes could support one's development as an artist of society?
- ♥ What might be appropriate forms of sharing one's life-research as a resource for others, embodying it in ways that do justice to the 'data' of lived experience?

The result of grappling with these questions is my emerging approach to social sculpture as an artistic, post-disciplinary, emancipatory form of life-research. It arises from the socio-political and temporal contexts of my particular life but reaches beyond the personal realm in as far as our lives overlap or you recognise yourself in me. As an original contribution to knowledge, it may be of inspiration to others who share my concern with making the world a slightly better place, and who are wondering about their role in this transformative endeavour.

2 Towards a methodology for embodying and sharing life-research

Before discussing the research project that my PhD eventually turned into (see chapter 4), I will provide a window into its development from April 2016. I will show how, even though the course of my research changed over time, there have been strands of enquiry all along that became the basis for what I ended up doing – be it partly unintended. They are related to the approach I developed for sharing my life-research as a resource for others, tracing and embodying it in ways that do justice to the 'data' of lived experience. I also touch on questions about agency and impact – concerning the possibilities and limitations of LIVING emancipatory life praxis (further elaborated on in chapter 3). These, too, are methodological questions, but on the more fundamental level of 'how to live one's life'. Finally, I reflect on how circumstances in my environment and personal life shaped my final project.

Whilst each of these foci deserve their own treatment, it needs saying that separating them out for the sake of clarity and analysis is to some extent an artificial intervention in a holistic process. For what I am attempting is nearly impossible and poses a challenge to the limitations of anything less comprehensive than life itself: to pursue life-research as PhD research. In other words: I have been attempting to conduct my life as art as research, and part of my life happens to be characterised by me being a practice-based PhD researcher whose practice involves writing and making films *about* and *as* their life-research. Note that the latter is more than merely reporting on life: "The act of describing experiences and the conditions under which the description takes place, themselves become an experience, and as such are more than a means to the end of delivering the content of the speech." (Meunier, 2012, p. 24).
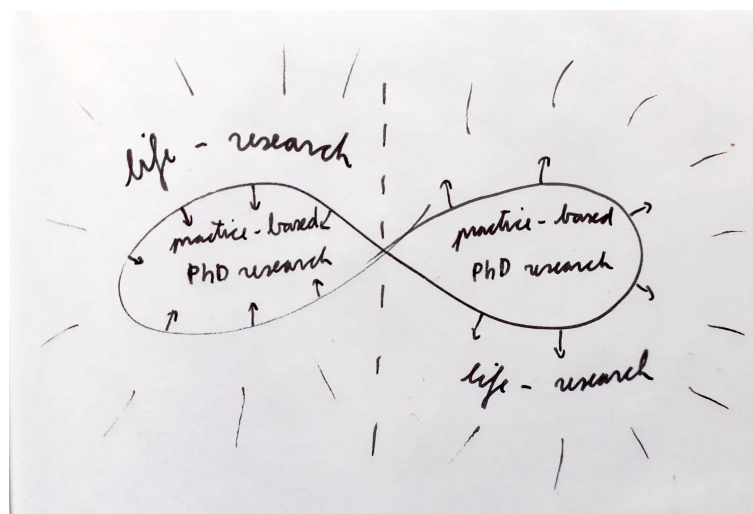

Fig. 3: *Practice-based PhD research on life-research;*
life-research on practice-based PhD research; and so on (2020).

2.1 How I entered my PhD

When I originally submitted my PhD research proposal, my aim was to understand how Sacks' pedagogical practices based in the notion of social sculpture could build capacities for engaged citizenship. I became particularly interested in the case of Earth Forum (Sacks, Stefan and Kirchgaesser, 2017; Sacks, 2018). A facilitated dialogue process that brings together people from across one organisation or from different backgrounds, it creates space to reflect on how they want to be in the world and how their personal actions and their work can affect change towards a more humane and ecologically viable future. My research question was how one could study the dynamics and the impact of such a process, which operates on a small scale but can engender profound experiences, transformative learning, and a new sense of personal and collective agency. I was looking for a methodology to narrate my findings in a way that does justice to the specificity and quality of lived experience – because where else do things happen and humans learn? And how else can one come to appreciate how one's work is affecting people? Along the way, I learned about a number of approaches that would turn out relevant to the self-experiment my research eventually turned into.

2.2 Raising consciousness through life-research

Since I intend for my research to raise consciousness in people both within and outside of university contexts, I cannot simply take for granted that academic writing is the most appropriate form to share my work. I appreciate the depth of academic writing, its commitment to following through on a question, its critical dimension, and the way it positions the enquiry in a broader field of references. However, it also has its flaws, such as a tendency towards jargon, the employment of a type of language that can be very exclusive, and a favouring of Western epistemologies over other ways of knowing – without even reflecting on it. Also, as feminist researchers have long pointed out, it assumes that its way – a way largely created by privileged white men – is the right way, dismissing knowledge passed on through other types of voices and actions (Tompkins, 1987).

The people I reach out to are not only fellow academics, but also artists, educators, activists, queers, parents, and people who work in NGOs – to name a few. To elicit a reflection on behavior, values, perspectives, and possibilities of being, I need to share my enquiry in a way that combines the best of academic writing with a style that *touches* people. And given that social sculpture poses the idea that *every* human being can be an artist of life, relatability is particularly important. I do not merely want to fill people with information, which doesn't tend

to stick very well in the first place. Instead, I want my ideas to take root in others, enabling them to make sense of their own lives and agency by providing a window into mine.

Reflexivity, as introduced by feminist scholars, is one way of making research more relatable. Connecting a topic to one's lived experience provides insight into the social location, motivation, ethics, and power involved in knowledge creation (Dowling, 2010). After all, knowledge is situated, and the story of my life is not mine alone. The reflexive auto/biographical "I" as described by Stanley (1992) illuminates the socio-political fabric of which it is a part: the people and communities it interacts with; the contexts it finds itself in; those addressed outside the text; second- and third-hand knowledges; as well as past and future selves. Rather than a distant observer, this "I" is an affected participant concerned with raising consciousness about issues it encounters, "conceptualising as well as encouraging social change, as the product of re-thinking the relationship between social and political structure and human agency – in other words, social change brought about through mass individual change" (Stanley, 1993, p. 44). It is this "I" that I recognise myself in as a researcher, and that I've been seeking a voice for throughout.

2.3 Auto/biographical creative nonfiction as queer narration

Perhaps because the genre of academic writing was new to me (my background is in Fine Art and practice-based research), it made sense to me to not simply take for granted what it was supposed to be, but to see writing in the first instance as a practice of sharing that requires a search for 'appropriate form' – a notion drawn from Sacks' social sculpture pedagogy:

> [T]he question [...] shifts to ways of sharing these perceptions and understandings with others. In other words, the focus is now on bringing this [research] material into form, on finding *appropriate form*. Describing this stage of the forming process in this way frees one from thinking about end products at the outset. Instead, ideas and work emerge and evolve through the process of doing and exploring from 'inner necessity'. The emphasis on finding appropriate form also frees students from getting locked into working in established art media and disciplines, unless they turn out to be appropriate.

> (Sacks, 2011, pp. 84-85)

As I experimented with ways of bringing to form my own and others' learning experiences related to Earth Forum, I came across the genre of creative nonfiction. Increasingly used in research contexts, its main concern is sharing knowledge as it comes embedded in stories *of* life, rather than extracting information *from* life and presenting it to the reader without the flesh.

Bones alone are difficult to digest. A form of writing that combines personal elements with research expertise and emotional and political engagement, one of its origins lies in American feminist criticism (Freedman, 1992; 1996). Freedman describes it as "cross-genre writing (writing incorporating critical theory, textual exegesis, autobiography, poetry, manifesto), alchemical writing, border-crossing writing, hybrid writing, embodied writing, or a quilt, collage, or patchwork of genres" (Freedman, 1996, p. 4). Creative nonfiction can also be linked to the emergent artistic movement described by David Shields (2010) as 'Reality Hunger', arguably *queer* in the sense that it questions normative categories of fact and fiction (fiction stemming from the Latin *fingere*, to form), whilst seeking a proximity to lived experience.

> What is a fact? What's a lie, for that matter? What, exactly, constitutes an essay or a story or a poem or even an experience? What happens when we can no longer freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience?

(Shields, 2010, p. 46)

Whilst I am aware that queerness to many people is mainly linked to a departure from heteronormativity and an expression of identity that challenges norms of gender and sexuality, I relate to it more broadly. A queer life and a queer approach to research and writing to me means an attempt at 1) noticing what I take for granted; 2) questioning what I take for granted; and 3) taking a conscious position towards what I used to take for granted, and perhaps choosing to approach it differently. It is queerness as "that which is, in Michael Warner's (1993, xxvi) oft-cited phrase, resistant "to regimes of the normal" – not only heteronormativity, but "a wide field of normalization," including "normal business in the academy."" (Weiss, 2016, p. 631).

> For it is our queer desires that motivate our search for an otherwise, for an object and a mode of analysis that could do justice to our hopes and dreams – political or analytic (or both). That this may never be achieved is, I think, the point. And so I think we should acknowledge our desires; indeed, I think it is our erotic, political, and intellectual desires that make our work queer […]. Queer as a wanting to know, to know more – "a commitment to a wondering curiosity," rather than "disciplinary certainty" (McGlotten, 2012, p. 3). Queer as a provocation to think otherwise, think anew. Aren't those our desires? They're certainly mine.

(Weiss, 2016, p. 635)

The way I have approached creative nonfiction for my own research is by looking at it through the lens of this expanded queer perspective: as a form of narration that follows the dynamics of

desire and resistance as essential and creative life forces, one that consciously questions norms of academic enquiry, and that playfully proposes alternatives. As such, it has become the vehicle for what my research eventually turned into: an auto/biographical case study that draws you in and takes you along on my journey of becoming, of finding agency, and of making sense of the complex experiences life presented me with.

2.4 Considering forms of sharing in conference contexts

My concern with conceiving of writing as a form of artistic practice, the aim of which is to create an engaging experience for one's audience, extended to other forms of sharing research. When I started attending conferences and trainings in the areas of active citizenship, adult learning, and arts-based research, I noticed that many academics and practitioners take formats of presentation for granted – even though there are others who make a serious effort at trialing alternatives. Still, a type of lecturing that heavily draws on the use of Powerpoint, packed with information and mostly a way of talking through a paper in a linear manner, is very common. Also, there seemed to be a consistent lack of space and time to process essential points. As a result, what I would remember would usually not be the main argument, but an anecdote or an odd bit of information. Whilst some clearly cared about the topic of their research – making their presentations slightly more relatable – I was disappointed to notice that by far this doesn't seem to be the case with everyone.

To me, the purpose of a conference presentation is to share something of importance to me with a community I want to be in dialogue with. It involves establishing a relationship with people. Therefore, drawing on what I had learned about 'appropriate form', I began experimenting with ways of involving my audience such that *what would stay with them* would be more likely to match *what mattered to me*. Small interventions included giving the audience a few minutes to find their personal connection to the research topic at the beginning of my presentation and leaving significant time for dialogue afterwards. Wherever I used Powerpoint, I tried working with minimal text and meaningful images of auto/biographical relevance. I also like to subvert the seriousness that permeates academic spaces by bringing a trickster quality to it. At a presentation discussing my relationship with theory and practice (see Fig. 5), I had the words slowly moving around in the background as people were considering their own relationship to it. In Canterbury (see Fig. 6), I embedded my research considerations in the medium of film to allow for a careful curation of pace and rhythm in relation to content intake. The conversation afterwards took place in the semi-dark, carrying the mood of the films, which played with the metaphors of light and darkness in relation to knowledge, over into the sharing space.
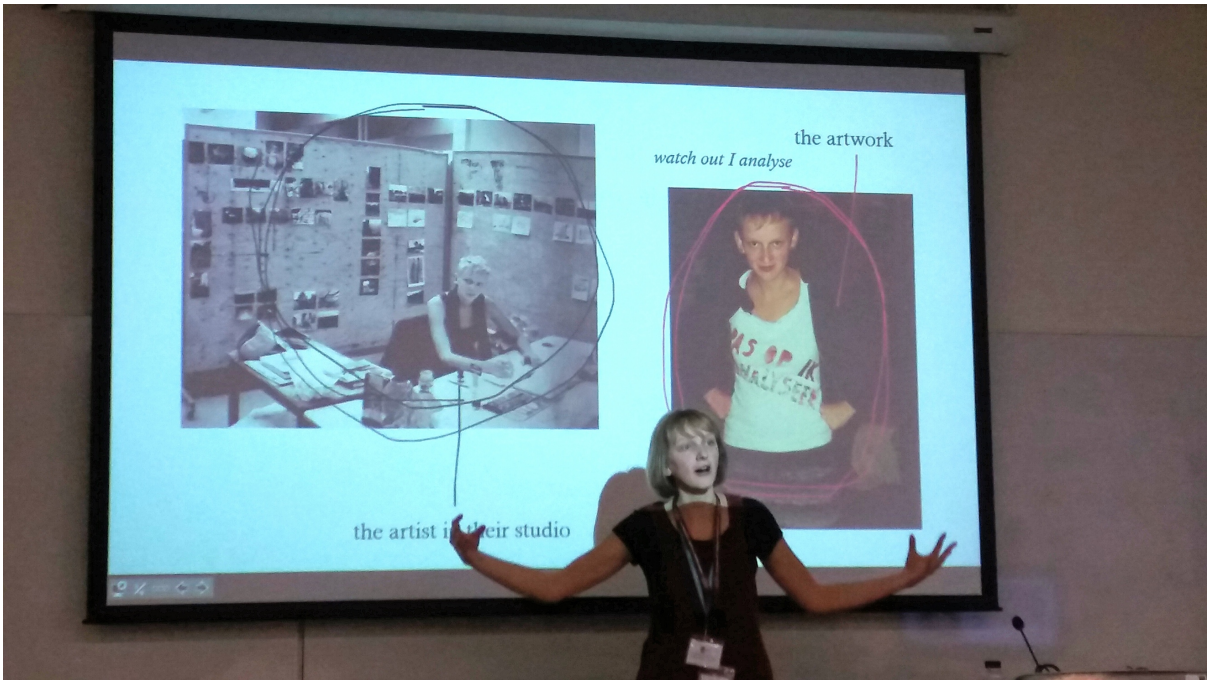
Fig. 4: *Powerpoint experiment (1). Auto/biographical reflections on my evolving relationship with theory vs. practice as an artist. CARU Annual Conference, OBU, 25 November 2018.*
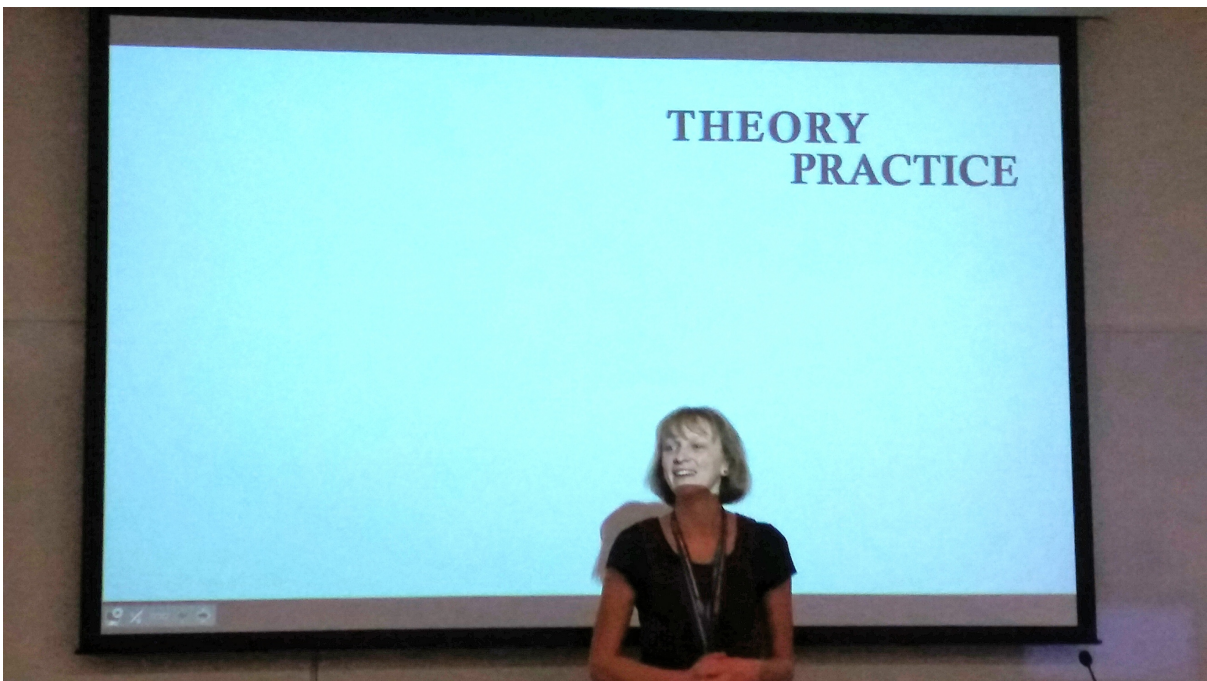
Fig. 5: *Powerpoint experiment (2). Moving words. Idem.*

Fig. 6: *Presenting in the semi-dark. Annual Conference of the ESREA Life History and Biography Network, Canterbury Christchurch University, 27 February – 1 March 2020.*

My interventions in conference settings have been attempts at creating situations conducive to personal connection, both between people and between people and the research contents. Their aim is to tease out the human in the professional and engender a reconsideration of taken for granted forms of knowledge transmission. As a result, the boundaries between LIFE, ART, and RESEARCH – arguably artificial and not necessarily helpful – are being blurred and put into question. As such, my conference work has been an extension of what my PhD project eventually turned into.

2.5 Finding an appropriate frame for my research: a social sculpture self-experiment

What is this text's autobiographical occasion?

(McLennan, 2013, p. 13)

Two years into my PhD, I realised that focusing on the impact and dynamics of Sacks's Earth Forum process was too limited an approach to grapple with my larger questions around the value and practicability of the idea of social sculpture. I felt the need to broaden my perspective and gain some critical distance from the research context I had been involved in for seven years. The moment I arrived at the final frame for my PhD project was in autumn 2019 – a time of intense personal change. I had just moved to Berlin, ended a long-term relationship, and come out as transgender. I also started working with Prof Linden West as my new supervisor. His background being in auto/biography, adult learning, psychoanalysis, and history, our conversations had made me look at my research from new angles. The perspective that 'my new life' was offering me got me back to my initial understanding of social sculpture as the art of shaping one's own life, everything undertaken as part of this being a creative exploration of possibilities to intervene in an unsatisfactory status quo. It dawned on me that my current situation would lend itself perfectly for an auto/biographical self-experiment around what it means to LIVE emancipatory life praxis. How would I find my way by myself, in a new city, in a new gender? To deepen my understanding of what it means to learn and to grow in life, I was also curious to explore parallels with other paradigms of emancipatory life praxis, such as pragmatism, psychoanalysis, Transformative Learning theory, and queer theory (see chapter 3).

Fig. 7: *New research map, 26/9/2019.*

What I wanted to avoid was taking for granted social sculpture as a grand narrative – a tendency I had noticed in how both Beuys and Sacks sometimes related to it (see *Letter to Joseph Beuys*). I was feeling ambiguous about this and a little concerned, because I think there is a risk of an unrealistic picture being created, and, even worse, a hero dynamic being activated that can get in the way of constructive engagement with the social sculpture ideas. If I was going to take an auto/biographical approach to my research on social sculpture as a paradigm of emancipatory life praxis, I wanted to make sure not to erase the struggle, the mess, and the inconclusiveness that characterises many real-life situations – despite the best of intentions. It has been important to me to avoid giving the impression that doing social sculpture lifts you out of mundane trouble and puts you on a higher plane, so to speak – even though it *can* be genuinely inspiring and uplifting. Therefore, I have taken care to openly voice my concerns and refrain from neatly drawing conclusions about the multiplicity of micro-events described in my Thinking Pieces under one ideological umbrella. In other words, in order to honour the possibilities that living with the idea of social sculpture can open up, I've tried to share my experiences and reflections as raw and honestly as possible – at the risk of making social sculpture look not quite as attractive.

In terms of credibility, I concur with Preciado and Haraway that an engagement with emancipatory life discourses must "consist of a positioned, responsible corporal political practice, so that anyone wishing to be a political subject will begin by being the lab rat in her or his own laboratory" (Preciado paraphrasing Haraway, 2019, p. 353). I realise that this phrasing can appear somewhat antagonistic, almost suggesting that one must experience the epistemological (and physical) harm one may inflict on others first-hand, to see what would *then* remain of the disconnected paradigm informing one's actions. Whilst I sympathise with Haraway's quote in the context of a book about biopolitics, I think its implications are wider and can be expressed more kindly without losing their power: theory doesn't easily make one *feel* the impact of one's actions, whilst personal experience does.

Whilst the notion of social sculpture has been an inspiration to many people's lives, as far as it is possible for me to ascertain, a self-experiment like the one I was about to embark on had not been undertaken in an academic context before. Therefore, exploring the basic premise LIFE = ART = RESEARCH from the unique vantage point of my new situation seemed to be an appropriate alternative to my initial PhD project. I am glad that in the final reframing of my PhD, I managed to find ways of drawing on insights from my prior work. Making my struggles the subject of my enquiry became the creative strategy for doing so.

3 The question of agency

The question of agency is central to the project of social sculpture and has therefore accompanied me throughout my self-experiment in emancipatory life praxis. A form of capacity for transformative action, agency involves perceiving possibilities for intervening in an unsatisfactory status quo and developing the skills to do so constructively. I see it as a kind of learning to learn – getting a sense for one's possibilities, desires, and limitations, and expanding one's abilities according to what is needed to make a slightly better world. Beuys drew on the work of Rudolf Steiner to frame artistic agency in an expanded sense (Holland, 2007). He defined it as the ability to mobilise one's imagination, inspiration, and intuition "to rethink and re-enliven static forms" (Sacks, 2011, p. 87) – be it ways of thinking, institutions, or social processes. Throughout my research, I have been wondering 1) what might be involved in becoming such an agent of change; 2) what characterises the learning processes happening along the way, and 3) what determines the scope of transformative action. As I went, perspectives from different fields of enquiry helped me shed light on these questions. In this chapter, I guide you through some of the theoretical background behind my work – starting off with social sculpture philosophy and then moving through Transformative Learning theory, psychoanalysis, alchemical psychology, and systems theory.

3.1 A social sculpture perspective

In a way, the idea of social sculpture poses the ultimate challenge: to live life in an artful manner – in the best way possible. At the same time, there are no guidelines for such a 'good life'. There is only the implication that finding alternatives to an unsatisfactory status quo requires the use and development of one's creative potential, i.e. one's perceptive, imaginative, reflective, and communicative capacities. The call is to free oneself from internalised 'oughts' and 'shoulds', and to take a conscious and critical approach to whatever situations one is confronted with – listening carefully, inwardly and outwardly. As Einstein allegedly pointed out, one cannot solve problems with the same mindset that created them. And so, if one chooses or is forced to care about at least some of the wicked problems touching one's lifeworld – be it matters of social or ecological injustice – one is called to embark on a learning journey, destination unknown (see *My favourite mystery*, 26/5/2020). In social sculpture terms, it means bringing awareness to one's own mindset and transforming the world in the wake of one's personal learning process.

Conceiving of social sculpture as the art of life implies that everything I am and do is part of an interconnected system. Every deed – even a thought-deed – potentially sets in motion a chain of

events that reaches far beyond me. Always asking myself how I might most constructively participate in the unfolding of a given moment, the entirety of life becomes an arena for creative action. Wherever I find myself, what I do bears significance and demands consideration. But also, it is precisely *where* and *how* I am situated that determines the shape and scope of, as well as the limits to, my agency.

3.2 Situating myself

My life has presented me with a multiplicity of perspectives, and I learned not to take any one story for granted early on (see *Letter to an Unlikely Lover* and *Saving the Soul 2.0*). I moved between divorced parents in Germany and the Netherlands – they were artists and both critical of a capitalist mindset, be it in very different ways. I lived in about fifteen different places of varying socio-economic status before I turned eighteen – in the countryside and the city, in poor, middle-, and upper-class environments. I attended different school systems – including Waldorf, Montessori, and regular education, as well as adult education for dropouts and home schooling. At present, no-one is actively trying to take influence on what I do and, for that matter, no-one in my surroundings cares much about academic titles. If I compare it to the lives of others, it is a situation of exceptional freedom. And yet, it is the only situation I can work from – in the hope that some of my findings will bear relevance to others nonetheless.

3.3 Perspectives from Transformative Learning theory, psychoanalysis, and alchemical psychology

If anything, participating in the project of social sculpture means being open to learn from life. But how do people learn? And what makes it more likely that they will? Transformative Learning (further referred to as TL) theory, originally formulated by Jack Mezirow and extensively elaborated on by a diverse field of researchers and practitioners, offers helpful insights. According to Mezirow (1978), the heart of adult learning is 'perspective transformation', resulting from a confrontation with 'disorienting dilemmas':

> Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.

> (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Similar to Paulo Freire (1996), who placed the concept of *conscientisation* at the heart of his critical pedagogy, Mezirow focused on the cognitive, rational dimensions of emancipation. In practice, however, the phenomenon of transformative learning doesn't appear to be as straightforward. For one, human beings have the notorious tendency to act against their better judgment. The real 'reasoning' behind behaving in a certain way often seems to be going on elsewhere. Also, Mezirow has been criticised for holding on to the idea that the individual is self-creating, implying that struggling to do so is a personal rather than a social failure – which doesn't hold very well against contemporary analyses of privilege (Formenti and West, 2018, p. 54). To address these gaps in understanding, scholars have integrated theories in TL discourse that acknowledge the role played by affective, extra-rational, and experiential modes of knowing as well as biographical, social factors, (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller and Schapiro, 2009, p. 10). Also, more embodied ways of going about research in an attempt to do justice to the depth and complexity of transformative learning have been emerging (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller and Schapiro, 2009; Clover, Sanford and Butterwick, 2013; Formenti, West and Horsdal, 2014).

Out of these ongoing strands of investigation, the one connecting TL theory and psychoanalysis is of particular interest to me (see Bainbridge and West, 2012; Formenti and West, 2018; Salling Olesen, 2019; West, 2014). Like Formenti and West (2018, p. 105), I "worry that accounts of transformative learning can seem distant from the suffering, struggles, doubts and even the pain of lives", as well as being "auto/biographically 'light' and reductive of learner experience (see West, 2014)". A psychoanalytical approach to understanding agency counters this tendency by acknowledging the complexity of the human psyche and its struggles – including the struggle to know oneself. The auto/biographical angle adds a consideration of the psychosocial dynamics involved, for example by highlighting the importance of good enough relationships in transformative experiences (West, 2014). Also, it allows for a depth only chartable by the auto/biographer themselves, them being "the ultimate participants in a dual participant-observer role, having privileged access – in some cases, monopolistic access – to their own inner experience" (Merton, 1988, pp. 19-20). Together, the psychoanalytical and auto/biographical take on learning most accurately reflect my own experience of transforming by living as I've come to trace, analyse, and reflect on it in my self-experiment. They have been indispensable in my attempt at making sense of the scope and limitations of my own creative agency.

From a Jungian perspective – his analytical psychology being a departure from Freud's original psychoanalytic ideas – the defining process of emancipatory life praxis is individuation. Whilst Jung was well aware that much of the time, we don't at all understand the motives underlying our behaviour, he also saw scope for our 'relative freedom' (Clarke, p. 133) to work with them

in transformative ways. More than personal development, individuation aligns with the idea in social sculpture discourse that inner work and outer action – personal and political – are connected (Sacks and Zumdick, 2013):

> This chosen path may of course conflict with collective norms, but it is not for that reason essentially narcissistic and anti-social. Indeed for Jung 'relationship to the self is at once relationship to our fellow man, and no one can be related to the latter until he is related to himself'.

<div align="right">(Clarke, 1992, p. 164, citing Jung, 1953-83, vol. 16, § 445)</div>

The relationship between self and world was highlighted even more explicitly by Hillman and Moore, who departed from Jung's analytical psychology to develop alchemical psychology. In terms of understanding human agency, they shifted the focus from individuation to 'soul-making'. Rather than invoking the concept of soul as the spirit unique to a living being, their reading refers to the quality of one's connection with oneself and the world one inhabits:

> When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars – good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy.

<div align="right">(Moore, 1998, pp. xi-xii)</div>

Soul-making as an emancipatory and transformative process, then, starts with developing a sensitivity for this connection (see *Saving the Soul 2.0)*. Furthermore, it encompasses a recognition of outer problems as reflections of inner dissonances:

> [W]e might more lightly and effectively engage in the work of the soul by becoming sensitive to the world's suffering. Our buildings are in pain, our governments are on the rocks, the arts are relegated to museums where they are explained away or reduced to technical concerns. Our personal lives may reflect these broader wounds to the world soul (…).

<div align="right">(Moore in Hillman and Moore, 1990, p. 10)</div>

With this call to make sense of personal processes as an inversion of world processes, an arc has been created. Starting from Mezirow's rational, individualised understanding of transformative learning, we have arrived at a view on human agency that considers the complexity of the

psyche as well as its social and ecological embeddedness. Let us take a closer look at this intersection between the micro and the macro.

3.4 Shifting paradigms: agency on the intersection between micro and macro

Following Moore and Hillman, one might identify a paradigm of disconnection as the umbrella for much of the issues the world is currently facing. A result of the recent Western history of modernity, materialism, positivism, and capitalism, it constitutes a way of thinking that separates subject from object, humans from nature, and communities from the myths that once gave them coherence and guidance in life (Abram, 1997; Martin, 1955). As philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1986; 1987), ecotheologian Thomas Berry (1999), nuclear physicist David Bohm (Bohm and Nichol, 2003), and many others have pointed out, this paradigm has led to a crisis of meaning as much as it has caused the exploitation of the planet and the falling apart of social structures.

Taking the perspective of psychosocial interconnectedness, how does a paradigm manifest? My experience of it is that it is like a medium in which I am embedded. It appears in many shapes in my everyday life and it creeps into my thoughts and dreams. It affects outer events and circumstances as well as my attitudes, assumptions, sense of possibility, and sense of agency. Like everything that has grown familiar, it can be hard to recognise how one is influenced by a paradigm. It is even harder to imagine how things could be different.

Contrary to what one might expect, environmental scientist and systems thinker Donella Meadows (1999) argues that shifting a paradigm can in fact be one of the most effective ways of bringing about change. Aside from focusing on addressing the symptoms of a larger problem (which is also important and essential for offering immediate relief), one looks for what is most fundamentally causing the issues in the first place. She concludes that the source of many issues is the worldview or set of beliefs and assumptions held by a society. They shape the way that people think and influence their actions on all levels – ranging from how they educate their children and how they relate to other-than-human creatures, to how they go about fulfilling their daily needs, and so on. Wouldn't it be the most overwhelming task to change something as fundamental and influential as a paradigm, one might wonder? No, argues Meadows, because however powerful the paradigm might work on a collective scale, it exists by the grace of individual people. And it doesn't necessarily need much for these people to change their mind. If then these individuals are inserted in positions of influence, they can work with the vast middle

ground of open-minded people, and hence spread new ways of thinking about and relating to the world.

3.5 Where does this leave me?

As a life-researcher, Meadows' perspective gives me hope. Even within my limited range of action, I may be able to contribute towards the manifestation of a paradigm based on connection and a trust in the possibility of creating a better society. Describing my personal attempts at social sculpture and articulating the struggles connected with such an undertaking might help others to recognise and more consciously navigate their own process of self- and world-transformation. In the end, living according to my values and engaging with individuals or groups in a way that moves them internally might be a way of contributing to a growing sense of connection and meaning.

All these different perspectives on agency inspired the way in which I have tried to navigate my own self-experiment in emancipatory life praxis. In practice, however, I find it difficult to really know where and how creative deeds originate, and to what extent an action is *actually* transformative. If I reflect on a situation, I can feel as though I've handled it in a creative way, or in the best way I could. But there is no way of measuring the level of creativity or transformative impact of any given action according to an objective scale. Sometimes I feel as though the micro-deeds in my everyday life, including the research and writing work I do, make a difference and that it's worth it. At best, it could be seen as a kind of soul-work. In other moments, I wonder whether I am not fooling myself by conjuring up a rationale to justify the small things I do, whilst I could also try and use my capacities in a different and potentially more impactful way – for example by becoming a politician, an activist, a school teacher, a therapist, or a parent. And yet, in all these possible scenarios I would have to deal with the limitations of the respective context, and I would have to become proficient in navigating its particular challenges – without knowing how well I would cope. Therefore, for now I have decided to focus on further developing the research work I am already familiar with, knowing that this is what I am passionate about and relatively good at – in the hope that a meaningful path will form as I "keep on keeping on" (West, 2014, p. 171).

4 *In* and *about* life: multidimensional artistic research

In this chapter I take you through the work I ended up doing for my PhD from September 2019 onwards. It covers the period of my deliberate self-experiment in researching life as art – tracing transformation and learning along the way. The overarching frame has been to 'test' the basic premise that LIFE = ART = RESEARCH, and to see how this might inform a social sculpture-inspired approach to life-research. Also, I set out with the intention to try and find appropriate ways of embodying and sharing my findings with others. This pursuit has been accompanied by questions around the scope of my agency as an artist of society (as elaborated on in chapter 3).

Embarking on this journey, I didn't exactly know what to expect – what I would do and what I would find. But I was committed to take any situation, any experience that might occur, seriously. If I was going to give an account of the data of my lived experience, I wanted to do so in the most honest and all-encompassing way possible. As best as I could, I didn't want to censor myself, or to censor things that happened. In doing so, I was inspired by Chris Kraus' attitude towards radical honesty:

> And I think I have the right to feel what I feel, and [others] do too, and – I couldn't really think, myself, of anything I've done that I wouldn't want ever to be said. I mean, I'm human. What are we ashamed of? And what about it don't we want people to know?

(Kraus, 2004, p. 61)

In principle, the landscape of this investigation covers everything that occurred in my life during the period of the self-experiment. However, my life as such can hardly be assessed in the context of a PhD. The reasons for this are 1) it would be too much; 2) despite striving for some form of radical honesty, there turned out to be things that I didn't want to make public (see chapter 5); 3) my life involves other people, and from an ethics point of view I can't simply turn them into my PhD research participants (see chapter 5); and 4) how would you even assess someone's life? Arguably, the play of imagination to consider the entirety of life as art and research is the primary dimension of my work, and part of the results of my enquiry encompass my own journey of individuation in this time. It is through my auto/biographical Thinking Pieces that I provide insight into my learnings for secondary audiences. By sharing them on my blog, at a conference, at a self-organised event in a queer cultural space, and in numerous informal situations, I let others partake in my journey. And whilst it is *my* journey, it intersects with other

people's lives, with the communities I am involved in, and with larger socio-political and historical contexts. An enquiry into what could be called the human condition, the stories I share work like literature: they contribute to new knowledge in that one way of making sense of our own lives is through other people's lives. Furthermore, the Thinking Pieces exemplify a method for taking experiences as a research material. Processing them by using presentational methods such as writing and filmmaking helped me develop the self-knowledge required for dealing with complex situations and creatively partaking in the transformation of my lifeworld. More than the sum of their parts, the Thinking Pieces embody my evolving approach to social sculpture as an artistic, soulful, emancipatory form of life-research. This is the secondary dimension of my practice-based enquiry.

4.1 My blog: Artists of Society

A short while into my PhD research, I started the blog that eventually became the platform for sharing my Thinking Pieces: *Artists of Society* (Kirchgaesser, 2020). Initially, it was meant to be a free space for myself, where I could pursue personal research projects that were not part of my PhD (see blog sections *Exploring Global Citizenship* and *DIY Learning Spaces*). In the sense that they were related to my life interests at the time, one could argue that they were a form of unintentional scoping for what my PhD research eventually became. These first two projects generated the initial traffic to get the blog going and helped me develop my writing and research practice.

4.2 The Thinking Pieces

From October 2019 onwards, I created 13 Thinking Pieces. Allowing myself the freedom to experiment with different formats, they have taken the form of letters, essays, and poems combined with images from my personal archive or of my own making. There are also three short films, two of which I created in collaboration with Allan Laurent Colin, a Mexican visual artist and filmmaker. The pieces are a composition of interrelated observations, questions, and reflections – characterised by an oscillation between immersion in and contemplation of life. The open format of the Thinking Piece allows me to explore different voices and styles, find appropriate ways to weave together multiple strands of thought and experience, and share them with others. It enables me to acknowledge the relational and situated nature of how ideas come into being and to highlight references that speak to me in the context. Since the creation of these pieces is my *practice*, I am not bound to conventions – it is me who decides on the criteria. I have the freedom to develop and reinvent this form over and over again, so that it may serve

the flow of meaning. They are *pieces for thinking* in two ways: 1) creating them serves as a reflexive process for myself, helping me make sense of my experiences and draw out significant themes and questions; and 2) rather than offering conclusions, they are meant to make people think for themselves. The latter occurs through direct engagement with the pieces on my blog, through subsequent correspondence, in dialogue where I share my work at conferences and events, and as part of the countless informal conversations I've been having with people.

In the way it is experienced, life is not general – it is specific. These Thinking Pieces cover about a year from September 2019 onward. Together, they form a map of my evolving self-experiment and individuation process, focusing on particular issues and situations as well as running themes I grappled with. Moving to Berlin after seven years living in Oxford, I let go of many of the structures that determined my life before (see *Letter to Linden West* and *Learning to fall*). I left my UK-based social sculpture research community behind after starting to question some of its problematic social dynamics, which I had let myself be drawn into over the years (see *Letter to Joseph Beuys*). I came out as transgender (see *Name change poem* and *Notes from real life*) and got involved with the local queer community (see *A queer transformative learning rollercoaster*). This happened as part of a process of becoming aware of internalised ideas about gender and sexuality and the way society keeps oppressive, heteronormative structures in place. A long-term monogamous relationship made way for a number of free love experiments – the result of a reconsideration of what relationships ought to be like (see *Letter to an Unlikely Lover*). I immersed myself in living rather than thinking or writing about living. For a while, I felt removed from academia – both physically and mentally. I struggled with its limitations – some real, some imagined (see *Darkifiesto* and *The salty sea*). Later on, I reconciled myself with being a researcher (see *Saving the Soul 2.0*) – one who values going into the unknown (see *My favourite mystery*). Also, Corona happened. It made me think of what makes life worth living (see *God in Corona World*). I started to reflect on the spiritual dimension that always seemed to be present in my work but that I'd never explicitly addressed before, as my supervisor Linden West kept on drawing attention to it. This took me right back to how my childhood, my parents, and the educational system had shaped me (see *Saving the Soul 2.0*). And finally, summer 2020 arrived with a mood change, as the scepticism towards the scope of my creative agency made place for a new belief in my capacity to be a teacher of some kind (see *Finding myself as an artist of society*). Many more things happened but went unnoticed, unwritten, or unpublished about (see chapter 5).

4.3 Overview of published Thinking Pieces

Title	Date	Intro & link
Letter to Joseph Beuys	16/10/19	A critical reflection on Beuys' call to "protect the flame", this letter is an appeal to reconsider how we tell our stories of hope. artistsofsociety.com/post/letter-to-joseph-beuys
Letter to Linden West	21/10/19	On PhD research as emancipatory life praxis artistsofsociety.com/post/letter-to-linden-west
Learning to fall	3/11/19	A short film // In the beginning we lived in paradise. One day, a serpent came along. Or maybe it was just our own desire to cross the final boundary? We ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And that was it. No bliss no more. artistsofsociety.com/post/learning-to-fall
Name change poem	5/11/19	Who are you? // Creature born from darkness // Someone I don't yet really know // Me but not me artistsofsociety.com/post/name-change-poem
A Queer Transformative Learning Rollercoaster	19/11/19	The LGBTQIA+ community teaches me how learning about my own otherness can open doors towards learning to deal with other people's otherness. artistsofsociety.com/post/a-queer-transformative-learning-rollercoaster
Letter to an Unlikely Lover	14/1/20	This letter is an attempt to trace the story of an encounter. Of little things that happened. And yet, where else does life take place? artistsofsociety.com/post/letter-to-an-unlikely-lover
The salty sea	18/1/20	Or, how not to do justice to the data of lived experience. A rant about stifling academic practices. artistsofsociety.com/post/the-salty-sea

Darkifiesto	6/2/20	How to embrace darkness in a world obsessed with the light of reason? An essay film about the struggle for soul in spaces made for the mind. A collaboration with Allan Laurent Colin. artistsofsociety.com/post/darkifiesto
Notes from real life	6/2/20	What does it feel like when your name and body do not match along the lines of gender normativity? A film poem about being transgenderqueer – an experience that is both disturbing and empowering. A collaboration with Allan Laurent Colin. **CURRENTLY ONLY AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE** (see p. 44) youtube.com/watch?v=ZjVb8WYZJOA&feature=youtu.be
God in Corona World	26/3/20	In this letter I illuminate the role that spirituality plays in my work – against the background of the Corona crisis. artistsofsociety.com/post/god-in-corona-world
My favourite mystery	26/5/20	How can you find that which is still unknown to you? On Meno's paradox, the mystery of transformation, and journeying into the unknown. artistsofsociety.com/post/my-favourite-mystery
Saving the Soul 2.0	1/6/20	I love the notion of soul, but what does it mean and what is its relevance in the world of today? artistsofsociety.com/post/saving-the-soul-2-0
Finding myself as an artist of society	14/9/20	Much of my self-experiment involved exploring agency by confronting its limits. Summer 2020, however, brought a mood change. artistsofsociety.com/post/finding-myself-as-an-artist-of-society

4.4 Collaboration with Allan Laurent Colin

During my self-experiment, Allan Laurent Colin and I were in exchange all along. Living in different countries, we mostly communicated through video calls, but we also spent 2.5 months

living and working together. During this time, we immersed ourselves in a shared creative process, exploring topics of mutual interest:

(darkness;   colonialism;   late capitalism;   heteronormativity;

Freedom;   love;   dreams;   fears;   the tarot;   knowledge).

We went on countless dérives, or walks with no goal

(in Brussels and Berlin;   in the mountains of Alsace and the forests of Brandenburg;

during a night in the Tiergarten park, avoiding all paths and humans;

through the shady and broken spaces of an abandoned swimming pool;

on a Dutch beach where I spent many summers;

through the villages of our grandparents;

in many cemeteries).

Allan and I have a way of complementing each other in our respective creative processes. He reminds me that everything is happening against a background of unexplainable things. That nothing is fixed and that there is a limit to what can be expressed in language. I remind him of his skill to speak through beautiful, compelling images and to trust his capacity to create meaningful narratives. Our interactions are characterised by mutual encouragement and recognition of each other's creative potential.

Our collaboration resulted in the creation of two short films (see *Darkifiesto* and *Notes from real life*) and a screening of our work titled *WAHN SINN – Future For Fools*. We each contributed our respective skills. Most of the camera work is Allan's. With both films, the initiative to start cutting and begin to create the narrative structure came from me. In essay film style, we worked without a script, finding the story and developing our thinking as we went – drawing from months of conversation before. *Notes from real life* (6 minutes) evolves around a poem that I wrote and spoke (see p. 9). Allan created the film structure and the images. Since it addresses my transgender experience from quite a vulnerable angle, I haven't published it on my blog as of

yet (see chapter 5). *WAHN SINN*, our screening event, was held on 7/3/2020 at Gelegenheiten – a queer community space in my neighbourhood Neukölln. It was attended by around 15 friends and members of the public. We hosted the event in drag and created a conversation around working as queer artists and life-researchers. I also showed our films at a conference in Canterbury (see section 2.5). Plans to screen them elsewhere had to be postponed due to Corona.

Fig. 8: *Ivan A. Kirchgaesser and Allan Laurent Colin hosting WAHN SINN*
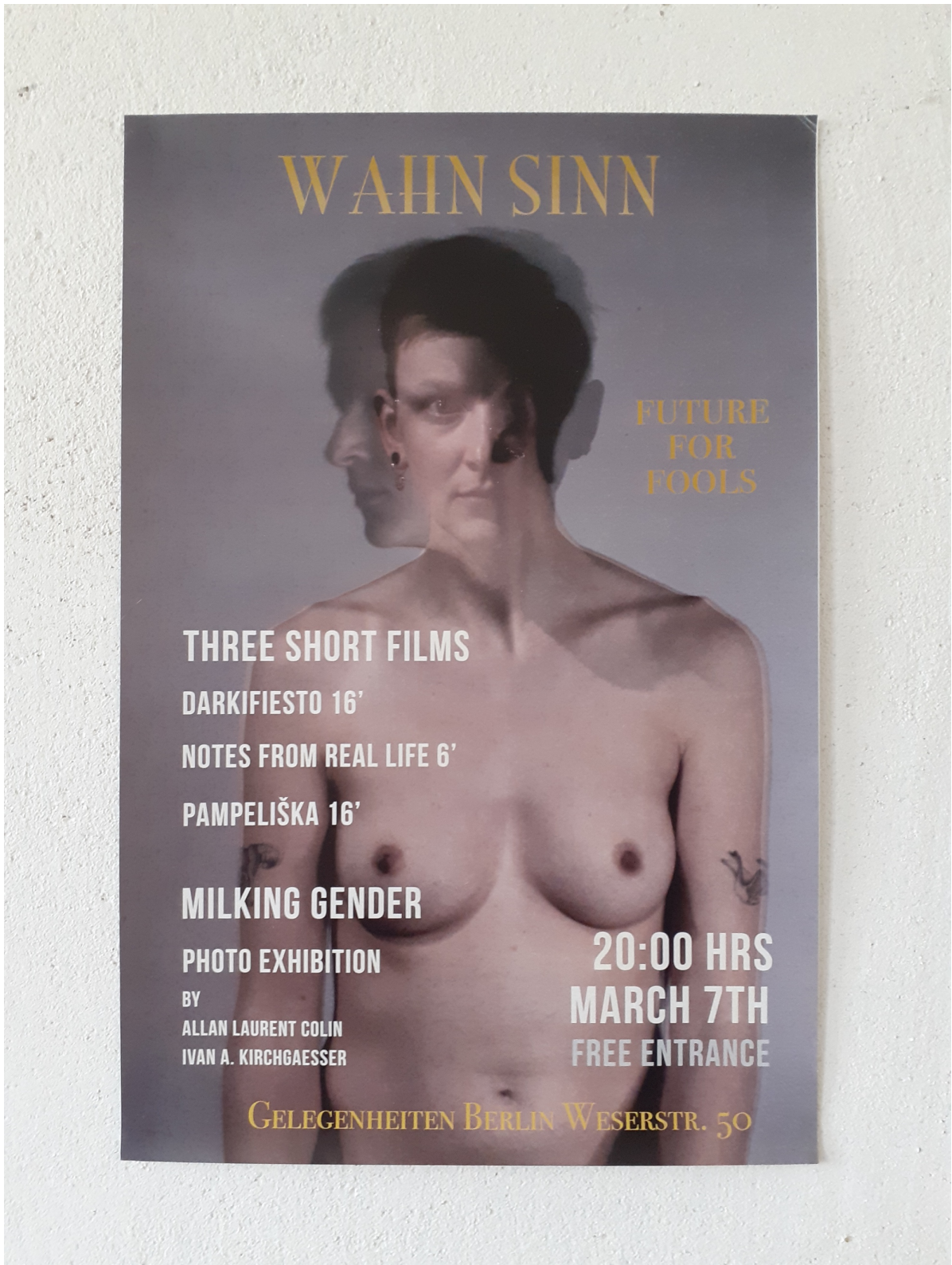*(© Allan Laurent Colin and Ivan A. Kirchgaesser, 2020).*

Fig. 9: *WAHN SINN event poster (idem).*

4.5 Reflections on my creative process

My Thinking Pieces are children of *kairos*, of organic time. I've been learning to navigate this organic time through a lot of practice, whilst unlearning the *kronos* mode, which I associate with an enforcement in spite of what is felt to be the right timing to act. *Kairos* involves a kind of dance between what Sacks in class used to refer to as 'directing and letting emerge' – a dance that characterises the creative learning process. In the words of Alhadeff-Jones, who wrote extensively about the rhythms of emancipation and transformative learning, "*kairos* (…) designates then the spontaneous and non-reflected ability to operate the relevant move, or the correct judgment, at the right time. (…) (T)he emancipatory value of the *kairos*, as an intense moment, requires both the spontaneous capacity to be in the 'flow' and the retrospect ability to reflect on the theoretical meanings, practical effects and existential values it carries." (2018, p. 186). I write or make films intuitively, without a plan for an end product in mind. I don't see intuition as a vague sense coming out of the blue, but rather as a mode of knowing that emerges from intensive groundwork.

This groundwork takes time. I have been privileged in the sense that during this period of my life, I have had time. Time to immerse myself in what some people call 'personal development', time to step back from activities for survival, time for sharing meals and having deep conversations, time to sleep and dream, time to process, time to reflect, time to allow creative processes to unfold. Time to be attentive and take note of countless creative micro-deeds through which I shape my life. Time to share these experiences with you.

I often use the metaphor of baking bread to illuminate how my Thinking Pieces come into being. First, I immerse myself in what I feel like I need to do at this point in my life. Then I begin to notice things standing out, things recurring, things taking on a certain significance. Connections start occurring, a field of meaning begins to manifest. Out of this emerges the recipe. My experiences are the ingredients. I start gathering them in a bowl, and a first processing happens. I knead, and then I let the dough rest. Whilst from the outside it might seem as though I'm doing nothing, under the surface alchemy starts to happen. This is not a time to force anything. But I know I'm on to something, and I trust that unconscious and half-conscious processes will do the vital work. When some time has passed, the transformation of loose ingredients into a new coherent entity becomes evident. I start to externalise, gathering bits and pieces in handwritten notes. I knead again. Now it's only a matter of days that the new Thinking Piece is ready to come out, and usually it happens swiftly. I place the dough in a baking pan and put it in the oven. In the heat of my conscious engagement a text is written, or a film is made. Fast working is

required to keep up with the pace of the piece formulating itself in me. Then I let it cool down, make some edits. I invite others to take a look. Finally, the bread is ready to be served, and it is best enjoyed in company. I share the fresh Thinking Piece on my blog, and from the moment it is out in the world, its life continues through the conversations evolving around it – nourishing others along the way.

4.6 Doing justice to the data of lived experience

Moving along the spectrum of immersion in and contemplation of life as I write or make a film poses a special challenge:

> There is a continuity in the living; whereas theory entails a discontinuity, a cut, which is altogether the opposite of life.

> (Cixous in Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 2003, p. 4)

In my Thinking Pieces I aim to stay as close to life as I can, always looking for a kind of immediacy in translating experience to language. I want to draw myself and others into the action of a moment, tracing the micro-transformations and learning processes that I am interested in. I do it by inserting bits of free writing that could probably count as poetic, fragments of dialogue that I remember, and thick phenomenological description. The credits for my being able to bring this type of writing into academic spaces – albeit still frowned upon and questioned by some – go to feminist researchers like Jane Tompkins, who in 1987 infuriated many white men by bringing her "private voice" into their journals:

> The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) *transcends* the merely personal. Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it.

> (Tompkins, 1987, p. 169)

Despite some progress having been made since 1987, I still share with Tompkins a concern about academic conventions that prioritize the abstract over the concrete, the general over the

particular, the model over the case, the detached voice over the affected one, and the dead specimen over the organism in its lifeworld (see *The salty sea*). I mistrust discourses that appear to glance over the messiness of reality and disregard that everything is happening against a background of unexplainable things. I suspect them to be pretentious and find myself wondering, does this person actually know what they are talking about? (Something women have long been wondering about when listening to men telling them about the nature of reality. As a trans man with plenty of experience of what it feels like to be on the other side, I do not wish to reproduce such patterns of patronising, misogynistic behaviour.)

When I started this self-experiment, I switched from 100% theory-based to 100% practice-based research to allow myself to be an affected human as well as a curious researcher. What I was looking for was space for finding my own way of doing justice to the 'data' or 'knowledge' of lived experience. Whilst more poetic uses of language are one way to get into the flesh of things, I also see the value of analysis and contextualisation – of taking some distance, a bird's eye perspective, and seeing things in relation to a bigger picture. At which point I ask myself to which extent my Thinking Pieces also become theory, and theorising being the archetype of academic practice, academic. The tension I experience is a tension between different modes of engagement, as alluded to by Tompkins. And yet, things are not as bad as they would have been thirty or more years ago. I find myself lucky enough to be able to assert a researcher mode that doesn't feel half as detached and objectifying as I once feared it had to be.

Rebecca Solnit brings into the picture another dichotomy I have been wrestling with: being an artist vs. being a scientist.

> Certainly for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophesies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of a long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists, too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery' – the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea.

(Solnit, 2006, p. 5)

I wonder: can we be scientists and artists at once? Is it really always as black and white as hauling in that which lives in the sea, dissecting and selling it on the beach, versus diving into the waves? In seeking a way of writing and filmmaking that bridges the gap between being an

artist and being a scientist, one that is both poetic and analytic and that crushes the boundaries between public and private, I aim for a kind of multidimensional truthfulness. To me the question has become not so much about this either/or, but about a movement between the two – a very human movement, I would argue. Yes, I can immerse myself and take you with me, and also, I can carefully lift shapes out of the dark and marvel at them with you without ruthlessly objectifying them. One could call it engaged reflection or loving analysis: a form of connective soul-work in the spirit of Hillman and Moore (1990) (see chapter 3). Perhaps, I even dare say that there is a devotional quality to this kind of life-research, as it invokes a sense of wonder at the world and my fellow humans – who are all, in their own way, trying to do their best. It is also aesthetic practice in the expanded way Sacks frames it: "reclaiming the *aesthetic* as that which enlivens our being in contrast to the *anaesthetic* or numbness" (2018, p. 175). From a pragmatic perspective, such an approach might be considered beautiful, in as far as it unifies reasoning with imagination to get to an embodied truth (Leddy, 2016).

4.7 Sharing my work – considering impact

In the framework of my self-experiment, it has been my aim to be as true to the continuity of living as possible and to engage other people in reflections about life. I long for my work to be accessible, in the sense that I want it to be read or seen and I want to be able to talk about it with people both from academic and non-academic backgrounds. Explaining things simply and clearly is part of that, and the way in which I have tried to do so in conversations with friends, family, peers, and strangers is reflected in the tone of my Thinking Pieces. To keep my enquiry part of a living dialogue, I need people to be able to engage with it as it is happening. Sharing my Thinking Pieces with others on the go has led to valuable further reflections on the topics addressed. The letters to living people (Linden West; Shelley Sacks; my Unlikely Lover) influenced the development of our relationships. The openness with which I wrote about my experience of the shared situation brought us to a deeper understanding of each other. Sometimes this led to the growth of mutual appreciation, and in the case of Sacks, it led to a clash and a sort of reconciliation later. However, given that they were published on a public platform (and written with that intention), they were read much more widely.

Overall, from people's reactions both to the written pieces and the films, I gather that they carry the potential to slow people down, take a closer look at things they perhaps hadn't considered before, and THINK – but not in a disconnected way. If anything, I have the impression that people are touched and inclined to open up about their own experiences, following up on the dialogue or writing to me even days after reading it or watching the videos. Several people even

reported crying or feeling physically affected. Feedback has also included descriptions of my work as having a directness and a vital quality, as well as being courageous. My sense is that the latter has to do with the way I make myself vulnerable, being open and non-judgmental about feelings and experiences that others might recognise, but don't dare to talk about. As such, I pave the way for them to open up to me or someone else they trust enough.

Certainly, the format of the Thinking Pieces also has its limitations. They have offered valuable starting points for in-depth reflections with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances, but it has been difficult to gauge their impact beyond people I know personally. I used my personal social media channels (Facebook; LinkedIn; Instagram) to flag up the publication of a new piece. Also, on my blog people can sign up for email notifications. The traffic on my blog as of 18/9/2020 shows that links to pieces have been clicked on 26 to 269 times, with a total of 726 clicks spread over 12 pieces, which makes an average of 82 clicks per piece (the 13th piece, *Notes from real life*, is only available on YouTube for reasons explained on p. 44). However, I don't know whether visitors engaged with the full piece or only with a bit, possibly returning to it later. Also, in most cases I don't know how it affected them. People have been hesitant with public comments and resorted to writing to me personally instead if they wanted to share their thoughts. Again though, these were mostly people I knew. If I could bring myself to edit my work to suit the requirements of other publishing platforms, I could perhaps reach a wider audience – as I have done with *My favourite mystery*. Making the idea and the practice of a social sculpture-inspired life-research more accessible would require a kind of translation, which I believe can best be done in relation to a specific context or community. Doing so has been outside the scope of my PhD, but is something I would like to explore and perhaps collaborate on in future.

4.8 Taking experience seriously

Becoming aware of my experience and taking it seriously as a source of knowledge has become second nature to me. Without that, there would have been no Thinking Pieces. However, it wasn't always like that. At art academy, I was taught a relativistic, postmodern take on experience, implying that experience is purely subjective and that everyone's experience is different. It left me feeling that whatever I tried, there was no way I could actually communicate any meaning with others through my work. Starting to take experiential knowledge seriously as a result of practicing a phenomenological approach in the Feedback Forums on the MA in Social Sculpture was a big step. Unlike regular art crits, which can feel like a tribunal in which you have to defend your work, we as audience were encouraged to suspend our judgment and

describe our experiences of the work that had been shared, rather than focusing on likes and dislikes, clever interpretations, associations, and asking questions. This way, the person who created the work could see whether the participants' or audience's experiences matched their intentions as a maker, and if not, which elements gave rise to dissonance. For me and others, hearing other people articulate their experience often led to a sense of recognition, and so, listening to others helped me become more literate about my own experience. I learned to trust and name it. Also, I realised that whilst people's experiences of situations, spaces, and processes *do* differ – depending on their personal frame of reference – there *is* also a space where aspects overlap: the space of intersubjectivity. This knowledge would lead to an enhanced sense of agency, because becoming aware of how each element speaks meant that you could deliberately shape an experience for others. If you think about it, it makes total sense in the context of social sculpture: how are we going to shape anything together if we all only have our very individual experience anyway? (Of course, this feedback methodology was not flawless. Its weakness lies in its sensitivity to power dynamics: some people are better at articulating and asserting their experience than others, and those with greater authority would sometimes claim their experience of the work to hold more 'truth' – diminishing other people's contributions and creating an echo chamber effect. Still, it tended to lead to a richer and more useful analysis of the works discussed than mentioned art crits, and by reflecting on these power dynamics, the group would also learn to better navigate the methodology together.)

The Thinking Pieces draw on the primary level of my research, what I might call the *experiential substance* of my attempts at navigating life as an artist of society. The creation of the Thinking Pieces themselves involves the processing of this substance – the secondary level of my research. The creative process involved in *both* levels of artistic research is characterized by what John Dewey describes in *Art as Experience*:

> An incredible amount of observation and of the kind of intelligence that is exercised in perception of qualitative relations characterizes creative work in art. The relations must be noted not only with respect to one another, two by two, but in connection with the whole under construction; they are exercised in imagination as well as in observation. Irrelevancies arise that are tempting distractions; digressions suggest themselves in the guise of enrichments. There are occasions when the grasp of the dominant idea grows faint, and then the artist is moved unconsciously to fill in until his thought grows strong again. The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development.

> (Dewey, 1934/2005, pp. 52-53)

A bit more on Dewey's understanding of experience. Dewey differentiates between experience that happens as one lives 'on the go' and *an* experience, which is intensified and rounded in itself. To consciously relate to a complex of experiences and to share it – to establish *an* experience in the Deweyan sense – a processing of the base experiential substance is required. The act of lifting aspects of experience up and bringing them towards a kind of "consummation", giving them "self-sufficiency", is, according to Dewey, what characterises the aesthetic process (1934/2005, p. 37). Whilst he often refers to the traditional arts to illustrate what forms this processing might take, he also implies that the act of creative sublimation can be understood in an expanded sense – in the shaping of everyday situations with interest, care, and genuine engagement:

> The intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged.

<div align="right">(Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 4)</div>

Hence, Dewey seeks to overcome the historical compartmentalisation of art as something separate from everyday life and tied up with institutional and capital-related interests – in effect arguing for what Beuys later called an expanded concept of art:

> A conception of fine art that sets out from its connection with discovered qualities of ordinary experience will be able to indicate the factors and forces that favor the normal development of common human activities into matters of artistic value.

<div align="right">(Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 10)</div>

Dewey's reasoning reflects the different levels on which I perceive my agency as an artist of society. The primary level involves trying to navigate my life and shape my interactions aesthetically according to principles of interest, care, and intent. The secondary level involves perceiving in this process something potentially valuable to share with others through the means of writing and filmmaking. The question remains: is there an essential difference between these levels? I would argue that practically speaking, yes, but in principle, no, since in the end, both manifest on the same plane of reality. For there is only one ongoing stream of experience – and whilst the secondary form progresses from the primary, the same principles apply to each. Hence, it follows that art *can* transcend the limits of its historical compartmentalisation and *can* be reunited with life once more.

4.9 The value of a processing process

In retrospect, I realise it was not merely a coincidence that I was not only more consciously regarding the way I was navigating life as art, but that I also engaged in the reflective writing about my experiences and processing them in the making of films to be shared with others. In the beginning I thought, well, I want to write and make films, so that will play a role in what I do in this period. Then, over time, it occurred to me that doing exactly that was actually the key to my emerging life-research methodology. The self-experiment would have been so different had I not been involved in a continuous creative processing of what was happening, how I felt about it, and what it made me think of.

Writing, making films, and presenting at conferences and events all became incentives to try and make sense of my experiences up to a point where I could share them with others, framed in a way appropriate to the context. The presence of an imagined and/or real audience pushed me to work with the raw material of my experiences and form them into a kind of sculpture – in a metaphorical, alchemical way, turning shit into gold (shit being a very rich material). Without this *processing process*, I wonder whether my life would have actually been research in a deeper sense, or whether a lot of opportunities for coming to new insight would have simply gone unnoticed. Even the fact that I framed this period as a *self-experiment* meant that the intent to engage with life as art as research was always present somewhere in the back of my mind, since it kept on making me wonder *what that meant right now*. This is different from how I was thinking of social sculpture as an expanded concept of art covering all of life before – which was more like a theoretical play of the imagination, more remote. Now, I was adamant to try and see whether this all-encompassing notion could penetrate right into the pores of life, whether it could really *saturate*. And certainly, engaging in an ongoing reflexive process massively increased the saturation level.

I am aware that practices like journaling have always helped people to make sense of their life and that, for example, even talking through experiences with friends, family, or colleagues fulfils a basic need to process and gain new perspectives. Externalising and embodying experience, be it through talking and writing or painting and dancing – even just for oneself and not to share with a wider audience – all serve the purpose of coming to greater clarity and give space to what needs space, soul-wise. But I do think it makes a difference if one consciously regards this process as *important* and as *creative*.

It is not for nothing that methods involving expressive or presentational forms of knowing (Heron, 1996) are increasingly used in academic research, both by researchers themselves and with others in participatory or action research and co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008; Formenti and West, 2018; Formenti, Luraschi and Del Negro, 2019; Yorks and Kasl, 2006; Clover, Sanford and Butterwick, 2013).

> Presentational knowing is made manifest in images which articulate experiential knowing, shaping what is inchoate into a communicable form, and which are expressed nondiscursively through the visual arts, music, dance and movement, and discursively in poetry, drama and the continuously creative capacity of the human individual and social mind to tell stories.

(Heron and Reason, 2008, pp. 370-371)

It is the deliberate engagement with experience and expressing it in the form of stories of different kinds that brings awareness to dynamics that might have otherwise gone unnoticed, creating opportunities for new insights to emerge, and potentially, heighten a sense of agency. Because when you make something conscious by giving it time and attention, working with it, it gives you an opportunity for acting upon what you already know in a half-conscious way more deliberately, to adjust patterns of thinking and behaving that are perhaps not so helpful, and to share your insights with others, contributing to their learning. This is an artistic, or if you so want, a *sculptural* process. It reminds me of a quote related to the Aleister Crowley tarot card of the Queen of Wands:

> Learning is finding out what you already know. Action is showing what you know. Teaching is letting others know that they know it as well as you.

(Ziegler, 1991, p. 66)

Externalising and embodying experience really helps me find out what I already know. At times, I am confused, my mind is blank or rattling with thoughts, or I feel like I'm losing the overview. It seems hard to grasp what is going on and I feel unmotivated. When in such moments, I start to write or create images in other ways, it feels like picking up a thread. One by one, I bring to the surface what has been going on in the background of my mind, which restores my sense of clarity and direction. It is precisely the kind of learning referred to in Ziegler's quote. From there, the step to showing what I've found out by sharing it is not as difficult. And I think the humility implied in teaching *as letting others know that they know it as well as you* lies not in

merely blurting out of new insights as if they've always been clear, but in giving insight into the dynamics of the learning process as honestly as possible and letting others partake in it.

4.10 Reclaiming presentational methods for social sculpture-inspired life-research

During my time in the Oxford context, I used to look down on presentational arts-based methods. I felt that they were reinforcing a limited concept of art – clearly a blind spot on my part. Sacks often reiterated what Beuys said about every human being being an artist – that it doesn't mean that everybody should sing and dance and paint, but that it is about shaping life and society as a work of art (Sacks in Beuys and Harlan, 2007). It is about bringing a heightened mode of perception, the richness of engaging with a situation imaginatively, and the emancipatory potential of experimenting with new forms *as artistic practice* to how we shape community, education, and institutions. Whilst I think it is true what Sacks was saying, I now realise that there is a special value in processing experience through presentational methods – as long as you don't think the art stops there! There is no need for an either/or. Rather, it can be a powerful way of enhancing the creative process of living life as an artist of society.

Making writing and filmmaking part of my PhD research at times felt like resorting to a more limited, and therefore inferior, art practice. However, giving myself permission to do so *because I wanted to* eventually made me realise how well it served me as a processing process for my life-research. Overcoming this blind spot enabled me to picture new ways of working in future, sharing my emerging approach with others. One idea is to set up a social enterprise that offers life-research courses and workshops, together with friends involved in theatre, filmmaking, dance, and photography. Developing a social sculpture-inspired life-writing seminar could be part of that. The focus of such a learning space would be to use presentational methods to develop a new perspective on life, drawing on the often-untapped resource of experience to find creative and perhaps more appropriate ways of shaping life as art.

5 The limits of radical honesty

Moving between the primary dimension of my research – navigating life itself – and the secondary dimension – reflecting on life and creating forms for sharing my experiences with others – meant making choices. The secondary dimension being a distillation of the first implies that certain parts made it into the public realm, whilst others didn't. In this chapter, I take you through questions that emerged along the way. How did I navigate this selection process? What got left out and why? And what does this say about the practicability of an ideal like radical honesty – and about the practicability of ideals in general?

5.1 Encountering boundaries

When I started my self-experiment, I was inspired by Chris Kraus' commitment to radical honesty. Abolishing shame and bringing into the conversation issues related to sexuality, transgenderism, and relationships that might stretch some people's comfort zone was very much part of my intentions – particularly because I have personally experienced the emancipatory value of liberating myself from internalised oppression in these areas. If I was going to live my life as art as research, I was not going to edit out certain aspects of life for other people's convenience. However, over time I discovered that there were issues and situations I did feel hesitant publishing about, for a variety of reasons: 1) self-protection; 2) not feeling ready to put reflections about still ongoing processes of personal change out in the open; 3) not wanting to be read as a 'trans community voice'; and 4) protection of other people's privacy. As much as I wanted to be open about all my experiences for the sake of doing an honest and rigorous enquiry into the possibilities and limitations of living life as an artist of society, I encountered boundaries.

5.2 Sensitive transformative experiences

> ("Honesty of this order threatens order," David Rattray'd written once about René Crevel and I was trying then to reach that point).

> (Kraus, 2006, p. 164)

A lot of my personal experiences over the past year, especially the transformative ones, were determined by my coming out as transgender, getting involved in new relationships, and throwing myself into the Berlin queer/hedonist/sex-positive/polyamorous scene. It is needless

to point out the controversial potential of going public on any of these spheres of life. On paper, 'reconsidering gender performance' and 'questioning heteronormative structures' sound fairly acceptable. However, what if I write about what that means in practice – not for sheer exhibitionism, but because I find that sharing my experiences can be empowering for others? Can I share what I learned about consent and transphobia from navigating all-gender darkrooms – without overstraining you? Can I discuss free-love experiments and journeys into the worlds of drag and BDSM, when it is clear that I am also the subject of my own research? If this is problematic, then how to do research on these topics if they remain tabooed and condemned to the realm of the private? Are there boundaries, and if so, set by whom, following what agenda?

For many of these questions, I haven't found a definite answer. I am aware that there is growing field of research on aforementioned controversial topics – even though auto/biographical perspectives still appear to be rare. In one of the examples I found – an autoethnographic investigation of BDSM as trauma play by Jeremy N. Thomas – the crucial issue is pointed out. Thomas (2020, p. 926), a male tenured professor, writes: "I had come to a point in my life where I was uniquely empowered to be vulnerable." Vulnerability is a privilege not to be underestimated. For me personally, the context determines whether I feel safe enough to talk about certain experiences. Writing and filmmaking partly gives the power to contextualise, to create a narrative around what it is I want to say that will hopefully make people empathise. And so, after careful consideration, I did publish a number of pieces that provide a window into some of these aspects of my life (see *Letter to Linden West*, *Name Change Poem*, *A Queer Transformative Learning Rollercoaster*, and *Letter to an Unlikely Lover*). However, the fact is that I do not know who looks at my blog. And it is a reality that stuff like this is being used against people. Self-disclosure can be risky; things like sex-positivity, polyamory, and transgenderism are still being stigmatized and pathologized. People have lost jobs and even custody over their children over being involved in BDSM practices. A short while ago, a transphobic attack happened just around the corner from where I live. While I tend to feel like I don't have much to lose, because I am not prepared to hide parts of myself, I do prefer to address certain issues in face-to-face situations, rather than putting them out on the web for anyone to read – without having a chance to get into dialogue.

There are further reasons for my hesitation to publish about my transgender experiences in particular. Despite having produced a lot of reflexive material along the way, I have been feeling that in many ways, this is a larger and ongoing transformative process. I am still busy coming to terms with my past. I am still working my way into this new identity. New dimensions keep on

opening up, and I keep on learning. However, when you write something and put it out into the world, it becomes fixed. I am still in metamorphosis. In my experience, recognising gender as a socially constructed category that is not equivalent to biological sex, and that is not linked to a particular sexual orientation, has only been the first step. Whilst for many cisgender people, this is already hard to follow, it becomes notoriously difficult to explain how the concepts of gender, femininity, masculinity, sexual orientation, and relationships get even further exploded once you enter into queer discourse – especially when talking to other transgender people. If anything, nothing seems to be what I thought it was. I am still reviewing and deconstructing what I once thought was reality, and I am not ready to come out with a new narrative.

Moreover, I am aware that many people have never (knowingly) had a personal encounter with a trans person. It means that if they are familiar with any trans narrative at all, it is the one that evolves around gender dysphoria, along the lines of "I have known since I was child that I was trapped in the wrong body and I hated wearing boys/girls clothes and I always wanted to play with barbies/cars but I wasn't allowed to". Whilst for some (or many) trans people this might apply, it is not always as clear-cut as that. However, the complexity of a different narrative can be hard to grasp for cisgender people. Being questioned about whether you are "actually trans" is not only exhausting, it can also jeopardise one's chances at getting medical support and being able to change one's name and gender marker in official documents. These procedures are still subject to heavy gatekeeping, and therefore, caution about what you put out there is essential. As a trans person at the beginning of their transition, my narrative is going to be interrogated and anything I make public now could be held against me. In my current situation, I do not have the privilege of vulnerability. Also, people for whom I am the first openly trans person in their lives might perceive me as a representative and take my voice for a community voice – a position I feel uncomfortable taking at this point. I do think it is essential to enrich the discourse around trans experiences and I would love to find ways of contributing my story. However, I have something to lose, and therefore I need to wait for a more suitable moment to take an activist stance in the trans community's fight for recognition and, in many countries, basic human rights.

5.3 When life-research exceeds the limits of PhD research: issues of ethics and ownership

Another issue I encountered when it comes to writing about my life as art as research was around the very nature of transformative learning. It involves other people. It is *social* sculpture. This is where the boundary between life research and PhD research becomes apparent. How can you ever get ethical clearance for life as a whole? And who gets the credits for the new

knowledge that emerges in relatedness? In an essay titled 'Giving an Account of Oneself', Judith Butler (2001) addresses the social aspect of becoming by referring to Adriana Cavarero's social theory of recognition:

> Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, exposed to one another, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle this constant and necessary exposure. [...] In her view, one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you": without the "you", my own story becomes impossible.

> (Cavarero in Butler, 2001, p. 24)

It was inconceivable to me to censor the social contexts in which some of my learning emerged, so I looked for ways of avoiding crossing ethical boundaries. One of my strategies involved selection of cases. For example, I didn't reflect on all my relationships, but I wrote about one particularly rich set of encounters with the full and informed consent of all people involved (see *Letter to an Unlikely Lover*). In the published piece, their names were changed, and I made sure not to give away any details that could reveal their identity. Another way of giving credit to the dialogical context in which new insights emerged was the use of the letter format, which allowed me to articulate what the other person brought to my learning process (see *Letter to Joseph Beuys, Letter to Linden West, Letter to an Unlikely Lover, God in Corona World*). A third strategy involved collaborating on Thinking Pieces.

5.4 On ideals and choices

We are suspended between what we find ourselves as, and what we want ourselves to be.

(Finlayson, 2005, p. 99)

How to live with an ideal? How to get from where I find myself to where I want myself to be? If anything, my self-experiment has taught me not to get hung up on ideals. There is a weight to them, a kind of self-imposed moral obligation, powered by the clear definition of the archetype. If you commit, you must do so fully – or so it whispers in my ear. In Jung's spirit, I conceive of archetypes as themes that characterize the human psyche as it developed in social contexts over a long time. He believed that there are "as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life" (Jung, 1953-83, vol. 9 §99), for they are "the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution" (Jung, 1953-83, vol. 8 §342). Love, freedom, honesty, struggle, despair, death – to name a few. In Clarke's words, they "represent typical key episodes in the drama of life, typical stories (…) which are repeated and replayed with infinite variations across the whole range of human history and culture, in myth, religion, art, even in science and philosophy" (1992, p. 117). There hardly is a way of avoiding relating to these dynamics, no matter where on the planet you grow up and live. If consciously engaged with, archetypal images can help one understand one's experiences and navigate life. Key ingredients of stories, they can be mobilised to intervene in an unsatisfactory status quo (as is the case with the story of social sculpture). However, archetypes, stories, and ideals can have an attractive and blinding kind of purity to them. As much as they can inspire, acting upon the momentum they provide can go terribly wrong. Therefore, within this relationship to life's bigger themes, reflection is essential and careful consideration of the choices one makes required.

The point is that the world is an imperfect place, and I as a human am fallible. I can make bad decisions in the name of an ideal. I can't simply transplant a beautiful idea such as radical honesty, or a compelling story like the one about social sculpture, into the mess that the world is. There has to be gradual process, as part of which I need to make considered choices. Sacrificing myself for an ideal like radical honesty would be a form of unhelpful martyrdom – as far as I'm currently concerned (martyrdom being another archetype). In this scenario, I wouldn't be in charge anymore – the archetype at work would be. This is the thing: ideals are compelling and inspiring, but they have the power to take over. As an agent of change, I need to be careful not to get swept away by them, but to safeguard my freedom to choose where, when, and how I deem it appropriate to act it out.

The problem I have encountered with radical honesty is that it suggests that one must aim to reveal everything at all times. However, first of all it is impossible to know everything. I have experienced self-deception first-hand, and even if I was really trying to be honest with myself at those times, it took a long process to start recognising my blind spots. Secondly, situations determine what kind of sharing is appropriate, and how much. There is no point in turning every encounter into a confessional. Perhaps rather than following the ideal of radical honesty, the notion of sincerity as situated honesty is more helpful: it implies making a genuine attempt at finding the right measure of honesty in a given situation. In this light, taking a step back and not choosing to put everything about my life into the public realm for the sake of research and learning appears entirely reasonable. Something similar applies to the ideal of social sculpture: of course I can try to be an artist of society, but doing so doesn't mean that I have found the key to life and that I'm already doing all I could, or that what I'm doing is actually 'good'. Allowing myself to tone down liberates me from the burden the ideal can become and returns me to that more down to earth navigator: my ability to respond according to what seems most sensible, considering all factors involved – including my personal capacity to face challenges, which may also be limited at times.

6 Conclusion

> If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight, – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem.

<div align="right">(James, 1895, p. 23)</div>

6.1 Recap of the research questions

I am one of those humans with a tendency to ask big questions. Running through this research project have been some of the ultimate questions of one who likes to believe that a better world is possible and that everyone has the potential to participate in its transformation.

- ♥ What can social sculpture look like in the reality of everyday life?
- ♥ What are the scope and limitations of the transformative agency of an artist of society?
- ♥ How can one live with an ideal without idealising it?

Despite my motivation being my own search for meaning and purpose, that being a *social* question meant that I was equally concerned with contributing to other people's learning:

- ♥ What practices or processes could support one's development as an artist of society?
- ♥ What might be appropriate forms of sharing one's life-research as a resource for others, embodying it in ways that do justice to the 'data' of lived experience?

The outcomes of my research manifest on two interconnected levels: as embodied in my personal learning and engagement with the world around me, and, drawing on the *processing process* I engaged with to make sense of my experiences and share them with others, as an emerging frame for a social sculpture-inspired approach to life-research. The Thinking Pieces I produced along the way testify to both these dimensions.

6.2 Auto/biographical reflections

What was it like to commit to a self-experiment in emancipatory life praxis and attempt to live my life as social sculpture? The awareness that in principle, I was doing this experiment at all

times, made me more reflective about how I interacted with people, what motivations were driving me, what questions I carried, and what was holding me back or evoking resistance. Having previously gone through a process of recognition about how my enthusiasm with social sculpture as an ideal blinded me to problematic power dynamics acted out in its name, however, primed me to be sceptical. Also, my coming out as transgender revealed quite how real oppressive social structures are, and how violently – if often unconsciously – they are kept in place. The debates around racism and unconscious bias as well as the protests sparked off by the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 only contributed to this sense that social transformation is a long, difficult process with many powerful forces working against it. But after months of holding back in terms of 'intervening in an unsatisfactory status quo' (merely being trans devoured most of my activist capacity), something shifted. This change might be related to the time I spent in isolation during the Corona quarantine – never had I been by myself, alone, for so long. As a result of that I came to appreciate interactions with other humans, unmediated by screens, in a new way. Having moved to a new country and city only months before without a job or university to go to, I needed personal encounters to connect to a local community I could be a creative part of in the first place. The more so because Corona halted my international lifestyle, which previously involved regular travelling to attend conferences and connect with friends, academic peers, and lovers. So as soon as social gatherings were beginning to be allowed again, I made deliberate efforts at meeting strangers and extending my social network, particularly within the queer community. It was in these informal contexts, through connecting with individuals, that I began to get a new sense of my agency as artist of society. Reactivating years of experience in working with adult students on quite a personal level, I recognised that what I *could* still do was operating as a kind of teacher, doing life tutorials. My Thinking Piece *Finding myself as an artist of society* captures that moment of perspective transformation. As such, it could be seen as an embodied conclusion to this research project.

6.3 An emerging social-sculpture inspired approach to life-research

Taking an auto/biographical approach allowed me to trace change and learning as it manifested in my life. A testimony to this enquiry, my Thinking Pieces present a journey into my world – past, present, and future – creating an opportunity for the reader/viewer to make sense of their own life by relating to mine. I introduce my friends, lovers, and teachers, as well as the Berlin queer community, my former Oxford-based social sculpture community, and ESREA, my current academic family – each a formative force in my emancipatory process. I provide insight into my struggles with the institution of academia as well as with heteronormative society, sometimes touching on painful and controversial topics. This self-experiment did not only blur the

boundaries between life, art, and research, it also sought for evidence of transformation in unexpected and messy corners – raising ethical concerns had other research participants been involved. Inevitably, it moved into terrain beyond linear logic, rational thought, and clear-cut categorisations and binaries. One of my objectives has been to find a way of documenting and sharing my self-experiment that could hold the apparent contradictions that make for the creative tension of life. The relatively open format of the Thinking Piece enabled me to experiment with ways of making sense of these complex experiences and sharing them with others. It provided a frame for reflecting on the scope of and limitations to my agency as it manifested in my attempts at creatively participating in life unfolding. As such, it supported my own development as an artist of society.

From my engagement with this *processing process*, a social sculpture-inspired approach to life-research started emerging that could be of value to others. Integrating traditional art forms, it engages presentational methods such as writing and filmmaking to 'picture' situations, interactions, and streams of thought, without judging them. Doing so, it connects reflection, analysis, and imagination to arrive at insights that can feed back into praxis. Playing with the idea of radical honesty, it challenges the life-researcher not to hide from themselves and others and allow themselves to be vulnerable if they are in a position to do so. A practice of engaged reflection or loving analysis, its aim is to open a space conducive to creativity characterised by curiosity, playfulness, and trust.

If the life-researcher chooses to publicly share their enquiry, so as to allow conversations to unfold around it and feed back into it, they may encounter boundaries. Not only in terms of what they are prepared or able to reveal, but also, from an ethical perspective, in terms of what their life-research reveals about others. In this regard, I have found the notion of sincerity helpful. A kind of situated honesty, it implies making a genuine attempt at finding the right measure of honesty in a given situation, whilst encouraging the researcher to find a form of sharing appropriate to context and audience.

Conceiving of life and the situations it presents one with as a material that can be sculpted rather than as something to be taken for granted involves a sense of care and dedication. It means genuinely asking oneself and others over and over again: *What is it that you are doing? What drives you? Do you believe in it? Do you care about it? And if not, could you do something different? Something that gives you energy, that activates your will, instead of perpetuating your struggle in unhelpful ways?* (These questions are an extract of *Finding myself as an artist of society*.) The opposite of avoidance, cynicism, and resignation, one could almost say that this

life-research I have been after has a devotional quality. It could be seen as a form of connective soul-work in the spirit of Hillman and Moore (1990), aesthetic as in enlivening, and striving towards beauty in a pragmatic sense. However, this constant questioning is not easy to keep up and regularly leads to disappointment in self and others if it can't be lived up to. I sometimes find myself wondering why I keep on making such an effort – and I may had long given up if it wasn't for it always turning out to be worth it. Life has a way of reminding me that no growth can be expected without the struggle. If you want to be an artist of society, you have to work for it, so it says.

6.4 The value of a radically personal phenomenology of parts

All the way through my self-experiment, I have been dialoguing with the established academic position that the auto/biographical methodology of my choice raises questions with regards to the validity and generalisability of the research outcomes. It is a concern rooted in what West (2020) calls the "dream of empiricism and the Enlightenment", which has inspired the natural sciences and humanities alike. Its promise: to see phenomena in the light of reason and do away with the "subjective contamination" of "superstition, magic and tyrannies of religion or other hegemonies" (West, *idem*). Its blind spot: that all knowledge is ultimately subjective (Day, 1990, p. 440) – even if there is a shared currency to these subjectivities in as far as they emerge from the shared experiences of being human in this world – and that even materialism and positivism are, in the end, belief systems. Criticisms on this approach to science have informed the development of methodologies that value the subjective voice and its specific, contextual nature as a valid and useful source of knowledge. Auto/biography demonstrates how the story of one life is intertwined with the lives of others, as well as with the larger socio-political and temporal contexts it intersects with. It challenges self/other, public/private, and personal/political dichotomies and provides insight into the motivations of the researcher, disputing the notion of neutrality. Engaging with these diverse takes on theory and practice in the history of academic enquiry leaves me convinced that in some cases – perhaps in more than where currently applied – a radically personal phenomenology of parts may better serve as a way of shedding light on the whole than a more superficial survey or even "the rarefied atmosphere of the interview" (Thomas, 2020, p. 73) ever could.

Trying to get to the roots of my experience meant moving into the complex terrain of the psyche – notoriously hard to chart. This is land wandered by psychoanalysts, alchemical psychologists, artists, and an increasing number of academics, where black and white, chaos and order, good and bad, useful and frivolous do not necessarily exclude each other. Doing justice to these 'data'

involved finding images and language that acknowledge the deeper felt aspects of transformative experiences. For, in opposition to Mezirow's (1978) original formulation of Transformative Learning theory, my self-experiment indicated factors at work way beyond perspective transformation through critical and rational thinking. In the sense that I see transformative learning occur organically embedded in life – sometimes incrementally, sometimes pivotally – I concur with many others (e.g. Formenti and West, 2018; West, 1996 & 2014; Kegan, 2000; Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006) who expanded on Mezirow's work to encompass a more holistic understanding of this "journey into becoming a more of a questioning, agentic, self-authored being" (West, 2014, p. 166). To communicate what matters to me in the process of becoming what I would call an artist of society, I couldn't but engage words like *soul*, *beauty*, *truth*, and even *God*. To me, these terms have a value in the sense they are "explicable in terms of the practical functions they serve in human activity and discourse" (Day, 1990, p. 439), and I have made concerted effort to explain and contextualise them as such (see e.g. *God in Corona World* & *Saving the Soul 2.0*). However, arguably controversial in an academic context, they are "often absent from the educational and research lexicon leading to a kind of ontological sterility" (West, 2020). My research has not been about unearthing objective and quantifiable facts in the way that the positivist, materialist, or rationalist tradition would have it. Rather, it has been phenomenological and radically empirical in William James's spirit, not ruling out the lived reality of any form of experience, including those that can only be described as mystical. This goes together with my impact *leitmotiv* that *what matters is what stays*: I can produce a brilliant piece of research and come up with conclusions that are potentially world-changing, but if I can't ignite a spark of interest in people and move them with my ideas by bringing them closer to their lived reality, they are in vain. Therefore, the ways in which I share my work, including the contexts I choose and the language I use, make the difference between my efforts ending up on a dusty shelf and my thoughts taking root in other people's realities.

Part of my work – in as far as I had to distinguish it from my life as a whole for the purpose of doing a PhD – has already been shared in the public sphere: through my blog; on social media; through conference presentations; at the queer screening event I organised with Allan Laurent Colin; and in countless informal settings. From the conversations happening in its wake, I can tell that it touches on an intersubjective dimension and helped reveal at least some indications that might be of use beyond my personal sphere. The feedback I received indicates that its contents are relatable and inspiring, providing food for thought (see chapter 4). And where people didn't directly recognise themselves in my experiences, giving them a window into my world and my ways of relating to it has elicited reflection on their part. However, the most

evocative interactions happening around my research have been with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances, and its impact is hard to gauge beyond that. Whilst I do think that personal and informal connections can provide a particularly valuable space for going into depth, in future I hope to find ways to share my work with the wider public – be it through other publishing platforms, some form of teaching, or otherwise.

So much as to the value and impact of what I did choose to share, because my self-experiment also confronted me with limitations to the ideal of radical honesty that has inspired me along the way. In principle, I think it is necessary and useful to share one's experiences with others – especially if it means giving a voice to lesser known and therefore more controversial perspectives. I am talking about issues such as transgenderism, homosexuality, sex-positivity, and polyamory. Whilst I believe with Chris Kraus that there is nothing to hide or be ashamed of, I have also become aware that vulnerability is a privilege. Exposing oneself in contexts where dialogue is possible is one thing. But doing so on a public blog or on social media comes with actual risks. No ideal, and no story that carries it, however compelling it might seem, is served by its followers throwing themselves off the cliff (this applies to radical honesty as much as to social sculpture). I conclude that the art doesn't lie in manifesting an ideal right here and now at all cost, but at making considered choices that will serve the learning process of society at large on the long-term. In the end, one can only aim to do the best one can in any given situation.

6.5 Creative agency in practice: the artist of society as a midwife for transformative learning

> Life brings one back to points in oneself. (…) Over and over again in different ways, saying without words: This is a place where you could learn if you wanted to. Are you going to learn this time or not? No? Very well then, I'll (…) find ways of bringing you back to it again. When you are ready then.

> (Lessing, 1969, p. 472)

I asked big questions. Life gave me small answers – but many of them (even if an ultimate answer never arrived and more questions arose instead). They came in all kinds of shapes, as alluded to throughout my Thinking Pieces. If it wouldn't have been for engaging in a permanent reflexive process, they might have easily gone unnoticed. Still, I am certain that despite concerted effort, I will have missed many clues. Aiming for self-knowledge doesn't mean that self-deception is not always lurking in the shadows – as psychoanalysis has taught and experience has shown me. In terms of what I *did* learn, this self-experiment has shown me that

transformative learning and creative agency in the most democratic sense manifest in the micro-sphere of the present moment. In micro-events and through micro-deeds, micro-transformation occurs. The teacher that is life itself mostly doesn't make sweeping statements, but its whispering permeates into the most unexpected corners. Its voice can be discerned through careful listening. Yes, sometimes it forces you to listen. It throws something at you that you must deal with here and now – this is when denial has no chance. Most often, however, it seems unbothered with whether you pay attention or not. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to learn.

Based on my experiences over the last year, I would argue that the most powerful way to become an artist of society – someone increasingly capable of navigating life and making something out of it that is worth living – is finding in oneself the desire to do so and aligning one's actions with this desire. This is a choice I believe we can all make – and if we can't directly change society at large, we can start by identifying the arenas in which we *can* make a difference. Depending on the contexts available to the individual, the artist of society may be in a position of practicing their craft on a large scale, but equally, a difference can be made in one-on-one encounters and by practicing mutual aid. Given the scale of the challenges humanity currently faces as a whole (global pandemics, climate change, systemic inequality, oppression and marginalisation of groups in about every society, depletion of resources, unsustainable agricultural practices, etc.), it would be commendable to attempt to contribute to change on a meso- and macro-level. However, this is not available to everyone. Certainly, I do want these big issues to be addressed by politicians, policy makers, and heads of companies, but that doesn't mean that the effort of someone consistently raising said issues with their family, friends, in conversations with strangers, in their workplace, and in their community, until one day, they might 'get through', is any less valuable. Also, it shouldn't be underestimated in terms of impact. If all action originates in thinking, and if a new mindset is required for addressing problems caused by an old one, the intimacy of personal connections and informal environments can provide invaluable opportunities for mutual growth. For being seen, heard, and loved creates a sense of safety that helps with the frightening task of stepping into the unknown and trying out new ways of being. And we can help each other by creating spaces for that. It could be organically between the lines of life or in settings specifically created for the purpose, in educational, political, or therapeutic contexts.

To me it looks like simple logic that action is most creative and effective if aligned with a desire for oneself and others to learn, grow, and flourish – desire coming with the energy required to get the job done. However, I noticed that this is not as clear to everyone in my acquaintance.

There are plenty of voices out there saying with great authority how life should be lived, what is valuable or worthy doing, and who is and isn't capable or allowed. They are the voices of parents, teachers, friends, neighbours, religious and political leaders, the media, and so on. Paradoxically, the voices of others often seem louder than our own. The voice of my soul and my better knowing can be hard to discern and take seriously among the choir of internalised authorities. But the flipside of the coin is that we can help each other back on track, by giving each other permission to take our experience seriously and reclaim it as a primary and unexpectedly reliable source of knowledge. As Socrates did his work in the marketplace by talking to the (male, non-enslaved) citizens of Athens, so we can be Socrates to each other, midwives of new insights that might help us face the struggles of life with more confidence and clarity. Learning doesn't happen in isolation and neither does teaching. In any moment another person, or the world itself, can become a teacher – if we let them.

If we take a step back from the rush and the trodden paths of everyday life and, for a moment, try to see ourselves and the world with new eyes, we might be struck with wonder once more – the wonder needed to start caring. We might stop taking things for granted, including the ways we think about ourselves, our possibilities and our limitations, and see beyond the self-imposed boundaries of our habitual tunnel views and ingrained concepts and positions. I would argue that these moments are essential when it comes to transformative learning, and that one can actively bring them about both for oneself and for others. As Meadows (1999) said, a paradigm shift doesn't primarily happen out there at large, but in a moment in a person, one at a time. This is where I see significant possibilities for becoming not just an artist of one's own life, but actually an artist *in the service of society*. We can assist each other in our learning processes, creating spaces where another person feels seen and safe enough to question the criteria based on which they have lived their life thus far and consider new perspectives. This is a principle that can be applied in our personal sphere. And building on that – where change on a larger scale can be affected by those in a position of influence – new ideas are more likely to take root in people who know from experience not to fear going into the unknown.

True, many limitations are real, and it can be hard (if not nearly impossible) to confront them as the tiny person one is. But also, many limitations are self-imposed. This is the front that can be worked on. Freeing oneself from self-imposed limitations and inviting the possibility for expanding one's horizon – for transformative learning – can help to create the momentum that might enable one to face larger challenges and at least attempt to do something about external limitations that one would rather have out of the way. Not giving up on the possibility of a

possibility is a prerequisite for claiming this freedom, as well as reclaiming the joy of learning, (re)learning to learn, and unlearning what doesn't serve the purpose.

Practically speaking, I have found that simple quality-of-life things can make the difference between growing a sense of creative agency and remaining stuck in unreflected, inherited patterns of thought and action. They range from taking care of the basics, including enough sleep, nourishing food, fulfilling friendships, and a welcoming home, to the use of a processing process such as journaling to articulate and honour one's experiences, dreams, thoughts, questions, and doubts. Furthermore, we can help each other by creating interpersonal spaces based on love and trust, engaging in forms of communication that are not just about bringing one's point across, but that are based on taking each other seriously, suspending judgment, and actually listening to what another person is trying to share. In terms of education, there could be more space for valuing different types of knowledge and learning based on the diversity of interests, desires, and temperaments – rather than forcing everyone to follow the same pattern of knowledge acquisition. And finally, on each of these levels, slowing down, reducing pressure, and exerting kindness can make a crucial difference in enabling the move from a state of conservatism rooted in anxiety to one of openness that is essential to a creative engagement with life in all its complexity.

My hope is that perhaps, in future, we will be able to find ways of crafting systems of education and governance that draw on these principles and make for a society less directed by fear, greed, and narcissism, and more inspired by the actual joy of learning and growing together. Until that point, I would be cautious with perpetuating a hierarchy of transformation that suggests that only if you are in a position of established power you can make a difference. It is not only discouraging; it also impacts the sense of possibility required to get things moving in the first place. Recognising one's creative agency and taking it seriously – sometimes reclaiming it despite what one has been told – might in fact be the first step towards becoming an artist of society.

6.6 As for the story of social sculpture...

That stories create reality has become something of a cliché. Still, it holds true that their power to mobilise the imagination and inspire our actions shouldn't be underestimated. As for the story of social sculpture – that every human being carries within them the potential to be an artist of society and that a better world *could* be possible if ways be found to elevate and mobilise this creative potential – it continues to inspire me. That is what good stories do: they stay with you and reveal new dimensions as your capacity to perceive them develops. They grow with you, and on the way, you pass them on. If a story takes root and starts to grow with others too, they might discover more dimensions, because their soil and weather is different from yours. Sharing the fruits means learning together what life with this story might look like. And as the story begins writing itself in our actions, it transforms from fiction into reality. Along the way, new perspectives keep on being added, since the question of how to live well can never be fully resolved. Hence, this self-experiment is a window into the ongoing process of learning that goes on a lifetime. There is always more work to do.

So much for proactive power. For right as I am about to close this deliberate attempt at living social sculpture, I realise once more that it is not just about initiating, creating, and even controlling the unfolding of events. The auto/biographical necessity of this enquiry arose from what I left behind: a research context that shaped my thinking for 7 years, a city that was my home for an equal amount of time, a relationship that held me for over 10 years, a badly fitting gender identity that I conformed to for 29 years, and with that a bundle of unconsciously inherited conceptions. Much had to be burnt down for something new to arise: a more *queer* understanding of social sculpture arrived at on my own terms – one that evolves with life and refuses to be pinned down, coming with "a commitment to a wondering curiosity," rather than "disciplinary certainty" (McGlotten, 2012, p. 3). Against many odds, I have emerged on the other side with a more grounded sense of agency – grateful for the reminder that life, as much as art, requires the capacity to surrender, let go, and fall.

Fig. 10: *Falling. Tattoo designed and engraved in my skin by Miriam Böhm, 5/6/ 2020.*

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