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*the*  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
PROCESS  
*of a*  
RITUAL OF KNOWING:

A Structure Built Around  
Unknown Things

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## THE BEGINNING OF A RESEARCH

Research begins from a place of uncertainty. If what is to be discovered is already known, there is no point in embarking on the journey. Certainty is safe and comfortable, while uncertainty holds the potential for growth and change. There is no final destination of knowledge, but a continuing cycle fueled by what has come before and what lies ahead.

A journey of unknown destination that begins for an unknown purpose can be dismissed as aimless wandering, or embraced as a catalyst for learning and the development of knowledge. Maybe this journey begins with apprehension—where to go, what to do? Can it begin at any point, by simply noticing the immediate circumstances of the present? Almost every point of space links boundlessly in every spatial and temporal direction, containing an infinite pool of possibility and, therefore, research potential. What imperceptible things rest in these interstitial spaces? What could tempt things that are everywhere all the time, but never seen, into showing themselves for a moment? What tools could make these things visible, or even begin to represent something unrepresentable? Perhaps the best that can be done is to build a framework, an architecture, a bridge. Maybe this is the only way we can get closer to the unrepresentable, or to anything.

Information is gathered and processed through a complex system of knowledge, a system of definite but flexible structure that adapts and changes, finds and follows patterns, and sometimes breaks apart under the force of something completely new. What is shattered can rebuild itself while integrating, adapting, and compensating for what has been rendered obsolete. This fabric of our existence weaves across space and time, and in its wrinkles intangible things reside. They rest in interstices between consciousness, sensation, and other processes that make up our ways of knowing. These *felt unknowns*, sensed things, are a source of infinite energy, the fuel of desire to discover the mysteries and potential of the universe. In these wrinkles, happenings occur. They *take place* by shifting from abstract and anonymous *space* into connection and entanglement, linking things together in a particular *place*. As one pleat joins another, a morphology is enacted, *takes shape*, and this form necessarily connects with the causes of its formation, and the continued causes of its metamorphosis. These connections might have no satisfactory explanation, and seem like spooky actions at a distance<sup>1</sup>. What entwines these things, and us to them, and all of us to the places where events occur? Are these invisible bridges science *or* magic? Were we brought together by chance *or* for some purpose that is not known to us? Maybe *or* has no place here, and now.

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<sup>1</sup> Quantum entanglement, criticised by Albert Einstein in his later years as “spooky action at a distance”, is the experimentally proven phenomenon of subtly entwined, distant particles having an influence on one another across space, indicating that the universe is not local; particles separated by millions of miles can still react as if they are right on top of one another. (Greene)

In these places, things embed themselves and begin to unfold in their own way, each thing concerned primarily with its own unfolding. The desire of each thing to find its way in the world manifests in this way, testing agency, and acting out desires to merge, individuate, grow, and transform. It is only in the process of unfolding that we can know how to unfold. Can this process be observed in the course of a research that acknowledges science as an adventure<sup>2</sup>—as a builder of bridges rather than walls? As soon as ideas must be categorized as something of science (to be proven), or something of faith (to be believed) a wall is constructed around them so that they may no longer continue their process of unfolding. If these things are bridged rather than walled, a kind of knowledge structure can emerge around them. This oblique and flexible way of viewing ideas is a productive uncertainty, where things need not necessarily be considered as one thing *or* another. As the ground beneath falls away, as everything shifts and changes, it is a flexible structure that endures.

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<sup>2</sup> (Stengers)

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SELVES

NOTED IN TEXTUAL DIFFERENCE AS  
( the past self / the present self / *the future self* )

**Whenever I begin to do something, I never know exactly what it is that I am doing.**

I also have that feeling, but when I begin to panic, it helps me to look back to what you did.

*And forward, don't forget.*

Yes, forward too. When I look forward, I can see the shape of things, but it blurs into the distance. When I look backward, at some point it also begins to blur... but I can see the things that we managed to get out of, so I know there is hope. Sometimes I forget the things I need to remember the most: who I am, what I'm trying to do, and why I'm even doing it.

**Rather hopeless and lost, not knowing what will happen.**

*Being lost always gives way to learning something you did not know before – Walter Benjamin said that the state of being lost is to be “fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery.”<sup>3</sup>*

I began with the idea that a series of small, seemingly simple interactions lead to something greater than the sum of its parts...

**Is that where we're going?**

*There will be collaborations with others, and they will help you, but eventually the materials you use, the ideas, the words, they will all be your collaborators.*

I am also interested in something that I don't know how to put into words.

*You are looking for the bigger picture, where your research will lead. You will not see it until you change your point of view.*

To change a point of view, to change at all... there is a before and an after, and something in the middle that is unknown. I think about the way we approach the unknown, the gaps, what

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<sup>3</sup> (Benjamin as quoted by Solnit 6)

lies between what we know and don't know, what we see and the way we can represent it, the things we think and the words we use to describe them...

**I never know how or if we can really *know* anything that we know. Do you know what I mean?**

*Yes, of course. We are limited in the way we can really know a phenomenon through perception. Immanuel Kant used the term noumenon, or the "thing in itself", to describe something the human mind can only understand through its relationship to a phenomenon (an observable manifestation of the unperceivable noumenon)<sup>4</sup>. You will begin to accept the unknowability of things. On the path towards the unknown, you will discover its relationship to knowledge.*

Do you mean "non-knowledge", the opposite of knowledge?

*The opposite of knowledge is ignorance while non-knowledge is more subversive. According to Sarat Maharaj it is the "other of knowledge", occupying the space between knowledge and its opposite.<sup>5</sup> It is a kind of knowing that continually subverts itself—"not-knowing is placed inside the fabric of knowledge, not outside of or in contradiction to it, but something that allows an experience of the religious and sublime".<sup>6</sup> Anthony Huberman curated an exhibition on the subject called "For the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there", and described it as a particular way of knowing the world, a way that leaves the door wide open for curiosity.<sup>7</sup> Non-knowledge, then, is what you can feel, what rests on the very tip of your mind... if you let yourself feel it. Sometimes our knowledge will expand by learning just how much we don't know about something.*

I think about non-knowledge as a strategy to deal with the amount of information that we have to cope with, to allow the unknown to exist in our psychological framework more comfortably... perhaps because the unknown is so frightening. To accept it is to accept learning and knowledge in a different way. It's interesting because it's always moving away.

*Yes. Martin Heidegger described thinking as a handicraft, something to be cultivated, and made a connection between the skills of the mind and the skills of the hand, as in traditional handicrafts. He said: "what beckons us to think is, simply, that which is thought-provoking. And, what is thought-provoking has not been thought; it turns away from us. What has not been thought (yet) withdraws from us"<sup>8</sup>... So to practice thinking is to practice following that which withdraws.*

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<sup>4</sup> (Wikipedia.org)

<sup>5</sup> Sarat Maharaj used the Sanskrit term Avidya to elucidate the idea: "by adding 'A' to Vidya (to see-know), we find the expression of a "middle term as in moral<amoral>immoral". (Maharaj 49)

<sup>6</sup> (Huberman 52)

<sup>7</sup> (Huberman interview)

<sup>8</sup> (Heidegger as quoted by Rosenberg 111)

**Yes, but what withdraws, and how to follow it? I need to understand some kind of structure or framework for this research, and I can only understand certain parts, as clues.**

*To understand the system, follow the structures. Structures connect the parts, or elements, of a whole. A whole is a system understood through its properties. We understand the circulatory system by what it does. We understand the structure of a vein by how it connects to other veins, and to organs. Structures are rules that define the composition and functioning of the system, "its properties and stability".<sup>9</sup> A cloud has a structure, weather has a system. Structures organize our reality, but they are always changing. While the present is shrinking, your knowledge is increasing in many ways. The way you understand this conversation, this day, and the very shape and fabric of the universe is changing. The past can be an anchor in such a destabilized climate.*

**Yes, an anchor if nothing else.**

What is past, and what is present? The temporal imaginary shifts. The rapid advance of technology and its nearly immediate obsolescence affects the way we measure the present.<sup>10</sup> It shrinks, caught in a continuously shifting cycle of renewal, causing instability in our relationship to time. This creates an "unbearable tension in our structures of feeling"<sup>11</sup>. But what does a structure of feeling look like?

*Raymond Williams used the term "structure of feeling" to describe the practical consciousness of lived experience. He distinguished this from the already formed, fixed and institutionalized official consciousness, or the social forms that are already well understood, and best described in the past tense. Structures of feeling address the experience of the present, not only the temporal present, but also the specificity of present being, physical, and emerging. The concept concerns meaning and values as they are actively lived and felt, still in process, often not recognized as social forms but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating. After analysis, these can be recognized as emergent, connecting, and may eventually become the more formalized structures of social institutions. Also importantly, it is about the "affective elements of consciousness" and the relationship between feeling and thought—"not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought".<sup>12</sup> This distinction between past and emergent social structures is similar to internal structures of thought. Williams found the concept of thinking to be a similarly finished and formed concept in comparison to a "more active, more flexible, less singular" definition. The past, fixed form is thinking; the emergent, becoming form is consciousness, experience, and feeling.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> (Spirkin 152)

<sup>10</sup> (Huyssen 23)

<sup>11</sup> (Huyssen 23)

<sup>12</sup> (Williams 132)

<sup>13</sup> (Williams 128)

*These structures seem to come from nothing, and begin to take shape. Any manifestation is only a momentary glance from one angle of infinitely many angles and moments. A translation of a phenomenon, influenced by a structure of feeling, gives form to an embodied knowledge. It is both thought and felt. Rituals are designed to get closer to this kind of knowledge.*

**A ritual to organize what is felt but not rationally understood? To understand the emergent knowledge of the present?**

*Rituals can be acts of the body that organize the disquiet of the mind, the unbearable tensions of being. Whatever words you call them by, they are structures, part of knowledge systems, and whether they make external sense, they make an internal sense to the performer of the ritual. A structure of feeling is another conceptual way of approaching what is not fully within one's grasp—the instability of time, perception, and truth. What is thought should not necessarily be placed above what is felt.*

I want to use structures of feeling and non-knowledge to get closer to the unknown, to understand it in a different way, and to approach learning for its own sake. The farther one goes, the more possibilities open up. The closer to infinity, the more infinite.

**Or the more lost we can become.**

Yes. But we are always getting lost and found.

**Yes, we are.**

I think this all relates back to the human production of knowledge and our expanding view of things, the slippery structure of feeling that we feel in the present moment.

**More solid than tomorrow...**

Less solid than yesterday...

*Sometimes you must get lost to see where you really are, to notice, to reorient yourself according to nature... to be more conscious, more awake.*

**I often feel that I am still sleeping, somehow...**

Or always waking up, again and again, in each moment.

*As your world becomes more immediate, you are more sensitive to your surroundings, more focused on the unseen that is most presently visible. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity... one is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes."<sup>14</sup> He refers here to being more conscious in the present moment. He is not referring to unrepresentable or unknowable things, but the immediate consciousness of present being. To be more sensitive to things is a way of getting unlost.*

### **That would be useful.**

It reminds me of a story about cutting through the unknown to get to the other side.

*The way to accept the unknown is to go through it, to go straight through the centre to the other side, except that it is not the other side but a path back to where you started, with greater clarity. In the process of learning, there are choices and vulnerability, and maybe that uncertainty is unpleasant, but to follow the path means traveling a long way to come back to where you started and finally knowing where you are. As the poet T.S. Eliot expressed: "we shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."<sup>15</sup>*

### **Getting unlost, for a moment.**

*Yes, and that happens through uncertainty. Certainty, and even the notion of things being "scientifically proven" is the source of much stupidity. In fact, you could say that "the lack of certainty is perceived as a sign of weakness instead of being what it is—the first source of our knowledge"<sup>16</sup>.*

There is this quote I love, but I can't remember who said it—"if we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?"

*Einstein said that.<sup>17</sup>*

Oh, right.

*He also said that "the most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science."<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> (Wikiquote.org)

<sup>15</sup> (Eliot)

<sup>16</sup> (Brockman 51)

<sup>17</sup> (Wikiquote.org)

<sup>18</sup> (Wikiquote.org)

The story is kind of like that—mysterious. It is not clear how the objects have a kind of agency, they share their point of view and show a different way of seeing the world.

**How do they do that?**

I'll tell you the story. It starts with a hole in the wall. No... not a hole... an opening.

## THE OPENING

The shadow of a mountain stretched long over a valley full of trees, and in these woods a small house rested, and a man lived alone. He was a thoughtful man, fond of studying nature, and since his wife had died, he was solitary except for the two snakes he kept as pets. He occupied his free time with an amateur study of morphology, taking great interest in the forms, shapes, and structure of things. It was his habit to make ink forms for a short while every day, which he sorted and kept according to their size and pattern. A simple pressing of ink into paper made no two forms alike, many were quite unremarkable while others became inexplicably beautiful. Like those ink blot tests he'd once been subjected to as a child, the shapes invited him to see meaning in their dark folds, but he resisted this idea, and preferred the forms to remain alive unto themselves, changeable, and free.

On a night when one season was shifting into the next, the heat of summer collided with the chill of autumn, and the air was alive with electricity. The man lay awake in his bed. He was restless, and the darkness that surrounded him was restless. The air was thick with possibility, and it was impossible to sleep. Possibilities swarmed in the air, perfectly silent and persistent. They flowed in synchronous streams until breaking apart, each vibrating at its own frequency. The snakes were especially agitated and their disquiet worried him. Something was about to happen.

The air changed and quickly cooled down. The compression in the room released as though the air was leaking out. The man rose out of bed, and moved towards the source of this cool breeze. What he found then was the strangest and most extraordinary thing he had ever seen in his life. What made it even more extraordinary was that he could barely *see* it. He knew it was there, he could feel it, but it hardly had the appearance of anything. Only from a certain angle could he see a shimmer, a shadow, the slightest shift from one thing to the next, an opening in the wall.

It was not clear whether the opening lead inside or outside, but it was certainly a boundary, a barely perceptible interface between one thing and another. Whether it was caused by the density of the air interacting with gravity, or some other force, we can never know... But in that dark nothingness there was too much of something that needed to get out, and the opening was the inevitable result of this force. This night was the first of many nights the man would pass through the opening to a place on the other side and return tired and exhilarated, without any memory of what he had seen.

Although he could not remember what happened, the man did not doubt the experience of his travels. The memory that *something happened* firmly remained. Most nights the man laid uneventfully in his bed. On other nights, he would feel something coming before it was there, and he was gripped by a terrible joy. His desire was as strong as his fear, a fear that it would suddenly be unreal, not an

opening anymore, just a stray breeze from an open window. He was afraid of risking himself in the unknown each time, but he was even more afraid that the risk would not come again, that he would never know what secrets the opening contained. The man began to fear the opening was a phantasm sent to drive him mad. He didn't fully know himself anymore. He didn't know whether he was himself or not on the other side of the opening. What dangers or pleasures did he meet, and why could he not remember any of them?

After several months of intermittent travel through the opening, he woke up one morning with a souvenir. It was a simple thing, but it was evidence of the otherness, of the place, and proof that his mind was not lost. This practice went on, and he amassed a fair collection of well-shaped sticks and small white stones that fit comfortably in the palm of his hand. He enjoyed these objects for their simple, imperfect beauty, and for the role they played as anchors to the material reality of the other world. To him, their forms were connected to the greater forms of the earth. Sticks were fragments of the intricately entwining structures of trees, branches reaching up and roots reaching down. Stones were distant relations to the mountains, broken pieces from every stone that had sat on the earth since its very beginning. The man got a very funny idea just then. But it wasn't just an idea, it was something he felt he knew but had forgotten. He sensed that these objects could tell him something from the other side of the world. They held evidence, like archeological artifacts, if only he could coax their secrets from them.

Thus began a series of experiments. The man thought he could know the nature of the other world by extracting the essence of its objects, by possessing their memory and the fundamental substance of their thing-ness. He became an alchemist of sorts, testing properties of substance for transformative potential, a process that never quite managed to be science, but never quite managed to be magic, either. Whatever he did, the objects would not reveal their secrets. They would not speak to him.

The man began to think that perhaps the problem was with his approach. Maybe he should bring something with him to the other world, something that could absorb and record the environment and then be read upon return. He brought recording devices of various kinds on his journeys through the opening. On playback they produced nothing but static—their capacity for communication was nullified. He had a bit of copper and thought it might work as a set of recording plates to be marked and printed for evidence. He tested this idea, but when he returned, the recording plates were blank. The man didn't know what else to do. Knowledge of the other side, what he wanted most of all, seemed to be out of reach. All of his efforts seemed pointless, and he thought, what good is an extraordinary gift if it cannot be kept, even in memory? He dumped his collection of objects in a rough pile, and left them there.

That night the man awoke with whispers in his ears. For a moment he wasn't sure whether he was hearing actual sounds or just echoes of dreamt sounds, so he kept very still. The whispers continued,

and they came from the objects. He got up and moved towards them. He saw that something had happened to the copper plates. They were no longer blank, but covered in washes of turquoise and green, some encrusted with a kind of slow-growing crystal. The objects had shifted from their careless pile to exhibit a sense of arrangement. Together they had become activated. Still they whispered, very softly, and he leaned in close. The memories leak out, they said, if you don't keep them in. Cover your head, and make it tight. Memories are slippery. They *want* to get away.

He wasted no time in creating a covering for his head, and kept it beside his bed so that when the opening next appeared, he was ready. It was only a few nights time before he felt that familiar cool breeze. The first time he traveled with his head covering was an intensely strange experience. He was born again into a world without reference points. Having regained the ability to remember, he had consciousness of the place where he was, and began processing his experience. He could hold on to some kind of awareness, but very quickly he found the only sensibility he had was one of absence—a lack of sensation altogether. There was no sound, nothing to see, everything was without texture or temperature. Or more precisely, he could not access these faculties. His senses were deadened and without function in every way. The only thing he could grasp was a dull, lumpy grayness, a wasteland with only the most basic sense of form and mass around him. It was very alarming, and then heart-breaking. After all this time, what he imagined of this world, the beauty of all its wonders and mysteries—these were all before him but farther out of reach than ever. He was an insensate beast, lost to all this world had to give, and hopelessly vulnerable. It didn't make any sense. He sat down, and began to cry.

The man remained sitting for a long time. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know anything about this world, how he had ever managed to find his way around before, or how he had ever been able to collect the objects. What terrified him most was that he didn't know how to get home. Somehow he had managed before, but now that he was conscious, perhaps he was getting in his own way and ruining everything.

He remembered people saying to him: when you're lost, stay where you are, and someone will find you. He had also heard many stories of people who had done just that, and died waiting. Then he remembered a different piece of advice, though he couldn't recall where it came from: when you don't know where to go, or what to do, when you feel lost, or paralyzed, just do something, *anything*. *Begin anywhere*. And so the man began by putting his hands on the ground to push himself up. As he did, he felt a small object was resting just beside him. He would almost say it was waiting to climb into his hand. By instinct he held the thing up to his face to get a better look at it, although he could not see it. Whatever intelligence his hands possessed was lost as well, the form of the object was not discernible. His numb fingers pressed it against his cheek, his lips, and against his nose. He felt a slight tingle. He raised the object again and pressed it against his open eye. His vision was flooded with light, and he was so shocked he dropped the object. It took him only a moment to find it again,

and he raised it quickly to his face. He moved it around slowly in front of his eye and glimpses of light, colour, and shape came into view. When he found the right spot, the world quite suddenly came into glorious focus. He tried holding the thing up to his ear, and the sounds of the world flowed in. He then understood that it was only through the object that the sensations of this world were available to him, without it he was naked and senseless. Overwhelmed, he carefully explored his immediate surroundings, found the opening, and went home.

The man considered this turn of events at length. The thing in his hand, a small shell of some kind, a broken shell, with a hole he could see through, had seemingly taken pity on him, and shown him the world. But how could it be so? Could it really be that in the other world he could see nothing without some kind of help? The appearance of the opening had seemed to be an extraordinary gift, but his total disability on the other side of it called this into question. His subjectivity, perceptions, and individual way of seeing the world were extremely limited and disadvantaged there. Still, the other world remained the place of his most intense desire, and despite his weakness, he felt as drawn to it as ever. He began preparing devices that would allow him to experience the other world more reliably. After some testing and adjustments, they fit quite comfortably.

Each different combination of things gave him slightly different perceptions of the other world. A walnut's view was different than a coconut's, or a slice of pineapple, or a shell, or a rubber ring. He found he preferred some views over others, and came to wear certain objects more often—those with especially charming or optimistic points of view. His vicarious experience of the other side of the world, a communion with its materiality and nature, was how the man began to learn the secrets of the opening. The objects he collected from the other side were fragments, but perfect in themselves, in whatever state of transition they were experiencing, passing from mountain to pebble, from grandeur to dust. Even as tiny particles, they could ride on his shoes. Their forms were in a constant state of metamorphosis, and he was grateful to be part of this in some way.

Like the skins of his shedding snakes, or the ink forms he made, he was only an observer, or at times a catalyst for how they would change form and become whatever they were meant to be. The opening had taught him this, or maybe he had known it before, but had been unable to see. Vision, he realized, was not to see only as his own senses allowed, but as something other that could show him the world in a different and extraordinary way. What satisfied him most about all of it was that it proved that no matter how much he knew, he could not know everything. There would always be something yet to know, and the things out of reach could remain that way, but still leave a tingling sensation in the fingers.

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SELVES

(past / present / future)

### Could the objects really speak?

The important thing was that there was a relation, a bridge. It is similar in some ways to another project we did, a collaboration between two people, trying to communicate through objects rather than through language: *Nothing was said but a gesture, but when you listened, the gestures became flowers (a conversation of objects)*<sup>19</sup>. The only dialogue was through the forms of the objects, their materials, and how they related to the other objects. They became evidence of the relationship, a ritual of knowing each other and the place where we were. Once the objects were made, they began to relate to each other and took on new meaning outside of what either human creator meant to say. This kind of new meaning is larger and more expansive than the original.

*Weird realism is a concept explored by Graham Harmon, who states that relations between real and sensual objects take place within “intentions”. These are shared, common spaces, the interior of a third space. Within intentions, objects do not touch each other fully but can “somehow melt, fuse, and decompress.”<sup>20</sup> Harmon also states that “relations between all real objects, including mindless chunks of dirt, occur only by means of some form of allusion”<sup>21</sup>, requiring objects to touch without touching, by way of a sensual intermediary.*

### What then was the sensual intermediary in either case?

*A sensual intermediary is not a human being facilitating communication. A real object, a pineapple, has a reality of its own, but to me, the eater of the pineapple, it can only be a sensual object. For us to bridge one another’s realities, we must have a sensual intermediary, and we cannot touch the full reality of one another completely. There is no way for me to know the pineapple-in-itself.*

This reality of things we cannot know... it seems to come back to Kant’s conception of the noumenon—the unknowable “thing in itself” that cannot be known by the senses as a perceivable phenomenon.

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<sup>19</sup> Please see figures 4, 5, 6.

<sup>20</sup> (Harmon 190)

<sup>21</sup> (Harmon 221)

*Yes, but the Kantian concept of noumena, those unknowable things, are tied to and limited to human perception<sup>22</sup>, whereas in the story the objects also have their own inner world. Noumena can only be unknown by humans, the thing-in-itself relationship goes only in one direction: human to thing. In the story there is a bridge between the objects' inner world and the inner world of the man. There are subjectivities and modes of perception unrelated to human consciousness. In this example, these subjectivities did the impossible, and touched each other across their realities. The opening is a physical and metaphorical bridge—this could be the sensual intermediary.*

**The place through the opening is an intention or third space, a place where the objects can relate?**

*It is a literal manifestation of the philosophical construct: a place where things can touch, melt, and fuse. The objects freely had memory and agency, and played a crucial role in providing information.<sup>23</sup> This touches upon another aspect of Harmon's metaphysical explorations of weird realism, and what he terms as polypsychism (an entity having multiple souls or modes of intelligence). A certain kind of consciousness can only be achieved for some objects through relations to others: "anything that relates can perceive".<sup>24</sup> The man could not perceive on his own without a sensual intermediary, and the perception of the objects was only revealed by their relation to the man, through the same intermediary.*

**The forms the man studied also seemed to have their own... agency? He made them, but to him they were free unto themselves.**

*Forms have a life outside of us. Even if we make them, objects, images and words evolve outside of our control. They enter into relationships with others, and then change. Raymond Williams saw the forms of art as being particularly subjective to shifting. He said they are in one sense finished, as visual objects, but always activated in the present moment by "readings", so it is always a formative process within a specific present".<sup>25</sup> These presences and processes can be seen as forms themselves, in comparison with other forms, such as "the subjective as distinct from the objective; experience from belief."<sup>26</sup> Similar to the reality of objects, the reality of forms can be linked with our own but can also be entirely separate.*

Forms of art are like the forms of language, they are created at a particular moment, but they continue to shift and gather new meanings after that moment. Forms also mark boundaries, separating inner content from what lies outside.

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<sup>22</sup> (Harmon 188)

<sup>23</sup> See fig. 7, 8, 9.

<sup>24</sup> (Harmon 9)

<sup>25</sup> (Williams 129)

<sup>26</sup> (Williams 129)

*There are discrete forms, which are entities separate from their environment, as are objects, as are humans. Once anything has form, it can begin to relate to other forms. There is also form as structure or system, as Williams describes. In the words of Henri Focillon “form is a dynamic organization that brings into play the concrete texture of the world as the sum of the body’s reactions to that which surrounds it... I do not say that form is the allegory or the symbol of feeling, but rather, its innermost activity. Form activates feeling.”<sup>27</sup> Forms are not just dead shapes or architectures, but living things that evolve through their contact with us, and other forms. I have form, you have form, as does a tree or a poem.*

### **Form activates feeling, so is part of a structure of feeling?**

*A structure of feeling is an invisible structure of affective processes. These structures are organized according to their function, and unlike forms, they are tied to human consciousness and experience. Forms can be anything with a shape, with or without content: “everything is form, life itself is form”.<sup>28</sup> They can be guided or influenced by human perception, but they also can exist wholly outside of it. The forms of nature, for example.*

### **What is the role of form in this structure?**

*Form in language, image, and objects are all evidence... They are the visible manifestations of relations. Whether forms come from a human desire to connect, communicate, or visualize something, or whether they are evidence of something else... An ink form made by a human shows a desire to make a mark, maybe to be seen by another human. It also shows the way the ink connected with the paper. It might be a letter, or number, a dot or a line. They illuminate processes that are always in motion, intangible. How do forms evolve the way they do? Through contact with environmental conditions that prompt evolution, including contact with other forms.<sup>29</sup> We cannot know everything about this process, only some things, and the rest of what is learned, or felt but unknown about it, is non-knowledge. They are an example of “a kind of knowing that operates against itself—an always slippery yet confrontational process of daring to touch what can never be entirely known”<sup>30</sup>.*

**These thinkers all seem to believe in a kind of unknowing. In this productive uncertainty you referred to, as a methodology for research.**

*The more your horizon expands, the more there is to know, and what is interesting may lie at the edges of understanding.*

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<sup>27</sup> (Focillon 27)

<sup>28</sup> Balzac as quoted by Henri Focillon (Focillon 33)

<sup>29</sup> (Focillon 14)

<sup>30</sup> (Huberman 100)

The sublime... the feeling of being at the edge, at the very limit.<sup>31</sup>

*The movement back and forth between sensation and the limits of the sensation makes you more aware of the limits you can perceive... "it is the sensibility of the fading of the sensible."*<sup>32</sup>

It is an experience that does not prioritize thinking over feeling, but it is not against thinking. To process information is to mediate the experience. There can be a great joy in the suspension of disbelief.

**As in magic?**

*It exists in sublime experience.*

Perhaps it does not have to be magic, just something that can exist in a suspended state for a moment, neither physical nor pure thought. It can be the moment when something seems like magic, before it is revealed to be scientifically possible. Sometimes curiosity can take you further than knowing—sometimes facts are a dead end. Comfortable, seemingly complete, but without wonder, without the intrinsic energy to move forward. As Einstein said about mystery being the true cradle of art and science.

*Between science and magic lies every conceivable possibility. To move between magic and science is a kind of ritual, an acting out of a process believed to be transformative. The alchemists believed they could turn lead into gold. They also imbued matter, or substance, with the possibility to transform. To the alchemists, matter was active, not passive. It seems rationally impossible, but the suspension of disbelief allowed them to carry on, and in this process they found the foundations of the scientific method. The notion of transformative potential exists in all rituals, from coming of age to cannibalism. Rituals allow an embodiment of otherness. Only in the praxis, the doing, can a becoming take place. Alchemists used the symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail, to invoke the idea of cycles, constant re-creation, and the integration and assimilation of the opposite.<sup>33</sup> At the moment of integration, of wholeness, one is also broken apart to begin again.*

Yes, it is like the project we did: *The Mistaken Belief of Invisibility that Led to a Visible Transformation*<sup>34</sup>, where two characters act out a kind of ritual dressed in costumes which on one side mimic the green foliage of their environment. The costumes mediated between the body and its environment, using camouflage for decreased visibility and bright colours to increase it, all within the same structure. The weird movements of the performers were a way

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<sup>32</sup> (Morley 47)

<sup>33</sup> (Wikipedia.org)

<sup>34</sup> See Fig. 1, 2, 3.

to create photographic images in which they were barely visible, so ultimately they shifted through different kinds of visibility, from camouflaged, to brightly coloured, to ghostly blur. In North American First Nations rituals, performers wear costumes to become Wolf, or Raven, and they do this to acknowledge the importance of these iconic spirits as well as embody them. For the time of their dance, they are becoming those spirits.

### What were the performers in *The Mistaken Belief of Invisibility* becoming?

The underlying idea of the performance was the feeling of being unseen, but it was about transformation itself. Maybe they were embodying the spirit of transformation that is possible through art practice, and acting out this transformation in a physical, ritualistic way, looking for the boundaries between the artist, the work of art and documentation. The performers explored the limits of their visible and invisible selves, in the lived experience. Visibility and invisibility were not opposites, but occurring simultaneously.

*Rituals are also a way of sharing specialized knowledge. In the First Nations culture of the Coast Salish people, each clan holds specialized knowledge—inheritable, intangible property that is transferred through well-defined and respected rituals, songs, stories, ceremonies, objects and designs. This is a culture that values the tradition of story-telling and exemplifies the idea of embodying knowledge. The myths, important stories, and specialized knowledge for hunting and gathering are passed down through a variety of means, but one of them is certainly by physically embodying the knowledge, and sharing it through ritual.*

Myths are designed to be easily understandable and meaningful, but they have a very set structure, built in terms of binary oppositions, the interplay between similarity and difference.<sup>35</sup>

*Some rituals do not come from myths, they are not a transference of set knowledge, they are rather a grasping for an understanding of what is not readily perceivable or understood. Like the work of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, in which she created situations of interactions between people and objects, rituals can be initiated by one person, and allow meaning to be generated by others.<sup>36</sup> Some rituals are reaching out, trying to touch aspects of the sensible that are hidden or invisible, inviting you to feel the felt unknowns. We are all living, breathing knowledge.*

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<sup>35</sup> (Storey 90)

<sup>36</sup> (Nash and Hammonds 15)

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN SELVES

(past / present / future)

**Are we nearing the end?**

*In a way, yes, but we are also doing just the opposite.*

How many words do we have left?

*We ran out of words a long time ago.*

**Is it time then?**

*Yes, it's time. At some point a transformation occurs...*

**And a ritual is complete.**

And I become you.

*And I become you.*

**And we begin again, at the beginning.**

But knowing what we know, which is something.

**But of course, not as much as we'd like.**

Right. Research must begin somewhere.

## FIGURES

Fig. 1



*The Mistaken Belief of Invisibility that Led to a Visible Transformation*

Long-exposure photograph

Sarah Stein and Enrico Piras, 2012

Created for the exhibition *Three Artists Walk into a Bar*, curated by De Appel curatorial programme participants the Black Swan.

Fig. 2



*The Mistaken Belief of Invisibility that Led to a Visible Transformation*

Performance, video stills

Sarah Stein and Enrico Piras, 2012

Fig. 3



*The Mistaken Belief of Invisibility that Led to a Visible Transformation*  
Photograph, performance documentation  
Sarah Stein and Enrico Piras  
2012

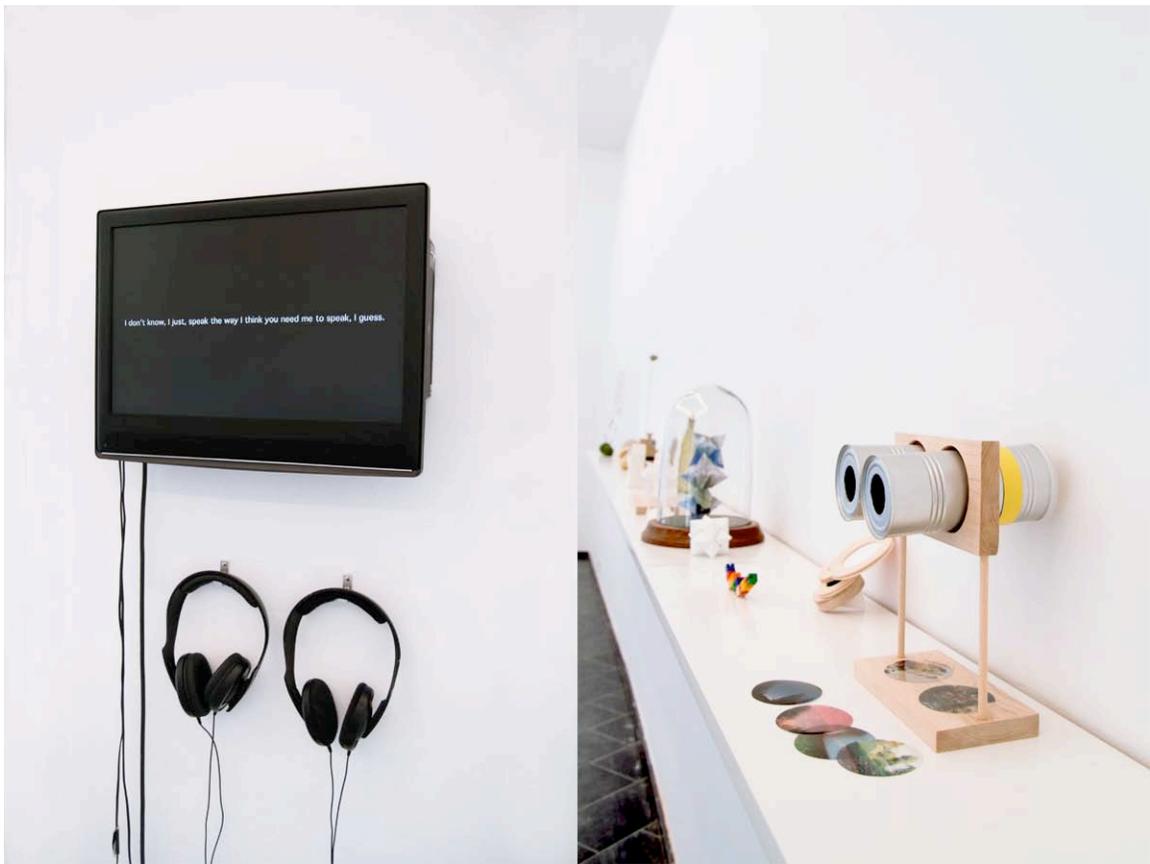
Fig. 4



*Nothing was said but a gesture, and when you listened, the gestures became flowers  
(a conversation of objects)*

Installation view in Academiegalerie in Utrecht as part of *Longing, Belonging: Narrating a  
Space in & through the Experiences of a City*, curated by Mika Hannula  
Sarah Stein and Hyemin Kim, 2012

Fig. 5



*Nothing was said but a gesture, and when you listened, the gestures became flowers  
(a conversation of objects)*

Video and objects installation

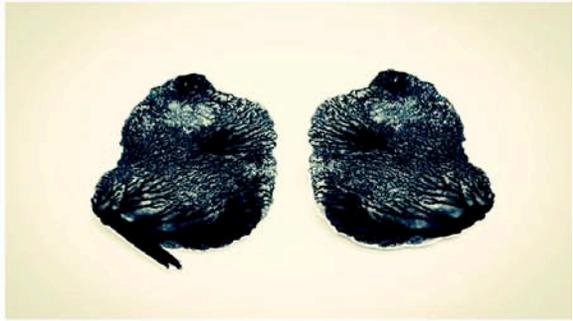
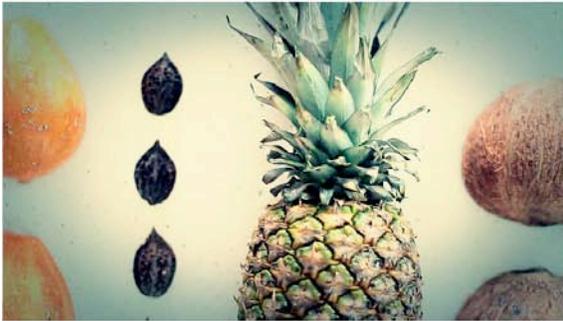
Sarah Stein and Hyemin Kim, 2012

Fig. 6



*Nothing was said but a gesture, and when you listened, the gestures became flowers  
(a conversation of objects)*  
Sarah Stein and Hyemin Kim, 2012

Fig. 7



*The Opening*  
Video stills  
Sarah Stein, 2012

Fig. 8



*Device for Vicarious Perception*  
wood, leather, pineapple, coconut, found objects  
Sarah Stein, 2012

Fig. 9



*Viewing Cabinet with Activated Objects*  
wood, copper, video  
Sarah Stein, 2012

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