

2022

Beginning at the End: Seven Reflections on Artistic Practice

MFA in Performing Arts

**All rights reserved.
No part of this book
may be reproduced
or transmitted in any
manner without prior
written permission from
the copyright holders**

ISBN: 978-9935-9530-2-5

**Texts and visual
materials by the
artists © 2022**

**Published by
Listaháskóli Íslands
/ Iceland University
of the Arts and FUKL**

**Editor:
Angela Rawlings**

**Book design,
layout, and cover:
Helga Dögg Studio**

**Art direction:
Helga Dögg Studio
Hjördís Eypórsdóttir**

**Typeset in
Helvetica Neue
and Dutch Roman**

**First edition, limited
to 100 copies.
Printed and bound
in Reykjavík, Iceland
by Litla Prent**

2022

Beginning at the End: Seven Reflections on Artistic Practice

MFA in Performing Arts

The MFA in Performing Arts proudly celebrates a space where the boundaries of art can be tested, expanded, and pluralised. This year, seven artists explore a series of themes that span from the everyday to the metaphysical. What ties them together is a shared sense of urgency to explore existential modes of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world.

This year we have been on romantic walks (with Amó), been cooked for and told family stories in a home kitchen (with Gunnella), been brought deep into our senses with the sand between our fingers and toes (with Helga), explored the poetics and politics of touch (with Kaisa), been hypnotised by the choreographic temporalities of continuity (with Sóley), experienced the fragility of our own memories (with Mart), and witnessed dance being taken into the places where it might be missed the most (with Vala).

Bridging the gap between our internal experiences and the external world, each artist creates a new space that plays between the two. This new space has a potential for you to discover something new about your surroundings or something deep within. I feel lucky to have been a part of it and it is with immense pleasure that I invite you to be part of it too.

**Welcome to the graduation works
of the class of 2022.**

We have been waiting for you!

Words

**Brogan
Davison**

Note

**A note from
the Programme
Director of the MFA
in Performing Arts**

What is so fascinating about an MFA in Performing Arts is the confluence of practice research and complementary writing. The 2021-2 MFA cohort of artist-researchers lays open their tacit and haptic knowledges in the artful essays housed in this publication. Readers will encounter the what (research questions), the how (analysis of process), and the why (conceptual framework) of each artist-researcher's creative process. Additionally, this year's group embraced the opportunity to experiment with literary-academic hybrid approaches to their complementary writing.

Anna Margrét (Amó) Ólafsdóttir imbues her text with playful thoughtfulness through epistolary writing and erasure as a form of writer-reader flirtation. Icelandic society is put under the microscope through two auto-ethnographic essays, as Gunnella Hólmarsdóttir interrogates the role of cookbooks in women's nervous breakdowns and Valgerður (Vala) Rúnarsdóttir takes the stage as The Dance Ambassador of Iceland to champion dance for bodies of all ages. Meanwhile, Mart Piirimees plumbs the vast depths of memory for dramaturgical purposes, making a strong argument for bubbles, blobs, and disappeared O's to grace his future pedagogy. Helga Arnalds and Sóley Frostadóttir offer different takes on earthly materials within their poetic prose, with Helga estranging the familiar through touch and memory while Sóley explores

terrain and temporalities. Finally, Kaisa Kukkonen proposes the permanence of touch through gently voiced and intertwined poetry, essay, and manifesto.

Readers: prepare your textual receptors for taste, touch, sense, scent, sight, thought, memory, being, meaning, listening, feeling, becoming.

Words

**Angela
Rawlings**

Note

**Sense and Sentence
Abilities: A note from
the Editor and Course
Instructor of the MFA
in Performing Arts**

Table of Contents

Words	Essay	
Anna Margrét Ólafsdóttir	Nostalgia Lives in the Now	10
Words	Essay	
Mart Piirimees	Awareness of the Deeper Levels of Memry as a Promising Performative Tool	14
Words	Essay	
Kaisa Kukkonen	Touch Stays	22
Words	Essay	
Valgerður Rúnarsdóttir	Let’s Dance —until your Last Dance	30

Words

**Helga
Arnalds**

Essay

**The Nature
in Everything**

38

Words

**Gunnella
Hólmarsdóttir**

Essay

**Hvað ef sósan klikkar?
What if you mess up
the sauce?**

50

Words

**Sóley
Frostadóttir**

Essay

**Continuity and
Other Temporalities**

60

Bio

Kaisa Kukkonen is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher based in Finland. She works with the poetry of movement, politics of touch, and somatic practices. Her background is in dance, words, and performance.

Words

Kaisa
Kukkonen

Essay

Touch Stays

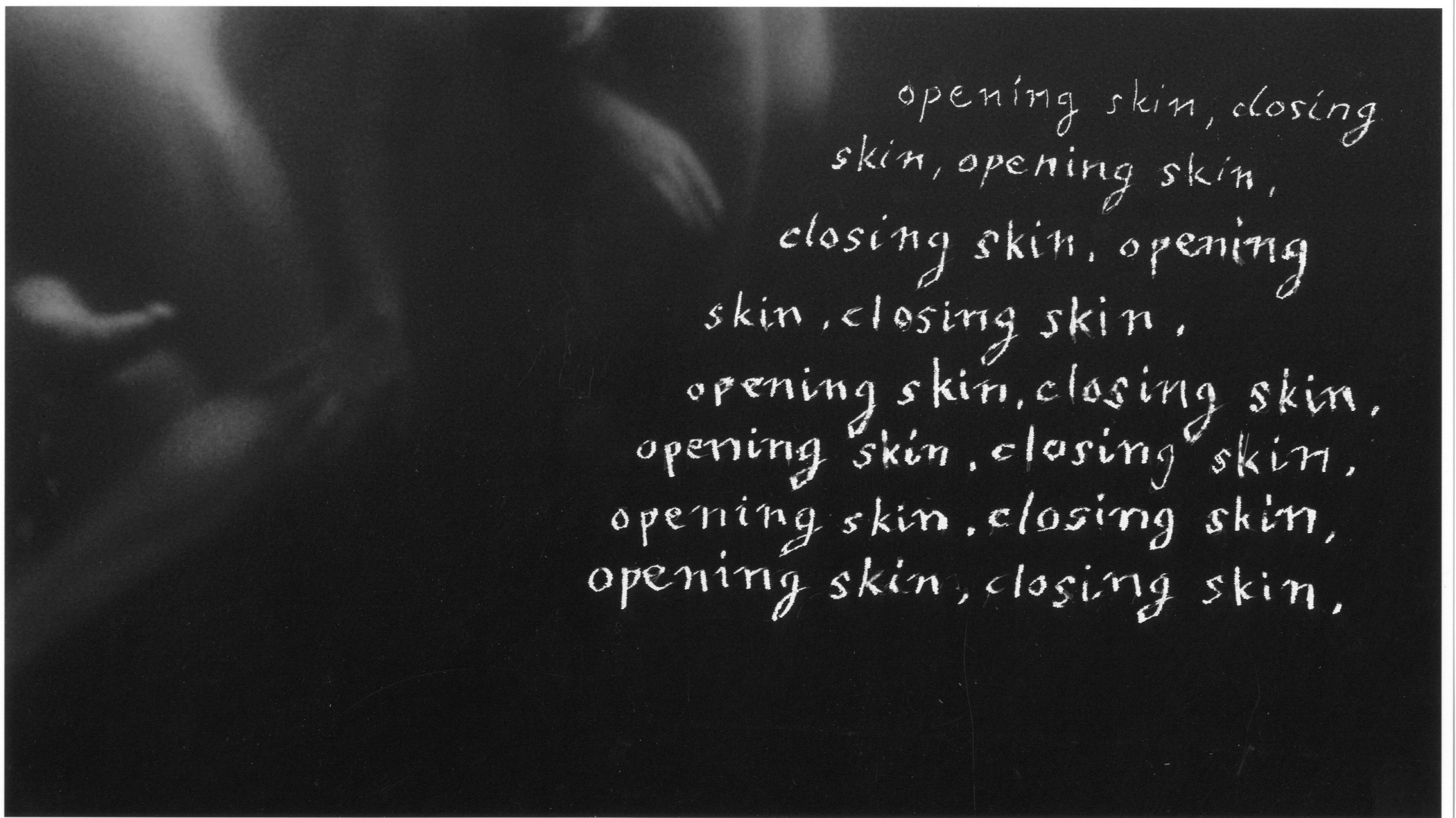
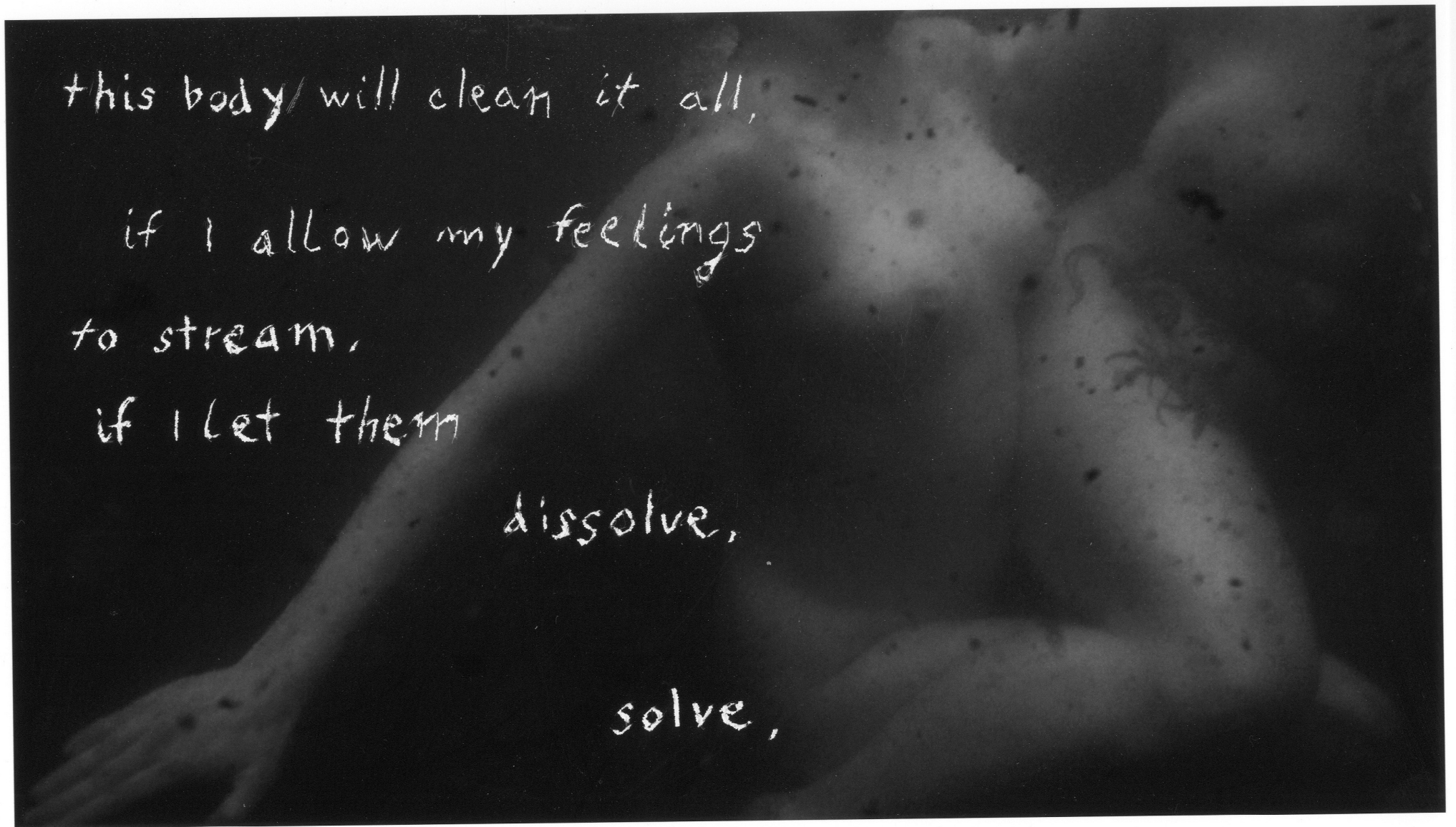
Touch Manifesto

Touch is a superpower
Touch goes through everything
Touch reveals the hidden
Touch reminds of
Touch is a process
Touch is an intra-action

Touch happens all the time inside all of us
We create touch, we co-create touch
We intra-act inside each other and co-create
this multi-sensed reality
Boom.

Touch organizes attention
Touch demands attention, intention?
Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones,
your neurons, your cells and sequences

Before touch, there is space in-between of us
Before touch, the space is like a thick pillow
Before touch, there is a direction
Before touch, there is an intention
Before touch, there is reaching towards
Before touch
tension, wish, attention.



Above: *Stream*. 2022.
Below: *Skin*. 2022.

In this essay, I write through the process of the poetic movement performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* (working title) which is structured as a book. The process spans over a year and intratwines many people, friends, lovers, and colleagues together with thoughts, projects, and play. I am very thankful to all of them, especially to Katarina Huber, who has been my partner of magic throughout this year and in the final performances.

I write in the first person because I let this project under my skin, inside my organs, flowing through my words and my blood. This project is not me, but part of me that has been hiding for a long time. This is me-visible, me-poem, me-chaos, me-bodymind.

How can a performance reveal the permanence, non-ephemerality, and accumulation of touch? How does such a performance affect the audience's experience of response-ability¹ and activate care for their surroundings, others, and themselves? How can the experiences of consent, touch, pleasure, and play on the body be translated and made visible to the spectator or even felt inside the body of the witness?

I wish for the audience to leave my performance with reflections on their own effect on others and vice versa. How is my touch the source of care, the activator, or the cause of trauma? This is something I aim to make visible through various performative, poetic, and visual actions as well as in this essay, showing the process of making, collecting, gathering, and accumulating connections, materials, knowledge, experience, methods, ideas, insights, and learnings.

Holding Meanings—Reaching Towards

Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us (Le Guin, 1986).

With my words, I'm holding, touching, giving a place to be, a place to arrive and to rest, to nest. A word touches. It gets born in my guts, in my belly; it touches the insides of my stomach, moves up slowly or quickly with abdominal muscle pressure, starts to become sound at the vocal cords that flap to create soundwaves as the air passes them, caressing the powerful root of the tongue, wrapping around it, poking my teeth from behind, and finally opening my lips. Sound touches my insides first and then caresses the world, tickling via the air everything and everyone—

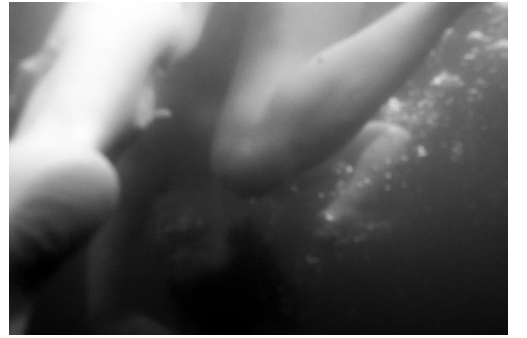
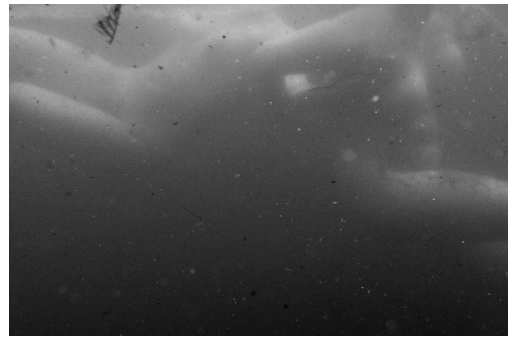
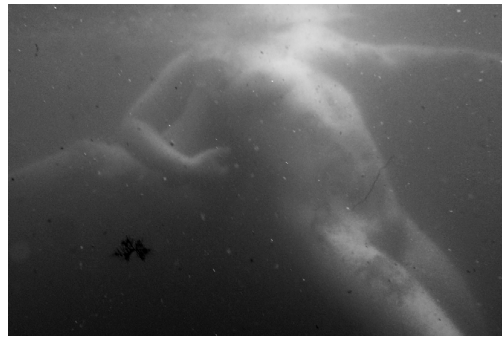
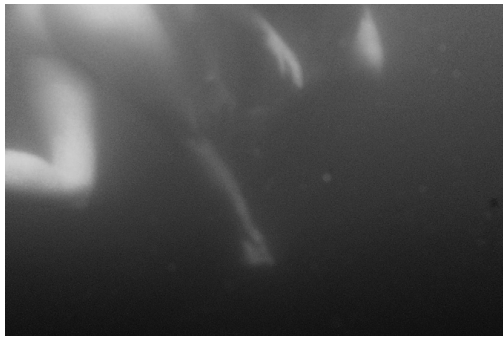
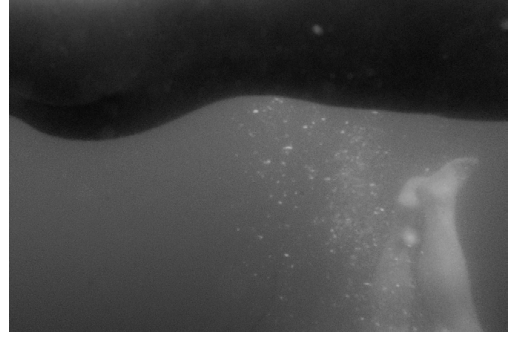
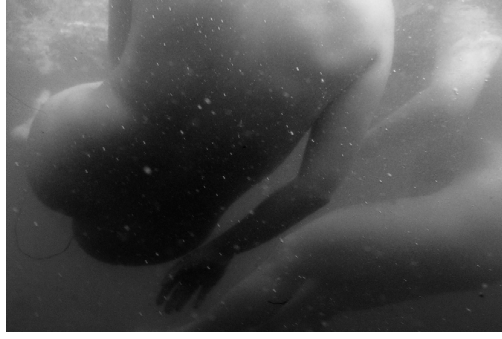
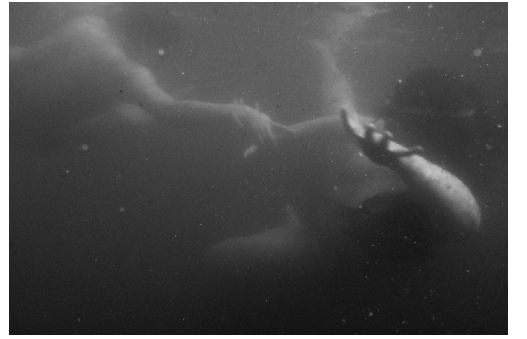
their skin, their hairs on their ears, going in, continuing the journey in their imaginations, enveloping their stories and worlds. Some words are swallowed, sucked back inside; this silencing holds meaning. Some words are shouted at others to hurt or to express pain, as swords creating more hurt. Words can be medicine or words can be violence. Words accumulating, piles on piles forming on our bodyminds, sonic tattoos of wordsounds, echoing in memoryskin, layers, and layers, and layers.

Skin is an envelope that contains the organs, soft tissues, fluids, and holds us together; we can choose what we include to be inside our skin. In my poem *Touch Manifesto* I write: "Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones, your neurons, your cells and sequences," meaning that all touches are recognised by the body, since the skin as a boundary is porous. In the resulting performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* of my practice-research, we can choose what we take in and what we take part in. During the performance, audience is invited to collect pages in the order they wish to form their own book, novel, or bundle of medicine. The pages of the book represent the different parts of the performance and can work as memories of the experience. I give an opportunity for audience members to get a symbol of permanent touch on their bodies, a small point of a tattoo that is done by my collaborator and performance partner Katarina Huber during the performance. It becomes a symbol of the accumulation and permanence of touch.

In my previous written work, a Master's thesis for Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts entitled *Noticing Power Relations when Teaching Touch in Contact Improvisation*, I talk about touch as the first sense and companion of movement; touch and movement support each other (Kukkonen 2021). This means that being touched is never a passive experience; nor is watching a performance about touch passive as it might activate processes in the bodyminds of the audience. In the performance, Katarina and I use movement to make the effects of touch visible.

Intra-action is a term I use when talking about touch. It describes the encounter between two or more entities where agency, the ability to act, emerges—"the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad n.d.) according to feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad. In intra-action, the change takes place inside both together; there is no separation.

¹ Derives from responsibility with the different spelling highlighting one's ability to respond. "When electrons meet each other 'halfway,' when they intra-act with one another, when they touch one another, whom or what do they touch?—In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability (Barad n.d.)."





Above: *Holding 1.* 2022.
Below: *Holding 2.* 2022.

Do I talk about violence or care? Do I show the negotiation of consent and give examples or do I bring forward trauma-activating stories? In *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway argues that “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges... It matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 2016). In *Take This Touch Inside Your Body*, I bring forward the care, the safety, and the accrual of safety rather than the trauma, and show how I got there.

We come to existence by touching. “By rubbing against the world, I define myself to myself” (Juhan 2003). Author and bodyworker Deane Juhan writes that there is no one-way touch; it always contains both directions. In the work of Barad, the binaries of active-passive, leader-follower, and subject-object are dissolved with the wording of intra-action and response-ability. Touch happens inside things—matter, discourse, and bodies. According to Barad, “Touching is a matter of response. Each of us is constituted in response-ability. Each of us is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other” (Barad n.d.). In this rewriting of responsibility, something more queer, chaotic, mutual, and messier can happen. Response-ability makes space for courage and bravery (Beaulieux 2019).

I invite you to touch, to witness, and to enter. My invitation demands your response. I want to organise spaciousness and clarity around decisions. In a performance with an audience, my invitation implies time and clarity for them to know what is expected. Contact improvisation dancer and teacher Nancy Stark-Smith said that “[t]ension masks sensation” (Koteen and Smith 2021); I wish to create space where tension can be freed for more sensation.

Listening Consent—Gathering Trust

Inside the movement practice, Katarina and I establish safety and accountability. We have decided to stay with the trouble and keep connected even if mistakes happen. Philosopher and artist Erin Manning writes about reaching out, already asking the other to “become a medium of expression... This multidimensional movement of desire is violent, for it presupposes a certain demand, a decision, an instance of response-ability” (Manning 2007). Manning emphasises that as we reach to touch, we touch what the other will become in the process of the touch. Reaching to touch is a risk—relating to the unexpected with someone we don’t know,

connecting the boundaries of skin to the shared unknown. The title picture of Melanie Bonajo’s video installation *When the Body Says Yes* is a screenshot² of many people spooning each other, in layers. I connect this image with my work’s aim to show the layering of touch, how all its sedimentations are still there, seeping through the layers. Another connection my performance has with Bonajo’s work is the topic of touch, consent, and the understanding that we, as humans, are lost in knowing what we want; we don’t dare to ask even when we know. In both Bonajo’s work and my own, the audience reflects on their own experiences of touch by seeing the performers go through processes of negotiation and interaction.

Author Brené Brown writes about trust, shame, and leadership. In her book *Daring Greatly*, she tells a story about a jar of marbles collected in relationships with people and how every little moment of connection either puts more marbles in the jar or takes them away (Brown 2015). Trust accumulates in small actions and moments and needs time; all of it can be taken away with one action.

Balancing Between Waves of Excitement and Walls of Resistance

Am I writing about waves, weight, and gravity? Intuition and gravity pull, push towards something, letting things fall in their places, like books on a floor. Books fall. Do words fall in their places? Cycles, patience, listening to the weight, listening to the rhythm. With relaxation, weight, knowing when to take the wave—not too early, not too late. Having the energy to fall when it’s the right moment, the right place for it. In a dance, the strength of the pull, pushing towards something, moves us forward.

Resistance makes up the landscape in which the flow of a river can run; it gives shape and structure for the waves, the flow, and the excitement. Boundaries create friction; I can feel my body of water, my body of excitement rub on my surroundings. If there would be no walls, the waters would spill all over the landscape.

My methodology for this creative process has been to follow waves of excitement and intuition in a sustainable way. To feel the waves, I practice improvisation, playplay³, listening, patience, rest, somatic movement practices (especially authentic movement), and Body-Mind Centering®, a movement and therapy approach to embodiment using movement, touch, voice, and mind (Hartley 1995).

² *When the Body Says Yes* is a video installation by Melanie Bonajo shown at the Venice Biennale 2022.

³ Playplay is a word created by the artist group pupucollective as a reaction to the terms from the sex-positive scene that are made by connecting a word to the word “play” e.g. fire play, bondage play, pet play. Playplay is based on free association, following intuition, improvisation, and joy.

I have also introduced alternative methods to my process, as I have been drawing for the first time in my work, doing automatic writing, layering images, and writing poetry to accumulate pages and make connections visible.

I felt the flow and weight of intuition in choosing my mentors and collaborators for this project. How I found Katarina to be my collaborator and a mentor was especially magical. In September 2021, they opened a sex-positive space called Spektrum Reykjavík which offers space for rope practice, yoga, bodywork, healing, and relational work. I contacted Katarina and felt a pull toward them right away. I appreciate the way they communicate their needs and are open to hear mine, which informs the groundedness of our work together.

We meet regularly to practice and to have conversations. Our meetings start by checking in and end with checking out. In these sessions, one person speaks and the other listens without interrupting. This helps to acknowledge the feelings that are present, which enables us to concentrate on what is happening in our moment of encounter and practice. Before each movement or touch session, we negotiate boundaries and wishes for touch and distance. We work with different themes, topics, and timeframes.

Throughout this year, we have organised and taught workshops about hugging, pain, and the spectrums of touch. This work has woven into the performance process as a gathering of trust, experiences, and knowledge. In the performance project, Katarina's role is to perform and support, providing time and conversation by bringing their own professional and personal experiences about healing and energy work, touch, and consent. I have assumed the role of driving force as the project is part of my studies in the MFA in Performing Arts. My role is to organise and plan the meetings and keep the project moving forward.

I use the concept of praxis to explore the permanence of touch. I practice different theories of intra-action and response-ability as well as practices of consent and communication in movement and in the performance. The practice itself is theory, creates theory, and is not separate from it (Nelson 2006).

The images I chose to support this text are shot as video underwater by Dan Farberoff; I manipulated screenshots to fade out the element of water. The images present one side of the process, how an experienced reality differs from the story of an image. These pictures show the effect of touch as energy on the body, even though the situation of filming was not similar compared to when Katarina and I met in the studio to move. In a still image, what remains visible from the original experience? Words can change the experience of seeing an image of an experience, and the experience of seeing touch can be changed with words.

Letting Go

I discovered the non-ephemeral attribute of touch and the accumulation of that permanence through my praxis. This accumulation and permanence are found in the layers and cycles of meanings that are present in our bodies through experienced touch. I believe performance can reveal the accumulation of touch and open the process of what's happening inside of a bodymind. The means can be various, but I believe primarily in creating spaces that allow multiple ways of being while creating space for myself as a performer. As I can't control what happens inside of other people, I can only give impulses, meet them halfway, and trust they make the same journey towards me or, in this case, the performance. For me, it's about letting go of judgements and helping others do it as well.

I wish to make clear that sensing, or seeing a performance is active, like being touched is actively receiving. In performance, through experiments, it's possible to get closer to that with attention. Together, we can create a laboratory-like space where we look at social behaviour, where there is time to feel what is happening in-between of us and inside our bodies. In the performance, I want to show mistakes, that it's okay to be messy and chaotic. It's about practicing together.

In the performance, I show the negotiation of touch as a way of keeping the process open and transparent. Through this process of writing, I become aware of the meanings of words and how they affect everything. In the performance situation, the kind of verbal cues I use likewise affects the experience of the audience.

I poke around structures that give me safety; I test what I need in order to stay response-able. I enjoy having a space where I can relax to the unknown, not be in a state of panic, and yet, riding the wave. This year of working on a project on touch has been important for me, as I have built up trust in myself and gathered self-confidence. I am aiming to accrue a sustainable way to work with art and performance, and I have realised this could be possible when I connect projects with life, meaning, giving importance to what is already happening in life and making that part of the process.

Touch is a pillow; we are under piles of touch. Opening and closing skin, breathing, porous boundaries. I want to see an increase in awareness of touch in others and to nerd about it more myself. Touch accumulates. Touch shows my boundaries. Connecting with others makes me me. I respond, act, react, and intra-act differently according to who I am with. Being in touch with my environment affects me-waves, me-weight, and me-gravity.

My Gentle Manifesto

Wearing clothes for the weather is ok
Sitting on the floor is ok
Staying home is ok
Going out is ok
Taking time is ok
Being here is ok
Noticing, no, yes,
Using simple words to say complicated thoughts,
and using complicated words to say simple
thoughts.

To get out of breath is ok
To make mistakes is ok
Noticing, no, yes,
Not reacting anymore, yet responding still,
Never staying still.

Still is ok
Being amazing is ok
Shining is ok
Taking space is ok
Being brilliant is ok
Using magnificent words for small things,
noticing there are no small things.

Barad, Karen. n.d. "On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1)." *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality (English/German)*, Edited by Susanne Wtitzgall and Kirsten Stakemeier. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://www.academia.edu/7375696/On_Touching_The_Inhuman_That_Therefore_I_Am_v1_1_.

Beaulieux, Michele. 2019. "Safer Brave Space." *Reservoir of Hope* (blog). October 14, 2019. <https://reservoirofhope.home.blog/safer-brave-space/>.

Brown, Brené. 2015. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Reprint edition. New York, New York: Avery.

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

Hartley, Linda. 1995. *Wisdom of the Body Moving: An Introduction to Body-Mind Centering*. North Atlantic Books.

Juhan, Deane. 2003. *Job's Body: Ahand-book for Body Workshop*. First edition. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.

Koteen, David, and Nancy Stark Smith. 2021. *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas*. Northampton: Wesleyan University Press.

Kukkonen, Kaisa. 2021. "Noticing Power Relations When Teaching Touch in Contact Improvisation." Frankfurt am Main: Hochschule Für Musik und Darstellende Kunst.

Le Guin, Ursula. 1986. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction>.

Manning, Erin. 2007. *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. U of Minnesota Press.

Nelson, Robin. 2006. "Practice-as-Research and the Problem of Knowledge." *Performance Research* 11 (4): 105–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160701363556>

Acknowledgements

In intra-action, conversations, and collaborations with (not in any particular order): Katarina Huber, Dan Farberoff, Synes Elischka and Vilma Riitijoki (pupucollective), Angela Rawlings, Mart Piirimees, Kerly Ritval, Brogan Davison, Meeri Mäkinen, Nita Little, Helga Arnalds, the Atlantic Ocean, whales I haven't seen but I know exist, trauma therapy, Contact Improvisation community, the war in Ukraine, Covid-19, Instagram, loneliness, aloneness, Tinder, bad dates, good dates, lovers, the best kiss, Improv Enthusiasts, pools especially Nautholsvík.

Original photos by Dan Farberoff.