

LEARNING IN THE SPACES BETWEEN WORDS

NOTES AND WHISPERS

Towards an intimate pedagogy for my
theory classroom



Table of contents

Acknowledgments	3
I BEGINNINGS	
Towards Getting Intimate with Theory	7
Before we Begin	8
Beginnings	13
Methodological Beginnings	17
Beginning with the Body	21
Education as an Affective Encounter	25
A First Understanding of the Intimate	29
II TRANSFORMATIONS	
Setting the Tone	35
Feeling Educational Space	43
Text as Intimate Space	47
Intimate Learning with Others	55
Assessment (A Letter to my Students)	63
III THE INTIMATE IN EDUCATION (REFUSING THE LAST WORD)	
A Pedagogy of Minor Gestures (On Institutional Change)	69
A Sticky Note on the Intimate in Education	76
Bibliography	78
Colofon	82

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I. Beginnings



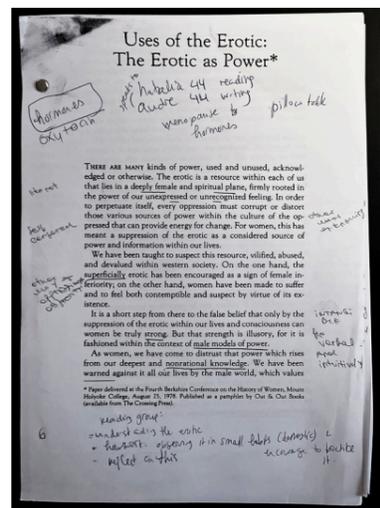
Image:
Interview with Dieuwke Boersma,
Arboretum Trompenburg,
15.12.2022

Towards Getting Intimate with Theory

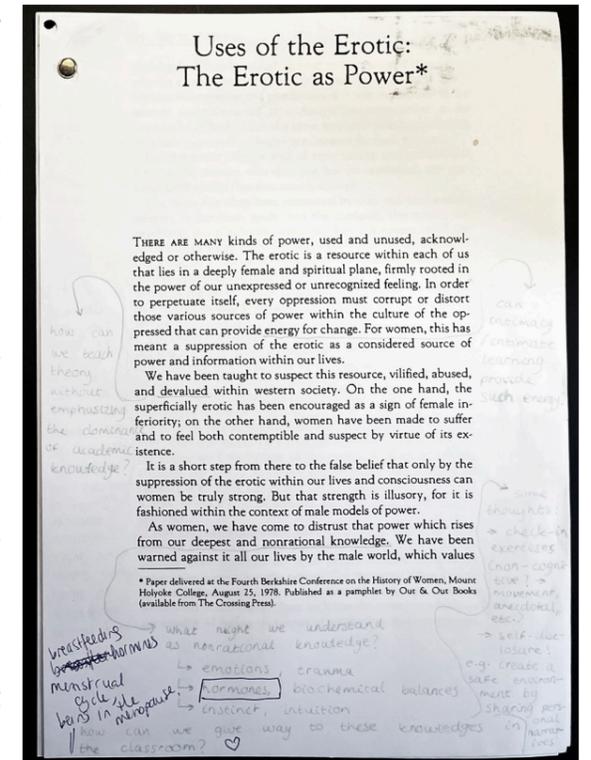
On December 15 2022, I interviewed Dieuwke Boersma, who is a researcher, educator and artist. I was interested to learn more about how she understands and uses theory in her work; the way she entangles teaching, creation and life in a very intimate manner. We went on a walk in the Arboretum in Rotterdam, and had coffee and a cake in the tea house that always reminds me of an elderly home's canteen, the cozy type of canteens for bingo evenings with carpets on the tables decorated with artificial flowerpots. Our conversation moved from topics such as the unruliness of motherhood and living the daily life with our sons, to loss and the agency of the ephemeral. We also talked about theory and what it means to Dieuwke in her art, research as well as her personal life (elements that to her cannot be separated as such). In times of grief after her daughter was born still, the reading and writing of theory, interweaving her own voice with the voices of others in the shape of a text, had become a refuge and a place of comfort and solace. She told me that for her, the lived experience comes before theory and before the subject. She produces theory in the messy, unpredictable and sometimes cruel flow of everyday life, in entanglement with theoretical texts and ideas from others. Theory to Dieuwke is not about applying abstract thought to a representation of reality, which can be perceived as quite a violent act of oppression if we look at it from a feminist point of view, but it is rather about movement; a movement in which thinking and doing are part of the same dance. In her pedagogy, Dieuwke approaches this idea by creating small spaces, a micro-cosmos in her classroom, where the implications of a theory can be felt and lived through. This allows for a movement away from the distanced application of theory onto a passive research object and towards trying to create small-scale pedagogical situations that enable us to understand and feel the implications of theory, and to get close to it through embodiment. Talking to Dieuwke about these deeply personal and at the same time 'professional' topics felt like a radically different approach to theory and knowledge because it was a conversation that was carried out heart to heart, in the non-institutional bingo-setting of the tea house. In this conversation, the ephemeral had a name, and she was called 'little cloud'.

Before we Begin

When pondering my own educational history, especially being a university student in the Humanities departments of Utrecht University and Leiden University roughly between 2006 and 2013, I remember a lot of feelings and bodily sensations that arose in the time and space of those institutions. I remember them often more vividly than the content of the lectures. I remember, for instance, a low-level feeling of anxiety while entering those enormous, packed lecture halls that were situated in labyrinthic medieval buildings. I remember how the physical presence of my own body amongst the assembled bodies of my fellow students often caused a feeling of unease. The suppressed panic that was caused by the sensation of my sweaty armpits, the suffocating feeling of trying to hold back a persistent tickling cough during the lecture, the vicarious shame felt when someone's stomach was rumbling audibly in the otherwise silent room. I remember the oppressive spatial arrangement of the lecture hall that caused our bodies to become static and immobile as the fixed rows of chairs with writing shelves made it impossible to leave the room unnoticed once seated. It was as if our bodies needed to be held hostage, to be suppressed, in order to optimally address our rationale. I also remember the liberating feeling of being able to release this tension the instant the professor called an end to the lecture, and to be able to move my body freely again. This felt immobility and suppression of the body was not explicitly imposed by the situation, but in hindsight, I realize that my unease and discomfort around bringing a living, digesting, smelling body to the university lecture hall derived from centuries of Western civilization.



In 2018, I began teaching theory to first year bachelor students at ArtEZ DBKV as part of the Actualiteit course. My role was an 'expert from the contemporary art field', but without any didactical experience, I didn't know any better than the established, traditional mode of teaching that I'd been exposed to during my time at university. I clearly remember the first morning I had to be in front of the class, and how uncomfortable I felt the entire time because I did not know how to escape my hierarchical position there. I put on my nice clothes and high heels, went to the front of the classroom and presented a PowerPoint with what I thought to be relevant contemporary artworks and concepts, discussed a theoretical text, asked if there were any questions, and left again. Just a 'normal' class. Soon, I started noticing my students' alienation, from the content and from me as a teacher. This made me nervous, and them too. They read the texts that I proposed, did their homework, but I felt like nothing really landed. I had a hard time connecting with them, and I had no clue how to be vulnerable as a teacher. At that time, my professional career had consisted mainly of working in the field of contemporary art as a program maker and exhibition curator, for a public that was familiar with a way of speaking about art and knowledge according to a certain level of abstraction. Also, I was taught to 'perform' the role of the curator publicly and in a hierarchical art world in an untouchable, almost inhuman way, or at least that's how I experienced it. I took this attitude with me to the classroom, encountering a different context and a different public. I think I did not really recognize who was in front of me and what they embodied. The students were young people who had just finished high school, often still living with their parents in the area surrounding Arnhem. Looking back, I think I was trying to compensate for my inexperience as a teacher by transferring as much of my knowledge about contemporary art and the art world as possible, at high speed, unconsciously creating the same uneasy situation in my classroom as I felt in the lecture hall while being a student myself.



Images:
Notes in the margins as traces of a reading of Audre Lorde's text on the erotic at my kitchen table with Maaïke and Natalia.
18.1.2023

This research arises from a personal desire to do things otherwise in my theory classroom, in the context of the institutions for higher arts education and in relation with the complexity of today's times. In 2019, I was preparing a workshop with writer and poet Mia You for Extra Extra, a cultural platform focusing on sensuality and urban life, and she introduced me to Audre Lorde's essay on the erotic from 1978. I was caught by its richness and contemporary relevance. To me this text described many of the things that we've lost touch with in our daily working lives as teachers. Lorde's words hit me in the gut. The text caused an overall feeling of excitement, a desire for change and a sense of the vitality of life. It made me mourn for the way we have lost trust in our bodies. In this text, Lorde recovers the erotic as a creative life force that nurtures our deepest nonrational knowledge, as she rethinks the concept of the erotic beyond the Western, narrow definition of it. I wonder what it would mean to bring this life force, this creativity and the "power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge", that she describes as the erotic, into my theory classroom and into the institutional context of the art school. Lorde's text was written at a time when second wave feminists publicly critiqued patriarchy, male-dominated institutions, and cultural practices, and black feminists showed the connections between racism and patriarchy, in what we would today call an intersectional analysis of inequality. Lorde was a black lesbian poet and writer, activist and mother of two, and her texts still strongly resonate today. I wondered, how can the erotic become a guide for a more embodied mode of teaching, and embodied learning in my theory classroom?

After becoming a mother for the second time in 2022, I came to even more deeply understand what it means to have to ignore my own body when teaching inside the institution. When my son was born in 2020, the private space of my home was pivotal to life and work due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. When my son went to daycare, I could breast pump milk on bed just minutes before having to show up online to teach a theory class via Teams. However, after my daughter was born in 2022, maternal activities became separated from professional life more extremely in terms of time and space. I experienced institutional times and spaces as contradictory to the physical, affective and unpredictable economy of motherhood. Having to ignore these intimate bodily functions, desires and needs during the act of teaching sometimes feels violent, as if this part of my life unconsciously cannot exist when I enter the workspace. Again, this is not explicit, but rather the invisible workings of the institution that make me feel like I needed to temporarily split off certain aspects of my life and being, or to find refuge in the toilet due to the lack of a proper lactation room at the WdKA, for example. My maternal body is excluded not only in the institutional time and spaces, but my subjectivity also is denied according to the notion of theory as something objective that prevails within the institution and patriarchy. Traditionally, theory is understood as a set of principles, concepts and ideas that objectively apply to a universal reality, which is the male-dominated society, excluding the experiences of other bodies. This is how students have come to understand theory as something that is separate from lived experience, from the textures and substances of everyday life, and therefore as eminently non-intimate.

With this graduation project, I am in search of a pedagogy that welcomes the feelings and sensations that have been left out of education and traditional pedagogy over time because they were attributed to the feminine, or to the natural world, or to 'low culture', and were therefore considered less valid or true. The things that were dismissed from the classroom because they were viewed as not objective or logical. Moreover, I am in search of a pedagogy that creates a mindset towards learning that is relational instead of individual. Looking back at my time at university now, I am surprised by how easily I can recall feelings and bodily sensations, which means that they were probably inextricably part of the substance of the education that I have received. The bodily sensations have stuck with me, while much of the predetermined knowledge I had to learn much less so. If I want to change things in my classroom, this is the terrain that I will take as my point of departure. This means acknowledging that we are bodies, that are present, alive and in relation with others and with the physical world in the educational encounter.

As a concept for rethinking these relationships in my classroom, I will turn to the idea of the intimate, as a sensed spark, a feeling of connection, comfort, and being grounded, that correlates with embodiment, relationality and love; instead of alienation, separation and violence. Linking the classroom and education with the intimate may in first sight seem like a juxtaposition, but this contradiction is reliant on the constructed binaries ordering our everyday, such as private/public, and mind/body. According to this logic, the intimate belongs to the private sphere and the body, while education and the classroom are placed in the public and mind-centered side of the equation. I am interested in how the intimate can become a carrier, a tool, or a vehicle for potentially and productively disrupting these binaries in the classroom. The intimate minor gestures that help to attune to others, and that create a new state of mind for students concerning learning and knowledge inside the institution.

Beginnings

During my maternity leave in the summer of 2022, I tried to ‘keep up’ with my studies by watching YouTube lectures while breastfeeding. One of the lectures that I watched and re-watched several times, was an interview with Silvia Federici that was commissioned for a summer school hosted by the School of Commons in Zurich called ‘Footnotes: Annotating the Future of Arts Education’. Federici is an Italian-American feminist scholar and activist, who has written several key works about, amongst other things, *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* (2018), and *Wages Against Housework* (1975). The video with the title ‘The clothesline is a piece of artwork’ (Jack Hogan, 2022) was shot in the intimacy of her private home. We hear Federici chat with the interviewer while he installs the microphone on her collar and the camera slowly captures her colorful pots and pans, books, old pictures of her younger self on the wall, some walking crutches in the corner and flowers in small vases on the windowsill. In the interview, she speaks about the idea of the knowledge commons, and critiques how capitalism continuously creates separation. Capitalism separates the parts of our own lives, parts of our own subjectivity and our own personality, and creates all these different territories. It separates individuals along the lines of class, gender and race, and it creates divided selves. It creates divided selves in the sense that, as Federici states in the video, “there are moments in our lives when we are knowers, and there are moments in our lives when we are doers, and then there are the moments in our lives when we are involved in economic matters. And all of this, of course, is artificial.” Yes, I thought in that instant, what historical forces produced the systems that neglect my breastfeeding as a way of knowing? What put this compartmentalization of ways of knowing in place?

To better understand these separations, and how they not only shape my personal life but also the educational system I teach in, and the way that we understand learning and teaching inside these systems, we should first look at its roots in Western humanism and how that resulted in education that strongly prioritizes certain ways of knowing over others. Humanism is the historical project that puts the human being in a central position in the world. It entails an ongoing struggle to define ‘what is human’, that goes back to the Roman era when humanism meant civilized men, as separated from animals and barbarians. This definition excluded both animals as well as other humans such as women and other races such as Indigenous people from the category of the human being. According to Kant, the essence of humanity is educated, rational autonomous beings, as this is what separates the human from animals. In education, this resulted in the prioritization of qualities that were defined as exclusively human (reason, language), while those qualities that we share with animals (body, impulses, instinct) were regarded as inferior. Hence, breastfeeding does not belong to the domain of the human, but rather to that of the animal and is therefore cut off from the definition of the human. Separation became the way to organize the world, and enabled hierarchization through categories (Ceder, 2016). This relates to what Zakyiah Iman Jackson (2013) calls “man’s attempt to colonize the field of knowledge” (p. 670), where the question of ‘man’ becomes the central object to humanistic inquiry, interrogation and critique. In this sense, acknowledging breastfeeding as way of knowing would become part of the project of epistemological decolonization.



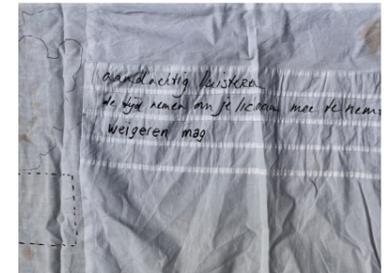
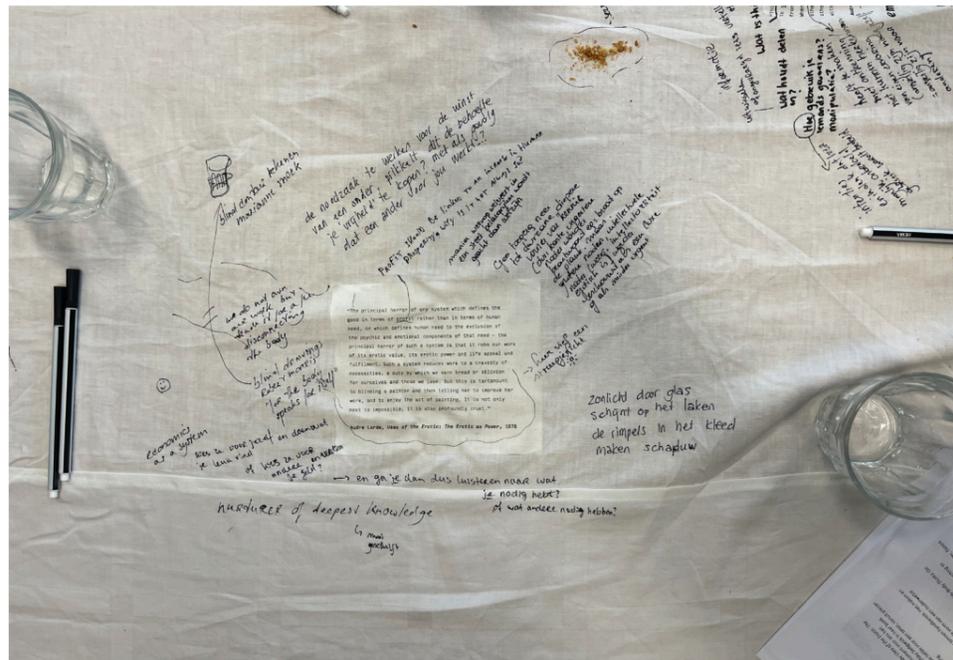
The legacies of Enlightenment era thinking and Greek philosophy still shape contemporary educational systems and practices. Accordingly, learning is seen either as an intrapersonal or intersubjective process. The intrapersonal mode is premised on the idea that students work mainly by themselves, they are self-motivated, with a focus on independent self-reflection. As a student at university, I also understood learning as something that happens inside myself, through the individual acts of reading, writing, and thinking. I also noticed that in my classroom this conception of learning creates students that become each other's competitors rather than peers in a community. The focus on the individual ignores the whimsical, non-linear and unpredictable process of learning. In the intrapersonal approach to learning, the student is the only one who learns. In curriculum theory, this understanding of education would be defined as teacher-led modes of instruction, where the expertise and methods of the teacher are the starting point instead of students' interests, needs, backgrounds and

goals, as would be the case in a student-centered approach to education (Ellis, 2004). In this educational system, knowledge is measured through assessments, grades, and reports, and rewarded with credits. Knowledge is considered to be a finished object to obtain, something that is separated from the student's and the teacher's bodies, and that is produced based on reason and the human-centric Enlightenment paradigm. How can I start teaching differently in my theory classroom? What would a pedagogy look like that operates in contrast to the cognitive, neoliberal-individualistic ideas that are based on separations, a pedagogy that acknowledges the body, and others, as co-constitutive to the act of learning?

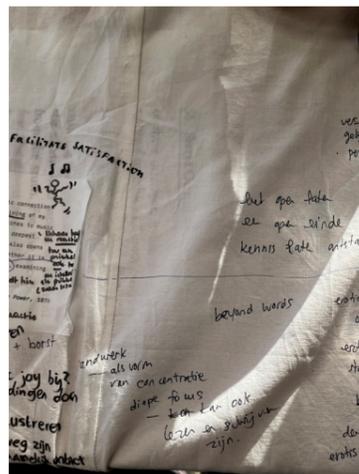
Image:
Breast pump parts drying on my summary of the text 'Cutting Through Water. Towards A Theory of Educational Relationality' from Simon Ceder. 2.2.2023

Methodological Beginnings

Before I begin to attempt to answer these questions, I want to explain how I am conducting this research. I am writing this text at a moment in my life where many things are coming together and, at the same time, are separated 'artificially'. I have my teaching job at ArEZ in Arnhem, my research master's at MEiA and Piet Zwart, which are equally substantial in terms of time and dedication. Then there is my domestic life with two small children. While writing this text, I feel constant fatigue in all my body parts. I must pump breastmilk every couple of hours (or at least, I try to) and my thoughts move in patchy patterns due to the current hormonal (im)balance in my body. This is not an ideal situation for 'properly' conducting research and for writing about it, one would say, and oftentimes I agree with this statement. However, for me in this moment, it is the only possible state. Due to postpartum hormones still in my body, I feel receptive to the world and other bodies, and more open towards what posthumanist thinkers would call the 'more-than-rational' aspects of the analysis process of doing research (Ceder, 2016). In the Western humanistic objective view on research, the subject and the object of research are considered to be separate in order to guarantee objectivity. In this moment, I am simply not able to separate my thinking and writing from the spaces, intensities, the messiness of my everyday life. It is entangled in too many ways, in terms of time, space and materiality.



Images:
Close-ups from notes on the table cloth, Pillow Talk
30.3.2023



For my research methodology this means that I acknowledge my own body and that of others in the research process, and try to become attentive to what is tangibly affected by events, words, theories, in the moment of relating. Rather than presenting evidence to affirm or debunk a hypothesis, I try to understand my position as inseparable from the object of my research. I am also a learning body, a sensing body, an experiencing body, a struggling and doubting body, and a becoming body in the spaces of my home, writing behind my desk, in the educational space, as well as in the magical night-time-space spent alone with my baby (and/or toddler). They are inseparable. In my writing and research process I try to create room and openness to follow these intertwinements of bodies and spaces. Trusting the process thus means following its meanderings, and embracing surprises and unpredictability, as the research goes through different stages and ways of knowing or getting-to-know something in a way that is always in relation with the world. Over the course of the MEiA program, I have read quite a lot. I love extensive bibliographies to browse through. To me, they are affective spaces in the same manner bookshops are, and the bibliography offered by Irina Shapiro and Renee Turner for the Contemporary Issues in Art and Design Education course (or 'The Garden Seminar') has become a place that I often return to. The cognitive products of these readings are somewhere in my notes or what I called the 'Chaos File' on my laptop. Other parts of it remain in my body, and this is what I am writing with. I do reference in my text, but I feel like the theory has moved more towards the background. I am now working with what has been set in motion, with things that have stuck on a much more unconscious level. So I try not to handle theories as distinct entities, but focus on movement inside and outside me, or what is mobilized. This means that the posthumanist and new materialist theories I have been reading have not become a separate theoretical framework applied as such, but are manifested as a shift in attention away from the rational and cognitive, and towards what would usually reside at the margins or inside the body; the affective intensities of teaching and learning. This is the level that I am trying to tune into in my research through an intimate mode of listening to my body and those of others.

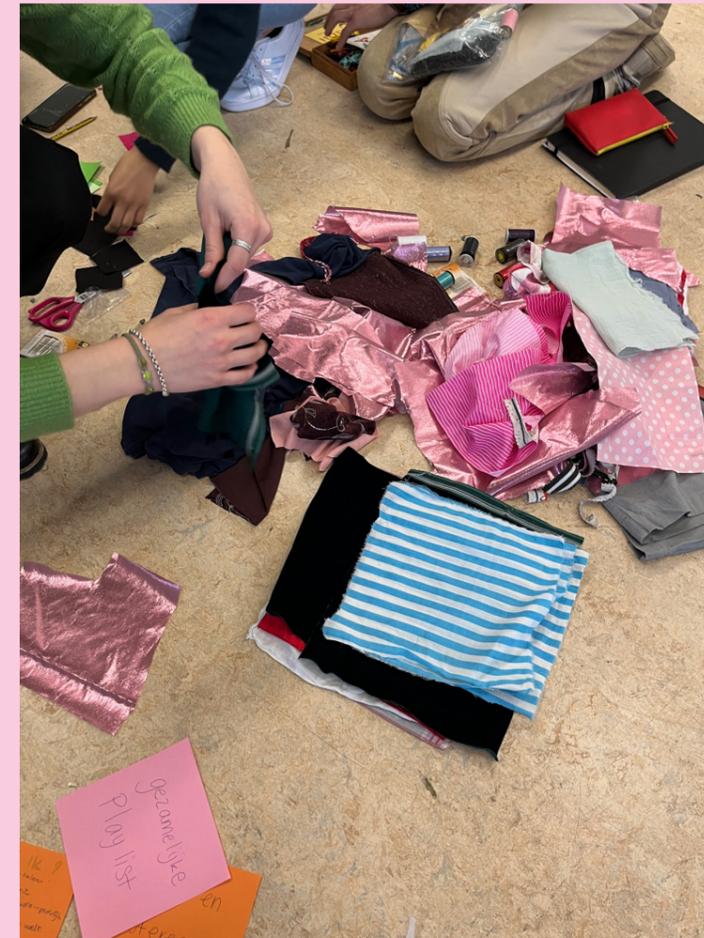


Image:
The note on the Post-it says: the intimate is in the ordinary

During the CIADE course, we were introduced to the idea of knowledge as something in-the-making, building on the idea that everything, also the classroom situation, is relational. This feminist and decolonial, as well as the posthumanist and new materialist, idea of relationality is shared with, or is rather preceded by, Indigenous epistemologies. The book *Research Is Ceremony* (2008) by Opaskwayak Cree Shawn Wilson, is a great example thereof. This relational approach means that I understand research and practice as inextricably connected. For my graduation project, I intentionally created moments for trying things out and listening-in on what happens in my body and that of others around me. For example, I created the reading group called Pillow Talk for Studium Generale at ArtEZ, and the theory elective that I taught in the spring of 2023 called Many Hands Make A Quilt also became an important arena for giving direction to my research process. The Pillow Talk reading group functioned as a space for experimentation, and for practicing 'reading rituals' of theoretical texts that helped me, together with others, to get closer with my research topic. For this reading group, I took the idea of ritual as a form to practice different ways of intimate reading together. This sometimes took the shape of simple domestic rituals, such as gathering at the kitchen table, or the ritual of cooking together, other times the ritualistic gesture was in text made spatial or just the circle that we were seated in on the floor. Next to these workshops and the reading group, I also drew on memories of situations and discussed scenes from my daily life with my students.

MULTIPLE TEACHING CONTEXTS

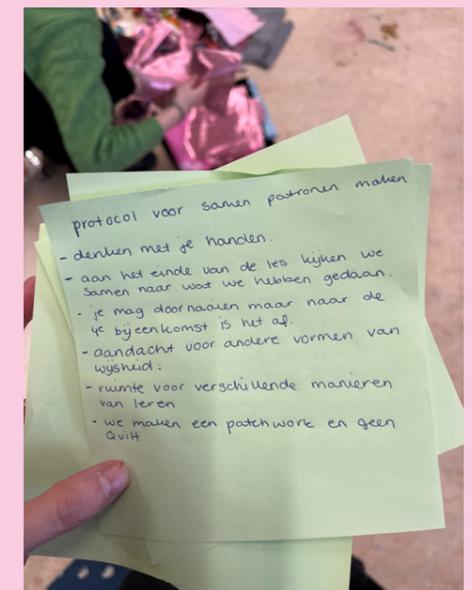
In this text I am describing lived experiences from my teaching activities roughly between January and June 2023. I have structured the subchapters by topicality rather than by educational event. Consequently, in some chapters I describe examples from different contexts alongside each other. My first teaching context is my everyday teaching practice as a theory teacher at DVKB in Arnhem; the second is the reading group that I conducted for ArtEZ Studium Generale in Arnhem; the third is the Rotterdam Arts and Science Lab (RASL) program, where I was invited to teach two workshops. Below I will describe specifics from each context in terms of thematic, students bodies and institutional context. The content and the topics addressed within different sessions will become clear in the text itself. What unites all of these projects is that they propose different ways of entering into an intimate relationship with theory, where the first point of entrance is oftentimes the body rather than a cognitive entrance-point.



Many Hands Make A Quilt theory elective, 27.1.23

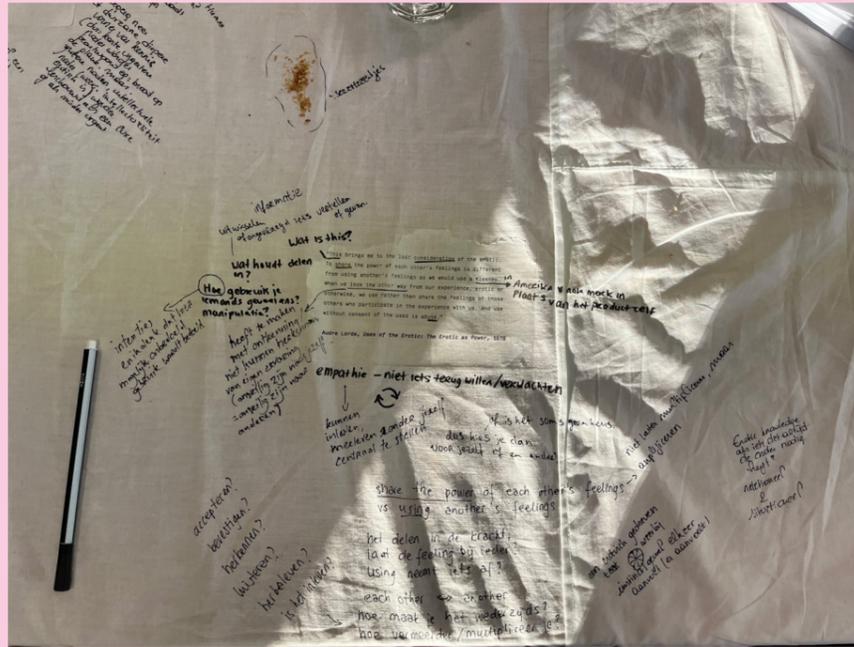
The Many Hands Make A Quilt course was a theory elective for DBKV students at ArtEZ in Arnhem that was conducted in January-February 2023. The course aimed at uniting thinking and doing by combining the reading of theoretical texts in the classroom together with intuitively creating a patchwork from brought scraps of fabrics. During the sessions, we collectively addressed the question: how do we learn? We gathered four mornings from 9.15 - 12.30 am with 15 students from the 2nd and 3rd year combined. This group was a mix of full time and part time bachelor students, resulting in quite a diverse group in terms of age and life experience. This course was an elective within the curriculum, hence all students had picked this course based on preference and interest.

Many Hands Make A Quilt



protocol voor samen patronen maken

- denken met je handen.
- aan het einde van de les kijken we samen naar wat we hebben gedaan.
- je mag doornaaien maar naar de 4e bijeenkomst is het af.
- aandacht voor andere vormen van wijsheid:
- ruimte voor verschillende manieren van leren
- we maken een patchwork en geen quilt



Pillow Talk I: Kitchen Table Reading, 30.3.2023



Pillow Talk II: Making the Bed, 13.4.23

Pillow Talk Propositions for intimate reading

The Pillow Talk reading group was a series of five gatherings between March and June 2023, with a group of variable students, an ArtEZ finances employee and an occasional teacher from different departments from ArtEZ. Most participants did not know each other on beforehand, although some of the DBKV students did. The group ranged from between 5 to 12 participants each session. This reading group asked the question: how to become intimate with theory in art education? Can we imagine a reading group where we approach reading as a radically intimate activity? Each session proposed a different reading ritual in the shape of a kitchen table reading, a cooking session or a karaoke-sing-along, for discussing topics such as embodied learning, sensorial meaning-making, and the ethics of relationships in the classroom. This reading group was extra-curricular, meaning no credits were given for participation. Every session was held in the library of ArtEZ in Arnhem.



The Wildly Domestic Classroom, RASL workshop, 5.4.2023

RASL workshops

In the past months, I conducted two different workshops at RASL. The first was 'A Skirt With Pockets' on 15 november 2022 in the context of the RASL minor for WdKA, CODARTS and EUR bachelor students, with a group of around 30 participants. The second workshop 'The Wildly Domestic Classroom. Intimate and affective ways of knowing' took place on 5 april and was done with a group of 12 students in the context of the RASL double degree program, that aimed to help students to reflect on their specific position - in between two studies, two educational paradigms and two disciplines - and develop work in that space. The focus was on in-between spaces and alternative and transdisciplinary forms of knowledge, research and practice.

Beginning with the Body

Since studying at MEiA, my teaching builds more and more on feminist pedagogies that pull from critical theory, such as black feminist writer and scholar bell hooks, who has written extensively on embodiment, feelings and emotions in the classroom. hooks builds on the work of Paulo Freire, adding a black feminist perspective to the idea of teaching and education as the practice of freedom. She stresses that beyond the realm of critical thought, it is equally crucial that we as teachers learn to enter the classroom as “whole” and not as a disembodied spirit (hooks, 1994. p. 193). In the chapter on Engaged Pedagogy, hooks writes, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994. p. 13). Here she rejects the idea of the objective mind of the teacher in the “bourgeois structures of education” that is supposed to be free of experiences and biases, reinforcing the separation between the private and the public, encouraging students and teachers to see no connection between life practices and habits of being and their roles in the classroom (hooks, 1994). hooks’ writing allowed me to understand that I can be more vulnerable as a teacher, and acknowledge that I don’t have to claim to be all-knowing and without any doubts, but that I am too a learning body, and that I should also share this process. In my classroom, I have become more easy going about adding a personal narrative to my teaching, and not only asking this from my students (hooks, p. 21). In the encounter with students and educational materials, I grow too, and I think reflecting on this enhances engagement from all to share in this process.

More broadly, critical pedagogies acknowledge that education is political, as it encourages students and teachers to question common assumptions in society that reveal hidden power structures, and systems of oppression and inequity that also exist in academic contexts. The core idea of feminist pedagogy is the questioning of hierarchical structures in the classroom and redistributing power to students. It criticizes traditional lecturing, moving towards teaching strategies based on conversation and discussion. These ideas are rooted in the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire’s work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). Freire deploys an educational theory centered on liberation through awakening critical awareness and thinking, which he calls ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 2017/1968). Freire sees this idea of liberation through education as a praxis: the action and reflection of students upon the world in order to transform it. He replaces the banking concept of education for the posing of problems in the classroom. The banking concept describes an educational system with students as empty containers that are filled with knowledge by teachers. Instead, the students become critical co-investigators of problems with the teacher, and they become part of a process in which everyone involved grows. It depends on the course that I am teaching, but when it’s fitting, I try to prevent the ‘banking’ of knowledge and lecturing in the traditional mode. I think of a question that can guide the seminars, for example, ‘How do we learn?’ Although this line of inquiry is quite broad, it proved to be an accessible question for my students that can be engaged with by all and approached from multiple perspectives.



Image:
Shoes taken off during one of the Pillow
Talk sessions

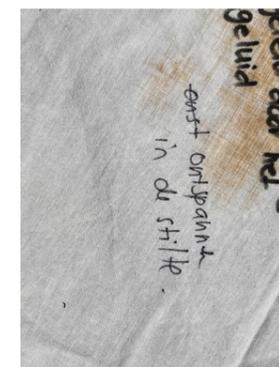
However, for my graduation project, I am looking for a pedagogy that acknowledges the bodies of both teachers and students in the classroom. Despite its emancipatory intent, critical pedagogies still rely on the Enlightenment discourse of the separation of object and subject, and thus remain an essentially rational-based theory of human liberation that objectifies knowledge, disconnected from experiential knowing and from the body (Shapiro, 1998). Understanding the intimate in the classroom, starts with the notion of feeling safe and acknowledging what the body needs. Stephanie Cariaga is an American pedagogue whose work is about 'Pedagogies of Wholeness' and the embodied classroom. The memories of my suppressed body that I described in the first part of this text are examples of disembodiment in education. Meaning that institutions are structured to reject, remove and delegitimize the wisdom that we have in our bodies (Cariaga, 2021. p. 236). Cariaga relates the need for safety and social justice in the classroom to embodiment and proposes ways for creating a home in our classrooms. She argues that the body must become our indicator for mapping our feelings and needs in the classroom. Here embodiment is defined as the "rich sensations, stories, feelings, memories, survival and resilience strategies, and desire we carry in our bodies" (Cariaga, 2021. p. 237). Mapping collective and individual needs together by listening to our bodies (which she calls "centering" a term that reminds me of exercises from my mindfulness class) becomes an important instrument for creating a safe learning environment. In order to feel safe in the classroom, we must feel safe in our own bodies, she says. I have not practiced the centering exercise in my lessons as such, however, it made me understand the importance of a sense of a basic bodily autonomy for the students: to sit how and where they want, to put their bodies in a positions that they find comfortable, to be able to go to the toilet or get something to drink when they need it.



Images:
Pillow Talk III: Sensual Competence.
11.05.2023

Education as Affective Encounter

Image:
Close-up from notes on the table cloth,
Pillow Talk



Understanding the intimate in the classroom, commences simply with the question of how we feel in the space. It is about acknowledging the classroom as a rather a ‘moody’ place, rather than merely rational. I turn to affect theory to understand how these affects take shape. I will hold on to the idea of affect as not ‘merely’ personal feelings, but rather as prepersonal and precognitive felt intensities. Affects are what happens in/with the encounter of bodies, in moments of relating. They are the intensities, flows and swirls of energy that produce and shape personal emotions (Dernikos et al., 2020). The bodily sensation and the emotion are often felt simultaneously: disgust, surprise, anger, pleasure. It is also what binds our bodies in collective groans of annoyance or joy (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 4). How we feel in the classroom, correlates with the familiar idea of the classroom as a safe space, or, to feel safe as a precondition for intimacy. In the essay ‘Love and Bewilderment. On Education as Affective Encounter’, Nathan Snaza (2020) writes about the tension between the demand for safe spaces and trigger warnings, and learning as something that involves discomfort and risk as well as bewilderment. He uses affect theory to make sense of two of his classes that diverged greatly in terms of students speaking and being involved in the discussion. One class failed to create space to be vulnerable, ask questions and think out loud with uncertainty, while the other class did so. For the first class, Snaza uses the phrase: “They didn’t feel safe enough to get lost” (Snaza, 2020, p. 109). For me, this taps into one of the basic conditions for creating an intimate atmosphere in the classroom: for students to feel safe enough to speak, to share with uncertainty, to explore, to take risks, to express doubts or to remain silent if they wish so. However, the condition of feeling safe is not the same for everybody, as differences among students in terms of race, class, and age influence how they feel in certain familiar or unfamiliar situations.

For my research, I want to highlight two aspects of Snaza’s theory: the first one is that safety, or how we feel in the classroom, is a relational affective milieu that is structurally uneven (Snaza, 2020, p. 110). Bodies that are in the same space, may not be in the same place in terms of what they embody and bring into the classroom, and thus how they feel in the situation. The student community of DBKV, where I teach, is predominantly white (although a bit more diverse in terms of gender and sexuality). The same is true of the community of teachers, who are mainly white cis-gendered. I know that some of the students feel uncomfortable in that context or out of place. This brings me to the second aspect: how we feel in the classroom, the emotions that circulate in the space between bodies, cannot be understood only constructed or isolated within the time and space of the classroom. Here Snaza builds on Sara Ahmed’s writing on feelings and emotions (2014), reminding us that everyone enters the classroom from elsewhere and carries personal histories of ‘affective accumulation’ with them, which are records of race, gender, class, and ability that shape their experiences of the world. How these affect educational situations both in and outside of the classroom cannot be completely predicted.

The above reminds me of a situation that I experienced with DBKV students on a city trip to Berlin in May 2022 that I accompanied as one of the teachers. We brought a group of around forty second and third year students to the Volksbühne theater to attend the performance *A Divine Comedy* by choreographer and dancer Florentina Holzinger. This play turned out to be very explicit, and some of the students left in shock before it was finished. I remember sensing their feelings of awe, the stress it caused to their bodies, while seated in the red plush chairs of the packed theater. After the play, we gathered at the square in front of the Volksbühne. Shock, anxiety, and disgust were up in the air and swiftly circulating among students, who were sitting in smaller groups on the grass, talking, some crying or panicking. The performance has been too triggering for some, and while we as teachers attempted to offer after-care and emotional support, it very strongly felt like emotions were circulating in such a way that was completely beyond our control. As teachers, we were lost, so to say. We had underestimated the effect of the play on the students, who after the immurement of pandemic lockdowns had already experienced the previous days in the large city as quite stressful and very overstimulating and, as some of them were inexperienced theatre-goers, the whole ordeal had turned into an overwhelming cocktail that produced an extremely negative group-feeling at that moment in time.

This stressful situation is inscribed in my body as a memory of an educational situation that I always want to avoid. Reliving it while writing this, makes me understand that emotions and feelings in educational situations are never entirely private, nor entirely public, but they shape some sort of 'terrain' or 'milieu' that is strongly relational. Affects circulate between bodies, as students see, smell, hear, and feel each other (Snaza, 2020, p. 112). On our trip that day, the mood was already down after visiting the Holocaust monument and discussing the colonial history of Germany at the Humboldt Forum, causing an affective accumulation that erupted while we gathered after the play on the public square in front of the Volksbühne. This brings me to an important point about how to understand education as an affective encounter which is not just about 'rational cognition and intellectual agonism' (Snaza, 2020, p. 112). Safety (or how we feel in class) is not something that can be merely produced through policy and house-rules. Becoming aware of how affects circulate enables an understanding of pedagogy as a practice that is, besides theories, ideas, assignments, and assessments, also about affect modulation (Snaza, 2020, p. 113)

Having said that, when we understand affect as a more-than-human actor in the room, something that exists outside of bodies (Dernikos et al., 2020) we can see how affect is never completely predictable or knowable, as it is something that happens beyond our influence and control, as some are more affected than others, and sensitive to different triggers (Snaza, 2020). However, within the uncontrollable, I believe that as a teacher one should always remain attentive to relationality and the unevenness of the encounter. When we understand education as affective, and that how we feel in the situation means starting with the body, we can create space for expressing what a body brings into the classroom. And by doing so setting the tone for what is valued or appreciated in class, the things that may exist and be expressed. Feeling unsafe is affective, and, as this is what affect does as it diminishes or enhances our capacity to learn.

A First Understanding of the Intimate in the Classroom

The first thing that comes to mind when trying to define the intimate or intimacy is a cluster of words such as familiarity, feelings, the private, closeness and attachment. This gives the word a positive quality, however linking intimacy to education also immediately calls upon negative associations such as ‘unwanted intimacies’, pointing at sexual relationships or physical intimacy. Especially after #MeToo and several cases from the recent public debate around abuses of power, unwanted sexual relationships and rape in institutional contexts, I want to stress that the physical aspect to it – human bodies literally touching each other – is not the kind of intimacy that I am interested in. What I want to focus on is the emotional state of the intimate, and the relational character of it. Traditionally, intimacy or the intimate is related to love, friendship, and family, walled off from the public parts of our lives. As it traditionally belongs to the realm of the feminine, it was attributed to the private domain rather than the public. The inward character of the word is also found in its etymological roots, as it stems from the Latin *intimus*, meaning inmost, innermost or deepest (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=intimate>). The Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘intimate’ along the lines of close, personal or sexual relationships. For my research, I hold on to this understanding of the concept that refers to the felt quality of a relationship or an experienced moment of connection or grounding, rather than the common sense sexual or physical understanding of it.

The topic of intimacy has been explored by a lot of feminist work on putting feelings and emotions, and thus the body, on the scholarly agenda, such as Lauren Berlant (1998) and Sara Ahmed (2014). Berlant describes the intimate as something that transcends private and public. In an interview she says that “the intimate is everywhere: you bring it everywhere and it circulates everywhere.” (Demeyer, 2021). It registers as intensities of attachment and recognition, inferred and explicit, that pass across people, groups and movements. Feminist writers have distinguished within the sphere of the intimate certain rubrics including feeling and affect, love, friendship, attachment, the personal and the everyday (Pratt & Rossner, 2012). Despite this text’s feminist perspective, I want to stress that I want to avoid reproducing old stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. The intimate is everywhere and it is for everybody. This does not mean that the intimate itself is not caught up in relations of power, violence, and inequality, and that is an instant source of comfort, equality and joy. The intimate is fragile, for some it’s even dangerous, and easily disturbed or prevented by the aforementioned power structures or asymmetries in the classroom when they are not addressed well. As soon as one feels unsafe, the intimate is hard to find. Nor is the meaning of the intimate the same for everyone personally, it has specific meanings in different contexts, socially, politically and culturally (Pratt & Rosner, 2012, p. 3). The intimate that I look for in the classroom does not have much to do with representations. However, it does exceed the boundary between the private and the public in a sense because it connects to feelings becoming public, or emotions contagiously moving between bodies. The intimate that I look for is a felt sensation, in a temporary situational moment of relating with others in the classroom.

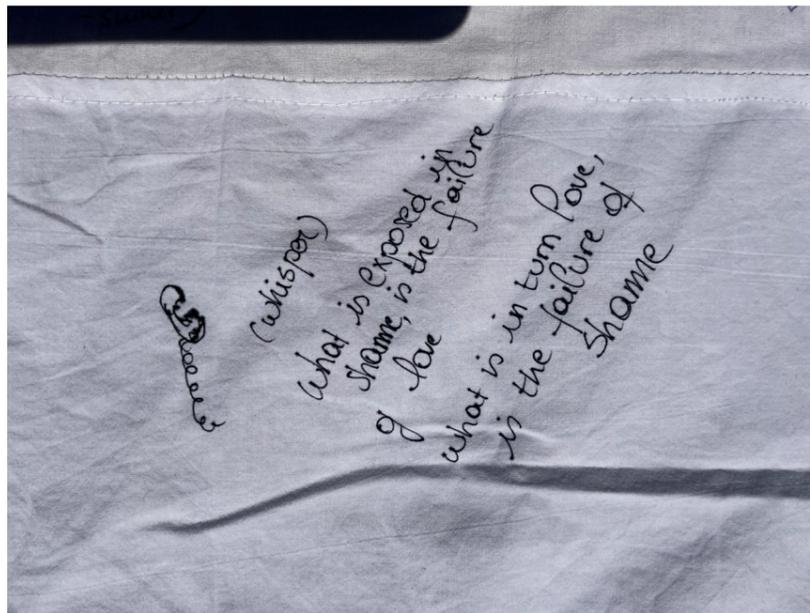


Image:
Close-up from notes on the table
cloth, Pillow Talk

The Intimate as Erotic: Reading Audre Lorde in the theory classroom

In order to understand the level of intimacy that I am looking for in my classroom, I will start with a reading of Audre Lorde's essay on the erotic. I will describe some basic principles that I use as my starting points for practically and conceptually approaching the intimate in my graduation project. Audre Lorde's essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', critiques the Western narrow understanding of the concept of the erotic and its negative connotations that prevent women from harnessing its power. Lorde defines the erotic as a force that comes from within, a resource that is present in all women, an internal power that we have lost touch with, as she describes, it is "the nurturer of our deepest knowledge." (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 53). Lorde holds the patriarchy and capitalism responsible for the oppression

of this female force in dominant society. Throughout the text, the individual self is the starting point for the erotic to exist, as she speaks of self-connection and self-affirmation. Here, the erotic is approached as something that arises from within, but always in relation with others, providing the power that comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person (Lorde, 1984/2007 p. 57). Most importantly, Lorde calls for opening up to the nonrational in our lives, and for embracing the yes within ourselves. She links the erotic with our capacity for joy and pleasure, and describes it as an energetic and creative force for change. For the erotic, there is no hierarchy, and it can be a way of understanding and affirming difference. Below, I describe three principles and relate them to the educational situation of the classroom.

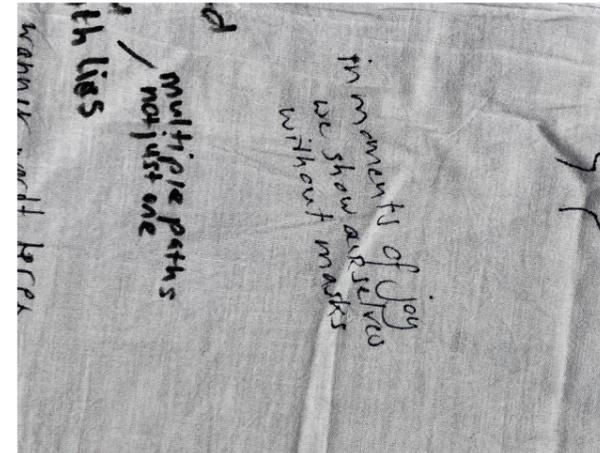


Image:
Close-up from notes on the table cloth,
Pillow Talk

Intimacy as Relational

The intimate can be an individual experience but it always exists in relation. A felt sensation of intimacy is never isolated but arises in relation with others. Lorde does not mention the release of the erotic force as a relational event as such, but she does describe experiencing it in relation with other people, with ideas, or creation (dancing with others, building a bookcase, for example). Therefore I want to address the relationality of the intimate in the classroom, considering how it resides firstly in the relationships with other people (teachers and students), and secondly in the relationship with the physical environment (space, objects). So this 'other' in the relationship expands towards the nonhuman too. The implications for my graduation project are that I focus on how reshaping these relationships through the intimate can help to be able to enter into a better, deeper or more intimate, relationship with new ideas and new knowledge. To change things in my theory classroom, the relational character of the intimate is the starting point.

Intimacy as Nonrational

Lorde describes the erotic as "that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 53). The nonrational are the feelings, emotions, sensations that are present in our bodies, in other words, everything that is not based on rationality, reason, or logic. The nonrational is thus not contradictory to knowing or understanding but exists as a way of knowing that is often neglected in traditional pedagogies as a source or a nutrient for knowledge. The nonrational also relates to embodiment and affect, as it encompasses feelings and emotions, as well as how these exist in affective educational encounters. For my theory classroom this implies that I look for ways to become attentive to and nurture the nonrational in the educational situation, and attempt to consider the intimate as a relational moment of learning, and a potential source of information.

Intimacy as Difference

For Lorde, the erotic can be a force that affirms difference, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." (Lorde, 1984/2007), p. 57). Everybody enters the classroom differently, and therefore good facilitation is key. Lorde stresses in her essay an ethics of participation, as she writes that while we should not look away from our shared experiences, we must shift our attention more towards the feelings of others. The implications for my theory classroom here would be that room is made to share experiences, worries and thoughts that are embodied in all the different bodies present. The shared joy of the intimate becomes a way of affirming and understanding difference. The sharing of joy, as a collective experience, can be experienced in the doing. As to Lorde, "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 54). When the intimate is in the doing, for my theory classes this means that I aim at implementing a doing, something that literally moves bodies.

II. Transformations

Setting the Tone

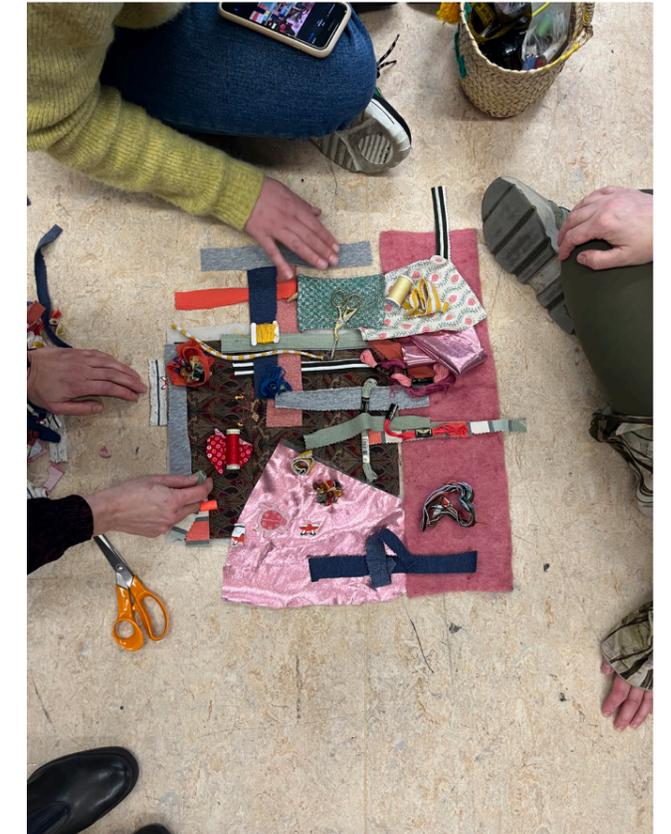
When trying to do things differently in the classroom, I noticed the importance of setting the right tone from the start as this allows the rest of the program to unfold more naturally. During my initial years teaching, I used to begin the first class of a course by explaining formalities: the program, the planning, assignments and the assessment. I often introduced myself along the lines of my curriculum vitae. I would do this unconsciously in order to legitimize my position. Beginning like this immediately sets the tone for the teacher as being responsible, creating a norm towards knowledge as measurable and transferrable by following a certain time-path toward a result. This way of beginning a course establishes a traditional student-teacher relationship. It produces individualized students, and a go-getters mindset (gaining credits), instead of an intrinsic motivation for learning and getting to know something. I often noticed this by the nature of the questions that students asked afterwards, that were often aimed at finding out the bare minimum they had to produce to still get the credits. In the subchapter about the intimate, I wrote that the intimate doesn't know hierarchy. It can be sensed by anybody, in any situation. I wonder how the intimate can reshape the teacher-student relationship and create a more equal power field, that of course never will be completely even as we cannot escape the structural hierarchy of the relationship as it exists in the current educational system.



Image:
Many Hands Make A Quilt Theory Elective,
27.1.23

Arriving

For the first session of the Many Hands Make A Quilt course, I asked the students to bring a piece of fabric from home, and asked an open question, prompting them to explain what they brought during a collective check-in at the beginning of class. This became a moment of sharing personal stories and histories about the role of needle work in their families (which in the East of the Netherlands and the rural areas around Arnhem where ArteZ is situated, is quite significant), about fathers who enjoyed doing needle work in the 1970s, or the desire to use embroidery in their fine art projects which is sometimes discouraged by tutors on the academy as it has certain connotations. Starting on the note of a personal narrative created an atmosphere where students pretty soon felt comfortable. While I still felt a bit tense when we were going around the circle to share, I noticed that students were relaxing their bodies as they relocated themselves to the floor and spontaneously started cutting fabrics while listening or tapping into the conversation organically. Generally, when I start class now, I like to start with a very brief moment of expressing what I bring in my body and creating space for others to do so as well. For example, when I just returned from maternity leave, I used to briefly mention my physical and mental state by explaining that I had to look at my notes more often than I used to, because of the postpartum hormones that caused forgetfulness. I often let this follow by a simple check-in question, along the lines of ‘what does your body bring today?’ Giving this attention right at the start of class, beginning with the body and creating a demarcated moment, perhaps helps to first of all to feel more comfortable in our own bodies. When we think of the intimate as relational, the relationship with our own bodies is perhaps the first relationship to start with.



Images:
Many Hands Make A Quilt Theory Elective,
27.1.23



Image:
Many Hands Make A Quilt Theory Elective,
27.1.23

Mapping Ground Rules Together

Setting the tone in the classroom is also about relationships with other human bodies. After creating a moment for sharing and intimate listening, I proposed an exercise for constructing a 'protocol' or set of ground rules together with the intention to create space for voicing needs and boundaries that help to make everybody feel comfortable, and to create a sense of how to work, and the kinds of knowledges that are appreciated.

I proposed three rules as a starting point:

Protocol voor samen patronen maken:

1. *We zijn samen verantwoordelijk voor het proces én de uitkomst ervan*
2. *We delen stukken stof, ervaringen en gedachten; maar je mag ook weigeren om iets te delen als je dat liever niet doet*
3. *Onze handen weten wat te doen*

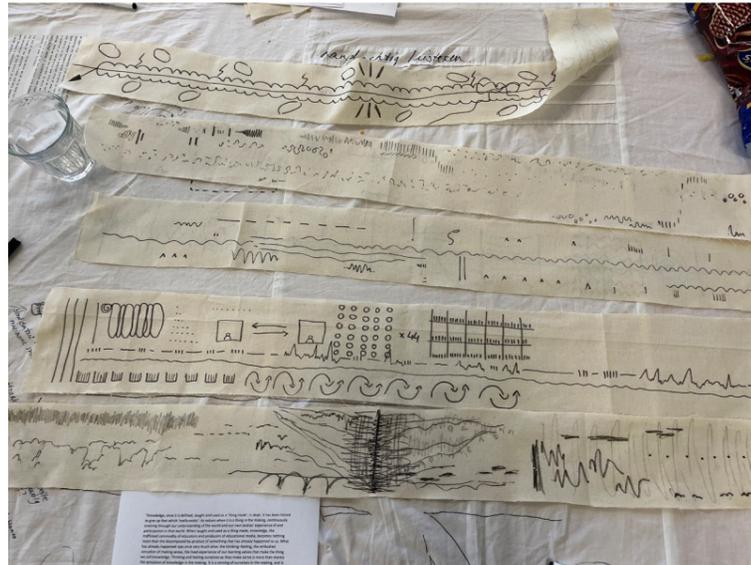
What followed was a brainstorm in smaller groups where students in groups of three discussed the question 'what do I need in order to be able to learn?' The conversations meandered between their own educational history and their experiences with teaching during internships. During the introduction I felt a bit uncomfortable and slightly nervous because of I was aware of the power I held in terms of voicing my intentions and beliefs for the course quite explicitly, but after this exercise I felt different in the relationship with the students. I was sitting on the floor, thinking out loud together. My position had physically changed, as I moved from being seated in a circle into a more disorganized constellation of seated bodies, and quite consciously felt a shift in power relations. I also felt this shift in my body: a sudden release of tension and a relaxation of my muscles, that I remember quite vividly. In my reflection of the session, I wrote that I felt like the traditional teacher-role had slipped off me. I came to understand that in the rather traditional power relationships between students and teachers, teachers may often feel uncomfortable too. Not being able to teach as a 'whole' body creates tension in teachers' bodies that equally shapes the affective situation of the classroom for all. Sewing together created a sense of collectivity; the students went on to create a WhatsApp group for further discussion, and many of them mentioned how much they enjoyed the patchworking activity in the first class. It gave them something to do with their hands, allowing them to participate while listening to the reading.

In the proceeding part of this text, I will circle back to the notion of structural unevenness in the classroom. It needs to be said that announcing that a classroom is a safe space, is not the same as actually feeling it as such. During this first session of Many Hands Make A Quilt, three students were absent. When they joined again for the second session the next week, I sensed that the 'affective terrain' had changed. I tried to intercept by proposing to adjust the protocol again after each class, but the energy remained slightly different. I strongly doubted whether the 'new' students felt as comfortable as the rest. This is partly due to the fact they also arrived differently in terms of personal histories and affective accumulation. I know that some of these students already feel out of place in the academy, and perhaps this is the reason they missed the first class. Creating an intimate atmosphere in the classroom through setting ground rules is not going to change this. To return to the idea of the intimate as a way of affirming difference through shared joy as described in the first chapter, during this second session, the felt sense of collectivity of the group must have felt rather exclusionary for the those who did not participate in the first session. I felt that this made it harder to become part of the intimate milieu that the group had created together. Here we should not forget the 'weight' of the literal crossing of the institutional threshold, when entering a school or classroom. According to Erin Manning, the point is not to say that one person suffers the threshold more than another. The point is to develop an attunement to the weight of that crossing, as she writes: "What kind of learning happens when the body is weighted down by the anxiety of the crossing, by the self-consciousness of being constantly singled out, hyper seen and unseen at once?" (Kuipers, 2019). Proclaiming rules for feeling and working well together in the classroom can set the right tone, but it is not a precondition for everyone to feel this in the same way, and could even create a 'false' idea of safety.

Feeling Educational Space

In terms of how we feel in the classroom, it is not just our bodies or the bodies of other humans that we need to become attentive to, but also the physical environment, the tangible and perceptible educational space. When I first started teaching, I never really thought of the physical space of the classroom and the spatial arrangement as something that strongly mattered, or as something with agency. This is not surprising, as in traditional educational theory, such as an intersubjective approach, the classroom is often seen as a passive container. The classrooms where I usually teach at ArtEZ, in the building that is located at Oude Kraan 74 in Arnhem, feel quite unwelcoming to me. The rooms are spacious but messy, cluttered with chairs and tables, and left behind materials from students. The ceiling is low, and the windows are large. When the windows are opened, the wind blowing against the blinds often causes an uncanny sound and, due to a lack of modern flat screens, it must be dark in order for the projection to be visible. When teaching a theory class, I always just ignored the uninviting atmosphere and arranged the space in quite a traditional manner: students seated in a U-shaped table constellation, myself at the front standing to present a PowerPoint or explain an assignment.

When I understand the intimate as a sensed experience in a moment of relating, I cannot ignore the space, the tangible environment, and how it inter-relates with our bodies. The atmosphere of a space is rather obviously of great influence. Snaza (2020) writes that rooms, just like language or words, have a certain tonality, a kind of tonal mood, or atmosphere, that is affective and that may make some students feel more comfortable than others (p. 115). However, nonhuman participants – such as lights, desks, windows, blinds, particular ceilings or particular carpets – also constitute an atmosphere through their vibrations and capacities to affect. How we experience the classroom is thus intimately and consistently connected to our perception of the space, often on an unconscious level (Ahmed). How we feel is inextricably connected to what space looks, smells, feels or sounds like. Place and feeling are always intertwined, as we are sensing bodies that not only feel each other but also the materiality that surrounds us. On the one hand, this means that the educational setting is about things that are already there and, on the other, it is a space that can be intentionally orchestrated through pedagogical gestures.



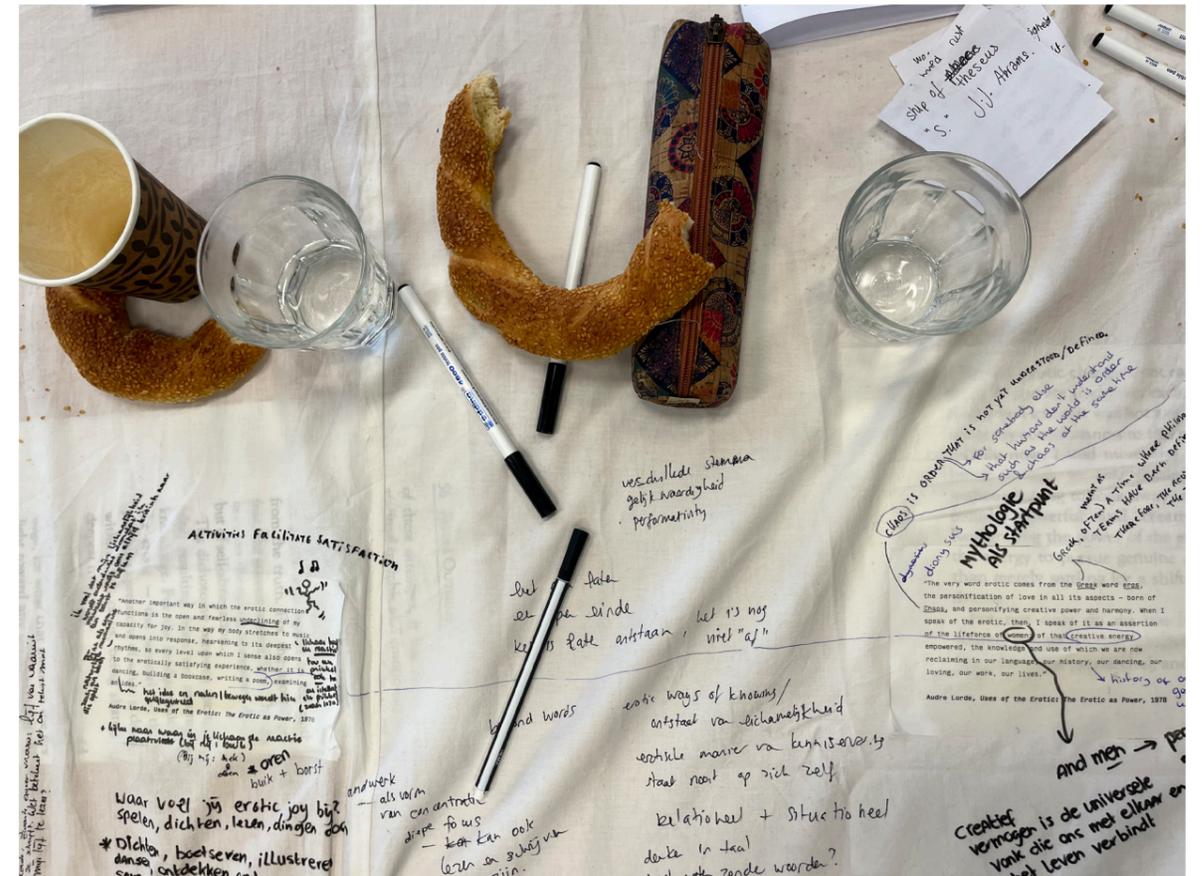
Images:
Pillow Talk II, Intimate Space: Making the Bed,
13.4.2023



Place-Making: Sticky Objects

The classroom where the Many Hands Make A Quilt sessions took place was a large office-like space, with around forty separate chairs scattered through-out. This space always feels very unwelcoming to me. At the beginning of each session, I started with unfolding the ever-growing piece of patchwork that we had created. This added an object of familiarity. I noticed that the students became attached to the patchwork, waiting for me to get it out of my bag and check what we had produced last week, recognizing the little things that they had added. The patchwork became something for our bodies to land on, creating a place in a space that is different from a chair or a table as the object carried an accumulation of stories, stitches and situations in it. For the Pillow Talk reading group, the tablecloth that I had created from the old pillow covers functioned in the same manner. I brought the table cloth each time to cover up two large tables, and we used the cloth as a shared notebook to take notes on. I noticed that the participants enjoyed coming back to it, reading the notes from the prior sessions or pointing out something in the notes that they had not seen before. The material object of the tablecloth became a sort of intermediary between our bodies and the space. The fact that the first Pillow Talk session was a very intimate reading session was important for setting the tone in how we feel with the tablecloth. The cloth became what Sara Ahmed calls a 'sticky object' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11). For her, stickiness is about histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs. The contact with the cloth, our experience of the pleasant gathering, and how we qualified that in words, became an impression that sticks with the object.

For the first Pillow Talk session, I had brought 'simit' (round Turkish bread) ajvar and baklava from my local Turkish bakery in Rotterdam to eat. The library space was sunny and had a great view of the Rhine River. The reading had been pleasant, the atmosphere was good. All of these things together left an impression on the cloth that accumulated throughout each session as the "history of contact" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 15). The emotion that we might feel in reaction to encountering the 'sticky object' again, resides in the contact between us and the tablecloth, and attaches meaning to it. Ahmed draws attention to the 'press' contained in the word 'impression' – the way that objects are infused with sensations, memories and encounters. Adding materiality to the space, bringing in materials into the theory classroom that return each session, helped to create a sense of home and familiarity. Objects like the tablecloth and the patchwork became props that equally have the potential to contribute to a sense of intimacy or an experienced intimate atmosphere. How one feels in an educational space can only partly be orchestrated, by bringing in materials that stay throughout the process, and on the other hand what is already there in the space has agency in shaping the felt atmosphere of the room.



Images left:
Pillow Talk III: Sensual Competence,
11.5.2023

Image right:
Pillow Talk I: Kitchen Table Reading,
30.3.2023

Text as Intimate Space

When I interviewed the artist Antye Guenther in January 2023 about her research practice, she mentioned that she prefers not to use the term ‘theory’, but instead refers to it as ‘reading and writing’ because this implies a more embodied relationship with text and avoids the ‘cold’ connotations with objective knowledge. This realization made me rethink how reading and writing happen in my theory classroom, and how I could turn this from a rather individualized and cognitive activity into something collective and more embodied. For the first session of the Pillow Talk reading group on March 30, I proposed a ‘reparative reading’ of Lorde’s essay on the erotic, in order to explore what this text from 1978 would open up in each of us and what it could mean in the context of our work or study today. Reparative reading (as deployed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Touching Feeling*) is a personal reading position that departs from the love for a text, from a position of the seeking of pleasure rather than from a position of critique, paranoia or problematization. In the first session of Pillow Talk, I tried to work with the idea of embodied reading by giving the prompt to become attentive to what happens in the body while reading the text; bringing attention to sensations, thoughts, memories, stories, feelings, desires. It is undeniably the case that when we read, we don’t just think, we also feel. Each reader will relate to the text differently and depending on the repertoire they possess before encountering it. This repertoire will be affected in the moment of reading and will cause the reader to change through the experience (Truman, 2016, p.99). Reading is always already an intimate activity: an encounter of minds – of the reader and the writer – mediated through print. This reading session was an attempt to ‘record’ these internal changes that were enticed by Lorde’s words and thinking, by becoming attentive to what comes up in the moment of reading. The process was recorded via collective note taking in the margins, this time not in the pages of the book, but on the tablecloth.

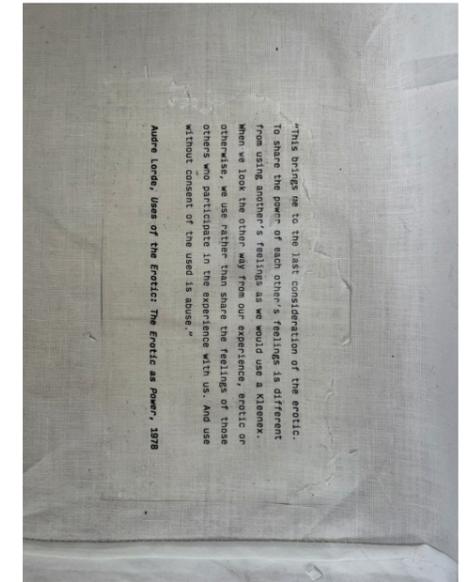


Image:
Pillow Talk I: Kitchen Table Reading,
30.3.2023

Notes in the Margins

I envisioned the tablecloth that I made for the Pillow Talk reading group not only as a placeholder for each session, but also as a shared space for taking notes. I imagined the experience as akin to taking out a library book and discovering the notes of a stranger which add a different, multi-layered dimension to the text. I turned the tablecloth into a medium for collective reading and note-taking by printing a selection of quotes from Lorde's text on the fabric, one quote for each participant. A couple of hours before we gathered for the reading group, I hastily transferred quotes from Lorde's text onto the cloth with sticky t-shirt transfer paper and a flat iron that I had bought the same morning at Action. This was a sweaty activity that I had to undertake at the floor of the staff room. I felt quite uncomfortable 'creating' something material for a theory class. It felt counterintuitive to my role as a theory teacher, i.e. someone who does not make things but rather speaks on abstract concepts. During the first session of the reading group, the prompt was for participants to read 'their' quotes out loud. We then conducted a silent reading circle, writing in the margins and swapping chairs clockwise, adding notes in dialogue with others. My intention was to create a silent correspondence between readers, recording all types of embodied responses to the text. Afterwards, the participants told me that they found this exercise – the intertwined practice of reading and writing – worked really well. The activity became a sort of writerly-reading. It was not so much about coming to the core or fixed meaning of the text or figuring out how the writer had intended it, but rather the idea was to respond to each other in an act of sharing thoughts and experiences in the moment, via a different medium than vocal conversation. I experienced this session as a very inward mode of reading together. Instead of arguments and opinions being voiced in the room, thoughts were materialized onto the tablecloth, at a slow pace, where a silent correspondence evolved between minds and hands. At the end, I felt some pressure to come to a satisfying conclusion by pinpointing what exactly Lorde meant by the erotic and summarizing what our interpretations of the concept were. However, the reading in silence and the note taking forced me to postpone the voicing of a conclusion, installing a different duration on the formation of knowledge. This did not occur within the assigned time and place, as something that was neatly finalized when the class was over, but rather unfolded as a simmering, ongoing process that could be opened again upon the next session. At first, I doubted whether that was strong choice or not, but decided that coming to no conclusion and keeping things open is actually allowed, and the participants agreed too.

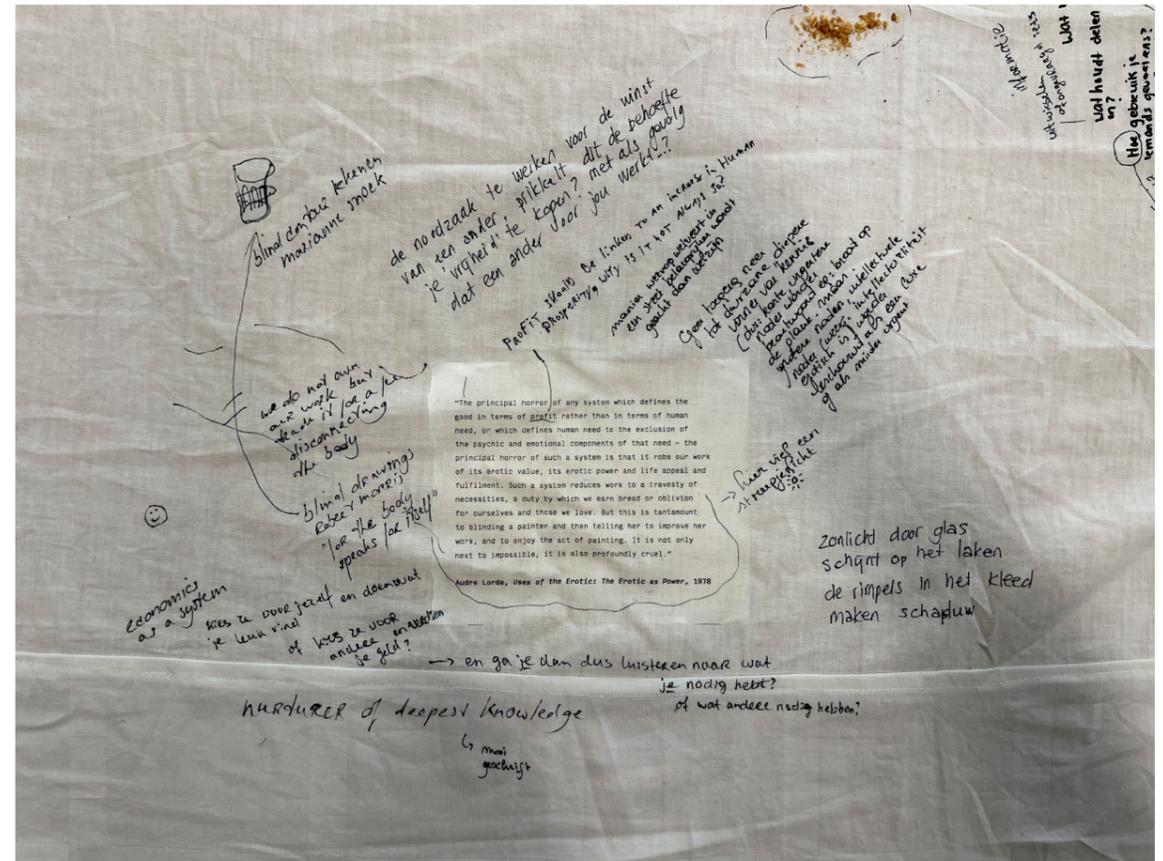


Image: Pillow Talk I: Kitchen Table Reading, 30.3.2023

Reading (Out Loud) With Others

My theory classes always had a traditional structure with regards to the place and time of reading texts. Reading is done at home as an individual undertaking and in class we discuss the cognitive products. During the Many Hands Make A Quilt theory elective, I started with relocating the time and place of reading into the classroom. Reading together became a collective ritual that I tried to organize by, for example, inviting students to re-shape the text spatially by putting printed sheets on the floor in a circle and letting everybody take turns in moving around them, reading out loud. My intention was to let different voices interweave like a patchwork. In practice, I noticed that students often felt uncomfortable with reading out loud. They were anxious about making mistakes or insecure about accents or slips of the tongue (as most texts were in English, with Dutch speaking students). In my introduction to the course, I had included the following statement: *alle haperingen, alle accenten en vergissingen mogen er zijn. Die zijn prachtig, net als foutjes in een naaiwerk*. However, the performativity of this proclamation is probably limited. After one student voiced her insecurities and told me she'd rather listen, I mentioned more explicitly that students may refuse to read, and we put that in the collective protocol. The participatory reading also illuminated that not everyone feels always safe enough to be open to generating collectivities.



After this experience, I became intrigued by the notion of failure that relates to reading out loud, and the affective landscape that this creates for both listeners and readers. As I listen, I tend to feel the shame of the reader making a mistake quite physically myself. I decided to focus on failure and the emotions that come with it in one of the Pillow Talk sessions, by proposing a theory-karaoke where we would blunder-sing fragments from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) together in order to make mistakes sexy instead of shameful. I wanted to amplify the voicing of a text, quite literally by sing-reading it, and turn it into a collective experience that escaped the reader-listener divisions. Here we would all become readers and listeners at the same time. We started the session by whispering a sentence from Sara Ahmed's text on shame in each other's ear, Chinese whispers style. Listening to the whispers, hearing each other's voices and saliva, and then closely approaching someone else's face and trying to shape the words with my own mouth, felt like the opposite of the hilarious karaoke session that followed. We were a group of five: one DBKV student, one Creative Writing student, one ArtEZ finance employee, my philosophy-teacher colleague from DBKV, and myself. When the tune from Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' started, instead of the original lyrics, sentences from the last paragraph of Chapter 3 from *The Queer Art of Failure* appeared on the screen. Everybody started off a bit hesitant, but soon we were sing-screaming-laughing the words, attempting to remain in synch with each other, the rhythm of the text and the melody of the song. After fifteen minutes of singing and repeating the words over and over, managing each time to fit text to melody a little better, our bodies were sweaty, and our cheeks were red. This time not because of shame, but because of shared joy.

Images:
Pillow Talk IV: Sexy Mistakes.
25.5.2023

Through collective blundering, participants agreed that we had turned the failure of being out of sync into a great success. The karaoke session opened up a conversation about the (im)possibilities of being out-of-synch in the structures of traditional pedagogy, and how this conflicts with modes of assessments, for example the 80% presence rule that functions as a threshold for students be assessed at all. One participant wondered, what does it actually mean to be present in the classroom, how can we be sure that presence equals learning? The sense of being 'in-it' together that the karaoke helped to facilitate allowed for a collaborative meaning-making of the idea of failure in the context of education. Singing together had created the conditions for a confluence of thoughts, affects and collectivities to emerge. The karaoke-session, the wildly physical experience of bursting into song, out of tune and out of sync, became a way for us to fall in love with our mistakes. These are true moments of connecting in the classroom, where we feel each other's mistakes and love them all the same. Here, the intimate becomes an important precondition for the ability to embrace discomfort. Students have to feel loved enough in order to start loving their mistakes. These mistakes turn into the wild eruptions of collective joy, in the intimate space between words that we should nurture as the risky surprises in the process of learning. It is important to notice that discomfort and safety are not the same here. We have to feel safe enough to be able to allow discomfort to exist in the classroom, and not to feel ashamed about it.





Image:
Pillow Talk IV: Sexy Mistakes,
25.5.2023

Image:
A Skirt With Pockets, RASL workshop,
15.11.2022



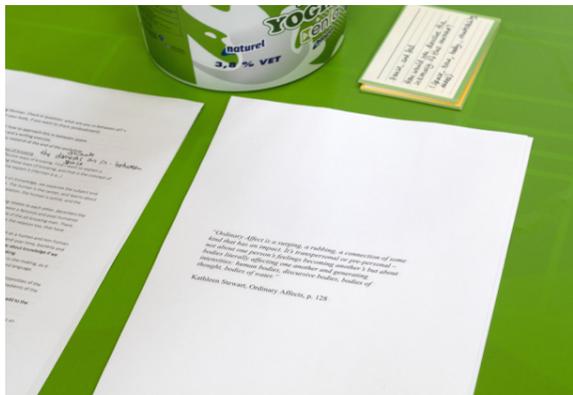
Intimate Learning with others

In a couple of my workshops, I have experimented with the sense of touch. A workshop that I proposed at RASL was called A Skirt With Pockets, held in November 2022, that took the participants on an individual sensory walk through the building guided by pre-recorded sound essay of my voice they could listen to on their phones. For the sensory walk, I took the pocket as a metaphor and material companion to engender an intimate experience of place, in this case the Hillevljet building in Rotterdam South, and to open up the question of what we can learn about a place through the sense of touch. In the sound essay, I related feeling and touching in the manner that Sedgwick writes about it in her book *Touching Feeling* (2003). The first assignment for students was to think of a question that is dear to them, relating to their own research projects at RASL. They would write the question on a piece of paper and put this in their pockets. This was followed by a set of prompts that invited them to zoom in and slow down, to walk in silence and to sense the building as if it were their pocket. I invited them to attune to the building as the sensuous terrain through touch and texture, asking the question: how does this experiencing, the experiential, then relate not only to feeling the world, but getting to know it too?

A fragment on the relationship between feeling and knowing from the script of the sound essay A Skirt With Pockets goes as follows:

*To put a hand in your pocket automatically means to touch, and touch is inextricably connected to texture, as texture is what we perceive through our fingertips when we touch a surface. It involves an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, and whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure. The feminist writer and scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in her book *Touching Feeling* that to perceive texture is always already to think. While perceiving texture, one cannot avoid thinking of the physical properties of the thing that is being touched, while at the same time being touched by it. When you touch, you feel.*

To perceive texture is not done merely through touching with the fingertips, it also involves vision and sound. We see texture, on various scales. You can zoom into the material something is made of, or perceive the texture of a landscape from afar. You can hear the texture of your trousers while walking, or the texture of the floor when being touched by your feet. Our sensing, feeling and perceiving bodies are what connects us to the world, also in the act of learning. When we learn, or get to know, as a perceiving subject, we don't do this as an island, but deeply and multiply connected to the world around us. By being in touch with it, and touched by it.



But what is it that we actually get to know by touching and feeling the physical world around us? After the workshop, I felt quite puzzled about what it means to understand knowing like this, as something that happens in the relationship between the body and the world, and what it could mean to the students in an institutional context. I felt that I did not completely grasp that yet myself. Feeling or zooming in on the details of a surface can create a sense of intimate, or at least proximity or familiarity, with a space. Paying attention to something, feeling it, may create feelings of connection, or quite the contrary: abjection or disgust, for example, when scratching a rough or stony surface with a fingernail. How is the learning itself intimate, and what do students get to know in this state? Thinking about how the intimate ties into thinking and learning, I now understand that the question is not put right: it is not about *what* is learnt, but rather the question is *how* we learn in intimacy. How can we take embodiment seriously as a feeling and knowing with others and the physical world around us? And, in terms of the intimate as nonrational, relational, and a feeling in the doing as described in the first chapter, the question rather becomes where the intimate learning is located in this whimsical process of education, as the cognitive and reason, and the cerebral capacity to reflect and to analyze, are inevitably part of this process too.



Images:
The Wildly Domestic Classroom, RASL workshop,
5.4.2023
credit: Maaïke van Papeveld

¹ Brood Herman in the Netherlands is similar to Amish friendship bread, a type of bread or cake made from a sweet sourdough starter that is often shared in a manner similar to a chain letter.

In April, I was invited back to RASL to host a workshop on 'intimate and affective ways of knowing' for the RASL dual degree course. This course was developed for Bachelor students to help them to reflect on their specific positions in between two studies, two educational paradigms and two disciplines – and develop work in that space. I proposed to turn to the intimate as a way of approaching this in-between space. The workshop was a 'Brood Herman'¹ baking activity followed by an individual journaling exercise. My intention was to prepare the bread together and afterwards discuss the idea of the relationality of knowledge and the notion of ordinary affects as one of the ingredients to this mix that is knowledge in the making (Ellsworth, 2005). I proposed to understand the space in-between studies and paradigms as a space where different ingredients transform into something new overtime, where the ordinary, the affects and intensities of daily life, are inextricably part of (Stewart, 2007). However afterwards, I realized that these concepts had remained too abstract, that I did not manage to make them situational and thus not affective, and that the students were having a hard time connecting the idea of preparing and baking fermented matter (the Herman dough), with the topics of learning and ways of knowing. I tried to transform this abstraction into something more concrete by reading a passage from my own research journal as an example of an intimate way of knowing in the domestic sphere. When this did not really land either, I understood that ordinary affects are too particular to be meaningful to all, it is really situational and sharing a personal example in words did not get the message across. In the moment, I felt that the students hardly engaged, and thus my proposition had more or less failed. My aim was to set something in motion within the time and space of the workshop itself. However, the encounter between the theory, the activity and the student's bodies did not become affective, and this was also confirmed by the students in their feedback afterwards. Where in the Pillow Talk karaoke-session, singing bodies, disco spaces, and projected words met in a productive way and allowed for a deeper understanding of the notion of failure in relation with education by making sense of the singing-experience together, such a moment of collective insight had not been achieved during the RASL workshop.

Image:
Preparing the Brood Herman dough starter for The Wildly
Domestic Classroom workshop



Perhaps, the notion of *touch* and *to be in touch with* can still be helpful to understand the idea of affective learning with others, and where it happens. I don't necessarily mean the mutual touching of human skin, but rather the multiple ways of (metaphorical) touching that may, or may not, happen in an educational situation. Touching happens in contact with others, in the here and now; it is involved in the present moment. When touching something, you are simultaneously touched by it too. Touch is never one-way communication. Touch can be about the moment of entering the classroom, how we 'touch' its atmosphere and how this at the same time 'touches' us. The touching can be the 'oomph' or the 'aahh' or 'yikes' that happens before we know what that actually means. Often, this happens in the doing, in an activity such as the singing together. These affective situations, spheres, and intensities are all inextricably part of the process of meaning-making in the educational situation, entangles with language bases aspects such as texts, prompts, conversation. Thinking through the relationship between intimacy and learning requires, again, that we understand that affect and thought are inextricable, and that learning is already as much about feeling as it is about thinking (Snaza, 2020, p.116). Affective pedagogies may also happen outside of the teacher's conscious intentions, and then the emotional or affective literacy is needed to pick up on these affects, and make room in the classroom time and space for creating new connections, and new styles for thinking. Pedagogy then becomes about allowing more of what is not ourselves – the affects, the more-than-rational presences, and intensities in the room – to allow the transformative process of learning to fully exist. This does not mean that I think that we should spent equal time with all presences, energies and intensities that emerge in the classroom and at all times. We still need separations, cuts, decisions, deadlines, guidance, in order to be able to get to the end of the class or course in time. However, I wished that we as teachers and students had more agency in shaping these cuts and separations ourselves, gently and lovingly, rather than centuries of Western civilization having already done that for us. Perhaps it is in the intimate, that we can create space for gentle cutting, for keeping the right distance while remaining *in touch*.

Perhaps you can feel the warmth of a body just left

Assessment (A Letter to my Students)

When we understand learning as embodied, as unpredictable, an ongoing movement of relating with others, how can I as the teacher assess the student's results after each course, within a certain time-frame, for each student individually and according to predetermined competencies? For the Many Hands Make A Quilt course, I decided to write a collective assessment in the form of a letter that I sent to students after the last session. The assessment entailed my observations of the sessions and their process as a group, complemented with some things that I learnt myself, to show them that learning never occurs in a one-way direction.



Image:
Pillow Talk III: Sensual Competence
11.5.2023

donderdag 9 maart 2023 16:24

Beste Lisa, Liesbeth, Lorita, Monica, Hester, Sanne, Femke, Marjan, Xiao, Nicoline, Nienke, Imke, Rosalie, Suzan, en Angelica.

Jullie vinden deze 'feedback' ook op Osiris, en ook alvast even per mail. Ik wil jullie bedanken voor je deelname aan de theorie keuzeworkshop Many Hands Make A Quilt. Voor mij als docent was het een interessant proces om samen met jullie te doorlopen. In plaats van 'feedback' in de traditionele zin, wil ik een aantal van de inzichten die ik samen met jullie heb opgedaan met jullie delen.

Hoe leren we? Dit is een vraag die ik mezelf vaak stel, ook omdat ik lesgeven en educatie niet zie als enkel iets leren áan anderen, maar als een situatie waarin iedereen iets leert (dus ook de docent), dus vooral mét anderen. Kennis wordt dan beweeglijk in plaats van een vaste leeruitkomst (kijk maar naar ons 'protocol'). Tijdens de eerste les bleek al uit onze brainstorm dat leren op zóveel verschillende manieren gebeurt, en ook manieren die niet altijd prioriteit krijgen binnen klassieke pedagogie. Het zijn de momenten van verhoogde concentratie, nadenken, luisteren, en ook voelen, het emotionele en intuïtieve. Ik heb veel waardering voor de manier waarop jullie met deze vraag aan de slag zijn gegaan: open, kritisch, en vertrekkend vanuit eigen ervaringen.

Dat brengt me meteen bij een andere belangrijke voorwaarde voor leren, wat niet alleen gaat over voelen, maar ook over je góed voelen. Het trof me hoe sommigen van jullie je grenzen aangaven, of duidelijk maakten dat iets niet goed voelde (zoals het hardop voorlezen). Bell hooks schrijft in haar boek *Pedagogy of Hope* over het belang om als 'geheel mens' aanwezig te zijn in de klas (zowel voor studenten als docenten). Dat betekent dat er oog is voor alles wat je meebrengt als mens, dus ook gevoelens en emoties, ongemak, pijn, een persoonlijke geschiedenis, en iedereen is daar ook weer verschillend in. Voor mij is dat ook oefenen: wanneer en hoe kunnen we, naast de theorie en opdrachten, tijdens de les ruimte maken voor de fysieke en emotionele aspecten, die ook van invloed zijn op leren en hoe we ons voelen in de klas? Jullie kleine opmerkingen waren daar een goede reminder voor. Als docent blijft het belangrijk om niet aan te nemen te weten wat 'veilig' voelt voor studenten.

Het maken van de patchwork bracht voor mij een 'huiselijk' element het klaslokaal in. Dat kan je natuurlijk als iets banaals beschouwen, maar het heeft me aan het denken gezet over wat het 'huiselijke' (the domestic, of the ordinary, the mundane, dat klinkt mooier), kan betekenen in de klas, in het kunstinstituut, en hoe dat samenhangt met hoe we ons voelen in dat instituut of dat klaslokaal. Het huiselijke is traditioneel gezien het feminiene domein, waar je jezelf kan zijn, min of meer afgescheiden van het publieke leven, maar tegelijkertijd ook 'werelds' (de keuken, de tuin, het intergenerationele). Huiselijke rituelen en activiteiten zijn ook vormen van leren en kennen, op zeer kleine en intieme schaal. Een andere observatie was, maar dat is natuurlijk subjectief, dat het prettig was dat iedereen zelf kon kiezen hoeveel of weinig je werkte aan het patchwork. Net zoals je zelf kiest te spreken of enkel te luisteren. Ook in stilte naaien kan zo voelen als 'meedoen'. De patchwork als een archief van onze collectieve uitwisseling, en individuele handen-kennis.

Tot slot wil jullie complimenteren voor jullie reflecties op de hotglue website. Ze zijn authentiek, mooi, en inhoudelijk treffend! Ik had daar in de laatste les eigenlijk meer aandacht aan willen besteden, want veel van jullie reflecties zijn zeker de moeite waard om samen te bespreken. Een les voor mij!

(P.S. alle deelnemers hebben de punten behaald, mocht je je dat nog afvragen :)).

Hartelijke groeten,

Jesse

III. THE INTIMATE IN EDUCATION (REFUSING THE LAST WORD)

A Pedagogy of Minor Gestures (On Institutional Change)

First of all, I want to talk about change. This research was conducted out of a desire for change, a wish to do things differently in my own classroom and to move away from the notion of separation towards the intimate as a vital principle of education. While writing this, I am still in the midst of developing and facilitating the last two Pillow Talk reading group sessions. I notice that when time is limited and my energy is low, I tend to fall back into old teaching habits. For example, after the last Pillow Talk session about the sensuous, I felt that I did not put enough effort into connecting the activity of making a soup with the content of the theory through prompts that effectively focused on learning through the senses. I noticed that I relied on talking about a text, rather than proposing a pedagogical gesture that permits the embodiment of it. Drastically changing things, I figured, is time consuming. This is obvious, as unlearning habits and creating something new is not done on autopilot. My job at ArtEZ (outside of the reading group project) does not formally allow for changes in terms of time and space in my everyday teaching schedule. The fte-units that are on my task description leave little room for development of new material, which in general produces employees that benefit from repeating the familiar course structures and content each year. Changing things is never effortless. Looking at it pessimistically and in the reality of the neoliberal working field, the work is 'extra' and is thus effectively unpaid. I also need to stress that an intimate approach is not applicable to all courses that I teach at ArtEZ, nor is it applicable to all theory. Some classes or projects offer room for artful pedagogical gestures, for creativity and experiment, while others require a more traditional approach to knowledge and learning.

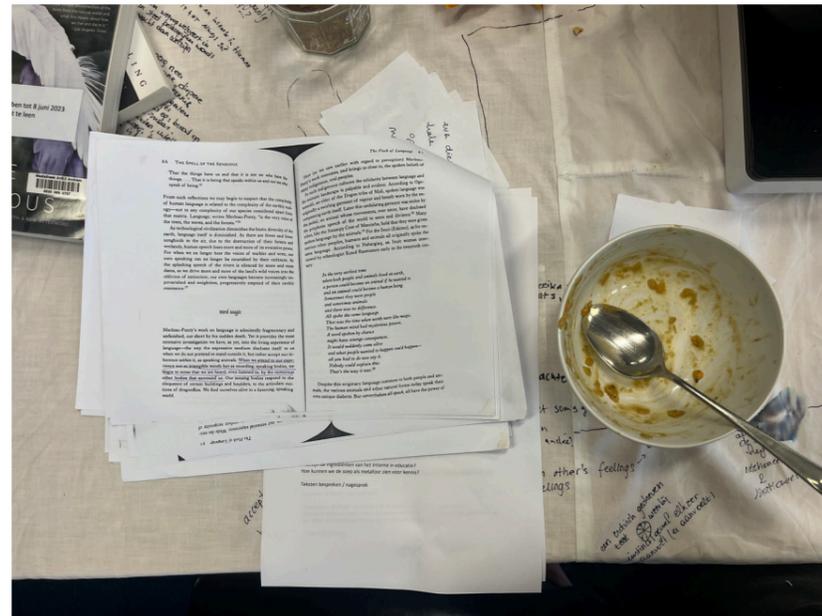


Image:
Pillow Talk III: Sensual Competence.
11.5.2023

Having said that, I think that the challenge is, in the position of a teacher with the privilege of a fixed contract albeit with little fte's, to find the in-between spaces or the places in the curriculum where I can change things under my own conditions. The Pillow Talk reading group, although it can formally be seen as part of the curriculum as a 'studium generale', to me functioned as a micro-space for experimenting with doing things otherwise. And the same goes for the Many Hands Make A Quilt course, which I could completely design myself and, for example, take the liberty to bypass individual assessments according to fixed competences. To value small changes in the micro-educational spaces – and to understand that radicality is not necessarily in grand public manifestations – a different mindset towards the idea of change is needed. When we understand reality as relational, or “fractal”, as adrienne maree brown puts in the book *Holding Change* (2021), the smallest change changes the whole of things. And like Erin Manning (2016) puts it, the major and the minor are always interlaced, however neither the minor nor the major are fixed in advance (p. 2). This means that the classroom is not an isolated space but is always interconnected with the world; with ordinary and the worldly, the intimate and the global. How we relate to each other confined to that space but is also practiced in life, and on the larger scale of the institution. Pedagogy is always already normative in the sense that its traditional shape it is based on a certain way of viewing the world. If we want to change things inside the institution, how we teach, and how this opens up to different practices, may change the nature of the 'collective intelligence' (Juelskjaer, 2020, p. 54) of the whole of the student body of the art academy, and the diverse ways of relating, acting, knowing and sensing that is permitted by the pedagogical gesture.

While I'm finalizing this text, I am also preparing for the last session of the Pillow Talk reading group called Dreaming Out Loud: Sleeping on the Future Academy. We will lay ourselves to rest in the ArtEZ library, to dream about the future of art school. Personally, I don't envision a school without walls. It is not a home, nor is it a garden, nor a nightclub. What I would love it to be though, is a place with no thresholds. No doorways or metaphorical thresholds, as well as no thresholds in terms of thought, imagination and valuation. What is the value of one body? If we would truly listen to our bodies in education, we would show up in class out of love; or not at all. This reminds me of a beautiful remark one of the participants made during a Pillow Talk session after I expressed my doubts about having so few participants for the reading group: “The people that show up are always the right people. One human is everything.” I thought this to be very true: one person showing up is already of immense magnitude. And what if no-one shows up for the next reading group session? I will dance on my own, dance in the empty spaces of the art academy library after closing-time, and sleep, sleep, sleep.



Image:
Pillow Talk V, Dreaming out Loud: Sleeping on the Future Art Academy
8.6.2023

Refusing the Last Word: A Sticky Note on the Intimate in Education

My application for the MEIA program, that I wrote in March 2021, consisted of a love letter to the program and the commission, as well as a handwritten note on the intimate that I included with the digital application. In the end, this project became not about coming to conclusions about the intimate in education, but rather about opening it up. Looking back to the workshops over the past months, there are so many sensations and encounters with students that got stuck in my body that I did not manage to describe in this text. Words just literally fall short. I experienced intimacy, but did the others too? When reading back the second chapter of this text, some of the intimate quality of the writing of the first chapter somehow got lost. I think that during the writing process, I must have unconsciously passed through the institutional portal. During the writing, I sensed the presence of an external verdict that I apparently did not manage to escape. I too, have to pass the exam, and perhaps therefore I felt in the moment of writing I had to prove my transformation, unconsciously moving towards a more analytical mode of writing, explaining the definitions of my intimate pedagogy. During the writing process, I failed to stick with my body, and at the same time, this failing shows how the institutional mechanism of examination impinges on the body. Perhaps in the end, my pedagogy just doesn't have any clear definitions, and it is rather about intentionality and situatedness. It is about feeling in the doing, and trusting this feeling as worthwhile. It is about taking risks and letting others experience that too. I think that is perhaps the most erotic part of education.

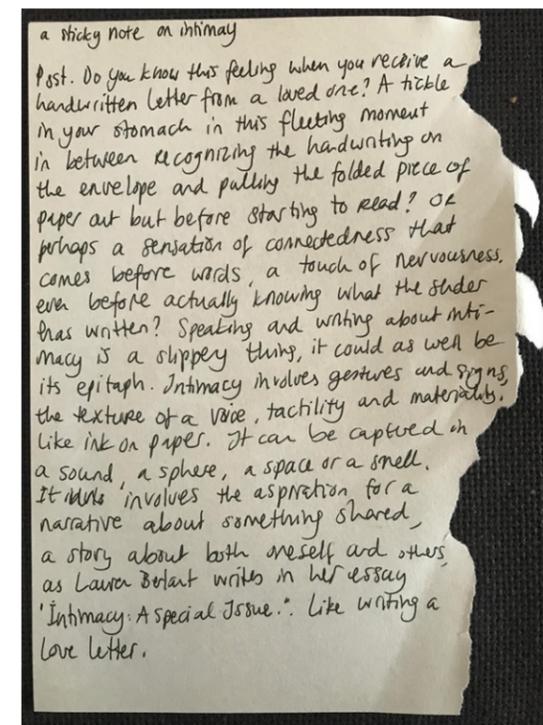


Image:
A Sticky Note on Intimacy,
14.3.2021

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