

Mid - Sentence

The Possibility of Nothingness
and the Pressure of Touch

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It is not less effective of something to be hidden. It still generates effects, initially reverberating through one's sensations and later through their decisions and actions.

In writing this essay, I began to pay attention to the boundaries of my own stories, following a line that crosses right through places, lands and dreams. For, as Donna Haraway would have it, "It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories; it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with. It matters where how ouroroboros swallows its tale, again."¹ In this story-essay, my aim is to explore two interrelated concepts: absence and presence. As a MID-SENTENCE, a transversal line that cuts directly through previously separated parallel lines, this essay crosses self analytical reflections and theoretical research. It circles back to whispers of other times and returns as a suspicion. Despite their ethnological opposite significance, absence and presence as I understand them are far from a simple reference to bad and good. They appear

¹ Haraway, Introduction to Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, p.10.

in this story as alternative realities which go beyond the ordinary understanding of the terms. With this in mind, I wish to underline the importance of distancing myself from the discrimination associated to them in order to finally be able to find alternative outcomes. The title of this essay announces the confluence of these two concepts and the life experiences through which I came to relate to them, ultimately rendering a fundamental link of my own story. Both in theory and practice, my artistic expressions ultimately reveal the intertwined relation between absence and presence and proceed to wider scopes and aims where a social dimension invites us all to identify with (or not). Thus, for a better clarification of the scope of this essay, it is important to introduce some reflections on the absence-presence dichotomy as they have been sublimated through the notion of nothingness. This will hopefully allow me to introduce in this essay a dimension that is both emotional and physical for "Nothingness is [...] the infinite plentitude of openness."²

I once read that intimacy, closeness, attachment and affinity are rarely experienced in the ‘absence of’, but I will start by telling you a story about intimate encounters happening at a distance. The story came to me as I recently found a notebook written by my father several years before he left. While a physical object, the notebook carried the emotional dimension involved in the concept of nothingness. It was this emotional dimension that ultimately made me understand my father’s absence as a space of possibilities - an “infinite plentitude of openness”. In that absence, I later came to recognise a type of spatiality that brought it close to the presence of my mother. As with the case of my father, so my mother’s continued presence finds a space within the framework of nothingness. Only this time it is its physical character that transports me to a place of possibility: a dimension which has led me on a journey through feminist politics. The purpose of MID-SENTENCE is to reflect these two seemingly opposite poles, even if only to constitute something as a world. Mainly it

² Karen Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice*; 99 (100 Notes-100 Though Documenta 13) (s/l: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p.16.

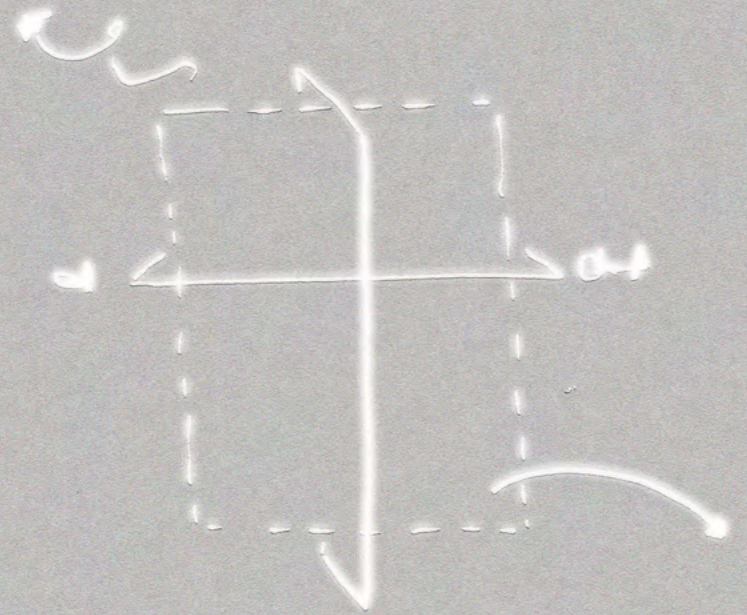
became a process of elaboration through strategies of language or/and discourse and sensorial and physical perception.

Emerging from a desire to dismantle the duality perceived in these relations, I allow myself to highlight the place that visual references play in the construction of my own spatialities. It is in them that I move; through them I have returned to the memories of my childhood to better understand the emotional and physical relationship I have maintained with the spatial references of my own perception. This is a story that keeps on growing through the edges of the maps of imaginary and real coordinates.

“Between my sensation and myself there is always the thickness of an original acquisition, which prevents my experience being clear for itself” writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Given the uncertain character of sensations, we tend to perceive and identify them within the order of things. When unmasking sensations, we clear up the mist of the sensible. In *Infra-World* (2017), François J. Bonnet speaks about the almost, or even totally un-perceivable moment in which a sensation is destroyed and transformed into a concept. He refers to children as the most capable of holding to this time span, prolonging it to its maximum. As a child, I was fascinated by the nothingness of ‘something’ that could not be replaced by any known thing. The younger I was, the longer it took for the primal experience of a sensation to be destroyed. In adulthood, I came to recognise that there is always a given place to the sensations within the common order of things. The conditions of legibility and univocity – impulsive, and instantaneous reactions to uncertainty – work to distance any sensible experience from itself. By repetition, this process ends up being automatised: “the clarification and characterisation of a sensation brings us (...) to the reassuring universe of certainties.”³ As I recollect my experiences as a child, however, I realise the extent to which I have been constantly attempting to change the common course of things. In conceptualising a sensation, I came to find matter with a double significance both as subject and substance to delve into the unknown. “Not even nothing can be free of ghosts.”⁴

³ François J. Bonnet, *The Infra-World*, trans. Robin Mackay, Amy Ireland (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017), p. 7.

⁴ Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness?*, p.12



To Outer Ends

Navigating through seen and unseen locations, I move between stories and geographies, transversing them into each other. According to bell hooks, there is a centre and a margin for any defined group. The centre appears as a representation of where supremacy is initiated, structured, and established. She refers to it as an area where speech is homogenised, and oppression and discrimination are fomented. The centre imposes its gravitational force on everything that surrounds it.⁵ Through her stories about her hometown – a small city in Kentucky –, hooks describes how she experienced navigating between the centre and the margin herself, a process whose **physical** dimension was carved on the landscape by the train tracks she would have to cross on her way from her house to the city centre, and from the centre back to her house. hooks' reflections highlight the way our social, political, and economic context has led people to develop a particular form of being in contact with the world and reality: “from outside to inside” and “from inside to outside”.⁶

As a reaction to the impositions of power arising from above, hooks proposes an alternative way of looking at the margin that should no longer be thought of as the peripheral space of loss and privation, but as a space of resistance and possibility – “a space of radical openness and creativity”, from where new critical discourses can arise.⁷ It is at the margin that oppressive boundaries of all kinds – those determined by racial, gender and class systems –, start to be questioned, challenged and eventually dismantled.

⁵ Bell Hooks, *Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness, Yearning Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

This enriches the complicity of this location, reenforcing the queerness of hope and change: the margin is, after all, “both a site of oppression and a site of resistance.”⁸ And it is exactly from the existence of one of such sites that the space for the other is created. It is within the margin that space is made for critical alternatives. Spatial reality arises in hooks' recollections as both a metaphor and a materialisation of power relations.

⁸ *Ibid.*

My own childhood **memories** are dominated by **spatiality** as a means of both self-experience and my experience of others, that is, as a **measure** of the long **distances** between us. I find myself trying to fit in such locations as the Portuguese Catholic family I grew up in – where conservative traditions determined our familial models, and imposed heteronormative and patriarchal ideas on *how to raise a child*. I remember experiencing a shift in my own behaviour, a constant adjustment of the singularity of my own thinking to the pressure of *being part of*.



Cutting things together-apart

When children play, as they mark their fields with chalk on stone, their body leans towards the earth, drawing limits on the floor. Within this margin, they can dig a hole, entering a deeper level into nothingness. The general theory of emergence states that the selection and combination of different elements within the same field can lead to new, yet unforeseen qualities.⁹ Similarly to the way water flows across a stone, changing course in all directions, diffraction is the process of ongoing differentiation, revealing differences after they have been generated. As the ongoing process of my childhood through which I navigated, we may think of diffraction itself as a knowledge-making process. When following a phenomenon of diffraction, one can redirect attention and intention to a new location that would otherwise remain far from the centre.¹⁰ A location left at the periphery, in the fringes of dominant systems; at the outskirts of a city or on the blurry borders of the mind. Diffraction clears up the way for greater sensitivity to a view of ourselves as part of a **continuous** becoming. And so I call upon Haraway once again: “It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories; it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with.”¹¹

In contemporary feminist theory, the phenomenon of diffraction is appealed to figuratively “denote a more critical and difference-attentive mode of consciousness and thought.”¹² Haraway, for instance, helps us to understand the concept as a metaphor by relating

9 Jelena Djuric, 2018, *Emergence (Of)New Materialism*, issue published on www.newmaterialism.eu.

10 Hooks, *Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness, Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

11 Haraway, Introduction to Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, p. 10.

it to thought, difference(s), and **otherness** in *The Promises of Monsters* (1992). According to her, diffraction is a “more subtle vision” of thinking and reflecting than the conventional scientific one.¹³ Thinking diffractively thus works to lead one on a path of stepping out of sameness, contributing as

it does to the recognition of differences.

Diffraction, then, “gives us the opportunity to become more attuned to how **differences** are being created in the world, and what particular effects they have on subjects and their bodies”.¹⁴ In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Karen Barad picks on this characteristic element of diffraction to connect it to the way feminist intellectual critique and textual engagements should be. Positing diffraction as a concept that speaks for the abolition of any type of hierarchy that may be established between different texts, theories and lines of thought, I too come to relate my own experiences to the theoretical thinking of others. If there is any strict commitment in this essay, then, it should be translated by the idea that “diffractively engaging with texts and intellectual traditions means that they are dialogically read ‘through one another’”.¹⁵ A methodology that seeks to apply both the feminist concept of diffraction and Haraway’s intimately connected idea that one ought not to reject what has been theorised before but should rather reuse the old to think anew.

12 Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, 2016, *Diffraction & Reading Diffractively*, issue published on www.newmaterialism.eu

13 Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/Others”. In: *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1992]), p.70.

14 Geerts and van der Tuin, *Diffraction & Reading Diffractively*.

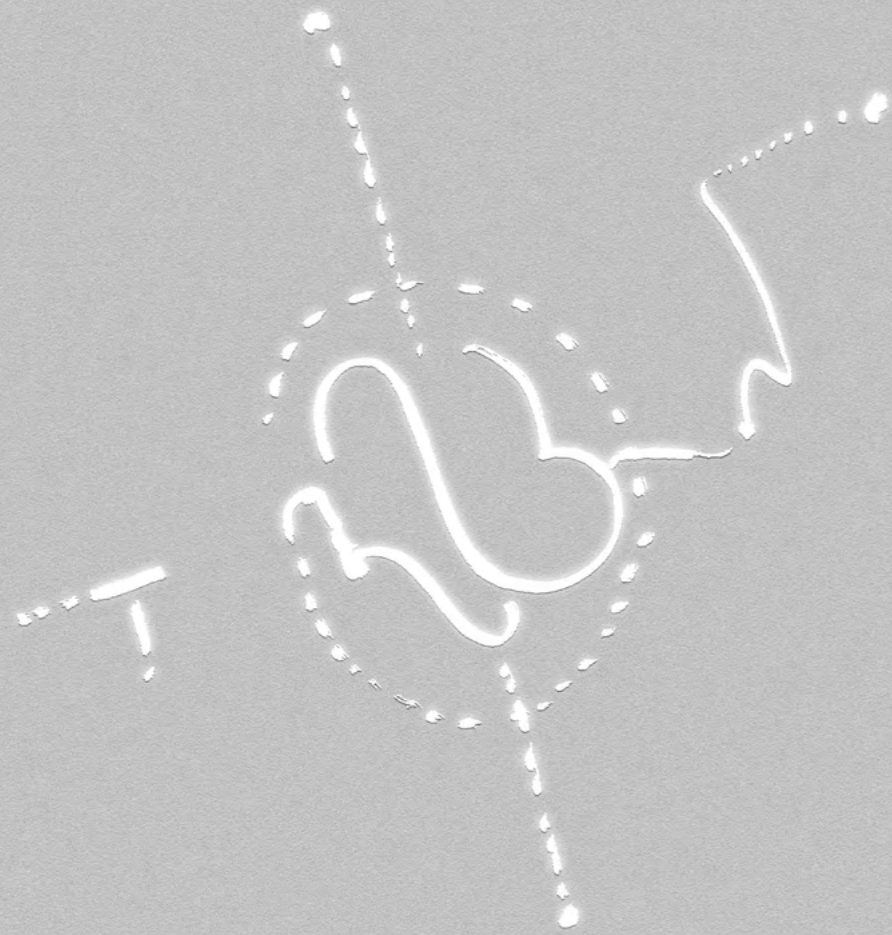
Before I delve into the way diffraction has more personally shaped my life experiences, let me illustrate this notion with an example borne out of feminist theory itself. In *Xenofeminism* (2018), Helen Hester refers to the so-called feminist second wave first as a **movement** “not known for its hospitality to anybody but cis women — (...) white, middle class, First World, cis women”. However, Hester concedes, we may significantly engage with second-wave feminist authors if only we commit to the intention of actively **repurposing** it: we can use “old means for new ends.”¹⁶ Some of these old means can be found in the development, during the feminist second wave, of self-theory and the introduction of the possibility of writing about one’s own life as a way to begin negotiating one’s own position in relation to other subjects.¹⁷ Such tools have found their way into contemporaneity through authors concerned to critically look into the connection between personal perspectives and social location. In her 2021 essay *Selvedges/Self-Edges*, for instance, Jane Rendell evokes the way second-wave feminist scholars importantly tend to reflect on their own problems and experiences, writing that “viewpoints are constructed and critical attitudes performed through writing one’s lived and located experiences”.¹⁸ As so, from Rendell’s and Hester’s conclusions, in what follows I will be calling upon memories of

¹⁶ Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 92.

¹⁷ Cf. Lauren Fournier on her essay *Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice*, when she states that “the practices of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one’s lived experiences” reenforces the idea of autobiography operating as a *mode of theory*.

¹⁸ Carolyn F. Strauss, *Slow Spatial Reader: Chronics of Radical Affection* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), p.148.

my childhood, reflecting on them, composing them and connecting them to a broader scale that is no longer just mine.



Near Here

Imagine a **monster** who, with its strange features, must *demonstrate* itself and frighten us with its deformities.¹⁹ While the monster comes to existence from the absence of any satisfactory identification, it embodies cultural and psychological characteristics that society finds difficult to grasp. Monsters are traditionally known for coming from elsewhere, from the unknown edges of a map, relating differently to time and space. They trouble, they worry.

My family structure was once disrupted by my father leaving to another country in August 2000. This provoked all kinds of interpretations of myself and of the situation from those around me. The uneasiness of our household situation deforming, made me experience a sensuous displacement, becoming a foreigner in my own environment. I related differently to time and space. I moved in and out of the unknown edges of a map. At an early age, my head was constantly filled with **imaginary** successions. My relation with what I could see or not was very similar, then nothingness was constituted by all the possibilities living in my own **fantasies**. In the **absence** of my father, not everything that could be felt was to be touched, and things needed not be seen so as to be loved. Sensations, back then, were alone, mute, and sudden, and could not be fixed anywhere. And somehow, in that absence, in the silence of conversations, noises and cries, I transformed my feeling of displacement into fuel for new imaginary locations. Living lively tension, in

19 "The etymology of monstrosity suggests the complex roles that monsters play within society. *Monster* probably derives from the Latin, *monstrare*, meaning 'to demonstrate', and *monere*, 'to warn'. Monsters, in essence, are demonstrative. They reveal, portend, show and make evident, often uncomfortably so." Cfr. www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster

the desire of being and becoming, on the possibility of cracking open. My relationship with my father has existed through the innumerable imaginaries of what it *could be*, and **affinity** was born precisely out of its **endless finitude**.



Affinity Units

The Possibility of Nothingness and The Pressure of Touch

The ‘limitless amount of’ has always seemed opaque to me; an opacity that would move as I moved, drifting towards and around me, and yet gigantic. New Materialism as an interdisciplinary movement and field of enquiry consists of thinkers like Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Manuel DeLanda, amongst others. It has been initiated mainly from feminism, philosophy, science studies, and cultural theory, yet it cuts across human and natural sciences. It combines different approaches and reflects on ‘How matter comes to matter’, by focusing on the restless **unpredictability** of all participatory agents and how that interferes with the making of **phenomena**. It focuses on how the ‘thing’ to be researched’, is entangled with the way we research it.²⁰ Being so, it is one of the research strings that added to my understanding of nothingness, and to the distance between me and my father.

Starting in 2007, phenomena has been one of the main subjects of Karen Barad’s writings. As part of her theoretical work, ‘Agential Realism’,²¹ she describes phenomena as the smallest units of analysis. As composed by matter and spatio-temporal properties, phenomena are characterised by their **ephemerality**.

20 Sofie Sauzet, “Phenomena – Agential Realism”, In: *COST Action ISI307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on How Matter Comes to Matter*, 2018. <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/wp/phenomena-agential-realism.html>

21 It is important to notice that in *Phenomena*, realism is not understood as something substantiated and fixed. Instead it emphasises that intra-action in agency has real effects.

Which makes everything and nothing simultaneously big and small, and potentially capable to be cut together and apart – since everything is **entangled** prior to the cut. As per Barad agency can be recognised in all kinds of forms: in repetitions, in silences, in distances, in spaces, in structures, in feelings, in things, in words. Leading up to a closer look into physical, social or emotional fractures; leading to spaces that are normally neglected because of their perceived insignificance; leading up to the absent presence of my father. But to examine something as phenomena, one must think of **agency** as distributed. Meaning that any kind of hierarchy established between the agents is disputed: “Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity”.²² An **intra-action** is, according to Barad, the process of understanding one (self) no longer as an individual, but as an active player of a broader dynamism of the living communication between humans and/or non-humans. This Baradian notion posits an alternative to the ordinary conception of interaction, challenging both traditional physics and the argument that there is no space for anything in nothingness.

But let me go back to my story. In 2020, I attended a lecture of Karen Barad at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. She introduced her recent work, which has been developed on the basis of Quantum Physics and Quantum Mechanics. A physicist herself, Barad has been interested in broadening the scope

22 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), p. 235.

of traditional physics so as to raise and explore questions concerning justice and the social world. To help the audience locate her research, she mentioned her interest in interrupting the narrative told by traditional physicists as her starting point by referring back to the historical means of Quantum Field Theory. This theory is known to be initiated in the late 1920s, and eventually interrupted by the Second World War, as the physicists working on the field were called to develop the atomic bomb. Barad got interested in the possibility of “examining not only the continuities of those seemingly disparate projects, but also to get inside the belly of the beast, (...) and to show that within that very same theory are (...) ways, in which it deconstructs itself.”²³ Later in the lecture, she would refer to the idea of ‘radical new imaginaries’, proposing a non-linear interpretation of all kinds of situations and even to the combination of them. This notion that answers for Barad’s reflections on radical new imaginaries, draws lines between my thoughts on auto-theory and feminism. As I could no longer experience my relationship with my parents as strictly binary, I came to understand them as a complex form of intra-action as well to be interpreted through its non-linearity.

I have recently reencountered the fictional spaces, my own imaginaries, that take part in the universe of the relationship between my father and I: “intimate encounters (...) can be achieved at a distance, when through memory and/or imagination we cast ourselves beyond where we stand to other spaces and

temporal frameworks.”²⁴ Through memories, desires, real and imaginary facts, I came to believe in the possibility of experiencing love in the present absence of someone. This unlocked the **unlimited possibilities** to tell a story about other kinds of love. Our relationship has always lived in the **indeterminate** state of *being/non-being*, and in the invisible non-existence, scattered by the ‘will-be’ or ‘could-be’.^{25 26} By saying ‘*missing someone is good, it means you care for them*’, my father would make me aware of the kind of love that would only belong to me, making me process feelings through the force of fictional perception. These fictional spaces would only be disrupted by the times we would meet.

²³ As Karen Barad added during the lecture.
²⁴ Strauss, *Slow Spatial Reader*, p.24.

²⁵ Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness?*, p.12.
²⁶ “Don’t for a minute think that there are no material effects of yearning and imagining. Virtual particles are experimenting with the im/possibilities of non/being, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t real.”
 Cf., Karen Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness?*, p.13.



Path Loss

Contrary to my father, my mother always lived up to her close **presence**. In full complexity and flexibility, she worked to keep my father's figure as present as his absence would allow. When actually meeting him, in the close presence of daily-life, the universe in which I kept him would disrupt. His absence would be emphasised, as well as the recognition of how present my mother was. Throughout my childhood, I have experienced an **intimacy** with my mother that hardly compares to anyone else. For a long time we shared daily necessities. Thriving together in a common space and in the plurality of thoughts shared in the constant and impetuous **proximity**. To use Barad's words, this was my primordial experience of that "exchange of warmth, a feeling of **pressure**, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer."²⁷ This moment of reflecting on my relationship with my mother, and the attempt to outline the consequences of close presence in daily-life, can be illustrated by Foucault's famous genealogical method.

Foucault's Genealogy investigates the shifting **network** of power, knowledge and the body. These three instances are understood to relate to each other. Knowledge induces effects of power, creating then new objects of inquiry that are normally imposed on groups of individual bodies. What if we would see power as productive, rather than repressive? Genealogy comes in as a diagnosis of "the present time" and of what we are, in order to question what is postulated as self-evident", and as a means

27 Karen Barad, "On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am". In: *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality*, ed. by Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), p.1.

"to dissipate what is familiar and accepted".²⁸ Foucault argues that power can be understood better in its **local** effects, for example in practices of the every-

day life. Emphasising the micro level of power, he sought to examine personal relations and alter power relations at the most intimate levels of experience. As Nancy Fraser suggests, Foucault's work puts forward a new way of reflecting on 'the politics of the every-day life' as it provides "the empirical and conceptual bases for treating phenomena such as sexuality, the school, psychiatry, medicine and social science as political phenomena".²⁹ By treating these issues as political problems, Foucault "widens the arena within which people may collectively confront, understand and try to change the character of their lives," an idea that may account for the

now wide literature on feminist interpretations of Foucault.³⁰ Among other feminists, Nancy Fraser, points out that Foucault's reflections on power relations, by determining our experience of intimacy, help to reflect on "the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, (...) the 'private' relations between the sexes and (...) the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies."³¹ To better understand the significance of Foucault's theory to feminist studies, I now turn to the way it has both stimulated feminist interest

28 Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. by L. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), p.265.
29 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 26.
30 Ibid.
31 Jana Sawicki, "Feminism, Foucault and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom". In: *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. by S.J. Hekman. (Pennsylvania: State University Press, 1996) p.162.

and feminist criticism. If there is one conclusion to be drawn from bell hooks's previously mentioned reflections about the centre and the margin it is that, within our analyses on power structures, we ought to conceive of resistance as something emerging from the outskirts, i.e. from the margins. Contrastingly, however, Foucault defends the idea that resistance arises within "the very meshes of power": not from the 'outside' but within the 'inside'.³² On this same topic, Judith Revel writes that Foucault's references to the literature of Raymond Roussel, Louis Wolfson, Baudelaire, and others, are one of the best means to understand his notion of resistance. Foucault noticed that in the materiality of these authors' speech, they have taken their creativity as a tool for innovation. From their writings, they have worked with literature as a means to get to its own innovation: "Not another language outside of that which is ours, but rather a distortion of the existing language."³³ On yet another paper, Revel outlines that we are totally entangled with the relations of power in which we live in. But if we were to understand that resistance must come from where power is established, where is the possibility for resistance to emerge from 'the outside'?

Feminists have been challenging traditional accounts of gender relations, in order to move towards a deeper understanding of the role of power in women's lives. There is a sense in which Foucault's work made a very important contribution to this un-

32 Judith Revel, "The materiality of the immaterial. Foucault, Against the Return of Idealism and New Vitalisms", *Radical Philosophy*, 149 (May/June) 33-38: 2008, p. 33.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

dertaking. Several feminist scholars have drawn a significant connection between the Foucaultian idea of power as constituted by that which it acts upon and a notion of power as something that is exercised instead of possessed. This became especially relevant to analyses of the process through which female bodies are transformed into feminine bodies. As Judith Butler argues, Foucault's understanding of power breaks down the distinction between biological sex and culturally constructed gender structures, and this collapse may ultimately work to liberate women from the rule of heterosexuality and reproductivity.³⁴

On the other hand, by suggesting that bodies are essentially passive and subordinated, Foucault makes it impossible to point out who is eventually resistant to power implications. He refers to it as simultaneously targeted by and composed of power, limiting the agency this body might acquire. This has generated a debate amongst feminists, sociologists and political theorists. Nancy Hartsock (1990), for instance, has argued that under such conditions, Foucault actually denies the individual's capacity of resisting to power. Hartsock contends that Foucault's questioning of the categories of subjectivity and agency should be treated with suspicion by feminists. She asks: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?"³⁵

34 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism And the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

35 Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" www.erg.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.123972.13607588831/menu/standard/file/Hartsock%20Foucault%20on%20power.pdf

In his later work, Foucault states that his theory of power implies the possibility and existence of forms of resistance: “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised.”³⁶ Despite this effort to recognise resistant power moves, the assumption that resistance relies upon and grows out of the situation against which it struggles eliminates any possibility of developing ‘liberatory knowledge’ and by that undermines the emancipatory political aims of feminism. Consequently, Foucault’s notion of resistance reduces the possibilities of increasing knowledge over patriarchal power which could potentially result in liberating women from oppression.³⁷ In this sense, Foucault’s work appears to be incompatible with the fundamentals of the political orientation of feminism.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by C. Gordon (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1980), p.142.

³⁷ Nancy Hartssock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” www.erg.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.123972.1360758883!/menu/standard/file/Hartssock%20Foucault%20on%20power.pdf



And So Entangled

As Nancy Hartsock writes, women have traditionally constructed their own self in relation to others. In them, lives a “valuation of concrete, of everyday life [and a] sense of variety of connectedness and continuities.”³⁸

Two years ago, I read Adrienne Rich’s book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). This was a book of extreme relevance at the time since it was the first to be published that refers to **motherhood** as an issue. The work stood out for me because here she presents a new approach to her feminism, previously expressed through her poetry. Rich assumes a personal position in relation to being a mother, and to how her own experiences were determined by the institution of motherhood imposed in its many variations on all those capable of bearing children. ‘Motherhood as institution’ is a notion that calls upon us to reflect on the issues surrounding motherhood as a practice embedded in traditions and conventions.³⁹

Thinking of the **continuity** that exists between my mother and me, I passively experience motherhood as a network of solidarity between us and those around us. Day after day, me and my mother lived through and created a bound that is not just about love,

³⁸ Nancy Hartsock “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing The Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism”. In: *Discovering Reality. Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 2003), p. 298.

³⁹ As the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication describes, institution is as “a term frequently used loosely to refer to established ways of behaving or, more formally to major social systems or structures which organize the primary social practices, roles, and relationships within a culture.” Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

but is rather deeply interconnected with the expectations and pressures determined by the gender system. Within the prevailing sexual division of labour and the repetitive history of familiar forms, my mother was always the primary responsible for parenting, housework and the financial management of our household. This consumed her time entirely, leaving no space to question it, nor to act or change it. Coming from this close experience to my mother’s space of impossibility, I became even more aware of the urgent necessity of alternative networks. Through Rich’s reflections, I came to recognise the constant need to open new paths where languages and other forms of communication can be channelled, so that things may grow instead of being stuck in the impossibility of change. This necessity arises not merely from efforts of maintaining or repairing, so much as from the possibility of thinking of the future.

There is an intrinsic **movement** in talking about my mother which leads me to continuously ‘refer back to’. Following this tendency, I have been looking into the way feminism too refers back to other forms and times of feminist theory and practice. Looking at Barad’s reflections on diffraction and intra-action, I recognise the possibility of **stretching** space of ongoing alters, the capacity to be simultaneously courageous and fragile.

I previously mentioned the way Hester’s *Xenofeminism* (2018) calls upon the significance of ‘referring back to’ the work developed during the second wave of feminism, in an effort to respond to the prevailing necessity of creating a more comfortable and intimate relationship between oneself and one’s own body.⁴⁰ But what exactly does xenofeminism stand for? According to Hester, it is “an attempt to articulate radical gender politics fit for an era of globality, complexity and technology – one which thinks about technology as an activist tool, [that] seeks to foreground the more oblivious material elements of (...) [intra-action] in contemporary mediated cultures, and draws upon recent engagements with the digital.”⁴¹ Thus, xenofeminism sets the bridge between oneself, the others and the *speedy return* from the world, as I experience it today. Hester proposes to demystify technology by ‘repurposing’ it. I wonder, how might technology contribute to a return to one’s own body? Is thinking of technology a question about our origins or one about the future?

40 Hester, *Xenofeminism*.

41 Ibid., p. 7.

42 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p. 170.

Technology has always appeared to me as a “heroic undertaking”.⁴² Totally in line with Ursula K. Le Guin’s words, I easily mistake technology by the ‘protagonist’, conceiving it as a ‘more than’, that finds its roots in male and self-destructive representations.⁴³

While technology has for ages been a means to improve human life, it has become an end in itself. The way people tend to relate to technology, outlining its definition based on the notion of the so-called ‘high technologies’, contributes to the alienation of technology itself, leaving no space to consider ‘low technologies’ as such.

Following this, and carrying on with the story of intimacy between me and my mother, I would like to think of technology in connection to reproduction. In particular the way technologies of the body, like **reproduction**, are nevertheless ultimately associated to and dependent on ‘external-to-our-bodies’ technologies. In other words, how during the period of pregnancy, when a body is carrying a child, the person can relate better to the changes its body is going through according to medical literacy, than by an actual understanding and closeness to its own self.

I remember the way my mother very proudly told me that, during my birth, she was lucky to have the possibility of choosing the room where she would go into labour. She asked for a room with a mirror right above the surgery table, so that she could see what was happening even though she had very little idea of what the procedures actually amounted to. So, what to make of the relationship between ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’ of professionalised medical care and again of our dependency on the so-called ‘high tech-

43 Hester, *Xenofeminism*, p. 8.

nologies'? When they have contributed to reproductive bodies losing control over their own reproductive capacity? The domain of 'external-to-our-body' technologies has been monitored by a technological, social and economical elite that is not only unreachable due to its technical literacy but highly gendered and unequal. Female and queer bodies – that is, bodies which escape the standards determined by hegemonic scientific practices – are subordinated to technological and medical forms of control, mostly implemented through a top-bottom logic. This observations led me to recognise the gender issues which add to the distance between human beings and technology. Hegemonic medical and technological procedures thus tend to operate with a homogenised conception of female bodies, drawing from a single imaginary of women's experience and directly contributing to the 'mythologization of femininity'.⁴⁴

Haraway writes about technology as "seduction to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity."⁴⁵ Considering the distance I experience between myself and technology, it became interesting to start relating it to my own body and reflecting on the type of spatiality involved in this relation. With feminist approaches, I have thus started the deconstruction of this distance. Following the path laid open by Barad, one can conceive of the relationship between technology and the body as yet another example of a relation of indeterminacy. Which is not

44 Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?"

45 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.11.

46 Barad, *Measure of Nothingness*, p.7.

to say that one cannot identify the beginning or the end of one and another, but rather that it is impossible to determine one as prior to the other.⁴⁶ I stand with Barad as she concludes that there is an interdependence between technology and the body, which challenges the idea of technology as an end in itself. Such understanding has ultimately led me to give up my quest for a genealogy of the relation between body and technology. And as for Barad, the feminist approaches of Hester, and Haraway, prompt me to reflect on technology as to be experienced by the body, in and out of it.

47 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.249.

48 Hester, *Xenofeminism*, pag 93.

By comparing the 'impositions' that bodies are subjugated to, when technologies are operated on them, and the technologies of the body, I recognise in the latter an undeniable openness to the field of **subjectivity**. This subjectivity comes to me as the feminist and queer activist 'tool' that xenofeminism speaks about. A subjectivity that belongs to the human being as well as to the technologies of the human body, and that reflects the fact that human bodies will never exist just to perform their function(s). As Haraway (2008), argues «technologies are not mediations, something in between us», but "'infoldings of the flesh.' What happens in the folds is what is important."⁴⁷ Meaning technology must no longer be understood as external but rather as entangled to the human body and condition. A great example that illustrates this notion, as recalled by Hester, is the tradition of self-analysis, self-care and self-check established by the feminist second wave.⁴⁸ These

Initiatives are responsible for long-lasting effects on contemporary theory-making and recursive attention of the self. They served a new conception of technology liberating non-male, marginal and non-standard bodies from medical care as we know it to be based on gendered ideas, ultimately objectifying behaviours and relations.

Being a body means to be under constant technological experiences and technology is always embodied.⁴⁹ Technology, in its subjectivity, contributes directly to the possibility of change, transforming and altering - which is per se queer and pro-mutant - as an embodiment of expression, unfolding into **communication** paths - as an intra-active element of our every-day life. Technology interferes on the course of things and runs through a **system** that, as Michel Serres (1980) describes, forges passages **in between** different domains. Passages for communication and for non-communication.⁵⁰ So, “for science is a system, as poetry is a system. Rain, sun, ice, stream, fire, turbulence - they all engender channel effects.”⁵¹ Which reflect the constant instability of all kinds of things, and therefore, of technology itself. From its subjectivity I believe that technology can finally relate to its own usage, so human beings can as well relate to it. Thus, if technology would eventually come back to itself, as the ouroboros swallows its own tale, some kind of air bubble would appear. This is where nothingness is

49 Nikki Sullivan, “Somatechnics”. In: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (1-2), p. 187-190; 2014, p.188.

50 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2013 [1980]).

51 Ibid. p.79.

52 Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, p.192.

finally allowed. Where nothingness and non-materiality open the space for memories and little wishes, that we call “ideas”.⁵² Where the end does not matter, nor the function of it, but its emptiness that opens even more possibilities to the production and reproduction of imagination.

Telepass

Measurements, Apparatus and Assemblage

In my own spatial constructions, **extensions** and **compressions** I choose to link both the relations between my parents and I, measuring also became part of it. Therefore, following Barad's work, measurements not only helped to constitute as they became a constitutive part of what was being measured. Measurements are a dynamism of forces established between all the bodies that communicate and influence each other. In fact everything seems to exist in the span between pragmatism and the irrationality, thus remaining **un-tangible**.⁵³ The 'Indeterminacy of something' appears to be prior to notions of scale, space and time, but there are two concepts that directly refer and interfere with the processes of measuring, and therefore thinking of how agency is distributed: apparatus and assemblage:

An apparatus is described by New Materialism as material-discursive dynamic, where meaning comes together with mattering, which comes close to my idea of nothingness although apparatuses are themselves the practice of materialising. They emphasise the idea that is not the subject that makes the object, but how these two notions entangled in each other, assert through how things are "*cut together-apart*".⁵⁴ The performative aspect that takes place at the moment of cutting together-apart, comes at

⁵³ Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness?*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Barad, Karen, 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, page 179.

⁵⁵ Mirko Nikolić, "Apparatus x Assemblage". In: *COST Action IS1307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on 'How Matter Comes to Matter'*, 2018. www.newmaterialism.eu/almanac/apparatus-x-assemblage.html

the moment in which apparatuses create "relations and distributions of power, as well as "practices of knowing in being".⁵⁵ On the other side, assemblages are the actual material performance of composing through the act of fitting. They are characterise by the endless possibility of histories being made through its **open-endedness**. Assemblages reflect on the actual effects of an intra-action, at the same time that they are matter for intra-active activity. They as well mix up with every attempt of reference to a continuous timeline, as consequence to the fact that everything is constantly moving, and relating to each other. As Jane Bennett describes, each element «maintains an energetic pulse slightly 'off' from that of the assemblage».⁵⁶

So, within an assemblage, each element/participant generates something other than themselves.

To conclude from the theoretical character of Barad's work, it is impossible to not point out the strong poetic approach to matter I recognise in it. And the fact that it does not close any possibilities in itself.⁵⁷ The field of Fine Arts is as well defined by its subjectivity, apprehended by the audience when interpreting a reality translated by the maker's personal intentions. In this sense, artistic practices contribute to processes of knowledge-making as well as to the fact that nothing can ever be understood as one compassed idea. To illustrate these previous lines, it is now the moment to refer to the work of three female artists, that through their practices have been exploring the syntax of **relationships** and **transfers**. By intro-

⁵⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010), p. 24.

⁵⁷ Poetic in the sense that it transcends a sensation through language.

ducing their work, I would like to specifically focus on the possibility of the empirical nature of chance, encounters and/or happenings, not always under their control. In each one of these artistic practices, I recognise a translation of time put in dialogue with an immanent awareness of matter. Exploring different materialities in proximity to each other, which allows dynamic relations to emerge in the 'moment of finding'. As we understood from Karen Barad, nothing is non-static per nature. So, in their work I came to identify a common allusion to motion, as well as reactive possibilities are suggested by intra-actions established between the different materialities involved.

Nina Canell

Nina Canell is a Swedish artist based in Berlin, Germany. In her sculptures we can find a constant reference to systematic dynamisms and to how they can potentially be interrupted. Canell's works refer to how memories are stored or not, and to the non-functionality of systems and how their relation can be about a non-relation. Relating should not be understood as comparison, as I previously mentioned, therefore we must think of relations as ongoing dynamics of becoming. Facing a general overview of Canell's work, I underline one of its characteristic - how material forms and immaterial forces are kept proximate to each other - in my view a focus point of great importance. Contrary to traditional sculpture her works are far from being static: "they alter, they are the result of motion or of a process" as Fredrik Liew, said on an interview given to the Moderna Museet channel, after curating Canell's solo-show in Stockholm in 2014.

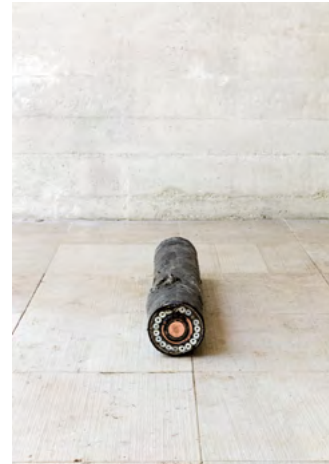
58 CCS Bard, Paul O'Neil, "Nina Canell by CCS Bard". *BOMB*, www.bombmagazine.org/articles/nina-canell/ (accessed 13 April 2022).

The series of sculptures "Brief Syllables," (2014), parts of electrical and communication cables, in their non-functionality, carry all the information that passed through them. Here there is an undeniable reencounter of the Baradian notion of a field, where all elements are connected through invisible paths. "The sculptural object ... doesn't really have a singular materiality of its own, it relies on a flexible relation to an immaterial circularity that is equally sculptural".⁵⁸ Likewise, silences, distances, spaces and structures

some of the features of my relation with my father.⁵⁹ Another relevant example is *Perpetuum Mobile* (25kg), a work produced in 2009, in which its essence carries the notions of how process can become a material aspect of a sculpture. Underlying this work every objects are treated as conductors of movement. This occurs by putting in space a basin with water next to an open bag of powdered cement, by which

the artist emphasises the reaction of one of the components to the others, activating the water, which starts vapouring, and consequently mixes with and hardens the cement. “Her sculptures can be seen as an extension of this tension between flow and hardening—they represent sculpture as process, sculpture as emergence or as the result of emergence”.⁶⁰ As I recently read on an interview done by graduates and the programme director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, “the sculptural object (...) doesn’t really have a singular materiality of its own, it relies on a flexible relation to an immaterial circularity that is equally sculptural”, said Nina Canell.

⁵⁹ In fact everything is entangled prior to the cut. Vd, p.11.
⁶⁰ Neringa Cerniauskaite, “Nina Canell: Moderna Museet/Stockholm”.ARTFORUM, www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201503/nina-canell-50321



Nina Canell, *Brief Syllable (chewed)*, 2017, installation view, 57th Venice Biennale, Nordic Pavilion. Image is a courtesy of Kaufmann Repetto.



Nina Canell, *Perpetuum Mobile* (25kg), 2009, basin, water, cement and ultrasound. Photo by Robin Watkins.

Kantika Bock

The German artist Kantika Bock is known by her sculptures and installations that explore temporality and space. She often deals with natural alteration processes, being all materials sensitive to certain conditions she finds in or imposes to the space. Thus all materials and elements involved react to each other as a continuous movement. Bock, according to the different places where the work is installed, reinforces ideas of re-arrangement. Her sculptures, assume their distinct characteristics depending on the surrounding environment of every show. Inhabiting and reacting to the context in which every exhibition takes place. In Bock's work and practice, it is easy to recognise that the artist deals with the spaces where the exhibitions take place as "interlocutor rather than object of study."⁶¹

Avalanche was project shown at Pivô, an exhibition space located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil in 2019. In which, as usual, the artist has confronted the regularly used materials like wood, bronze, fabric, plaster, ceramics and found objects with the conditions of the space. Her methodology is know by starting with a detailed analyses of the building and its geographic location. From here, Bock initiates an *in transit* dialogue with the space between natural and induced processes.⁶² When physically experiencing the space, Bock is finally in contact with the sensible of her reactions to the location, managing to conceive the right shapes to it. Immediately this feature drew my

attention to the spatial references of my own perception and in what way they helped me to better interwind both my emotions and spatiality creation as important notions I have been speaking about throughout this essay.

The way she explores the materiality of her sculptures, is most of the times transitory and reversible. *In Horizontal Word* (2019), becomes a relevant example in this sense. A piece of clay wrapped in industrial fabric was thrown by the artist from the open terrace of the building where *Avalanche* was presented. The free fall and the carrying of the material to the exhibition space and up to the terrace caused an impact as they were imprinted to the matter. Since the sculpture translates the physicality of the moment of making, the work only lasted as long as the exhibition, highlighting the ephemerality of the material. Another important example of her work with a similar intention is *Fountain for Avalanches* (2019). The artist installed aluminium pipes that carry rain water through the rooms and direct it back to the streets in order to make a connection between inside and outside space of the building. "A fountain that only works when it rains".⁶³ In this work, agency is shared with the uncertainty of the climate. As if kept in a suspicion, the audience waits for something to happen. Bock addresses indeterminacy as prior to any conceived notion of time.⁶⁴

61. Fernanda Brenner, *Kantika Bock: Avalanche* (São Paulo: Ministério da Cidadania e Pivô, 2019), p.1.
62. Ibid.

63. Kantika Bock, "Kantika Bock talks about her solo show 'Avalanche'", interviewed by Fernanda Brenner, 2019, minute 7:49, www.vimeo.com/358876300
64. *Ibid.*, p.20.



Kantika Bock, *Avalanche*, 2019 at Pivô, São Paulo, Brasil. Photo by Everton Ballardin.



Kantika Bock, *Avalanche*, 2019 at Pivô, São Paulo, Brasil. Photo by Everton Ballardin.

Magali Reus

Magali Reus is a London-based Dutch artist. Her work is known by its sculptural forms, often produced in series, that refer to ordinary objects that I recognise from everyday life, but that the artist explores as part of systems meticulously produced. The various processes and forms that we can identify in Reus's sculptures increase the sensation of a movement inherent not only to the moment of making, as well as to the works themselves and to their display in the space.

In 2017 she presented her work for the first time in a solo-exhibition in Scandinavia, at the Bergen Kunsthall. *Hot Cottons* has unfolded itself in a series of spatial 'chapters', a combination of new works specifically done for the exhibition. The series of works has been described as a 'mid-render', a term that suggests its digitally designed forms as well as to its hand-made characteristics. "As if it has been prematurely transported from an embryonic design phase."⁶⁵

Magali Reus's sculptures live in a 'state of transition', as if something has been frozen in a slow process of restoration as each finished work refers to a moment of analyses of something that will continue after. "Materials are not born, and nor do they die, they simply change form and structure, a reminder of their inherent passage through time (...). Contrary to appearances, materials are always in motion, haunted by a compulsion to move and transmute (...). They are non-static per nature."⁶⁶ In the various processes that Reus explores in her sculptural practice,

⁶⁵ Laura McLean-Ferris, Quinn Latimer, *Magali Reus: Hot-Cottons* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), p.27.
⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.31.

such as casting and moulding techniques, reference to architectural ornaments, details from industrial design and daily-life objects, she creates “difficult-to-read surfaces [which] upset the viewer’s sense of time (...) or time-span since it illogically expresses the status of being both new and used.”⁶⁷ Which relates to the continuity inherent to the relation between my mother and I, that later assumed a more conscientious feature when I managed to deal with both the notions of motherhood and feminism.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid.
⁶⁸ Vd. p.16-17.
⁶⁹ Vd. p.20.

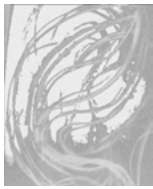
Hwael is one of the series of works presented at the previously mentioned exhibition. It is composed by three parts which can be understood as dislocated parts of one skeleton. Through different layers, sections and repetitions, the artist makes us travel through the three sculptures looking for the similarities and the differences of every detail, in the urgency of finding a connection between the different ‘chapters’. Even though the realistic representations of machinery, each sculpture’s functionality remains as an enigma. Reus’s installations suggest that the viewer must engage with the work as a tourist, as an attentive researcher that moves within one sculpture or through the parkour of the multiplicity of works displayed in the same space. This movement, at the same time that it is emphasised by the open-ended character of the pieces, it refers back to it.⁶⁹ Contributing to a longer temporal experience of each work, widening every details to the audience’s experience.



Magali Reus, *Sentinel (Serif)*, 2018, image courtesy of the artist



Magali Reus, *Hwael*, 2017, Installation view ‘Hot Cottons’ at Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen, Norway, image courtesy of the artist.



The unlimitedness of nothingness, that I have been recognising all through this essay, expressed by the absence of my father, the presence of my mother and then conceived in the materiality of a work of art, is not only characteristic of each one of them but it rather exists in their own intra-actions. Nothingness was indeed the notion with which I better identified my own challenges in the intention of transvering the significance of words, theoretical thinking and my own familial experiences. Thus, I became fully aware of nothingness as a concept of great accuracy to represent such notions as emotional and physical features and its infinite plenitude reflected by openness. This openness allowed me to come across spatiality, as another kind of space, in which my subjectivities are reflected through my own memories, fantasies and desires. Spatiality has contributed to the reflection of the imaginary coordinates in which I overcame the distance from my father and how, through its finite plenitude, I came to find affinity.

Simultaneously, this same concept made me acquire the notion of motherhood as an institution that I have re-entered, as an infrastructure in which I allowed myself to combine technology with thoughts on gender issues. Through this story-essay, I came to recognise the underlying continuities in which everything gets disintegrated into parts and those parts again into other parts. This explains the choice of the three artists whose work I previously referred to. Through their practices they have been exploring the syntax of relationships and transfers in which various ways they deal with the notion of nothingness with a purpose that is very close to my own view.

Lately I have been fascinated with the formalities of a pipe, indemonstrable and hallow. At the same time it is **vacuum**, it is the **continuum**; that with its cylindric shape reaches out to places where nothing is expected to be said, carrying even though all kinds of things. As tubular systems are built in circular cross-cut, coming to the end of the text also means to return to its beginning. So, “if the energy of the vacuum is not

determinately zero, it isn't determinately empty. In fact, this indeterminacy is responsible not only for the void not being nothing (while not being something), but it may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence."⁷⁰

*70 Barad, *What Is the Measurement of Nothingness?*, p. 9.*

- Karen Barad, "Posthuman Performativity: Toward an understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter". In: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28 (3), p. 801-831: 2003.
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Continuum
Vacuum
Transfers
Relationships
Open-ended
Un-tangled
Compositions
Extensions
In Between
System
Communication
Subjectivity
Reproduction
Stretching
Movement
Continuity
Motherhood
Local
Network
Pressure
Proximally
Intimacy
Presence
Indeterminate
Intra-action
Agency
Entangled
Ephemerality
Phenomena
Unpredictability
Attinity
Absence
Fantasies
Imaginary
Monster
Repurposing
Otherness
Continuous
Differences
Diffraction
Distances
Measure
Spatiality
Memories
Physical
Nothingness

