

Department of Fine Art

Master of Fine Art

**I was not thinking,
then nothing's changed**

or The story of a youth who went forth

to (un)learn what fear was

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art**

Anne Rombach

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¹ Referring to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was*, transl. from German: *Märchen von einem, der auszog das Fürchten zu lernen*, <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/175/grimms-fairy-tales/3169/the-story-of-the-youth-who-went-forth-to-learn-what-fear-was/>.

Abstract

People often look up when they're thinking, or narrow their eyes as if focusing on something in the distance. 'Thinking' is very often tied to 'seeing'. 'I see' is what you say when you understand something. 'I see' is what I said when I focused on nothing – 'finally,' I said, 'finally I see something.'

In that sense, stumbling upon 'something' while focusing on another thing became a repetitive pattern in my practise I try to welcome instead of avoiding it. The result is becoming more connected to the world around me as opposed to living in the illusive place of mainly thoughts. Often I felt heavy but when I focused on nothing I could lift off easily, as if I had all of a sudden lost imaginary ballast. Nothing has changed and become something concrete to work with.

I realised how profoundly the system of language and symbols controls my perception. I deconstruct it, and intentionally misunderstand it, welcoming flips of the tongue and other linguistic accidents. I let different languages and meanings meet, and thereby discern between the tool and the trap that the world of language and thought can be. Deconstructing language can be mind and sense opening. It shows the limits of our linguistic world and the immense indescribable, unknown and empty space between the lines with which we interact.

In my thesis I describe the process of how I work and also of how I don't – a journey of becoming that leads to my MA project called *Nothing happens*, a video of a performance projected in a floating box.

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Knot (pronounced not)

I came home from one of my early morning walks into the woods, drew a line on a piece of paper and wrote underneath: ‘Für die einen ein schwarzer Strich. Für die anderen der größte gelöste Knoten der Welt.’ (Engl.: ‘On the one hand a black line. On the other hand the biggest untied knot of the world.’). Back in Reykjavík I materialized this imagined disentangled knot by drawing *The biggest untied knot of the world* (fig. 1) on a paper roll which was the starting point of my meticulous examination of untying knots displayed in an installation in the academy’s exhibition room *Kubbur*.

The knot can be seen as a metaphor for entangled thoughts, problems, difficult situations, and a confused state of mind – a symbol for stressful confusion: feeling stuck and caught in the constant attempt of untying a (self-made) loop consisting of invisible thoughts and disconnected feelings. I worked with the knot as metaphor for my state of mind, dragging it out of its invisibility and processing it through my senses. I was playing with the process and different methods of untying a knot such as converting ‘How to tie knots’-instructions, reversing the examination through taking the result as the starting point of a journey backwards, or visualising the transformation of an entangled knot into a solved one, incorporating the linguistic confusion the word ‘knot’³ offers as soon as it is pronounced.

The action of tying knots is a well-established practice within many fields, whether it is to hold a steady course when sailing, to prevent a perilous fall into the abyss, or simply to keep one’s shoelaces tied: knots are everywhere around us. This exhibition examines the knot and works with the idea of how it can be untied. (...) The knot cannot be seen; you are only told that it was there before but that now it has been untied. This leads to the emphasis on the pronunciation of the word ‘knot’, which is the title of the exhibition: *Knot (pronounced not)*. This alludes to a knot that is not so ‘pronounced’—it is there but, at the same time, it is (k)not.⁴

Describing something as present and absent at once reminds me of a poem by the educator and poet Hughes Mearns from 1899 called *Antigonish (or The Little Man Who Wasn't There)*:

Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there

³ “How to Say or Pronounce Knot”, video, 0:03, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hebGZiXJ4eM>.

⁴ Ásta Friðriksdóttir, part of curatorial text printed in brochure poster accompanying the exhibition *Knot (pronounced not)*, February 21-March 6, 2015; entire text accessible on <http://annerombach.com/works/knot-pronounced-not/>.

He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd go away
When I came home last night at three
The man was waiting there for me
But when I looked around the hall
I couldn't see him there at all!
Go away, go away, don't you come back any more!
Go away, go away, and please don't slam the door
Last night I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away⁵

I considered both the *Knot Theory* and the legend of the *Gordian Knot*. Both want to achieve the aim of solving knots even though their approach is quite contrary: in *Knot Theory*, the study of mathematical knots, solving a knot (a simple closed curve or loop) is done by simplifying it as much as possible. The *Gordian Knot*, according to the legend a knot impossible to disentangle, was cut with a sword by *Alexander the Great* who thus produced the required ends to unbind it. He fulfilled the oracle's prophecy that the one to untie the knot would become the king of Asia. The *Gordian Knot* has often been used as a metaphor for an intractable problem which challenges to think 'outside the box' and find a loophole.

My loop became visual within the repetition of drawing an S-bend on paper, again and again, but on contrary to the stagnation of my looping thoughts I added one important move: movement. I did not draw on the same spot over and over again; I was moving the paper one step further after each line. Repetition and movement met on the paper roll and let me see progress, literally.

Each line can be seen as a unique breath one takes over and over again – no matter in what concepts you are caught, you are breathing in and out, and while doing that you move on constantly, life moves on constantly. It was such a tiny move *to move* (= to draw), but it changed the whole concept I was caught in. Seeing the rope growing, I could see time passing, the rope became a metaphor for the line of life.

⁵ Hughes Mearns, *Antigonish*, 1899, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/antigonish-i-met-man-who-wasnt-there>.

The artist Janine Antoni also describes her work *Moor*⁶ (fig. 2-4) (which contains a rope she was weaving of materials donated by friends and relatives) as a ‘lifeline’. It is a living artwork in the sense that it is still growing and changing. In another video work titled *Touch*⁷ Antoni appears as a tightrope walker against the backdrop of a summery beach panorama, balancing herself on a tightrope that seems like a line stretched right above the sea’s horizon. The distance between beach and horizon is contained in this illusory image, as Antoni’s weight causes the rope to merge with the horizon.

KNOT (pronounced *not*) manifests my decision not to show any real knots in the exhibition in *Kubbur*, only differently ways of untying entangled or imagined knots.

The exhibition consisted of the drawing of *The biggest untied knot*: the paper roll was connected with a knitting needle across my working table to a music stand, upheld by a white balloon exactly at the spot where the drawing stops. On the balloon it says ‘Hurra!’ (fig. 5-9).

Two other parts of the show were placed on the working table (which was covered by a long roll of paper that extended down and across the floor and up again to the opposing wall of the gallery): a box containing small sheets of tracing paper showing different compilations of drawn black arrows (fig. 10) that I copied from ‘How to tie knots’-instruction cards (fig. 11). Next to it were precisely ordered bundles of threads on a sheet of graph paper (fig. 12).

To the wall to the left of the table were mounted a drawing of all the previously mentioned instructing arrows combined within one piece of paper, and another paper with the line ‘and again’ in my handwriting (fig. 13, 14): each line had been covered with a correction tape, then written over with the same text ‘and again’ – repeated many times (fig. 15). These two works show a process of combination and repetition demonstrating other types of movement: the many arrows on one sheet of paper remind of dance patterns, or the movement of the wind or water streams illustrated in weather forecasts, whereas the repetitive process of writing ‘and again’ leads to another movement into a three-dimensional form: the layers grow and build up on the paper.

The floor was taped with white arrows referring to the instruction cards (fig. 13) – there was an unspoken invitation to the viewer to deal with instruction signs he would walk on. I was curious about people’s reaction: are they ignoring it, or trying to follow the instructing

⁶ Janine Antoni, *Moor*, 2001, see visual supplement Fig. 2-4

⁷ Janine Antoni, *Touch*, 2002, see min 0:55 in “Janine Antoni | Art21 | Preview from Season 2 of “Art in the Twenty-First Century” (2003)”, video, 1:52, accessed January 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_n2kfqNmpY.

directions? Are they getting confused? Some of the instructing directions were easy to follow, whereas others were taped in a way impossible to follow prudently and as a consequence led to confusion. Unless one sees the pattern of arrows as an invitation to simply move, and not as restricting instructions to follow, one experiences the dilemma of having to decide which way to choose, not knowing or seeing the purpose of it all. I enjoyed watching one visitor who raised her eyes from the taped floor quite soon and danced to the instructions. Thus she experienced the space through her movement instead of thinking about it: it was a little girl.

On a pedestal there were copies of the exhibition brochure with a text written by my pseudonym *Anne the Great* (text: *I am knot thinking*, see above).

While setting up the show I chose pieces I did not think of as related or valuable before. I said goodbye to my darling (an animation on 16mm film which I was working on during the semester) and combined works I did on the side while mainly paying attention to the (over-) thought-out concept of my exhibition.

Stumbling upon ‘something’ while focusing on another thing is a repetitive pattern in my practise. I try to welcome this instead of avoiding it, as the result is becoming more connected to the world around me as opposed to living in the illusive world of thoughts. Here is an anecdote that illustrates how, by stumbling, I become aware of my restrictive fear of losing control in everyday life:

Queen of fucking everything

I wake up very early in the morning, and think of having a good cup of coffee. Then I decide unanimously to fall asleep instead; I turn around and – stand up. Deciding to fall asleep again does not work, my mind is already many kilometres ahead - and although it never works, I go through this decision making almost every morning, rehearsing an impossible play, dreaming of me being in control of my sleep, being in control of myself.

Instead I get out of my bed, walk into the kitchen and control the preparation of a good cup of coffee. I try to be quiet so my flatmates do not suffer from me being in and out of control. I prepare three slices of bread with cheese and jam although yesterday I had decided to start living a more disciplined and healthy life - and I am not even hungry at this point.

I ignore my health plans and numb my critical mind as long as I am following old habits. I pour espresso and some warm milk into a cup (fig. 16), decide to add no sugar and immediately feel proud of this healthy decision I've made – I take the cup and the plate, go back to my room and start to feel like I am in control again. I am sneaking, and aware of it. I've always made an effort to hide: my mother, who has a very light sleep, would often tell at what time my brothers came home at night but she would not hear me sneaking on tiptoes.

Right in that moment, as I am moving gracefully through the room feeling like the most silent dancer in the world, delicately balancing my hot cup of coffee and a plate, then bending carefully over to lay them gently on my desk – I stumble over a chair.

I realise: my attention is always pointed at 'something' – and sooner or later I would crash with something else on the way. I am surprised and also amused by myself, being so naïve to believe I could be aware of everything around me. I laugh.

I came across an interesting speech by the writer David Foster Wallace where he is describing this self-centeredness I stumbled upon:

Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on.⁸

He takes it further to the importance of learning how to think, which in his opinion is about learning how to exercise some control over your thinking:

It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. It's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centred and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self.⁹

⁸ David Foster Wallace, "This is water", audio, <https://soundcloud.com/brainpicker/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water-1>.

⁹ Ibid.

Due to my thoughtful manner I used to stumble rather later than sooner, my attention span is often overextended – fearfully taking care to prevent doing anything wrong, my perception travels through the world of thoughts, concepts, expectations, ideas and assumptions and from there they are put into a conceptualised reaction to the outward world, which often brings about some peculiar delay and disconnection. Becoming alert of my own ridiculous cautiousness makes me love the pain caused by the kick in my shin. It reminds me of being self-aware which, in turn, means being conscious of my self-awareness.

Art works

Another morning, not that early and without the attempt to be invisible or utterly quiet – while making a coffee this time, looking at the scrape on my shin, I think about the important relation between art and the everyday. Some of the methods I start with are to: disconnect, connect, relate, separate, delete, scale up and down, move around... – to invite something

the nature of which is totally unknown¹⁰

to me as yet to happen, to appear, to show up and disturb me. Behind those methods lies a desire to do so with ‘myself’, to discover and ‘create’ myself, free from ideas of ‘how I am supposed to be’ – a desire to find my own nature, my own way of being – which currently feels unknown to me. Finding my own way of ‘discovering myself’ seems to be the same creative journey as finding my own way of making art.

I am inspired by the everyday, the seemingly ordinary, and the absurdity it offers when looked at it closely. Discovering something unknown in the familiar intrigues me. There

is the sometimes unstated but always implicit notion that a turn to the everyday will bring art and life closer together. [...] in the reconciliation of art and life lies perhaps the potential to undermine what has appeared to many as a misconceived view of art’s destiny: to be no more than an autonomous and rarefied sphere of production and consumption.¹¹

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburg: Canongate Books Ltd., 2006), 4.

¹¹ Stephen Johnstone, *The Everyday*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel ; Cambridge, 2008), 13.

Art in my opinion challenges constant learning and unlearning of what we know, and helps to find and lose our identity apart from common standards, theories, concepts or ideologies – without any instruction ensuring safety and certainty. Anaïs Nin describes this as follows:

It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and, as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.¹²

In his paper *Experience and Experiment in Art* writer and philosopher Alva Noë's central thought is that

(...) Art can make a needed contribution to the study of perceptual consciousness. The work of some artists can teach us about perceptual consciousness by furnishing us with the opportunity to have a special kind of reflective experience. In this way, art can be a tool for phenomenological investigation.¹³

When, once again, I found myself being lost in the entangled world of thoughts, fragmented memory and fear of the unknown future, I discovered a poem one can read at any time on any player anywhere, a free companion reminding one of the present moment:

PAUSE REW.
STOP FWD.
REC PLAY.¹⁴

Siri Hustvedt talked about this growth or change of perceptual consciousness in her inspiring lecture called *My Louise Bourgeois*. She describes her personal relation to the art of Louise Bourgeois and from there the often forgotten point that every perception is a personal experience; and everybody experiencing Louise Bourgeois' or any other artwork experiences her/his very own work of art.

Expectation is crucial to what we see. (...) We see largely what we expect to see. In other words we bring ourselves with our pasts to artworks; selves and pasts which include not just our sensitivity and brilliance but our biases and blind spots as well. (...) Good art surprises us. Good art reorients our expectations, forces us to break the patterns to see in a new way.¹⁵

¹² Anaïs Nin, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/anaisnin163753.html>.

¹³ Alva Noë, "Experience and Experiment in Art", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, No. 8–9 (2000): 123.

¹⁴ Anne Rombach, *Poem EJ by Anne the Great*, Reykjavík 2015, accessible on <http://annerombach.com/works/abc-amp-friends/>.

¹⁵ Siri Hustvedt, *My Louise Bourgeois*, Haus der Kunst, Munich 2015, video, 1:06:53, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRSFr-Yggnw>.

This concept of ‘my reality’ and Louise Bourgeois’ art inspired me to visualise the process of a search or discovery, focusing on the often invisible requirements needed:

One must be open for being heartbroken.

One must be open for being ~~heart~~broken.

One must be open for being ~~heart~~broken.

One must be open for being ~~heart~~broken.

One must be open ~~for being~~ heartbroken.

One must be ~~open for being~~ heartbroken.¹⁶

‘Making art’ sounds somehow wrong to me, I prefer to call it ‘making art work’. Art is not something I invent. It is something that is out there to be discovered – some sort of spirit maybe, which I try to set into vibration. Artworks can be seen as arrows pointing at art, as in the artist Agnes Martins opinion

The response to art is the real art field.¹⁷

My response to art is (emotional, physical, or conceptual) stimulation, as an artist as well as a viewer, listener or reader... in short: as a receiver. This response touches and alters my movement which in turn stimulates everyone and everything around me – if I leave room for it. The response depends upon the condition of the receiver. I think artworks work like invitations: they describe, refer or invite to experience art. Artists invite you to step into the field and it’s your own artistic choice to accept that invitation – in this way the viewer (or receiver) becomes an artist as well.

Beyond cause and effect

It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophesies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it’s where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists, too, as J. Robert Oppenheimer once remarked, “live always at ‘the edge of mystery’ - the boundary of the unknown.”¹⁸

Science claims the existence of universal validity of conditions, staying within the realm of cause and effect, whereas art explores the unknown territory.

¹⁶ Anne Rombach, *My Louise Bourgeois*, 2015, accessible on <http://annerombach.com/works/abc-amp-friends/>.

¹⁷ Agnes Martin, *Writings / Schriften*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1993), 155.

¹⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburg: Canongate Books Ltd., 2006), 5.

Ludwig Wittgenstein works the space beyond cause and effect in quite an entertaining way in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a philosophical work which contains short numbered statements revealing the relationship between language and reality as well as the limits of science. His conclusion is the existence of what he refers to as the ‘inexpressible’:

6.52 We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

6.522 There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.¹⁹

In a speech titled *We Cannot Survive With Real-Politik* the psychologist and psychoanalyst Arno Gruen explores the origin of the dilemma we are in, the fear of what is beyond our rational knowledge:

We believe in our rational point of view because we are able to push aside our feelings, which we consider to be irrational. Feelings have become a threat for us and must be repressed; therefore, we judge a way of thinking to be realistic if it has been freed of empathy and the capability to share pain, to understand suffering, and to feel a connection with all forms of life.

When he wonders what could save us from the plight by alienation from our own feelings he refers to *His Holiness the Dalai Lama* who wrote:

Paradoxically (...) we can help ourselves only if we help the Other. (...) It is the cultivation of love and compassion, our ability to enter into and to share another’s suffering, that are the preconditions for the continued survival of our species. (...) To understand the suffering of others (...) means to possess true empathy (...) The feeling of community with all living creatures can be attained only if we recognize that we are all basically united and dependent on one another.²⁰

This unity is even discovered by science: Irish physicist John Stuart Bell showed in what has become known as *Bell's Theorem* that any two atoms, once having encountered each other,

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. C. K. Ogden (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1922), 89-90.

²⁰ Arno Gruen, *We Cannot Survive With Real-Politik*, Arno Gruen’s acceptance speech for the Loviisa Peace Prize 2010, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.rauhanfoorumi.fi/archives/1279>.

will forever be connected or have an influence on each other, regardless of their location or distance from each other.

This universal connectivity is outside the realm of cause and effect. Physicists consider cause/effect to be bounded by the speed of light. The effect Bell describes is superluminal - faster than the speed of light. The implication of Bell's Theorem is profound. It implies what the mystic states: the universe is connected, there is no true separation, what occurs here may instantly have an effect on there. Bell's work indicates an effect that is outside of causation, outside of process, outside of time. It indicates a quality which is described by science, but cannot be explained by science. Science has gone past its own understanding. What is the farthest edge of science is describing is the very early and rudimentary scientific contact with consciousness. And as we have seen, consciousness fundamentally alters everything it touches.²¹

‘Contact with consciousness’ and having ‘gone past my own understanding’ are part of the dilemma I found myself stuck in: I was failing to understand myself. Now I value this dilemma and see it as my ‘ticket’ to knowledge beyond understanding. When I came to Iceland I was confronted with two other languages, and the struggle to express (and to understand) myself was the initial for a journey inwards in order to getting to know myself anew, including the territory beyond cause and effect, and beyond words.

Langwitch

I’ve played with language ever since. It became a big part of my artistic practise since I discovered language as a beautiful and also dangerous tool that I never really knew how to use. People often talk about the flood of digital images – what about the gigantic flood of words? I ‘see’ spoken and written language as material with incredibly creative and dangerous potential.

I realise how profoundly the system of language and symbols controls my perception. I deconstruct it, and intentionally misunderstand it, welcome flips of the tongue and other linguistic accidents, let different languages and meanings meet, and thereby help to free myself from the world of thought and language that I find myself trapped in. Deconstructing

²¹ Steven Harrison, *Doing Nothing : Coming to the End of the Spiritual Search* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 84.

language can be mind and sense opening. It shows the limits of our linguistic world and the immense indescribable, unknown and empty space between the lines.

Understanding language is integral to understanding thought and reality. As language develops, we are swallowed by the reality that language creates. While we may crave the wholeness that we experienced before language, we cannot find that unity in the world we have created through language.²²

We perceive something and then we communicate what we perceive. In that process we include our thoughts, memory, fears and projections and often end up with something quite different to what we initially perceived. I pay attention to perception and its communication and by revealing this on-going process in different ways (transforming the familiar into another form, or interrupting its common sensation), I create space for suggestions of ‘how we could perceive differently’; and thereby sharpen the awareness for what we (don’t) see and how we communicate it. And here stumbling upon my own unawareness, my unconscious patterns and blind spots, become the welcome accident referred to earlier. This challenges improvement and change as being the main constant.

Since I decided to shine light on my own blind spots I stumble upon curious things, coherences, illusions, and entangled companions:

I unwind myself like a length of multicoloured yarn (...)²³,

believing patiently that you should

never cut what you can untie.²⁴

In a lecture at the *Thinking like an Artist Conference*²⁵ the artist Janine Antoni points out that we all have the capacity for creativity, and that the non-creative behaviour is learned. I very much agree and find that learning nowadays, for adults, is mostly about unlearning the learned, daring to discover the unknown, letting go of illusions. I love to look for this creative potential in what everybody is familiar with – in order to turn the common ground into a common playground and bring art back to the place where it initially happens.

²² Steven Harrison, *Doing Nothing : Coming to the End of the Spiritual Search* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 34.

²³ Fernando Pessoa and Alberto Caeiro, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. Maria José de Lancastre, transl. Margaret Jull Costa (London: Serpent’s tail, 2002), 24.

²⁴ Joseph Joubert, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/164152-never-cut-what-you-can-untie>.

²⁵ Janine Antoni, *Thinking like an Artist*, conference at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, video, 53:01, 2010, accessed January 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_4YoZqfBY0.

‘It feels like I am learning backwards’ is a phrase coming up in my mind quite often since I started on this journey inwards. I learn everything anew by breaking the monocacy of language and thought, and turn it into democracy with many more ‘parties’. I learn to appreciate the world beyond language and to see ‘the unknown’ as the direction all artists are pointing to.

Fear and desire

Again and again I am drawn to imagine the seemingly impossible, the invisible, the unknown, to test meaning versus meaninglessness, to find a way to love what both fascinates and scares me, such as paradoxes, contradictions and uncertainty. I relate to Franz Kafka when he says he is

(...) constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones. Basically it is nothing other than this fear we have so often talked about, but fear spread to everything, fear of the greatest as of the smallest, fear, paralyzing fear of pronouncing a word, although this fear may not only be fear but also a longing for something greater than all that is fearful.²⁶

Fear is a powerful motor which has kept me imprisoned for a long time while simultaneously trying to find a loophole. Having learned through my drawing of *the world’s biggest untied knot* and amongst some other relating coincidences about the illusion of being stagnant, the beauty inherent in confusion, the necessity of being lost on the way of finding one’s own inner compass - now I keep moving, welcome stumbling, welcome failing, welcome falling into uncertainty - stop being dominated by paralyzing fear.

I’ve learned and keep practising the art of laughing about myself which I define as a form of love, not taking myself too serious. That is however only possible if I dare to come out of hiding and show up. Often invisible fears and depressing thoughts – once they are pronounced (or otherwise transformed into material) – turn into creative but ridiculous concepts and lose their depressing power.

²⁶ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.openculture.com/2015/05/franz-kafkas-kafkaesque-love-letters.html>.

Under the most rigid conventionality there is often an individual, a human being with original thoughts or inventive fantasy, which he does not dare expose for fear of ridicule, and this is what the writer and artist are willing to do for us. They are guides and map makers to greater sincerity. They are useful, in fact indispensable, to the community.²⁷

Working on the knot as my metaphor for the heavy entangled bunch of thoughts that I've collected over the years, has helped me to reveal some of my own blind spots. For years I was stuck in certain ideas built on fear, shame and doubt; and this condition felt like being stuck in the very moment of 'almost' falling, 'almost' breaking apart, 'almost' losing one's mind, not daring to let go of the 'rope' that I was fearfully holding onto – trying to be balanced – afraid of the emptiness or nothingness that I could sense nearing.

Only by showing up I invite others to do so, too. Daring to expose tie points others can relate and connect to is how I came about the following quote by Virginia Woolf, sent to me by a friend of mine:

Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body.²⁸

Exposing myself is the invitation to welcome the beauty of stumbling with others, to truly connect and move on. This

visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which is the source of our greatest strength. For we have been socialised to respect fear more than our own needs (...), and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.²⁹

On my daily walk to school along the seashore I usually listen to music – in my opinion the most accessible of the arts. During weeks I listened to the same song again and again, and recorded myself singing. The song is called *My body is a cage* by the band *Arcade Fire*, and the chorus is as follows:

²⁷ Review of Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 5: 1947-1955*, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/11/08/anais-nin-unfamiliar/>.

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000); see fig. 17.

²⁹ Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, paper delivered at the Modern Language Association's Lesbian and Literature panel, Chicago, Illinois December 28, 1977, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.csusm.edu/sjs/documents/silenceintoaction.pdf>.

My body is a cage that keeps me
From dancing with the one I love
But my mind holds the key³⁰

I twisted the words ‘body’ and ‘mind’ and sang the original chorus first, and then my twisted version:

My mind is a cage that keeps me
From dancing with the one I love
But my body holds the key³¹

In the background you here ambient noise such as cars, rain or the sea. I see a relation to the *drawing of the untied knot* – again I am describing a moment of some sort of stagnation but also realisation, of being in between a transformation, the beginning of an end. Or is it the *End of the Beginning?* That is the title of a song by *Black Sabbath* which was whispered into my ears recently; when I started to stumble upon songs I never listened to before (or never consciously listened to before):

Is this the end of the beginning?
Or the beginning of the end?
Losing control or are you winning?
Is your life real or just pretend?

Reanimation of the sequence
Rewind the future to the past.
To find the source of the solution;
The system has to be recast.

Release your mind.³²

The accident in this case is that I had no idea of this song being on my player. So, while once again walking the well-known path along the sea, processing thoughts and feelings relating to transformation, change, letting go, being stuck... suddenly the musician *Ozzy Osbourne* invites me to question life with him. And I laughed. I imagined *Black Sabbath* especially talking to me: as if it was a sign.

³⁰ Arcade Fire, *My body is a cage*, music video, 4:47, 2007, accessed January 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhhZdune_5Q.

³¹ Anne Rombach, *My body is a cage, my mind is a cage*, audio compilation, 5:35, accessed May 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nghceCeFTxl>.

³² Black Sabbath, *End of the Beginning*, music video, 8:19, 2013, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0W91FrTIYk>.

I am constantly looking for meaning or its absence, and relate to Roland Barthes' short and basic description of his interest in an interview (Engl. transl.):

I am interested in all things, but not in everything about all things, only in a certain aspect, the aspect of meaning.³³

I enjoy it when the meaning I create makes me laugh, when sense (I consider happiness a sense) is found in absurd nonsense and logic is turned upside down, and when, while being on a journey of solving a problem, the problem itself disappears: its creation, which was born in (and through) my mind, was brought to consciousness - and dissolves. The problem becomes valuable since it brought about the limitation of my mind and consequential personal growth. In a film version of a German fable I watched recently one person is asking the other: "Why is life so difficult?" whereupon the other responds: "So we learn to think."

When we are unhappy it is because something is covering our minds and we are not able to be aware of happiness. When the difficulty is past we find happiness again. (...) Happiness is unattached. Always the same. It does not appear and disappear. It is not sometimes more and sometimes less. It is our awareness of happiness that goes up and down. Happiness is our real condition. It is reality. It is life.³⁴

By the way, the song on the first music cassette I owned is called *Looking for freedom*³⁵ by David Hasselhoff, and I remember singing along wholeheartedly as a kid. I assume it had a deep impact on me.

Hurra!

Nothing's changed

About fifteen years ago I stumbled upon something – and maybe that was the moment I started to become afraid of stumbling. 'Something' was not big nor very small, not ugly or beautiful, there was neither bad smell coming from it nor a very pleasant one. I couldn't tell if it was new or old, or what it was made of – no matter how hard I tried I could not figure out what it was.

³³ Roland Barthes, *Meister der Dechiffrierkunst*, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qie5hR1aJgE>.

³⁴ Agnes Martin, *Writings / Schriften*, Ed. Dieter Schwarz (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1993), 137.

³⁵ David Hasselhoff, *Looking for Freedom*, music video, 3:56, 1989, accessed January 17, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ot_katYYiU.

It was just there, suddenly, and I stumbled over it; it seemed to be or filled with something heavy. Curious about its condition I inspected it carefully. There was nothing, literally ‘no thing’. I wanted to get this thing out of my way. I bent down and - could not move it even one millimetre. Sometimes I call this ‘something’ I stumbled upon ‘a box’ – it would change its features during the years but calling it a box seemed to be the simplest term I could think of. How can something containing or being ‘nothing’ be so heavy?

I was carrying this box with me and it influenced me, very often it seemed to occupy me. I tried to understand and explain it but it only got heavier. However, when I came to Iceland three years ago I experienced myself free from any heavy thoughtful weight – until, after some months, I stumbled over this imaginary box again. Pain mixed with desperate confusion, and still I wanted to get this thing out of my way. Hiding and ignoring ‘nothing’ did not work anymore, so this time I attempted to visualize and communicate it, transformed it and discovered my passion for storytelling as a way of understanding. Working on ‘nothing’ started with admitting my confusion, entangled thoughts and repressed feelings that I faced in my previous work *KNOT* (*pronounced not*) - and through the process of trying to find out what ‘it’ was I found what it was (k)not.

In my current working process (working title: *Nothing’s changed*) I am taking my personal linguistic and sensible relation to this find further: I collected ‘nothing’ by going through all my Emails and *Facebook* messages, extracting sentences that include the word ‘nothing’ (fig. 18) and combined them with related objects which reflect different approaches to experiencing ‘nothing’, or an imaginary ‘something’. In fig. 19 something was cut out and turned into ‘nothing’, the cut-out part becomes ‘something’ although it is nothing there, the image becomes an object. The hands covered in gloves holding ‘nothing’ show the careful dealing with this something/nothing interplay, it is treated like a treasure with dangerous potential. I combined different ‘nothing’s’ and played with its meaning (fig. 19-23) in various ways, in order to make it lighter, to turn ‘nothing’ into something valuable and useful to learn from – and not to be held back by its heavy emptiness that was dragging me down into highly stressful anxiety and depression as before.

In short my personal struggle became too heavy to hide or ignore, I listened to my body that was suffering. I could not focus on anything anymore, so I decided to focus on ‘nothing’ instead. I wrote down unconsciously:

It was heavy but when she focused on nothing she could lift it up easily, as if it had lost its weight all of a sudden. Nothing's changed.³⁶

Reading this felt like discovering an invitation to a journey, and I love this unconscious stumble that brought lightness with it: 'nothing' really has changed by looking right into it and allowing myself to become the *Queen of Nothing*, instead of trying to be the *Queen of Fucking Everything* (fig. 16).

There were made many beautiful conceptual works about 'nothing', often describing 'nothingness' as emptiness, void or silence - but that's not what I am drawn to. I have lived and thought in concepts for too long, I'm rather interested in letting concept meet (or even be disturbed by) intuition, an interplay that brings forth consciousness and transformation. Having studied the exhibition catalogues *Voids: A retrospective*³⁷ (2009) and *Nichts Nothing*³⁸ (2006) that contain stimulating conceptual artworks, one of the works that touched me strongly is by the artist Robert Barry: sentences written with a typewriter on white paper, showing 'something' that is outside of our ability to grasp (fig. 24-27).

Although I only found what 'it' was not that I was looking for I gained valuable knowledge, metaphorically speaking: I found myself sneaking into the 'scene' through the backdoor. I am discovering all the strange weight that I carry around with me, and find what to let go and how, in order to spiral towards that what it is.

The return of the repressed

It's just a few weeks ago that I started to focus on 'nothing', but since then a lot has changed. I allowed change to happen. Not like before where change often felt like something rare and dangerous – as if only from time to time one gets caught in a storm of unforeseen happenings, drowns in waves of repressed feelings and washes up at an unknown beach trying to find out where one is.

Unfortunately I didn't find out before. Unconsciously, I made 'the unknown beach' look as familiar as possible, out of fear of the unknown; and even though being washed up at a new

³⁶ Anne Rombach, *Nothing's changed*, found object, 2015.

³⁷ Mathieu Copeland, *Voids : A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2009).

³⁸ Martina Weinhart, Max Hollein, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, *Nichts = Nothing* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ; New York, 2006).

spot, I almost managed to turn it into the good old place I came from – including the entire emotional luggage and the mind-set that caused the storm. I got fucked up and instead of focusing on my inner compass to orientate (call it intuition, heart, soul...) I built up everything as it was, I refused change out of fear. I orientated on ‘how I am supposed to be’, on functioning within a concept rather than being authentic, and ignored my heart.

A very clear call to change was coming from what is considered a sickness; after having experienced it I’d rather name it a wake-up call: depression. The quotation below from an article called *Therapy wars: the revenge of Freud* highlights the development and differences between Cognitive behavioural therapy and psychoanalysis. It says:

Psychoanalysts contend that things are much more complicated. For one thing, psychological pain needs first not to be eliminated, but understood. From this perspective, depression is less like a tumour and more like a stabbing pain in your abdomen: it’s telling you something, and you need to find out what.³⁹

I am very interested in the analytical discovery of the human condition – but I also have my doubts when we lose sight of the human condition as a unique and mysterious nature. Analysis is only one part of the discovery. Still I relate to the analyst’s approach defined by psychoanalyst and author Stephen Grosz:

Each life is unique, and your role, as an analyst, is to find the unique story of the patient, (...) there are so many things that only come out through slips of the tongue, through someone confiding a fantasy, or using a certain word. The analyst’s job is to stay watchfully receptive to it all – and then, from such ingredients, help people make meaning of their lives.⁴⁰

I experienced depression as mute emptiness after a turbulent breakdown, insomnia, nights bathed in perspiration desperately hoping to fall asleep, various pains in various body parts, too fast heartbeat, loss of weight, of energy, of interest, of passion, something very heavy pressing my chest, disconnection from everything and everyone, waiting for time to pass or end.

I see depression as the physical expression of repression. ‘The return of the repressed’ (fig. 28) is the title of one of my drawings – touching upon this matter literally through art works like a journey towards myself. And even the psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed

³⁹ Oliver Burkeman, *Therapy wars: the revenge of Freud*, in The Guardian, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jan/07/therapy-wars-revenge-of-freud-cognitive-behavioural-therapy>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain.⁴¹

It helped me to process the inexplicable by transforming it, seeing it as material, as just another, invisible but not less present part of the whole mystery of life.

It is what it is

It is madness
says reason
It is what it is
says love
It is unhappiness
says caution
It is nothing but pain
says fear
It has no future
says insight
It is what it is
says love
It is ridiculous
says pride
It is foolish
says caution
It is impossible
says experience
It is what it is
says love.⁴²

I remembered this poem that I found at the age of nineteen and liked very much. When we were asked to write an artist statement last year I replaced the word 'love' by 'art', and suddenly my feelings of fear, shame and doubt were resting for a moment, I relaxed. That's when I felt that 'what it is' is enough. I see art and life and love as inseparable, just by looking at *what it is*.

⁴¹ Carl Jung, Accessed January 27, 2016, <https://www2.bc.edu/~bruyn/documents/CarlJungSayingspdf.pdf>.

⁴² Erich Fried, *It is what it is*, accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/106990-what-it-is-it-is-madness-says-reason-it-is>.

At some point there is nothing more to reasonably understand, there's nothing to explain – it is enough to feel 'what it is', which often is an underestimated knowledge. I made the mistake of trying to understand and capture love, out of fear. That's when I started to lose it. And every time I tried to explain or understand art in a rational way I lost it, got headaches and stuck.

Nothing is an awe-inspiring yet essentially undigested concept, highly esteemed by writers of a mystical or existentialist tendency, but by most others regarded with anxiety, nausea, and panic.⁴³

I experienced anxiety as art's (and love's and life's) greatest killer. So, the key for me to 'becoming an artist' was to find out and remember:

You can never know anyone as completely as you want. But that's okay, love is better.⁴⁴

To be an artist is to become an artist, again and again. To keep learning and to deal with whatever holds you back. My anxiety caused highly stressful situations, since there is nothing certain, nothing to hold on to or to understand, and nothing that keeps you from falling into the unknown. But then, 'falling' with trust feels like floating – there is no falling.

Agent Anne

I like to call myself a 'bonding agent'. Whether I am connecting people, facts, words, images, beliefs, various realities or tangible material – everything is some kind of material that can be connected, if the bonding agent is getting to know and respecting the character, the needs, and often hidden potential of the parts involved. Sometimes things must be disconnected first, cut into separate pieces, taken apart – in order to discover individual aspects, from different points of view, with appropriate approaches. It also happens quite often that I try to connect non-compatible units, and see in the fact that they don't work together a hint to my own blind spots. This makes me question my working method, my point of view, and makes me try another one. I do believe that everything was and still is connected in a surprisingly simple,

⁴³ P.L. Health, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on *Nothing*, vols 5 & 6, Macmillan, NY (1967), ed. P. Edwards, p. 524, in John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing: vacuum, voids and the latest ideas about the origins of the universe* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 1.

⁴⁴ Review of book by Caroline Paul, *Lost Cat: A True Story of Love, Desperation, and GPS Technology*, accessed January 17, 2016, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/04/09/lost-cat-wendy-macnaughton-caroline-paul/>.

often hidden way, but I found myself separated from myself, I've lost the connection to myself, and I lost 'what it is' that I lost.

I am thinking of (bonding) *Agent Anne* as a figure collecting observations, relations, dis-/connections, questions and answers of the known and unknown territory in a form used in documentary genre: a nature discovery channel – with the aim to show that our reality is nothing else than fiction, and open up for a more creative way of living, leaving restrictions behind, taking oneself less seriously, welcoming the unknown, connecting myth and science, physics and metaphysics, material and mystic – this connection is the very nature of existence.

Others press the world into laws of nature in order to understand it. I turn it into stories.⁴⁵

I investigate my personal relation to the unknown, to contradictions and paradoxes – and discover my own nature, potential and validity, instead of fighting restriction as I experienced before. 'Nothing' started to change and became 'something'.

The first woman on the moon

I set different tasks that help me to be attentive in a playful way, connecting consciousness with the inner child who sees everything with wonder and curiosity:

If only, I feel now, if only I could be someone able to see all this as if he had no other relation with it than that of seeing it, someone able to observe everything as if he were an adult traveller newly arrived today on the surface of life! If only one had not learned, from birth onwards, to give certain accepted meanings to everything, but instead was able to see the meaning inherent in each thing rather than that imposed on it from without.⁴⁶

Agent Anne was very active recently, during a visit at home in the Black Forest. She felt the need to play, and she did so, without overthinking or pre-analysing her work. She spent time in her old child's room at her parent's place and was curious to explore herself in this well-known surrounding, to turn this familiar place into a place of work.

⁴⁵ Peter Stamm, transl. from German: 'Andere zwingen die Welt, um sie zu verstehen, in Naturgesetze. Ich mache sie mir zu Geschichten.', statement found on the back of one of his books, see fig. 29.

⁴⁶ Fernando Pessoa and Alberto Caeiro, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. Maria José de Lancastre, transl. Margaret Jull Costa, (London: Serpent's tail, 2002), 27.

The setting was as follows: I would sit in front of the computer camera, press play and would see what happens. I had a slight notion of ‘something’ and would just allow myself to do whatever came to my mind (or sneaked past it), to do ‘something’. My inner critic was on a holiday. After ‘doing something’ and looking at those short clips each time I was surprised, as if I met someone else: I could observe how Agent Anne talks, how she moves, how she works, how she expresses herself using words and other means – and it felt like I found a new friend. We had a lot of fun, Agent Anne and me.

I recorded Anne being in that very moment, creating something out of the available means at that place: I called the first clip *Enga hugmynd um hvað liggur í loftinu. / Achtsames Kopfzerbrechen*⁴⁷, which implies a language game referring to the action in the video. I wrap my head with a piece of bubble pack and squash the bubbles (fig. 30). It reminds of an excessive thinking act, trying to squeeze something out of the mind. The Icelandic title literally translated means: ‘No idea what’s in the air’, the German one plays with the word ‘Kopfzerbrechen’ (Engl.: breaking the head) which stands for ‘worrying’, literally it means: carefully breaking the head.

Another clip shows me blowing up a white balloon (the one I used in my previous knot exhibition), while the daylight around me changes, and the bigger the balloon gets, the more I disappear in the darkening background (fig. 31). I called it *The first woman on the moon*⁴⁸. It felt great to improvise and be in tune with the sunlight in such a simple but effective way.

The third clip I want to mention happened in the forest: I went out for a walk and recorded myself talking about things that were going on in my head: my yet unknown MA project, from there about language, confusing meanings that lead to misunderstandings, their inherent beauty, my love for dialect, friendship beyond words, the sound of ‘banana’ and authenticity (fig. 32). Back home I edited the video and called it *Sneak preview - clips from a nature documentary about the rise and fall of meaning*⁴⁹.

Then I decided to clean my room, and since there are stored many works I made during my studies at the art academy in Leipzig, I thought I could use the opportunity and offer them for sale or exchange, and hence talk about it. Again I filmed this action with my computer

⁴⁷ Anne Rombach, *Enga hugmynd um hvað liggur í loftinu. / Achtsames Kopfzerbrechen*, video, 0:55, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t82etxPLtys>.

⁴⁸ Anne Rombach, *The first woman on the moon*, video, 0:39, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ny2eXSjcVrk>.

⁴⁹ Anne Rombach, *Sneak preview - clips from a nature documentary about the rise and fall of meaning*, video, 1:12, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOM5jy5fZrk>.

camera, and went through a photography series, and also some paintings and other things I stumbled over in my room. I talk about the works, how they were made, what I was thinking or feeling, and also about side issues that came up in that very moment (such as dust on art, or my passion for wrapping) – then I transcribed everything I said and put it as subtitles, to stretch my fascination for the unedited spoken word. I did not edit my speech but I cut the video: I took screenshots of every subtitle-scene, trying to find an image that would support the things said or even add to it (fig. 33-36). On my website you can scroll through 145 screenshots of the video; in addition to the visual presentation you can listen to the original soundtrack of the recording, it is called *Artist talk*⁵⁰.

This experience of freedom and presence in the very moment was a boost into improvisation and performance making. Back in Reykjavík, urgently having to decide about what I am going to do for the final show, I tried many different things with the photographs, objects and handwritten notes I had worked on – but could not see anything happen. Then I developed a plan for a performance which I would film or do in the museum in Kópavogur: I painted my studio wall with black chalkboard paint, and intended to write 'Nothing's changed' or another phrase from my 'nothing collection' on it, wipe it off with a sponge afterwards, write it again, wipe it off – over and over again. I thought it would represent the paradoxical relation between 'something' and 'nothing', presence and absence, language and life; and by repeating the writing and deleting process with chalk and water I would create vague traces, blurred clouds of 'nothing', and see the sponge as a symbol for the memory.

So I set up the camera, and a spotlight, and waited for the sun to go down – in order to have the spotlight as the only light source, creating some sort of timeless space. While I was waiting, the sun, very low at that point, was shining through the window directly on my black wall. I liked it, and pressed 'record' (fig. 37) – I thought I could test the camera while I prepare the wall for the performance later.

What happened?

I stopped thinking. I focused on my task to make something happen, now, while the camera is running and the sunlight is moving across my black wall. I had a notion in mind about what will happen – I wanted to write something about 'nothing' with chalk, and wipe it off

⁵⁰ Anne Rombach, *Artist talk*, slideshow, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://annerombach.com/works/artist-talk/>.

afterwards. The camera was recording, and I thought of the poem that I mentioned earlier, the one that reminds one of being in the present moment, to 'REC PLAY'. That was what I was doing: highly concentrated I was considering how to proceed: should I draw guiding lines? How big am I going to write, and what am I going to write? 'Nothing's changed'? 'Nothing happens' or rather 'Nothing happened'? What happens when I talk about the past, what does it mean when I use the present tense? Or should I rather write 'There is nothing'? You can see me pondering about those questions in the video (fig. 38). I chose this video as my final work because it contained what I was searching for: being in the present moment, highly concentrated and devoted to the act of doing, enjoying the absence of doubt and fear, dedicated to all the details, free from expectations. I created a space for me to be. I had to consider the technical aspects of the camera and the light, of course, but that was not problematic – it was just the given frame to make something happen, and to run along with – it was actually motivating me not to overthink and not to stop, just to keep going.

What happens in the video: While the sun moves across the black wall, I draw guiding lines onto it, using means I find in my studio: starting with a piece of wood that was part of a sculpture, then a paint roller (fig. 39), and a broken wooden pole, a leftover from the Mongolian tent I built with a friend – trying to make the lines as straight and neat as possible. Once in a while I step back, and look at the wall, spot some unevenness and try to fix it by wiping it off with a sponge (fig. 40), letting it dry and trying again. I also leave the frame, and often it seems as if nothing happens in the video. The sun moves and creates a silhouette of things that stand behind the camera (fig. 41), time passes, and sometimes you hear sounds from far away referring to the space outside the frame. Slowly it gets dark – after 50 minutes, when the sun is down, I turn on the spotlight. The scene looks quite theatrical now, as if something big is going to happen soon (fig. 42). Eventually I finish drawing the lines. Then I try out different messages I could fill in by drawing with my hand in the air (fig. 43), estimating the space I would need and also choosing the message I want to write. Finally, I start writing and arrive at 'Noth' when my piece of chalk is finished. I go and get another one. I complete the line 'Nothing happens', go over it two times to get a clear white line, in the end using my finger directly on the wall (fig. 44). After done with this I leave it for about 15 minutes, then I come back and after staring at it for about 20 seconds, I decide to spray the wall with water. In those 20 seconds it is as if I am reconsidering how to continue, and then keep going. The water drops reflect in the spotlight, so the word 'Nothing' disappears, and the drops run down the wall like tears (fig. 45), the action manifested in the line 'Nothing happens' leaves the stage. It feels like a goodbye scene. Later I wipe the space in between the

lines, clean it and let it dry. The final image shows the 3 lines empty, some watermarks that are still drying, and the traces of the water drops that were running down the wall (fig. 46). Then the video starts from the beginning, the duration is 1 hour and 35 minutes, unedited and looped.

Artist talk and also *Nothing happens* reminds me of a work by Kenneth Goldsmith called *Soliloquy*: an unedited document of every word he spoke during the week of April 15-21, 1996. He wore a hidden voice activated tape recorder and later transcribed his recordings. *Soliloquy* was first realized as a gallery exhibition at Bravin Post Lee in Soho in 1997 (fig. 47). Then the gallery published the text in a limited edition, later, in 2001, Granary Books published a trade edition of the text. There is also a web edition of the work⁵¹, which is fun to examine. There are great possibilities to play with the presentation of text: only the sentence that the mouse is hovering over is visible, referring to the nature of the spoken word, the momentary presence of spoken material. I like how he treats the ‘real’ speech as material, and exposes himself in such an unedited state. The word ‘Soliloquy’ stands for a discourse by a person who is talking to her-/himself, a method often used in drama to disclose a character’s innermost thoughts – so it is the act of talking while or as if alone. That has become one of my main interests lately – investigating it to the act of ‘being’ while or as if alone, with and without spoken language.

Nothing happens

My video *Nothing happens* made me think of a ‘nature documentary’ – when I watched it afterwards it reminded me of an observation of an animal which you want to get to know by studying its behaviour, its nature. I enjoy the fact that I am a mere stranger to myself. I am learning not to be scared; instead we are becoming friends, Agent Anne and me.

The video is very dark and sensitive to light; I had to find a solution how to show it in a group show that did not have a separate darkened room. Pretty soon it was clear I had to build a space that fulfils my needs, and after thinking of various structures and considering just showing it on a TV screen – I decided to build a box. A box that is floating and filled with ‘nothing’ (fig. 48), referring to the imaginary box I was carrying around with me. By making use of it I turn it into a supportive space, not seeing it as a burden anymore. You see the

⁵¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Soliloquy*, 1996, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/>.

construction of the box from the outside, the wooden frames and the OSB plates, the screws, some marks on the wood and the projector that projects the video onto a white screen through a hole in the wall (fig. 49). I lifted the box a little by putting it onto the wall supports, leaving a small gap between the box and the floor (fig. 50). Inside I covered it with black fabric, so the projection would be of high quality. The box is about the size of the space I occupied in the performance, the distance from the camera to the wall is about the same as from the projector to the wall. It has two entrances/exits, which resemble me entering and leaving the image on both sides and giving the visitor the opportunity to ‘go through it’ rather than ‘going in and out again’ through the same door.

The video leaves nothing out; it is a continuous stream of lifetime, showing every second of the process and the contradiction between language (‘Nothing happens’) and life where there is always something happening. I did not create an object to look at, rather one to look into – I share my experience of being. I do not expect the viewer to watch the whole video, it is up to her/him: there is a bench to sit down, and the viewer decides how long she/he will stay. I do not expect anything, and I don’t want to fuel expectations, the title states ‘Nothing happens’. And only if you pay attention to the small details you see that there is something happening. I hope I could bring awareness to those details that are often not recognised, and I hope my setting was offering the space to do so. I feel that our lives are lived on accelerated speed and overloaded with things and tasks we don’t need – I feel overwhelmed quickly, as if I am running, as if I would scroll through my life and not take the time that I actually need to enjoy it fully, in its details.

In the book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* the Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki talks about the Buddhist view on ‘nothing’, and the importance of keeping our ‘beginner’s mind’:

What appears from emptiness is true existence. (...) You should have a general house cleaning of your mind. You must take everything out of your room. (...) Concentration means freedom. You should be concentrated on nothing.⁵²

He says that the usual view of life is rooted in the idea of existence, and that one must give up that idea and forget about all preconceived ideas. For a long time I was struggling with my own existence – I doubted it, as I was doubting almost everything. That’s why I felt drawn to ‘nothing’, I did not know who I was and who I was not, I felt like a soft lump of clay, always different, automatically deforming and adjusting to the people and environment around me,

⁵² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2010), 100-102.

sometimes even contradicting myself. I was sculpting my self ever since I became aware of 'it', while desperately longing for a constant, something that was 'I'. I remember sitting on a chair in my room and thinking 'Maybe I don't exist.' The only reason for this quest being a problem is the fixed idea of the self and how it has to be. Now I consider an always-changing self not at all a problem. But one must master the (trans-/de-) forming; and not be a victim to concepts sculpting on autopilot.

Anna Deveare Smith, an actress and playwright, writes in her book *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* about these two interests of mine: language and authenticity; and she also mentions a house, which made me think of my box:

The creation of language is the creation of a fiction. The minute we speak we are in that fiction. It's a fiction designed, we hope, to reveal a truth. (...) Our ability to create reality, by creating fictions with language, should not be abused. The abuse is called lying. (...) We can learn a lot about a person in the very moment that language fails them. In the very moment that they have to be more creative than they would have imagined in order to communicate. (...) The idea is that the psychology of people is going to live right inside those moments when their grammar falls apart and, like being in a shipwreck, they are on their own to make it all work out. (...) It is a search for the authentic by using the fictional as a frame, a house in which the authentic can live.⁵³

I try to create those settings where I am exposed to the very moment, and I have to improvise and am on my own. Then I am getting to know myself apart from thought concepts, at least those that do not apply in that very moment. I do so in order to get to know myself from another angle – and overcome my anxious barriers. Of course this exposure is still quite safe, I am alone and I do not interfere with other people's reality directly. I am at the beginning of this journey, and I will continue carefully, practise confidence and trust as well as disciplined commitment to the process. The writer E.E. Cummings got to the heart of the Artist's journey:

Indeed, the Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself; and the agony of the Artist, far from being the result of the world's failure to discover and appreciate him, arises from his own personal struggle to discover, to appreciate and finally

⁵³ Anna Deveare Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2001), 304.

to express himself. (...) “to become an Artist” means nothing: whereas to become alive, or one’s self, means everything.⁵⁴

In that sense I am looking forward to apply what I have learned and unlearned during these two years of becoming a ‘Master of Fine Art’ – to experience life rather than think it, to keep on transforming, in short: to proceed the journey of becoming a ‘Master of Fine Heart’ – a term that I once misheard.

And so does my work: I carry on the story of the empty box I once stumbled upon, and fill it with new stories by people whose commitments need a (emptied) space to make something happen – the project I want to support next is *The Travelling Embassy of Rockall*⁵⁵, an Iceland based collective of people asking questions such as ‘What if you could start a new society on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean? What would you keep, what would you discard, what new ways of life would emerge?’ There is a parallel between the empty box and the island they imagine – both are places waiting to be filled with ideas and discussion on how the world works. And so we will turn the box into an actual embassy that will be placed at the harbour in Reykjavík during this summer, and create a space for something to happen.

⁵⁴ Review of an essay by E.E. Cummings, *The Agony oft he Artist (with a capital A)*, accessed May 10, 2016, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/02/09/e-e-cummings-miscellany-agony-of-the-artist/>.

⁵⁵ *The Travelling Embassy of Rockall*, accessed May 16, 2016, www.rockall.is.

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Visual supplement

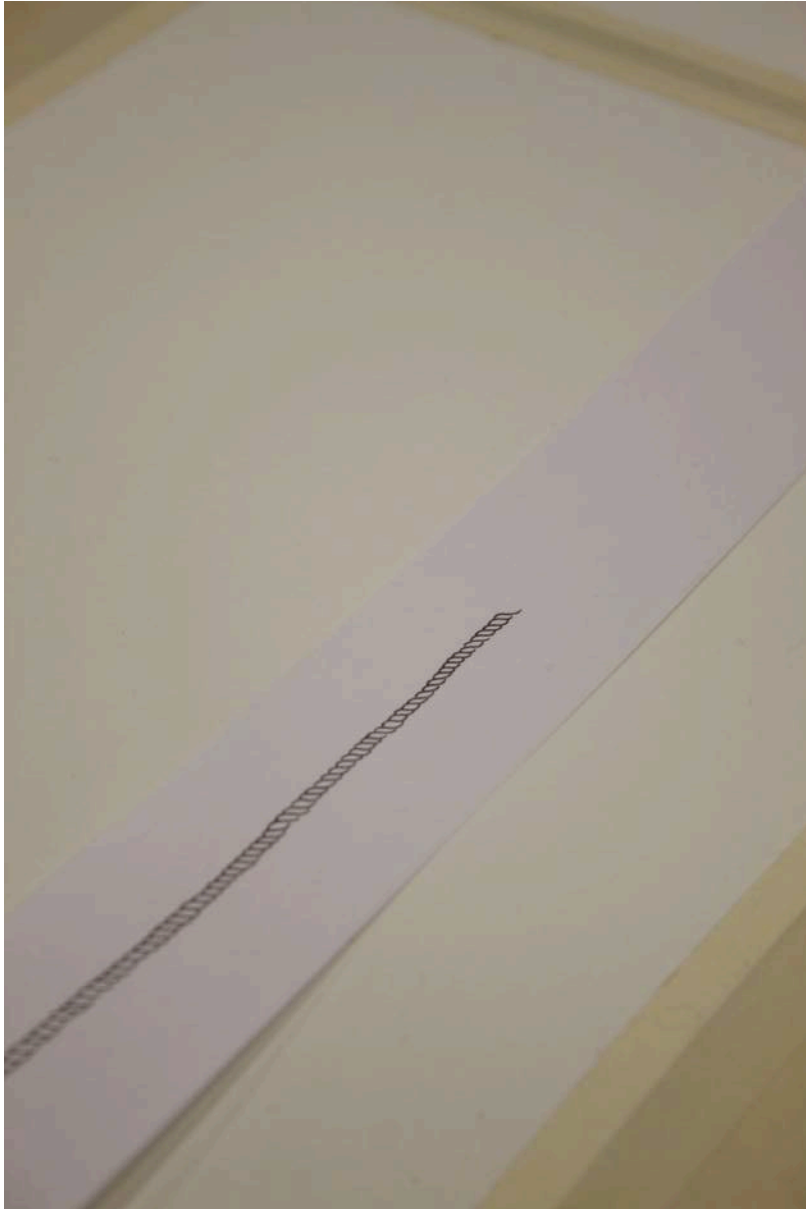


Fig. 1: work in progress: drawing *The biggest untied knot of the world*, MA studio, Reykjavik 2014



Fig. 2: Janine Antoni, detail of *Moor*, 2001, <http://www.art21.org/images/janine-antoni/moor-detail-2001->, accessed January 17, 2016

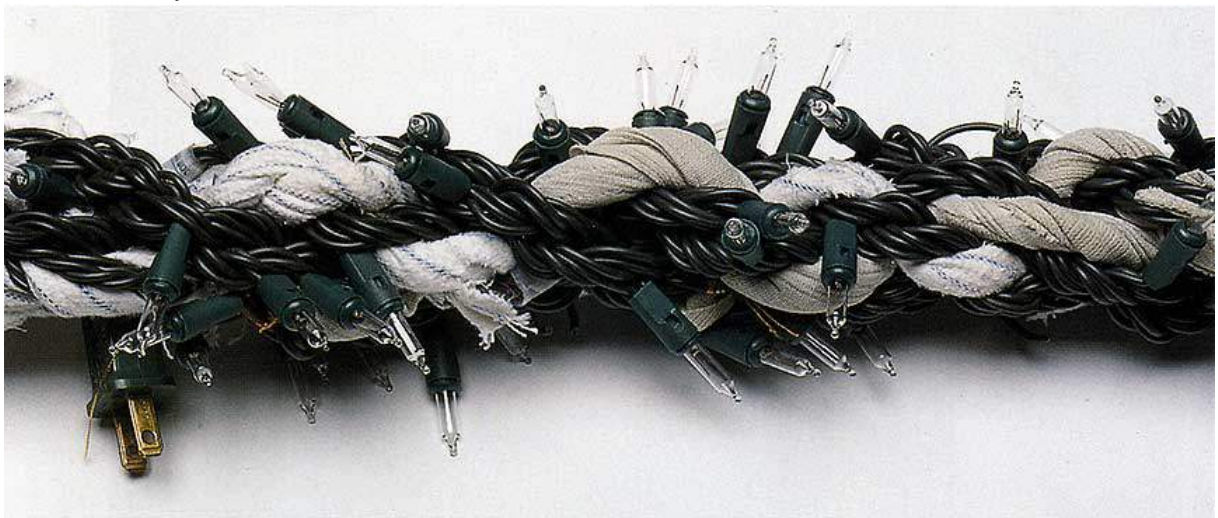


Fig. 3: Janine Antoni, detail of *Moor*, 2001, <http://www.art21.org/images/janine-antoni/moor-detail-2001-1->, accessed January 17, 2016



Fig. 4: Janine Antoni, detail of *Moor*, 2001, <http://www.art21.org/images/janine-antoni/moor-detail-2001-2->, accessed January 17, 2016



Fig 5: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavík 2015



Fig 6: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavík 2015

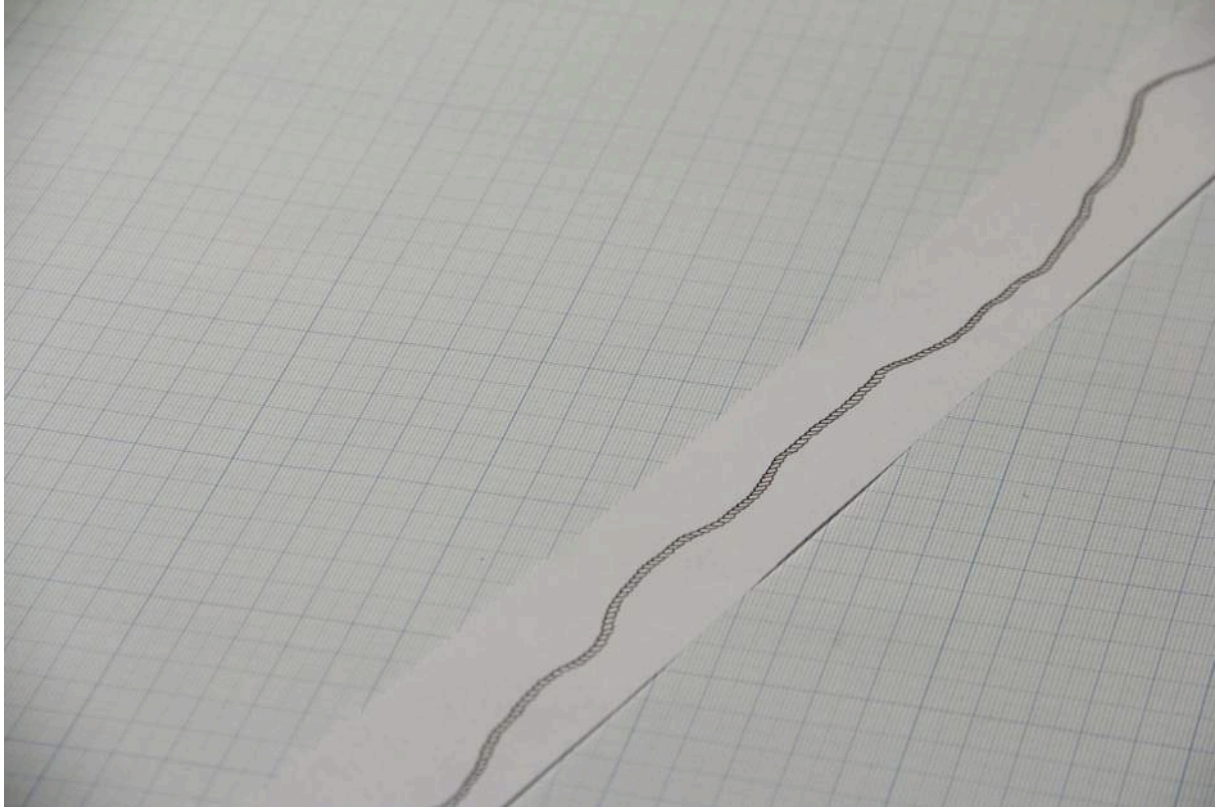


Fig. 7: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavik 2015

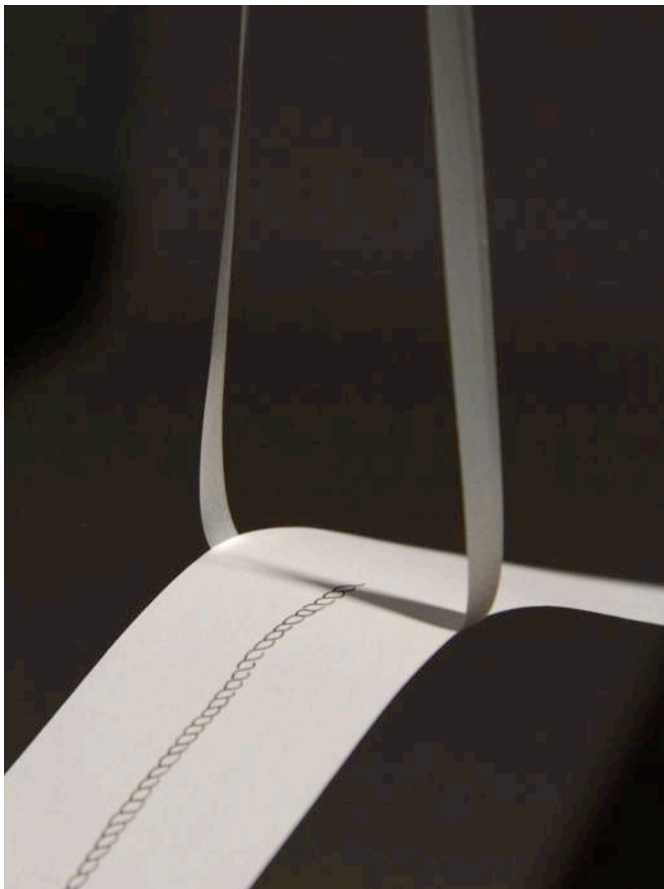


Fig. 8: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavik 2015

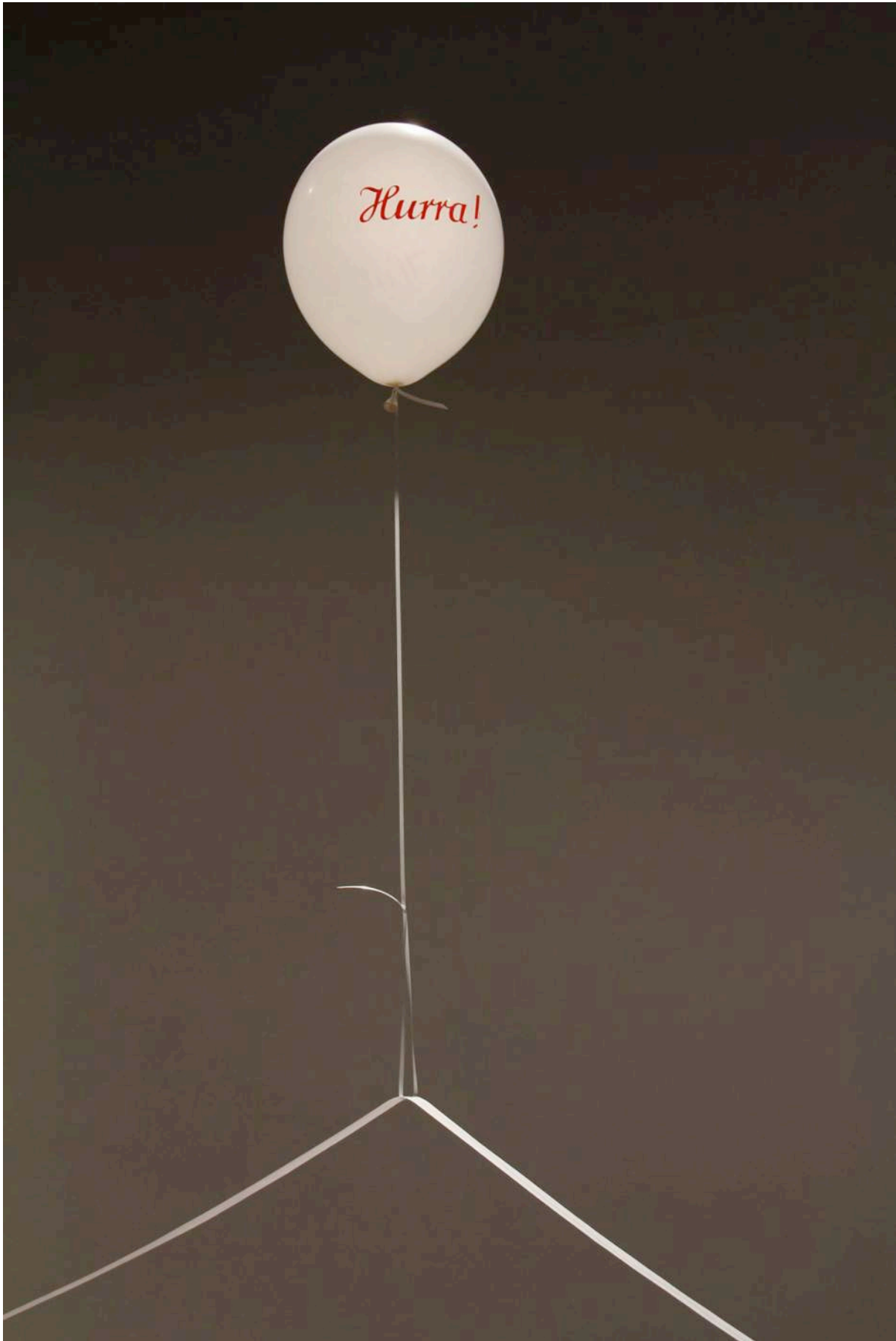


Fig 9: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavík 2015



Fig.10: *KNOT* (pronounced *not*), installation view, Reykjavík 2015



Fig. 11: Anne Rombach, working process of copying arrows from 'How to tie knots'-instruction cards, Reykjavík, January 2015



Fig. 12: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavík 2015



Fig 13: *KNOT* (pronounced not), installation view, Reykjavík 2015

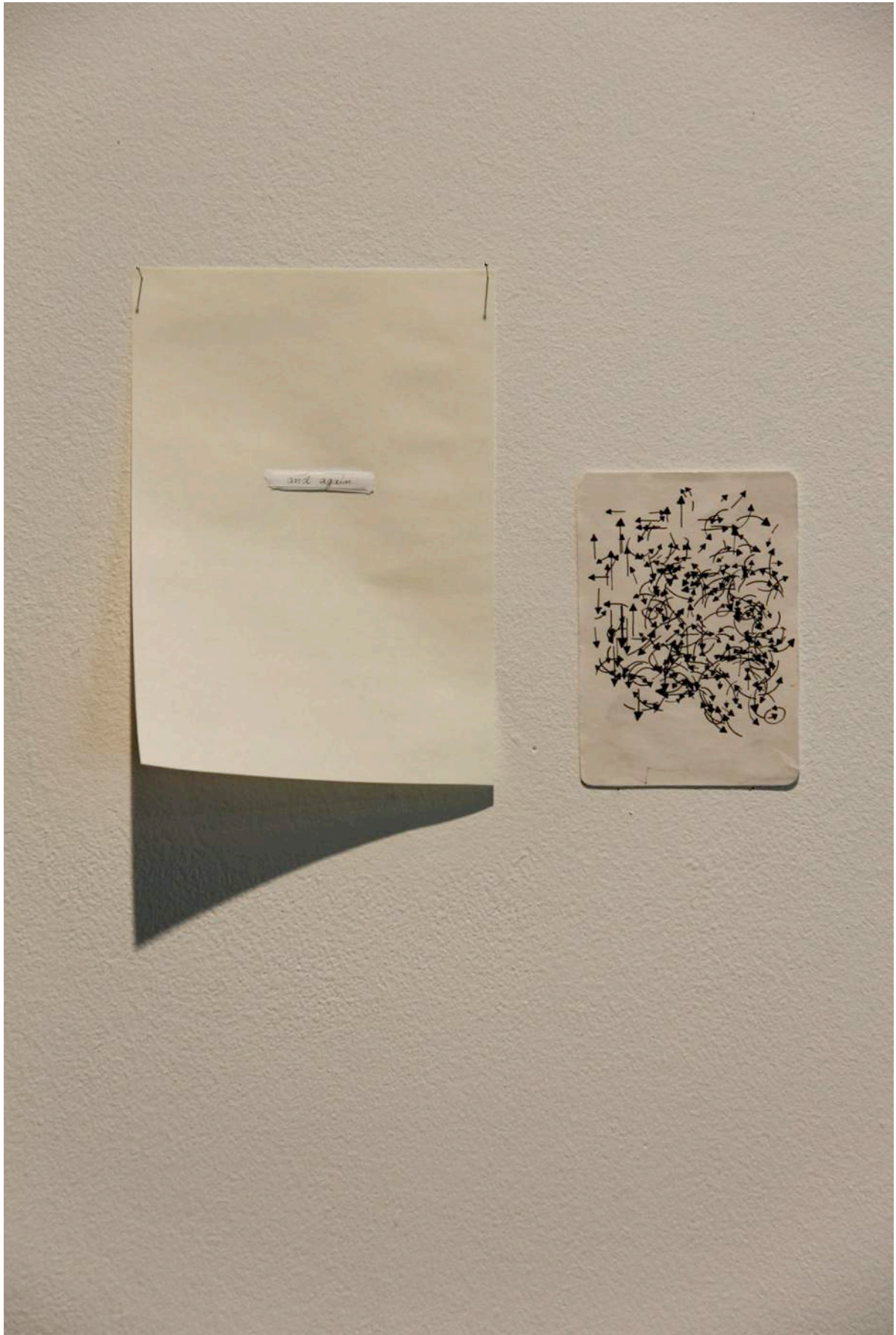


Fig. 14: *KNOT (pronounced not)*, installation view, Reykjavík 2015

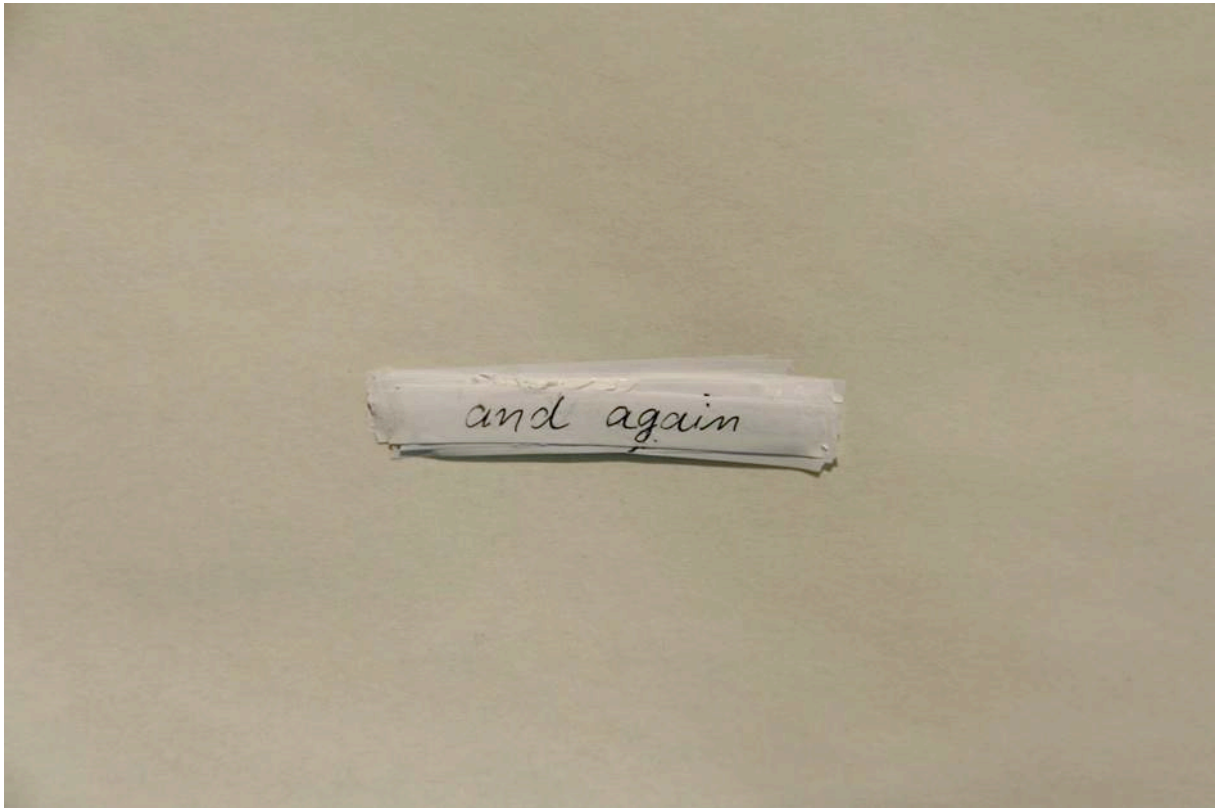


Fig. 15: *KNOT* (pronounced *not*), installation view, Reykjavík 2015



Fig. 16: coffee cup, Reykjavík 2015

nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body."

"We are late," said Susan. "We must wait our turn to play. We will pitch here in the long grass and pretend to watch Jinny and Clara, Betty and Mavis. But we will not watch them. I hate watching other people play games. I will make images of all the things I hate most and bury them in the ground. This shiny pebble is Madame Carlo, and I will bury her deep because of her fawning and ingratiating manners, because of the sixpence she gave me for keeping my knuckles flat when I played my scales. I buried her sixpence. I would bury the whole school: the gymnasium; the classroom; the dining-room that always smells of meat; and the chapel. I would bury the red-brown tiles and

Fig 17: picture of reference in Virginia Woolf's novel *Waves*, sent by a friend, Facebook 2015

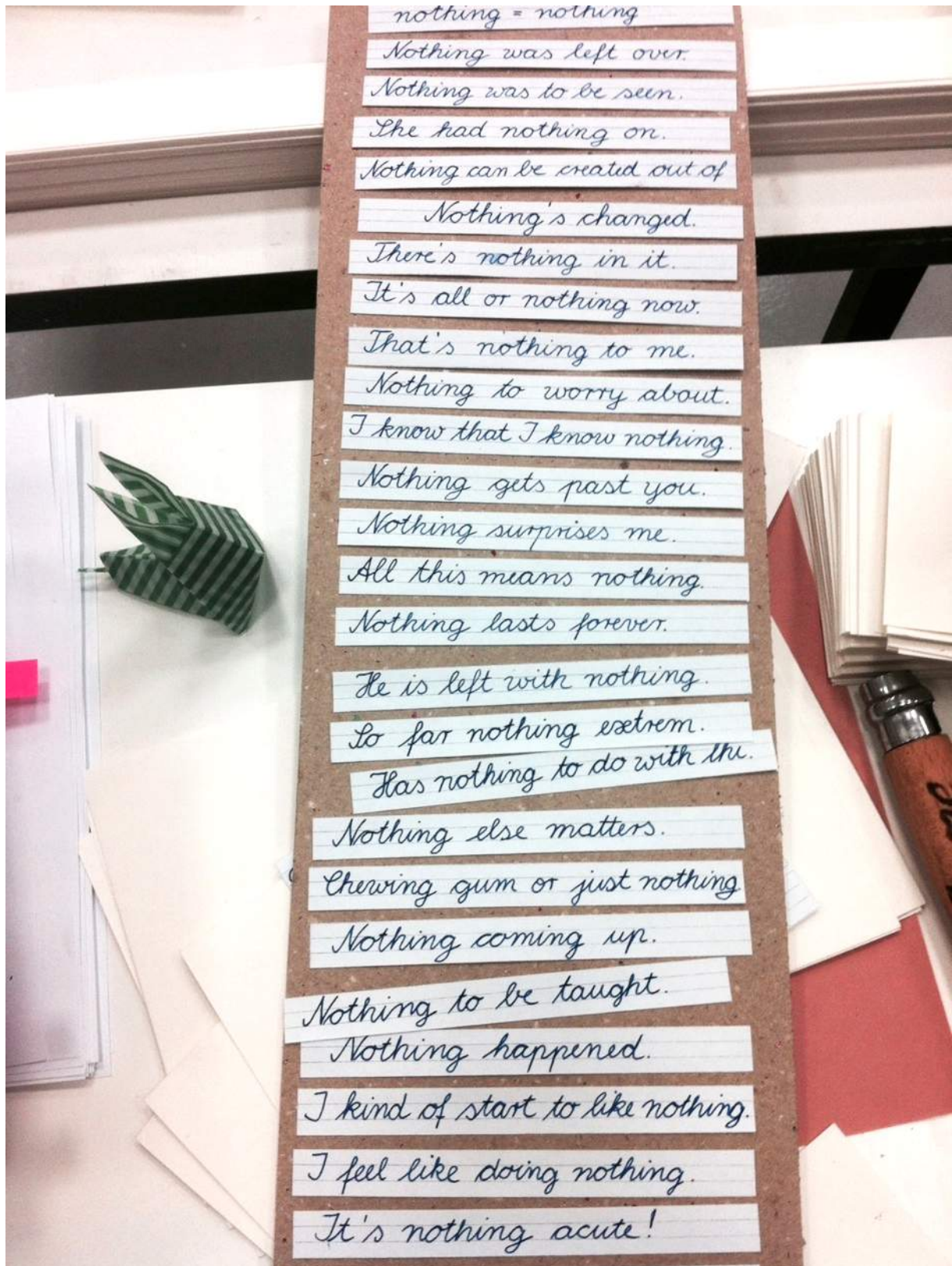


Fig. 18: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), one-liner containing 'nothing', found in personal messages, Reykjavik 2015



Fig. 19: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), a box containing nothing but 'nothing', Reykjavík 2015



Fig. 20: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), gloves holding 'nothing', handwritten line saying: 'There's nothing in it', MA studio, Reykjavík 2015

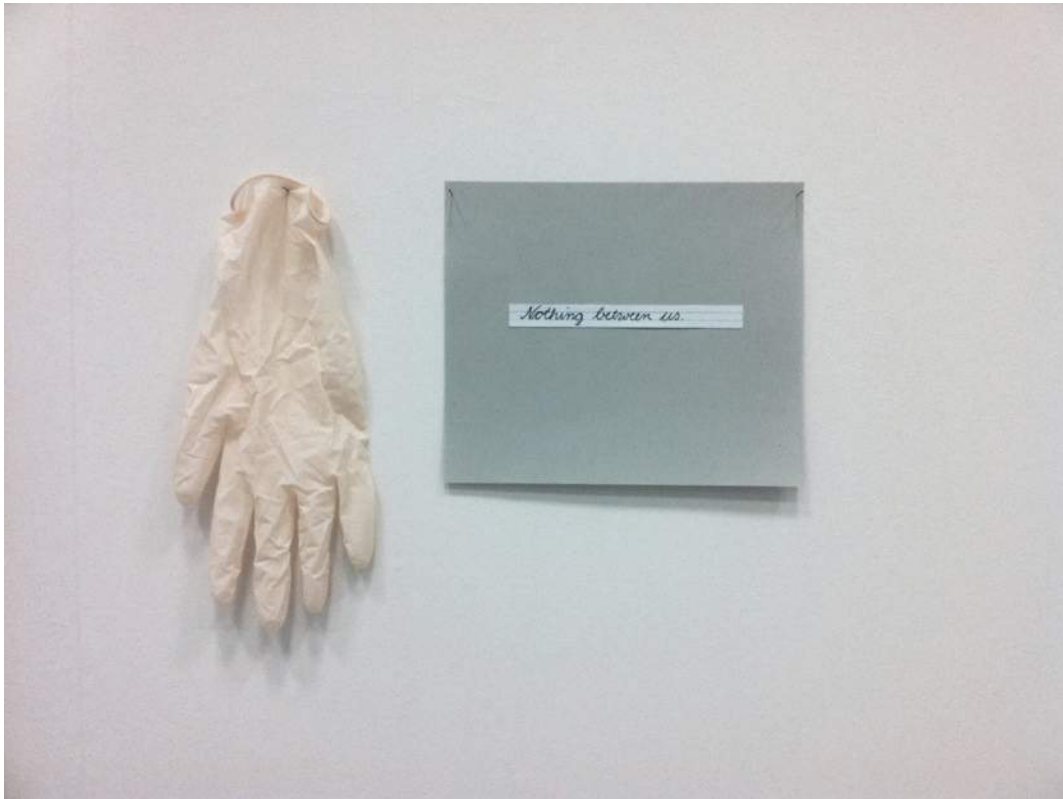


Fig. 21: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), glove, handwritten line saying: 'Nothing between us', MA studio, Reykjavík 2015



Fig. 22: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), bridge leading to wall, handwritten line saying: 'Nothing's changed', MA studio, Reykjavík 2015



Fig. 23: work in progress *Nothing's changed* (working title), part of collection of 'nothing' (photo with 'nothing' cut out, used glove, empty b/w film slide, photo of bridge to concrete wall), MA studio, Reykjavík 2015

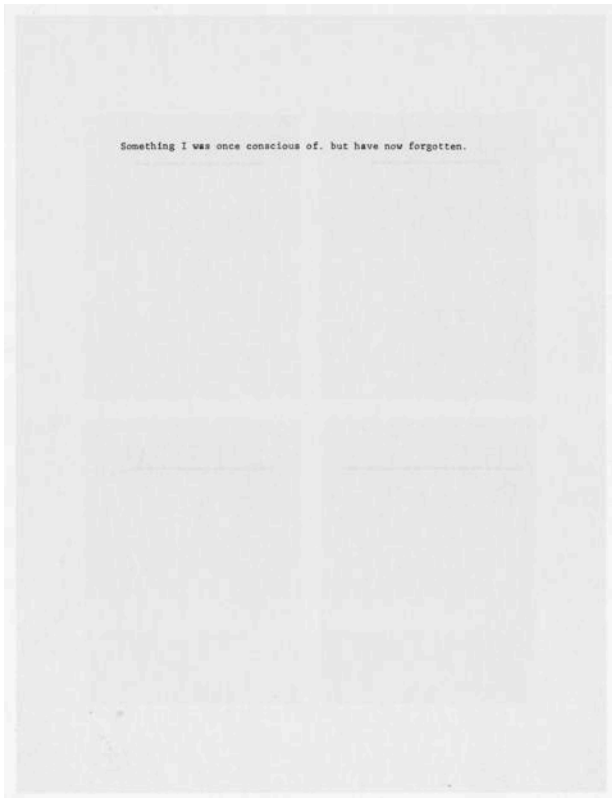
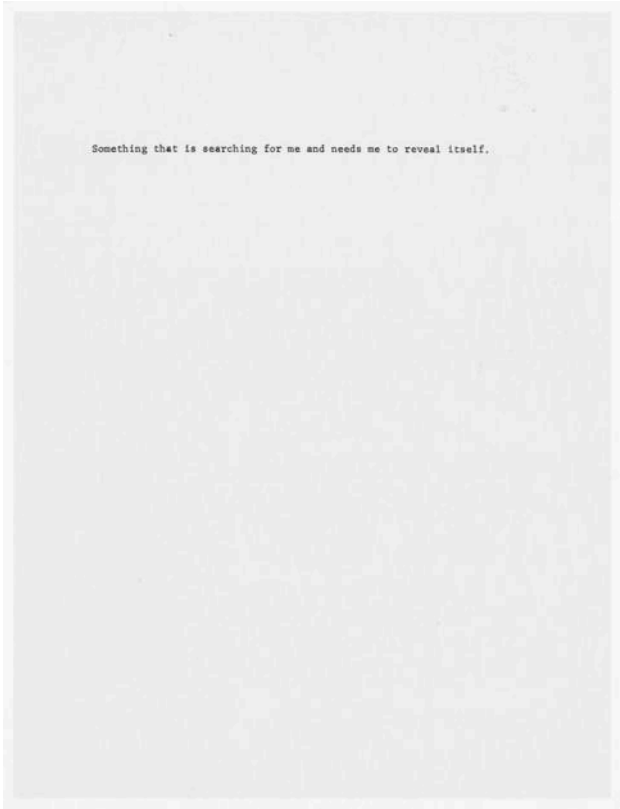


Fig. 24-27: Robert Barry, *Untitled*, 1969, four parts: *Something that is searching for me and needs me to reveal itself* / *Something which is unknown to me, but which works upon me* / *Something I was once conscious of, but have forgotten* / *Something that is taking shape in my mind and will sometime come to consciousness*, Typewriter on paper (display copy), each 27,5 x 22,3 cm, Collection Paul Maenz, Berlin

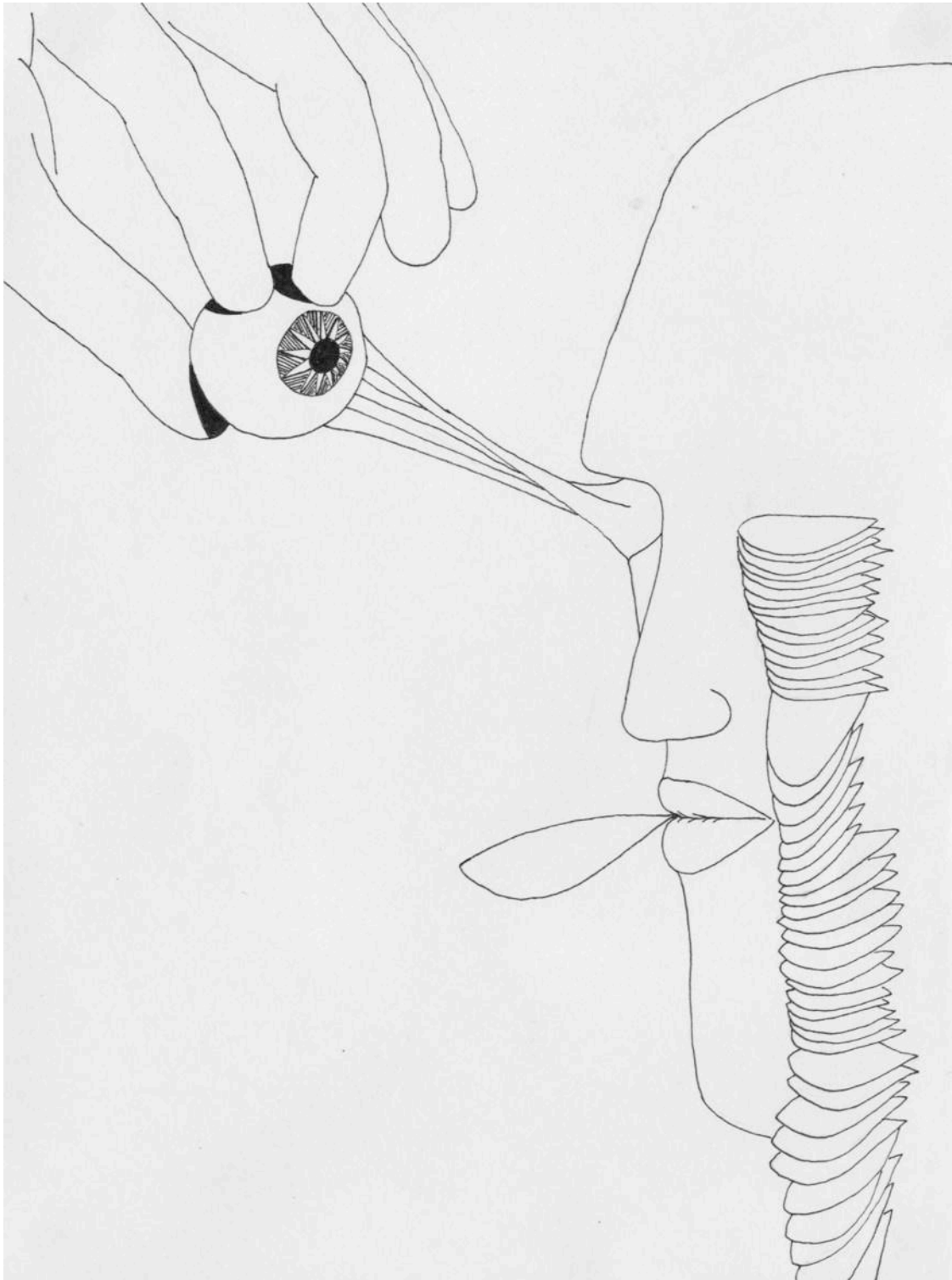


Fig. 28: Anne Rombach, *The return of the repressed*, 20 x 15 cm, unconscious drawing session, Reykjavík 2015

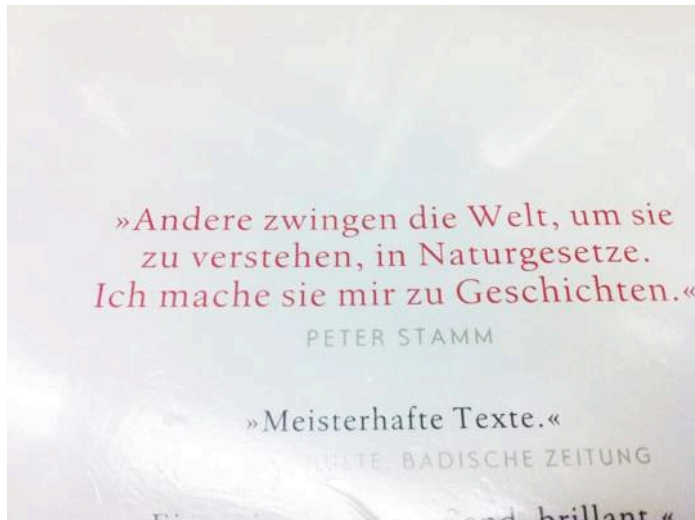


Fig. 29: picture of Peter Stamm's statement, found on the back of one of his books, Germany 2015

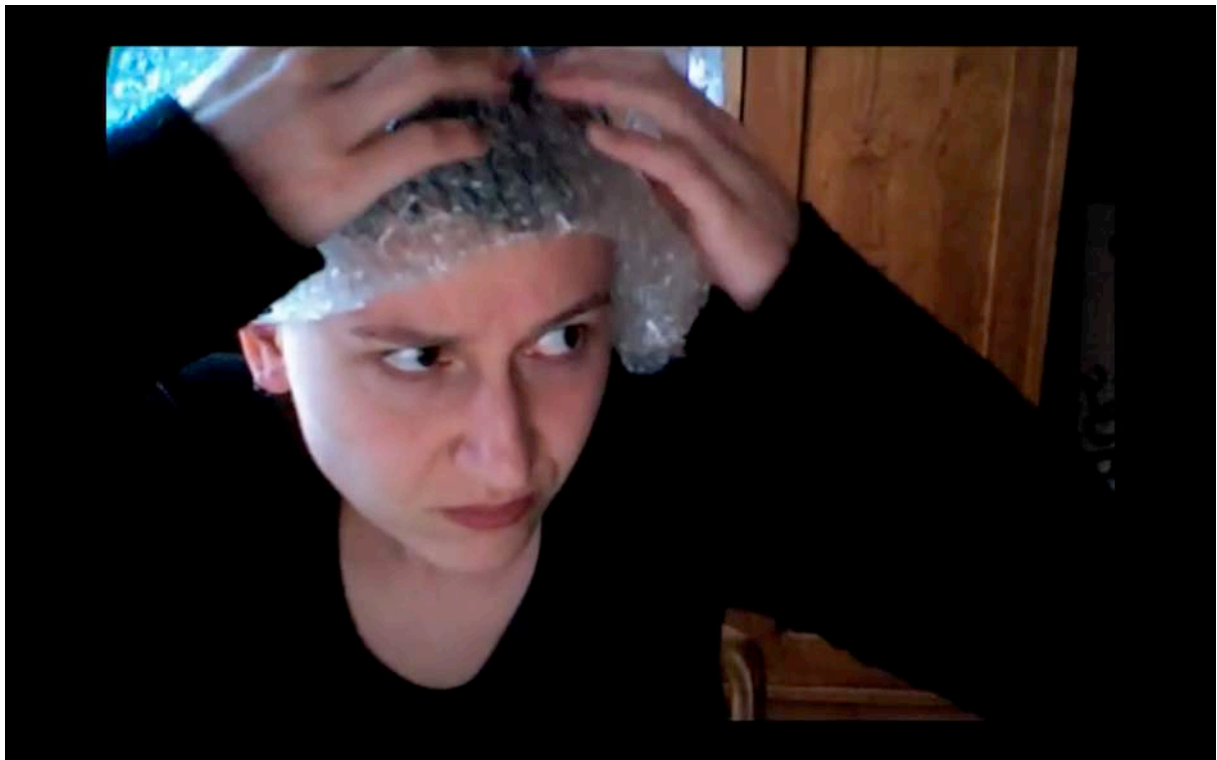


Fig. 30: Anne Rombach, video still from *Enga hugmynd um hvað liggur í loftinu. / Achtsames Kopferbrechen*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ny2eXSjcVrk>



Fig. 31: Anne Rombach, video still from *The first woman on the moon*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t82etxPLtys>

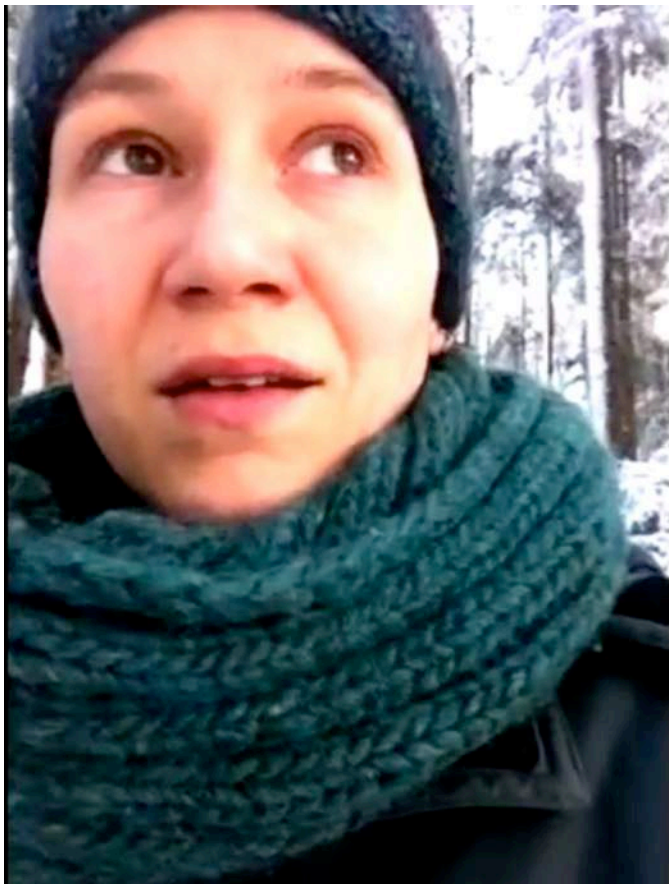


Fig. 32: Anne Rombach, video still from *Sneak preview - clips from a nature documentary about the rise and fall of meaning*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOM5jy5fZrk>



Fig. 33: Anne Rombach, one of 145 screenshots from *Artist talk*, 2016, <http://annerombach.com/works/artist-talk/>

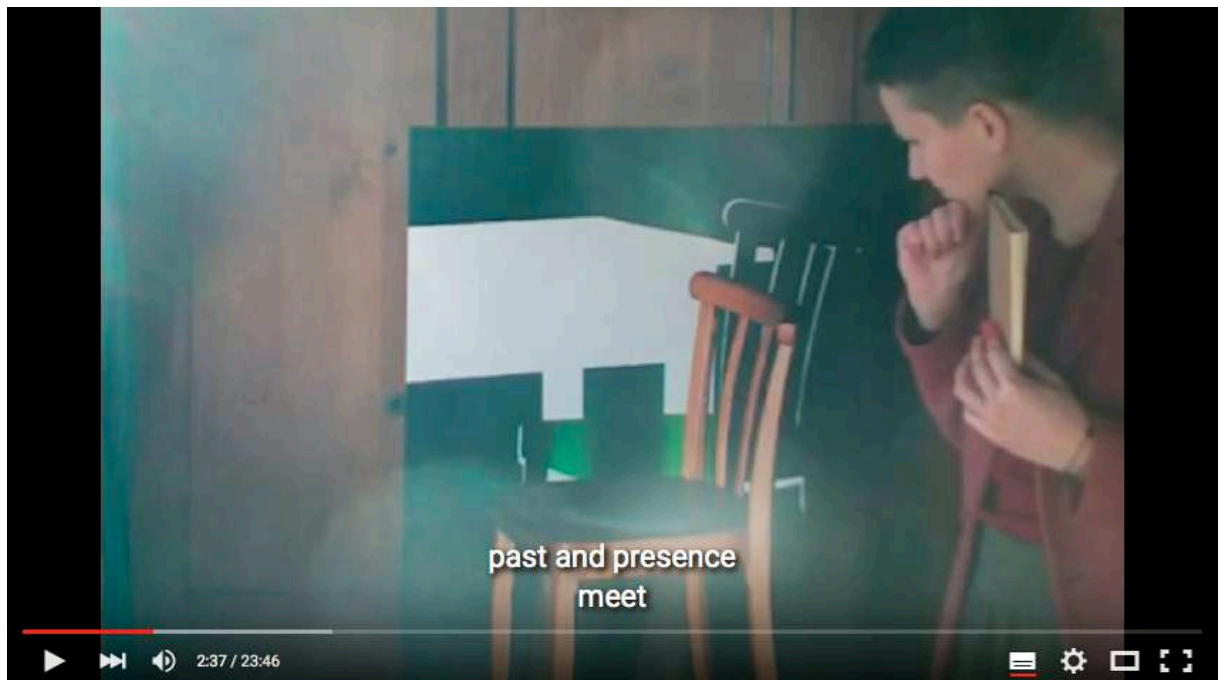


Fig. 34: Anne Rombach, one of 145 screenshots from *Artist talk*, 2016, <http://annerombach.com/works/artist-talk/>



Fig. 35: Anne Rombach, one of 145 screenshots from *Artist talk*, 2016, <http://annerombach.com/works/artist-talk/>



Fig. 36: Anne Rombach, one of 145 screen shots from *Artist talk*, 2016, <http://annerombach.com/works/artist-talk/>



Fig. 37: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min

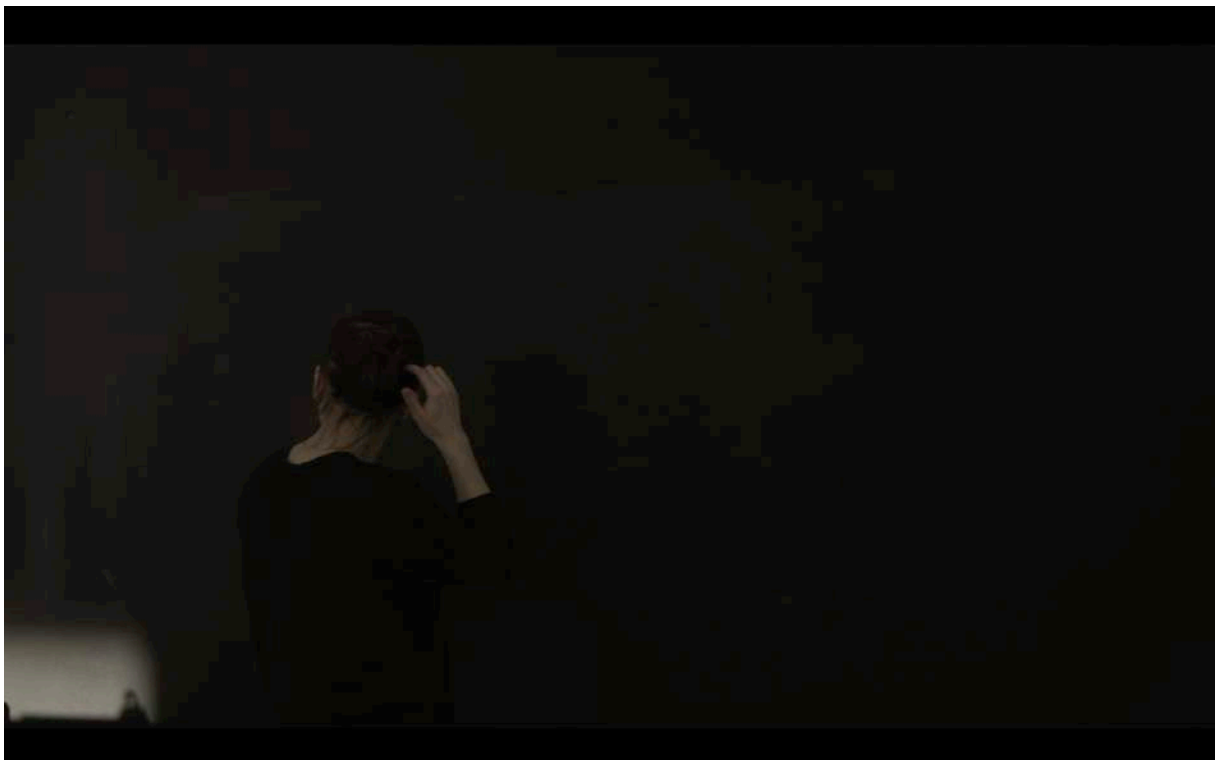


Fig. 38: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 39: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 40: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 41: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min

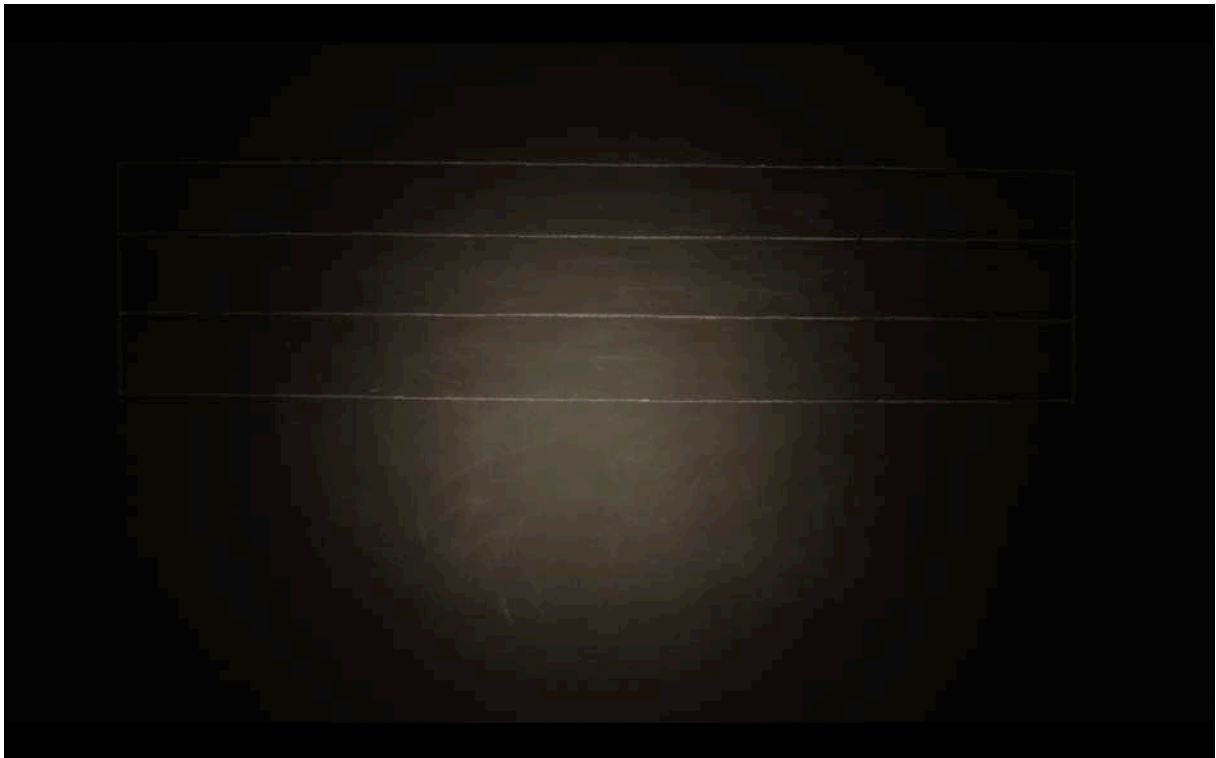


Fig. 42: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 43: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 44: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 45: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min



Fig. 46: Anne Rombach, still image from *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, 95 min

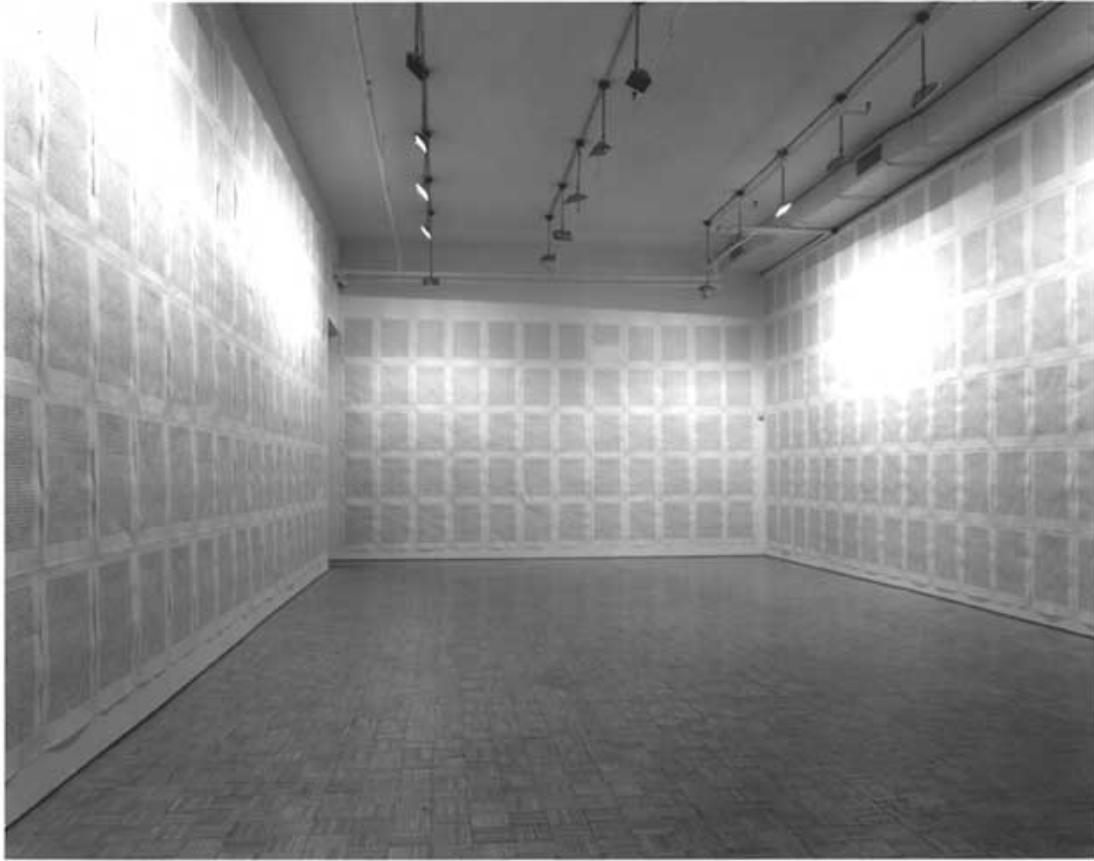


Fig. 47: Kenneth Goldsmith, *Soliloquy*, 1997, tiled computer printouts, installed at Bravin Post Lee, New York City



Fig. 48: Anne Rombach, installation view of *Nothing happens*, video-installation, projection in wooden box, 2,4m x 3,6m x 2,4m, MA Degree Show 2016, Gerðarsafn - Kópavogur Art Museum



Fig. 49: Anne Rombach, installation view of *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, projection in wooden box, 2,4m x 3,6m x 2,4m, MA Degree Show 2016, Gerðarsafn - Kópavogur Art Museum



Fig. 50: Anne Rombach, installation view of *Nothing happens*, 2016, video-installation, projection in wooden box, 2,4m x 3,6m x 2,4m, MA Degree Show 2016, Gerðarsafn - Kópavogur Art Museum