Sensing, drawing and making sense

Enlivening ethnographic fieldnotes

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When I first attended a Tantra workshop as part of my research, I knew that writing fieldnotes would be a challenge.[1] I had signed up as a participant after interviewing the facilitator for my PhD project, which explores older women's intimate practices in contrast to existing norms and stereotypes of ageing femininity.[2] As part of my research, I joined intimacy-oriented workshops that were led by women over the age of fifty and attended by a significant number of people in the same age group.

During the workshops, we synchronised our breathing, looked at each other long enough to blur the person in front of us, visualised our erotic core as a creature with its own form, movement and desires, and then embodied that creature in a mossy corner of a forest. The sessions had a dizzying and opening effect. A group of strangers suddenly became intimate while I became a stranger to myself — or perhaps the self that emerged surprised me. In the moments when I could write fieldnotes between meals and sessions, during toilet breaks and before bed, it struck me that my writing felt shallow, weak and "thin" compared to the embodied experiences we had had. Was my ability to write too weak to capture its richness, or were the words simply inadequate to describe what had happened?

Between these questions and writing notes, I began to make drawings in my field notebook. When time was too short to make a drawing, I would write down sentences that I could later use as prompts to draw. Initially, drawing was not a conscious commitment to a particular method, but rather a licence that I gave myself to play. I found the exercises visually suggestive, as they involved detailed visualisations, movements, and physical sensations that had a certain texture and spatial dimension. Having learnt and used a visual language for years I have a background in drawing and illustration — translating these sensations into drawings provided a fruitful way to make sense of these enigmatic experiences. I used this ability to make "multilingual" notes with words and images that worked symbiotically together to form a drawing.[3] The drawings offered themselves to me, so to speak, and I accepted their offer.

Allowing this to happen in the notebook was also in line with my intention to develop a feminist "unruly" methodology that bridges disciplines and thrives in the in-between. I had been inspired by Jack Halberstam's queer "scavenger" methodology, which borrows methods from different fields and embraces a certain academic indiscipline (Halberstam 1998, 13). Following the methodology of the project and its conceptual focus on unruliness, I wanted to create space for experiences and practices that fall outside of dominant understandings of sexuality, intimacy or even perception — and that might otherwise remain invisible. This led me to engage in co-creative practices with participants, producing visual material and organising participatory workshops as part of the research.

Embodied participation can provide access to tacit knowledge and allows for a deeper understanding of certain practices and the relationships created around them, but the positionality of the researcher influences this process. In this particular case, I am aware that the social dimensions we shared with the facilitator and some of the participants — those of gender, class and ethnicity, for example — brought me closer to understanding their experiences. My position

as a younger woman, on the other hand, made me an outsider to their experiences. Recognising this insider/outsider position (Griffith 1998; Parikh 2020), I consider the material I have produced as inevitably filtered through my own perspective, bearing in mind the benefits of using my own embodied experience and the potential pitfalls.

In this essay, I will explore some of the possibilities of including drawing as part of a feminist ethnography. After describing them, I will discuss how drawings — through their materiality and visual language — can convey affect, become means of communication, and animate ethnographic work.

INTER-SPECIES INTIMACY IN THE MISTY WOODS

The series of drawings shown here were made during and after participating in two Tantra workshops in a communal house in the Belgian Ardennes. The practices involve mind-altering exercises such as breathwork, chants and visualisations, and often a degree of intimacy with another person or the group. They are practised — in this particular context — with the aim of questioning the boundaries between the self and the "other" and challenging notions of what the self is, wants and does. The sessions took place indoors and in the nearby forest. The outdoor sessions involved intimacy with beings other than ourselves, humans. Intimacy with the trees, the moss, the earth, the water and the forest or river itself was as central to the exercises as the meditations we did together.

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER BY UNDOING WHAT WE SEE

The drawings I present here revolve around an experience that is difficult — and perhaps counterproductive — to put into words. I will use them as a vehicle to convey my impressions of the practices during the workshops.

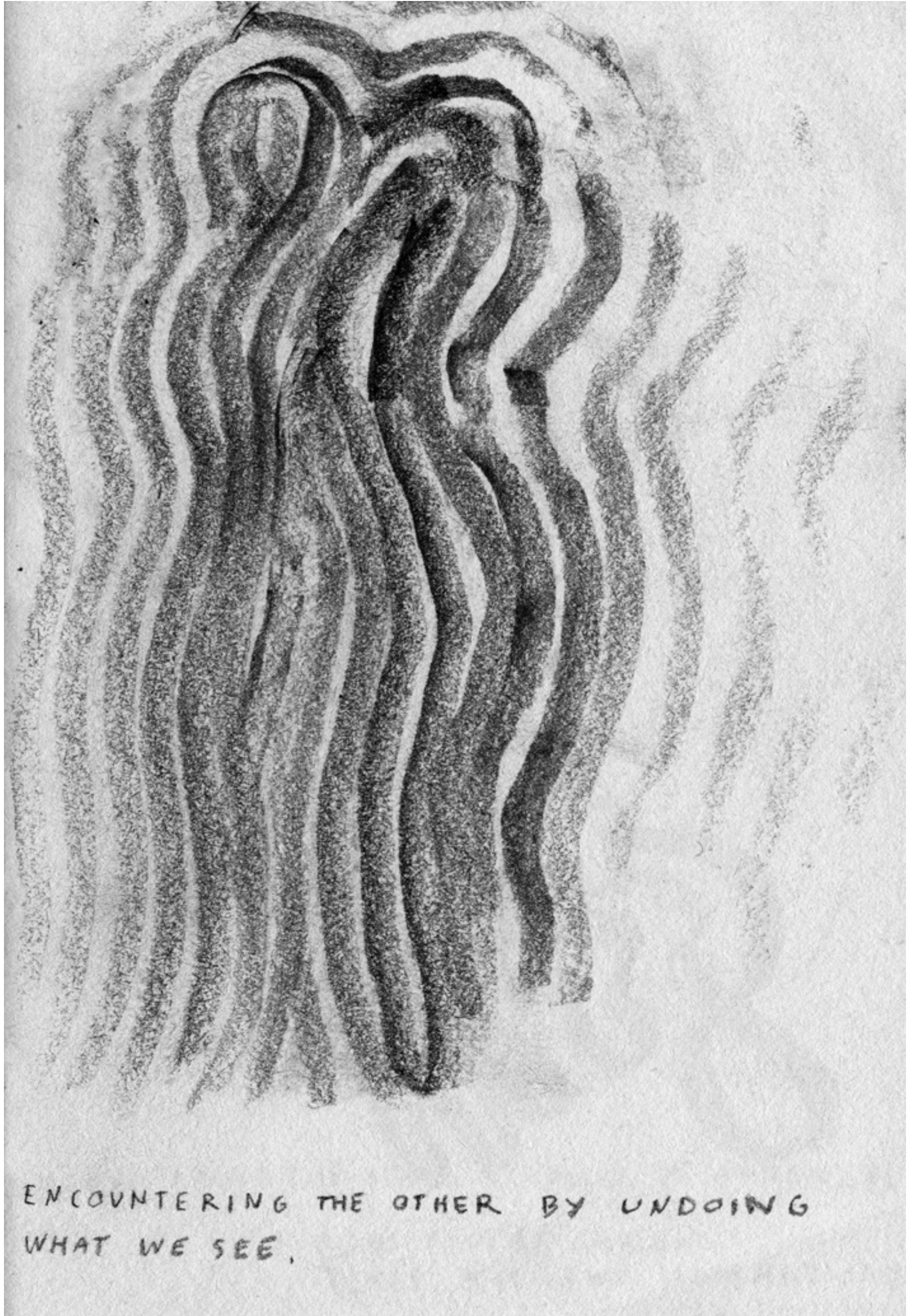


Figure 1

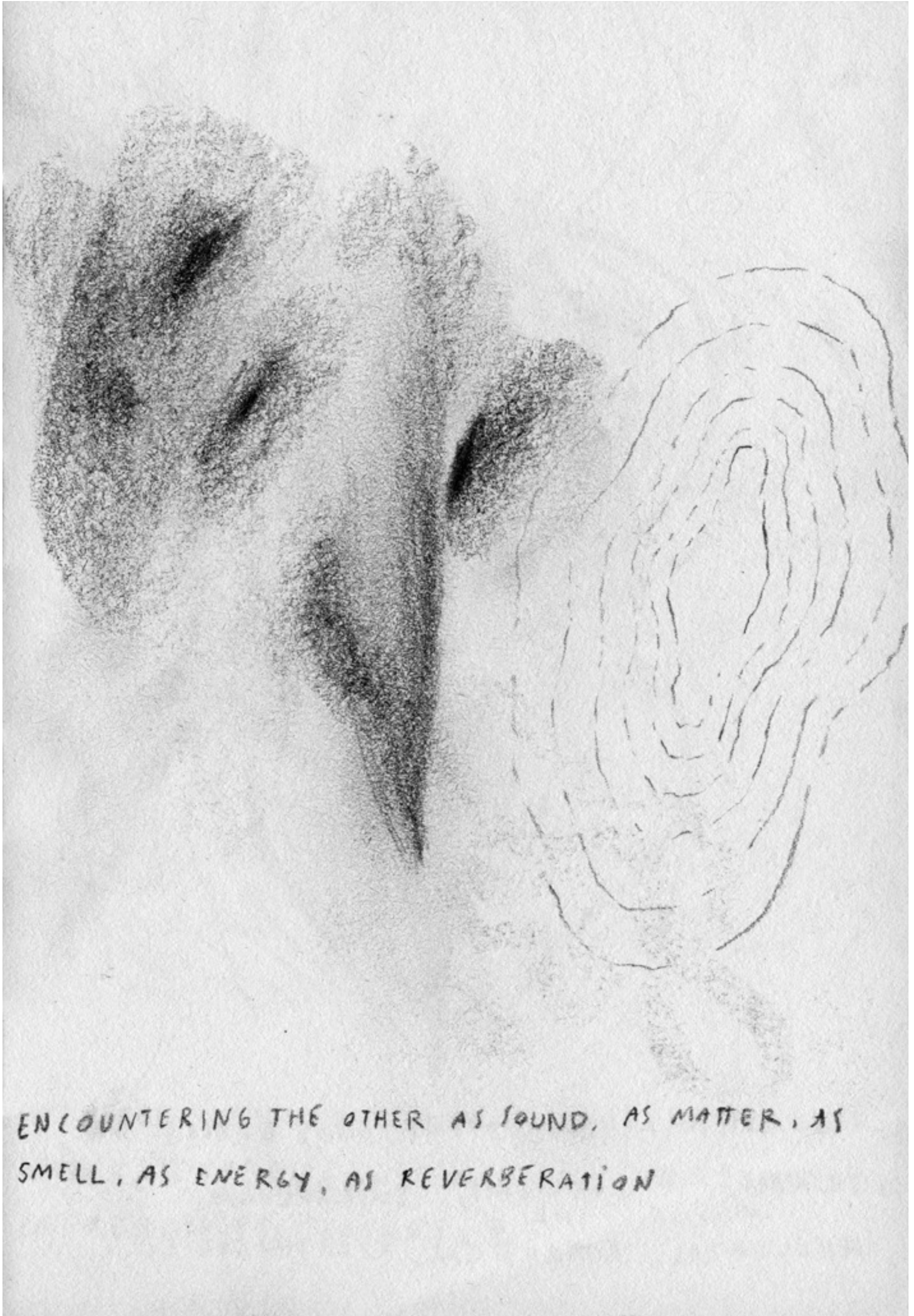
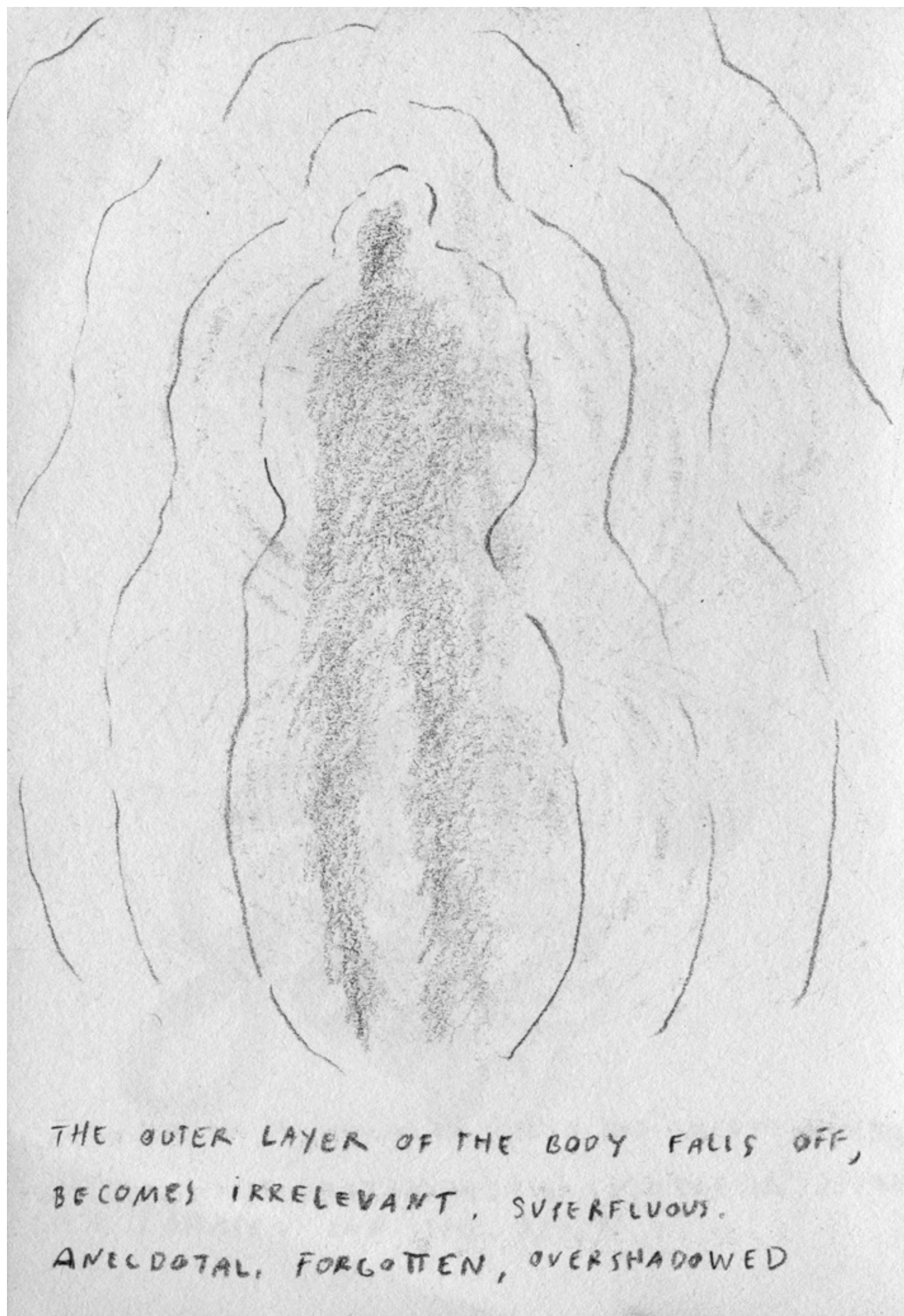


Figure 2



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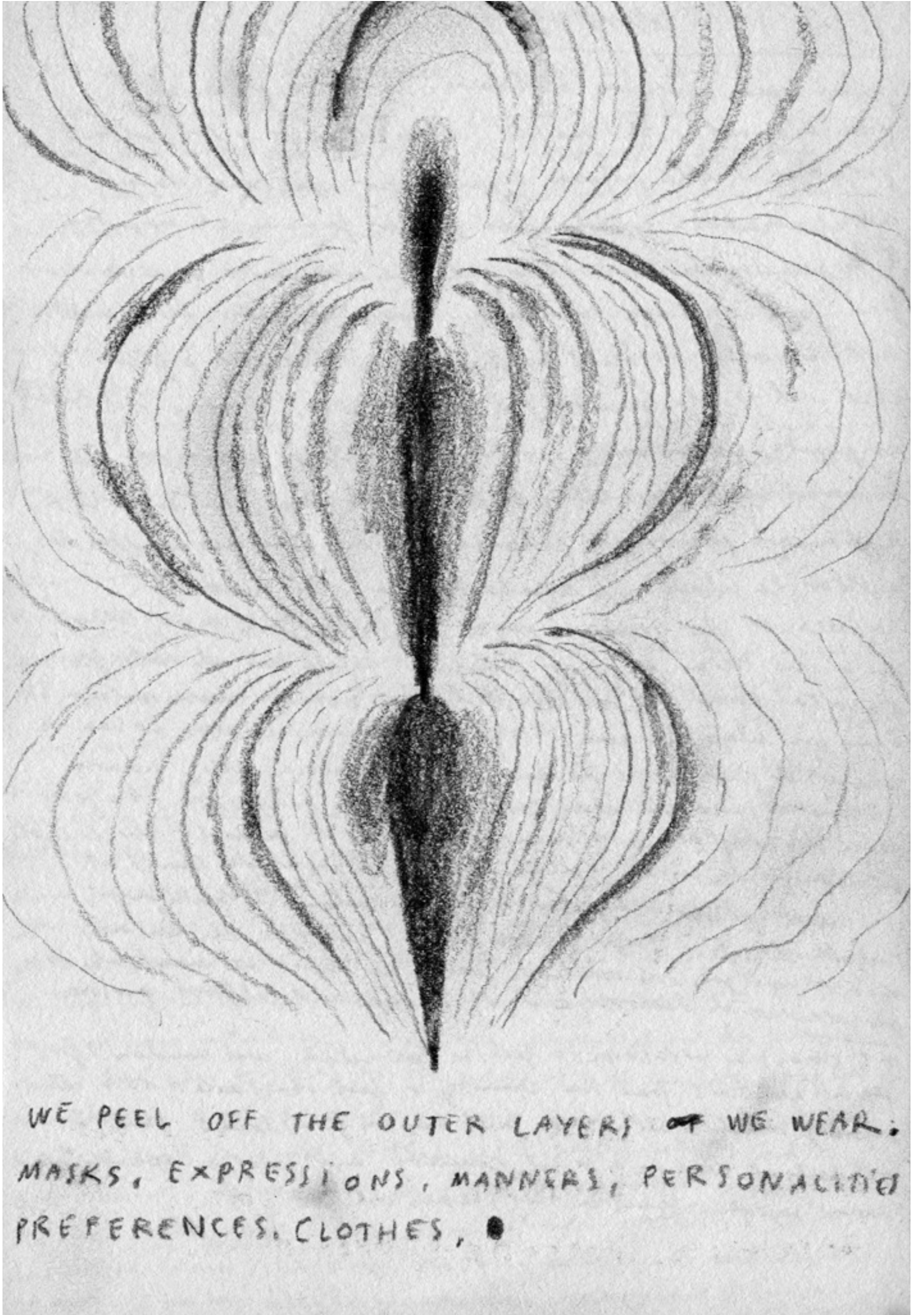

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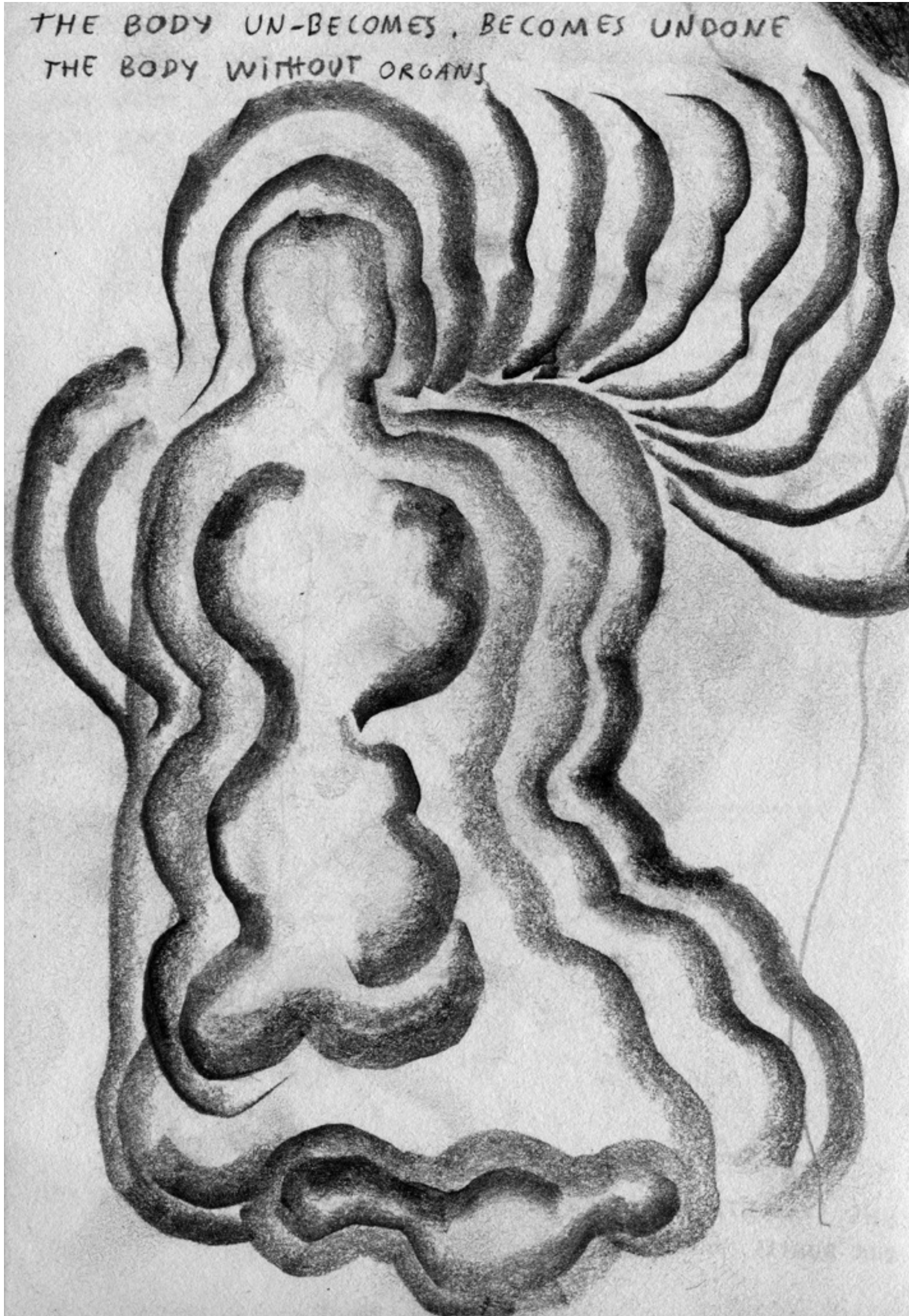

Figure 5

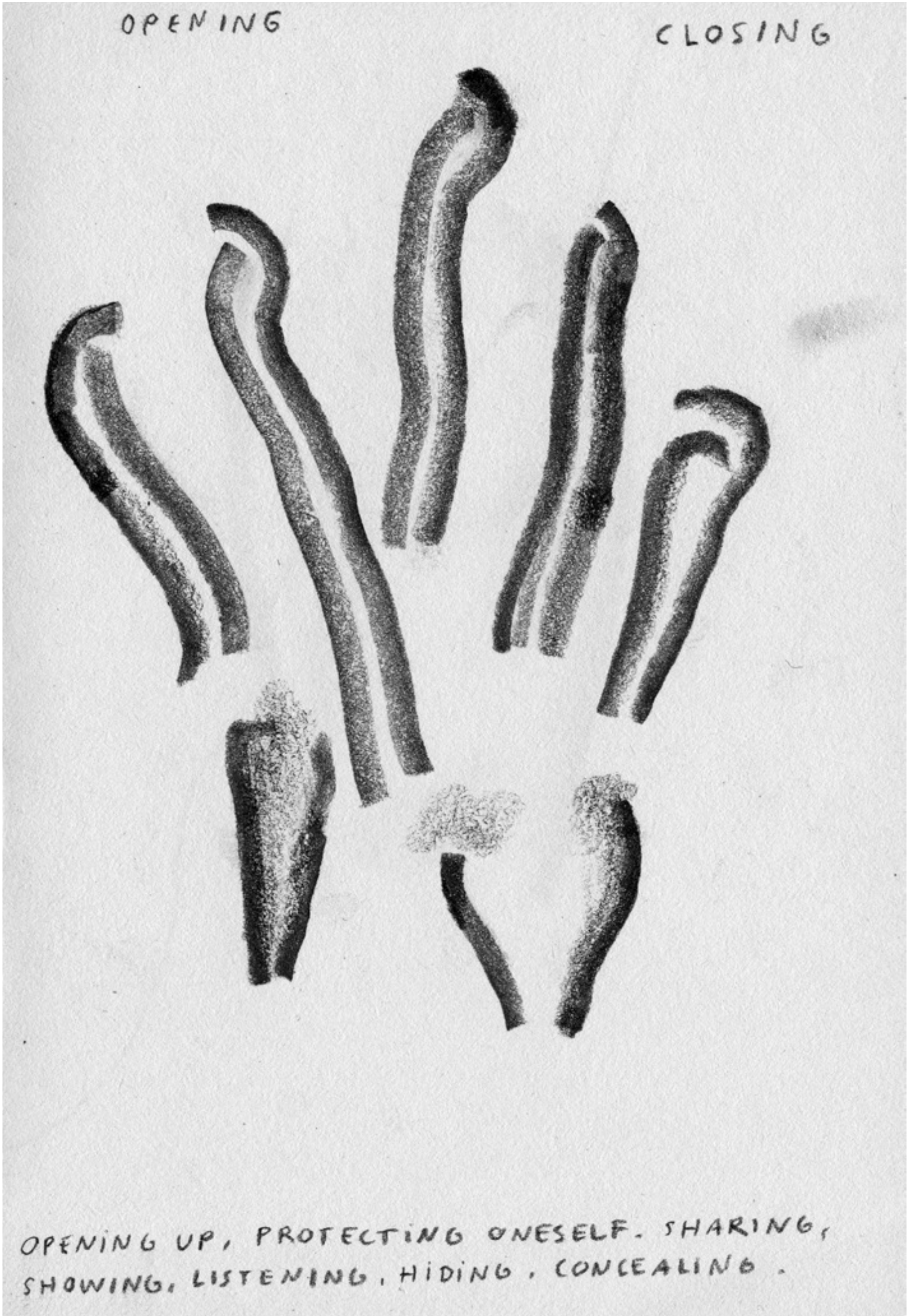

Figure 6

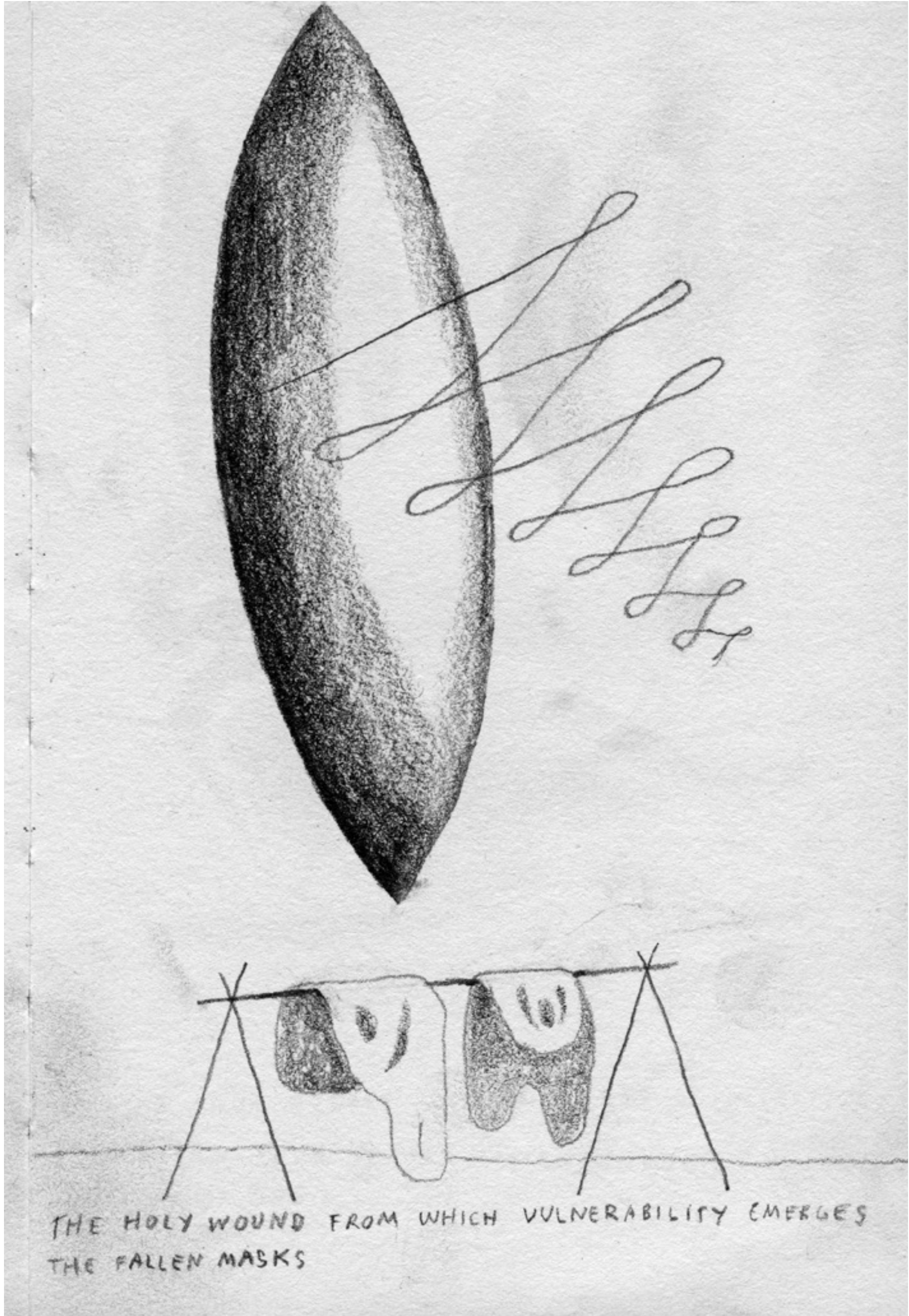

Figure 7

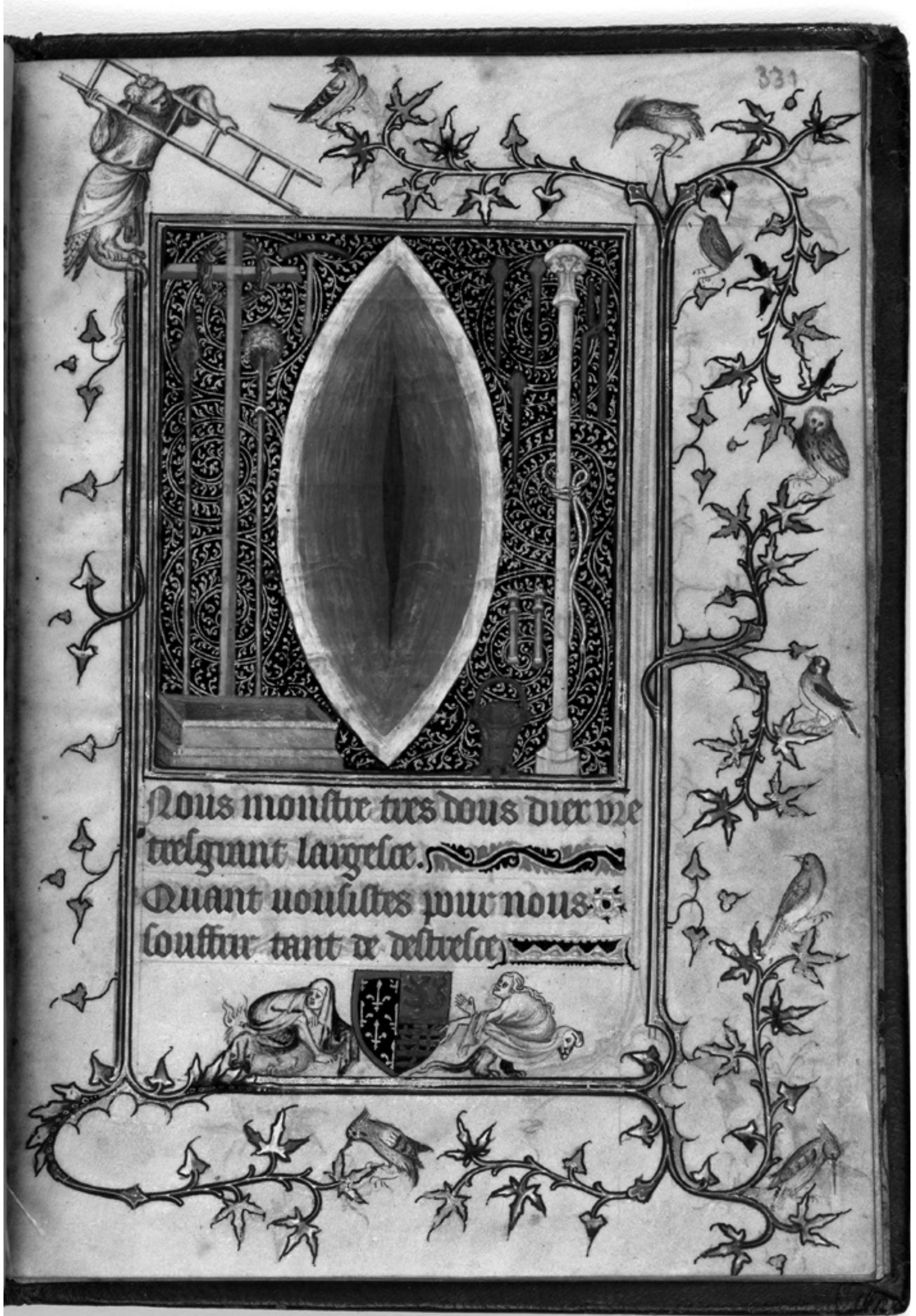

Figure 8

EXERCISES ON INTIMACY

Figure 9

Figures 1-4 show a process of undoing what we see in others in order to draw attention to what remains invisible. Many of the exercises were performed with eyes closed or looking into the eyes of another, resulting in a shift in visual perception that extended to other ways of sensing. In figure 1, lines of similar width but decreasing intensity outline a human silhouette — or perhaps it is two silhouettes intertwined — reflecting the vibrations that the figure(s) emit. As I made this drawing, I recalled a recent experience of physical closeness with another participant in which we closed our eyes while making sounds of varying intensity and pitch. Since we could not see each other, other ways of sensing were intensified. The fading lines in the drawing are meant to represent the vibrations of sound and other emanations through which a person can be perceived — including those that do not easily translate into English words.

Figure 2 elaborates on this perceptual experience by depicting emanations of different textures, that can be read as coming from different persons — each having their distinctive form — or from the same one. Figures 3 and 4 reflect the process of perception beyond social identifiers, something that I was particularly struck by during the weekends. The exercises shifted attention from visual perception to other senses, drawing the focus away from the identity markers we use to categorise and read each other — for instance gender, age, dress or physical appearance — to create a different kind of encounter. As the weekend progressed, I found that the way I had read the other participants at our first meeting gradually became less central and another part of them — their energy, sound, smell and presence — became the focus of my awareness.[4] Later, the practices became more intense and intimate. We did meditations where we touched each other, which was another point of encounter and recognition of the other, and a new challenge to the self and its boundaries. The sessions included exercises where we were encouraged to behave in ways that are not socially accepted as "normal" or allowed in public spaces, such as screaming or making all kinds of noises, moving in extravagant ways, twitching, impersonating animals and other creatures, rubbing against each other, undressing and so on.

Figure 5 was drawn after a conversation I had with the facilitator. During our talk, she mentioned Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "body without organs" as a source of inspiration for her work (Deleuze and Guattari 2003). By playing with this concept in a drawing, I was able to give it a form and connect it to the practices she was guiding us through. In the conversations and during the workshops, she talked about how one of the aims of her work is to challenge the ideas that our bodies are disconnected from the web of life and that our identities are static. She used the term of dissolving or undoing the body and the self to refer to the process of reconceptualising the body/self in relation to the environment in which it is embedded.

Figure 6 illustrates the moments of interpersonal exchange that took place in the sessions. Before and after the exercises, we were invited to share what we had experienced. The degree of vulnerability shown in the sessions varied from person to person, creating a choreography of closing and opening, revealing and hiding. The drawing plays with these inner movements by depicting organic forms that open and close to varying degrees — some even exude a certain kind of mist.

The drawing in figure 7 differs from the others in that it takes up some of the metaphors that were present during the sessions to creat e an imaginary scene. It incorporates elements of my own visual imagination to reflect the atmosphere of the sessions and create a kind of affective landscape. The drawing takes the metaphors of wounds and masks literally and puts them together in a desert-like environment, creating a certain eerie and oneiric atmosphere.[5]

In figure 9, the metaphor of the masks used in one of the meditations is also taken literally. This drawing differs from the others in material terms, as it was made at home on a larger sheet of paper and drawn with crimson ink and a dip pen. As a result, the lines are finer and more detailed, which gives the drawing a different character. The drawing takes on the characteristics of the tool, creating a more concrete representation that is less diffuse and gives it a more descriptive

approach. If you look at this drawing in comparison to the others, you get an example of how the material has its own agency and in a way determines the shape of a drawing.

SENSUOUS MATERIALITY IN MOTION

In addition to the possibility of translating experiences into images, drawing also offers a characteristic materiality that is accompanied by the corporeality of the act of drawing itself. If we understand drawing as an act of mark-making, the materiality and corporeality of the medium comes to the fore. A trace on a sheet of paper recalls the gesture with which it was made and tells of its intensity, direction and speed. Traces of graphite on textured paper create superficial strokes that lead to light grey, diffuse lines and surfaces, and pressed gestures produce darker indentations and harder shapes. This materiality also contains meaning, as a delicate line undulating on the surface of the paper creates different sensations, thoughts and emotions than an angular shape etched deeply into the paper. As mentioned earlier, the material used for a drawing also influences how it speaks. The texture and messiness of drawings also speaks about the conditions under which they were made. Drawings made on the go, in a moving train, or crouching on a mattress on the floor have a different quality than those made on a desk at home — less controlled, rougher, messier. Drawings made at home can be made on larger paper sheets and using a broader variety of materials than drawings made on the go, which require using what is available — normally a small notebook and a pencil or a pen. Here this contrast is most palpable between figure 9 and the rest of the drawings. The existence of the drawings as objects with a material reality — their afterlife on the pages of a travelling notebook — causes them to change. A drawing made in February will look different in July, and by December it will have changed again. Drawings in a notebook in use and in motion are subject to friction, additions, modifications and accidents in addition to their natural ageing process. The friction of the pages smudges and blurs the graphite, and a spilled cup of tea can stain the paper. The paper can

discolour over time, and the weather can cause it to curl. Every event in the material life of a drawing adds meaning to it and transforms it in the process. From this point of view, every element of a drawing — its visual language, its materiality, its textual inscriptions, its corporeality — contains meaning and can be explored as a means of communication.

THE RELATIONAL LIFE OF DRAWINGS

Besides their visual language and materiality, drawings can also serve as a means of dialogue with participants. As traces of an experience, they offer the possibility to explore whether there is a resonance between the experiences and observations of the researcher and the participants. This form of dialogue is central to anthropologists' use of drawings as part of the research process (Alfonso and Ramos 2004) and it is important to consider in a project that is committed to feminist ethics and challenges hierarchical logics in favour of more horizontal research methods (Hesse-Biber 2014, 236). While using drawings made during fieldwork as dialogue tools does not guarantee more horizontal research relationships, it can offer a possibility for reflexivity and the incorporation of participant's perspectives in such process. I found that showing the drawings I was making and talking about the fact that I was making them added an interesting layer to my position of participant-researcher in the workshops. Now and then I was asked about the drawings, which I then showed and discussed with other participants. Some asked me to send them drawings that I would later make, which opened the possibility to stay in contact after the workshop. Others showed me drawings they had made themselves, and our shared passion for drawing became a point of connection. In these cases, my role as a "person who draws" opened up spaces of dialogue, contact and the intimacy of sharing one's creative work, which in itself can be a vulnerable act. This aligns with the view that ethnography should not be a one-way process, but rather a relationship, and that expanding the tools we use to communicate can contribute to this goal.

Later, drawings made during fieldwork can serve as the basis for more developed visual narratives that complement the written analysis. While this possibility is still unexplored in my project, I take inspiration from research that uses different media to make its insights accessible to a variety of audiences. For example, Mary and Kenneth Gergen have incorporated theatre performances into their ethnographic work. They stated that "as we expand our modes of expression, so do we expand the number of people with whom we can join in the dance of understanding" (Gergen and Gergen 2002, 19).

LIVELY FIELDNOTES

In the edited volume "Redrawing Anthropology," Tim Ingold reflects on the possibilities of drawing to enliven anthropological research. In it, drawing is understood in a broad sense, as "movement that leaves an impression or trace of one kind or another" (Ingold 2011, 2). It considers the possibilities of drawing not only to represent what is being looked at, but also to look along. In Ingold's view, drawings then become not only descriptive or material records of an event, but also living traces that offer the possibility of reliving it. A drawing then becomes a living thing, not a static document. This approach to drawing goes hand in hand with the feminist concern not to do research *about* people — to keep oneself in the position of a distant observer — but to research *with* them, and surrender to what is happening. It reminds us that drawing, like ethnography, is not just a means of representation or description but a living process that transforms the maker and the viewer, conveying emotion and sensuousness. As such, it is not bound by the limits of figurative representation, but has the potential to express affect and interiority, as Ingold notes with reference to Wassily Kandinsky:

> Kandinsky sought to release painting from the constraints of the figurative, to escape the bondage of objects and their imagistic representations so as to reveal the 'inner necessity' of affective, animate life — of the inner movement of becoming that is so readily obscured by its outward, objective forms (Ingold 2011, 18).

This affective dimension of drawings brings them to life — it goes beyond visual representations of what is seen or observed to include lived experience. As the field of phenomenological anthropology expands, driven by a growing interest in the sensuous (Pink 2011; 2009), this potential of drawing deserves further exploration.

Drawing, with its visual language and materiality, is therefore a powerful tool not only to represent what is seen, but also to convey what is experienced and perceived. Taking a reflexive stance, drawings made during fieldwork can open opportunities for dialogue and connection with participants and can later be used to communicate research findings to a variety of audiences. I suggest that further exploration of these possibilities can energise ethnographic research, particularly when it aims to understand subjective experiences.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Figures 1-7 are black and white reproductions of drawings made with graphite pencils of various degrees of softness (3B to 9B) on bone-coloured drawing paper, in a 18,5 x 12,8 cm (closed) bound notebook. Figure 9 is a black and white reproduction of a drawing made with crimson ink on bone-coloured Sennelier drawing paper of 25 x 25 cm and 65/70g/m². Year of production: 2023. All drawings have been digitised in June 2023. Figure 8 is a black and white reproduction of a miniature made with tempera, grisaille, ink, and gold on vellum of 12,6 x 9 cm (individual folio) in a bound prayer book. Made in Paris, France before 1349.

Notes

[1] Tantra here refers to a practice loosely inspired by Eastern Tantric teachings and modern reformulations of them, often referred to as Neo-Tantra — the facilitator explained to me that her work contains elements of both.

[2] The PhD research is part of a larger interdisciplinary research project entitled "Later-in-life intimacy. Women's unruly practices, spaces and representations" (LiLI). It focuses on the Belgian context and engages with women who are around the age of 50 and older. It has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 851666). https://lili.ugent.be

[3] When I speak of drawings in this text, I mean the amalgam of lines, shapes, words and meanings created by the combination of image and text traced on a surface.

[4] This is a shift in perception that each participant can develop according to their willingness and disposition — and one that can rarely be achieved in only a couple of days. The interactions between participants during the two weekends — and further workshops that I attended — suggested that this dissolution of social signifiers is not straightforward, and that gendered, aged and other characteristics remain stubbornly visible to each other.

[5] The "holy wound" in the drawing is reminiscent of the almond-shaped wound of Christ depicted in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg (Fig. 8) and other illuminated Christian manuscripts of the Middle Ages. The drawing connects the iconic image with metaphors often used in therapeutic language that link healing from physical damage with emotional and spiritual restoration.

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