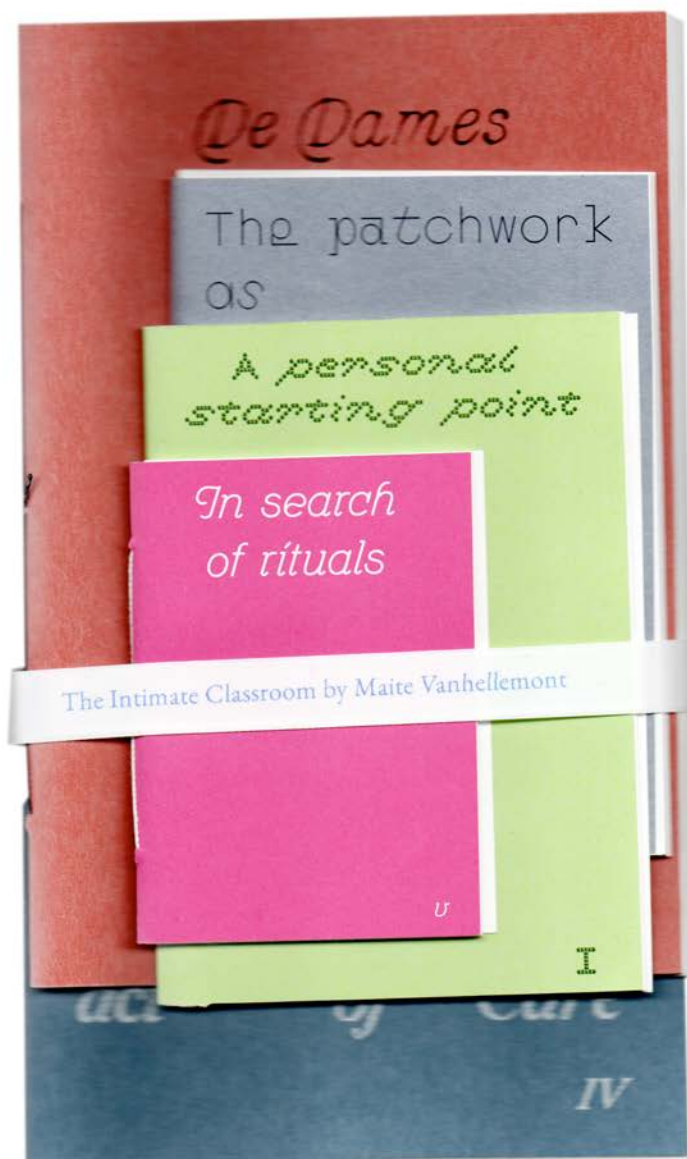


The design of this thesis – five different booklets in five different colours and three different sizes held together by a ribbon – refers both to the tablecloth I worked on during my research and the writing style that emerged from it.



A personal starting point

A graduation project by Maite Vanhellemont
Master Education in Arts,
Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam, NL
Supervisors: Çağlar Köseoğlu & Renée Turner

The Intimate Classroom
To all the women I know and learn from
(Working title)

A personal starting point

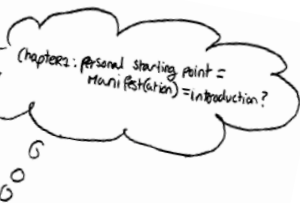


In my earlier writings, I expressed my desire to focus on feminist pedagogies and methodologies within (art) education. I wanted to explore what it actually means to create a ‘Feminist Classroom’¹ as an educator, to discover the recurring ‘ingredients’ for this type of classroom and ideally, design a ‘cookbook’ for myself and others to rely on when designing a class.

My desire to ‘do things otherwise’ has remained largely the same, but previous and recent **experiences** in my own life, as well as **stories of women** around me, have led me to shift my focus. At the beginning of this academic year, I experienced what it is like to be pregnant, unexpectedly. To wonder whether motherhood was a role I wanted to take on, at that moment in time as well as in my life in general. I decided to go ahead with it anyway.

I noticed my **body** and mind changing day by day to a point where I sometimes no longer recognised myself. I felt incredibly lonely at times and found it especially unfair that I couldn’t share the physical and mental aspects of this process with my partner. Nonetheless, I also felt my confidence as a future parent and curiosity about this child grow.

Sadly, at eleven weeks of pregnancy, we learned that it was no longer viable.



To write and do research in a period in my life in which my mind has never been this **foggy**, and where emotions like happiness, sadness, extreme fatigue and anger succeed one another so rapidly, is a strange, but very real experience. I feel like I cannot and should not ignore this state of being within the process of writing my thesis on 'The Feminist Classroom'. Because isn't the feminist classroom preeminently a place where we create space for

*our **bodies** that are intervening,
our **bodies** responding?²*

1 This term refers to a book I will further introduce in the upcoming chapters: Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, 'The Feminist Classroom', Basic Books (1994)

2 Renée Turner during a conversation about my graduation project on 05.12.2025. 5

Even though I lost it, I **carry** it with me: to work, to class and through life. Things we **carry** with us change the way we teach and learn. It can complicate things, sometimes, but it can also open up space for a different way of working.



In teaching, we often pretend knowledge must be rational and structured but what happens when the classroom starts to speak from that other place?³

After a few weeks of rest,
I felt the urge to read again.

I went looking for the voices of other women and found **companionship**⁴ in Jesse van Oosten's thesis '*Learning in the space between words*' which made me realise that an important part of what I consider 'The Feminist Classroom' is actually **a very intimate** one.⁵

Jesse also writes about her interview with artist and educator Dieuwke Boersma who, in a period of grief after her daughter was born still, experienced that

*the reading and writing of theory, interweaving her own **voice** with the **voices** of others in the shape of a text, had become a refuge and a place of comfort and solace. Dieuwke produces theory in the **messy**, unpredictable and sometimes cruel flow of everyday life, in entanglement with theoretical texts and ideas from others. Theory to Dieuwke is not about applying abstract thought to a representation of reality, which can be perceived as quite a violent act of oppression if we look at it from a feminist point of view, but it is rather about **movement**, a movement in which thinking and doing are part of the same dance.⁶*



4 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, (2017): p.16:

“A companion text is a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden. Such texts might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone.”

5 Jesse van Oosten, ‘Learning in the space between words’ (2023), abstract:

In her thesis, Jesse van Oosten “turned to the intimate as a dimension that potentially resists and transcends the opposition between the body and discourse in education. She proposes an understanding of the intimate that is not about bodies touching bodies, but rather about how our bodies feel in educational situations with others: other humans, space, text. Based on Audre Lorde’s essay on the erotic as a force that arises from within, our deepest nonrational knowledge that we should learn to nurture (again), she unfolds an approach to the intimate along the lines of relationality, the nonrational, and difference.”



Just like Jesse and Dieuwke, I believe that the lived **experience** always comes before the theory and before the subject. This personal starting point seems to be a recurring element in the work of many other feminist writers, artists and educators. In my first meeting with my supervisor Çağlar Köseoğlu we talked about how feminism can be a way or route to legitimise 'other forms' of knowledge. Such as **embodied** knowledge, non-theorised knowledge, and knowledge by experience.

Throughout my research, terms such as **'non-rational knowledge'** and **'informed intuition'** seem to recur quite a bit, and it has made me realise more and more that our choice of words matters as teachers. That is why, as part of my thesis, I developed my own list of words related to my research.



GLOSSARY OR
LIST OF WORDS
I WANT TO
HAPPEN AT
THE TABLE? ↓

The reason these terms appeal to me is that as a woman I have often been called 'irrational' or 'too emotional'. By connecting these terms to knowledge, we reclaim them. As an experiment I have highlighted words and sentences throughout this thesis that I think are important within my field of interest. They are incorporated into the cover(s) of this thesis, like a backbone or an embrace, like stitches that hold the different elements of my writing together as a patchwork. What associations would come to mind if you only read these words?

In our search for other 'experts' my partner and I ended up at a discussion group for women and couples with similar experiences. It was quite special and intimate, to share stories with strangers, to whom you didn't have to explain anything. One comment from the moderator stayed with me. She told us that, in addition to dealing with the loss, we had also been given a different task: *"You now need to teach others how to talk about sad things. Because we're not very good at this. And you need to be clear about what you do and don't want within this process."*⁷



⁷ Ellis Klijn, 02.12.2025, original quote: *"Jullie moeten anderen nu leren hoe je over verdrietige dingen praat. Want daar zijn we niet zo goed in. En je moet héél duidelijk zijn in wat je wel en niet wilt in dit proces."*

It made me realise that we don't really learn this as teachers. How do we give space to the vulnerable within our classrooms?

The discomfort?

Without becoming
too fragile?

When I dare **to dream** big, I want my graduation project to be an example of how to turn theory into practice and translate it into everyday life. I truly enjoy reading all kinds of feminist theories, it's been an **empowering** process so far, but as long as I don't translate them into practice, they just remain beautiful ideas.

*I think of feminism as a life question; a question of how we live our lives given that the structures we wish **to transform** are structures that persist. We have to live with what we wish **to transform**. As a feminist working in the academy, though, I sensed that what was taught and known as “feminist theory” had become somewhat disconnected from the questions of how **to live**, and the questions themselves relegated to an earlier outdated style of feminism. I wanted to bring feminist theory, too, back to life — strengthening the ties between the inventive creation of feminist theory and living a life that sustains it.⁸*

In order to do this, I believe it is important to include sources other than academic ones in my thesis. I think my process would benefit from seeking examples from artists, collectives, researchers and educators working at the intersection of art, education and feminism.

TO
SHARE

I also keep thinking back to a scene from the series 'Fleabag' that was circulating on Instagram a while ago and it really struck me. The series main character ('Fleabag', Phoebe Waller-Bridge) is sitting in a bar with Belinda (Kristin Scott Thomas) who tells us in a monologue why we should look forward to menopause:

*"Women are born with **pain** built in. It's our physical destiny: period **pains**, sore boobs, childbirth, you know. We **carry** it within ourselves throughout our lives, men don't. They have to seek it out, they invent all these gods and demons and things just so they can feel **guilty** about things, which is something we do very well on our own. And then they create wars so they can feel things and touch each other and when there aren't any wars they can play rugby. We have it all going on in here inside, we have **pain** on a cycle for years and years and years and then just when you feel you are making peace with it all, what happens? The menopause comes, the fucking menopause comes, and it is the most wonderful fucking thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then you're free, no longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You're just a person."*⁹

I forwarded it to a few of my friends and it all gave us goosebumps.

Perhaps, goosebumps are a pretty good reason to treat something as a source.



8 Sara Ahmed, *'Feminism must be lived, an interview with Sara Ahmed'*, 21.05.2017

9 *'Fleabag'*, created and written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, monologue performed by actress Kristin Scott Thomas, season 2, episode 3.

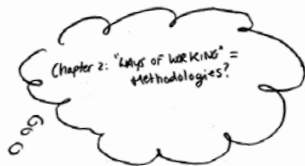
Experience(s)
Stories of women
Body
Foggy
Bodies
To carry
Place
Companionship
Intimate
Voice
Voices
Messy
Movement

Embodied
Non-rational knowledge
Informed intuition
Irrational
Too emotional
Experts
To share
Space
To dream
Empowering
To transform
To live
Pain/pains
Guilty
Goosebumps

The patchwork
as

structure

II



The patchwork as structure

In this thesis, I am not following the traditional academic structure. This started **intuitively** and has eventually transformed into a **conscious decision**. Different texts by feminist writers, artists and others have taught me that 'deliberately postponing **a certain outcome**'¹⁰ can also be considered a feminist act. You could also argue that a learning process doesn't always have to be about results.

I believe that the topic of this thesis does not call for a 'traditional' format and that such a format could even work against me, reducing or simplifying what I want to say. I am deliberately refusing to present a specific research question. That doesn't mean that I don't know what my research is about or that I don't believe in **the power of questions** — because I do. To me, these questions are part of a story, which I have **carried** with me throughout my research. In Indigenous societies stories and metaphors are often used as a teaching tool. *Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain **life lessons** from a more personal perspective.*¹¹ To some of the questions in this story I have found answers and some are still unanswered.

That is why I prefer to approach my research and thesis – both the written text and the visual elements – as a **patchwork** in which different topics, contexts, and questions are interwoven. I would like to invite you, the reader, to view the various paragraphs as patches of fabric. Sometimes it will be clear which ones are connected, as different colours and patterns overlap. Sometimes new arrangements may emerge, while separate elements and **loose threads** remain.

10 I'm pretty sure I read this somewhere during my research, — but as is sometimes the case, I'm afraid I can't remember where. Most likely, this is a quote from the '*The Feminist Class-room*' by Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault (1994)

11 Shawn Wilson, '*Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*', Fernwood Publishing (2008): p17





One spring morning, I met Dieuwke Boersma at the entrance to the Trompenburg Garden in Rotterdam. Having been moved by her contribution to Jesse van Oosten's thesis, I was keen to speak to her. I was hoping for a sense of **recognition** — or perhaps even some advice from her as a researcher, lecturer and someone with a similar experience.

For nearly three hours, we drank **coffee and lemonade**, ate cake, went for a short walk and talked about all sorts of things. She began by apologising that her story might sometimes go off in all sorts of directions. She explained how for her, theory and practice are **intertwined** – not linear, but **fragmented**, like life. When she said that, I felt a sense of understanding and the freedom to think, share and make connections in that way.

We were both open and vulnerable; it was an **intimate** conversation, but we also found ourselves **laughing a lot**. Again, I was reminded of how special it can be to share something with someone – a stranger – without having to explain or justify myself. To have a conversation with someone who accepts **your story** as true, as knowledge grounded in experience.¹²

¹² During our meeting, Dieuwke and I talked about all sorts of things, most of which must remain in the garden where we met. I made a conscious decision not to record our conversation, so when I write about this meeting, it is a paraphrase, based on my impressions and memories of that morning.







In their wonderful book *'The Feminist Classroom'* Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault provide an intimate view of how feminist teachers were revolutionizing higher education in the early nineties. They advocate a non-linear and sometimes even 'unfinished' approach. In the first chapter they express their hope to give a sense of 'unfinished business', of vignettes and snapshots of classroom lives that continue to evolve beyond their construction of them at one point in space and time. In this way, they hope to show their 'authority' as a limited and contextual narrative that is part of an ongoing conversation with participants and readers.¹³

I would like to approach my own research in a similar way. Using personal experiences as a starting point, I explore broader issues within (art) education. Through patch-working (both literally and symbolically), storytelling, mapping and creating with others, I explore themes of intimacy, vulnerability, embodied knowledge, knowledge by experience, trust, loss and rituals. The layout of my thesis — five different booklets in three different sizes — refers both to the tablecloth I worked on during my research and to the writing style that emerged from it. I want to experiment with the question of what actually constitutes a feminist classroom. What are the ingredients (or stitches) that bind such a classroom together?

13 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *'The Feminist Classroom'*, Basic Books (1994): p.22

In my refusal to adhere to an 'academic structure' – one with a clear research question, order, beginning and end – I choose a **messy** route

A route in which my emotions and experiences are present in the text. I didn't know beforehand where this would lead me and it turned out to be one with an open ending. But along the way, I've learned **to embrace** and acknowledge this way of working as a method.

My thesis is not necessarily intended as a critique of the existing structures of MEiA or higher (art) education in general. However, I do think that if vulnerability is a given we have to work with within our classrooms, existing structures sometimes call for flexibility.

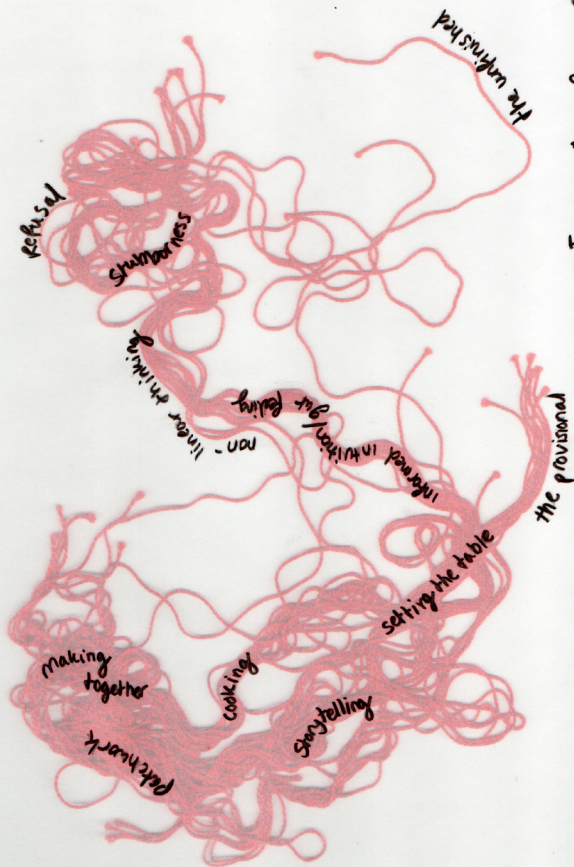


As Shawn Wilson beautifully states: *“Research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers. It is my hope that readers of this book will begin to question some of their own beliefs about the way research needs to be conducted and presented, so that they can recognize the importance of developing alternative ways of answering questions.”*

“Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.”¹⁴

14 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Shawn Wilson, ‘Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods’, Fernwood Publishing (2008): p6 and T. Tafoya, ‘Finding Harmony: Balancing Traditional Values with Western Science in Therapy’, Canadian Journal of Native Education 21 (supplement) (1995): p.12 as referred to by Shawn Wilson.

Messiness as part of my methodology:



= Feminist Action Research?

I'm not alone in my experiences and in this way of working. Many came before me. Throughout my research, I came across the work of feminist writers, lecturers, artists, and 'ordinary' humans who employ similar methods, in which the *relationship between writing about textiles and making textiles* becomes apparent.¹⁵ I am particularly drawn to how *topics often treated with silence may find useful alternative forms of communication in the textile*.¹⁶ Such as in the wonderful 'Infant Wrapping Cloth Project' in which Birgitta Nordström provided families with the option **to hold lives** which end before they begin.¹⁵

I could have used many more sources, but unfortunately, a master's thesis is too short for that. And perhaps Pennina Barnett puts it best, when she explains why she chose this approach: "*What if the poetics of cloths were composed by 'soft logics', modes of thought that twist and turn and stretch and fold? And in this movement new encounters were made, beyond the constraints of binaries? [...] And if 'soft' suggests an elastic surface, a tensile quality that yields to pressure, this is not a weakness; for 'an object that gives in is actually stronger than one that resists, because it also permits the opportunity to be oneself in a new way.*"¹⁷

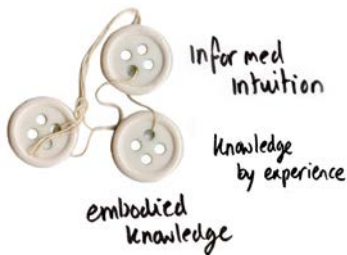


15 *'Introduction part one: Touch'*, The Textile Reader edited by Jessica Hemmings, second edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (2023): p.3

16 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Birgitta Nordström, *'HOW DO YOU FOOTNOTE A SMILE? One Dialog about Two Extremes of Textile Research'* (excerpt) (2020), The Textile Reader edited by Jessica Hemmings, second edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (2023): p.48

17 Pennina Barnett, *'Folds, Fragments, Surfaces: Towards a poetics of cloth'* (1999), The Textile Reader edited by Jessica Hemmings, second edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (2023): p.32

These alternative ‘structures’ and *feminist settings* seem *to foster* vulnerability, storytelling and a sense of safety — but not without risk.¹⁸ In my research, I explore and experiment with (practical) methods for teaching and learning based on feminist theories. This approach opens up space for a more embodied way of writing, making and learning. As an embodied writing, this writing-as-gesture is an invitation to the haptic — *to touch* and connection, to an epistemology of physical enactment and inhabitation. [...] This writing-as-gesture compels us to conceptualise the materiality of the text in new ways, and to find new – embodied, *provisional*, collaborative, precarious – ways of learning and knowing.¹⁹



18 Renée Turner and Çağlar Köseoğlu in on of their emails to me, 17.05.2026

19 Kaye Mitchell, 'Afterword', as published in *Gestures: A body of work*, Alice Butler et al., Manchester University Press (2025): p.317





As a feminist teacher, I'm intrigued by how Peg Speirs argues that all feminist art education should be considered Feminist Action Research: *"Boundaries collapse within the life of the feminist art educator, between her* research, her work in a creative form, and her teaching. Feminist art educators take on multiple roles of the artist, teacher and researcher simultaneously. Research is a word that surfaced over and over again as the feminist art educators described what they do and what their students do in preparation for their projects. Broadly interpreted, by combining the word feminism with art education, FAE is activism in many forms informed by interdisciplinary sources and efforts of feminists in art working for social change. Its form can be an article for publication, an artwork, a classroom assignment, a curriculum, a web page, a collaborative work, whatever is the most appropriate form to express that work in a particular venue. Feminist art education is feminist action research."*²⁰

20 Peg Speirs, 'Collapsing Distinctions: Feminist Art Education as Research, Art and Pedagogy', (1998): p. 88

21 Pennina Barnett, 'Folds, Fragments, Surfaces: Towards a poetics of cloth' (1999), The Textile Reader edited by Jessica Hemmings, second edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (2023): p.32

Most of what I've written came out of an intense feeling of urgency, of the text needing to exist.

But now I too need to graduate, and as the deadline comes closer, I can feel myself stiffening. Doubting things I might need to elaborate on, chapters I still need or want to write and citations I still need to find, in order to finish my thesis in 'the right way', at 'the right time'. When I wrote my first "pilot study" – a large part of which now makes up the first 'chapter' – I didn't write it thinking it would be 'good enough'.

I wrote it because I needed to. One of my tutors, Marek van de Watering, gave me feedback in the form of a letter. Given the circumstances, he felt that this would be more fitting, because he didn't want to 'asses' me straight away based on criteria. I thought that was such a kind, considered act. A feminist and 'soft logic'²¹ response to my situation at the time.

In his letter, Marek reminded me that in a lot of action research, *and with Feminist Action Research in particular, it is important to be allowed to say that it is not, and need not be, clear when it begins and where it ends. And whether it begins or ends at all. For the need to clearly begin and end is often institutional, imposed and artificial. In traditional academia, action research is a problem due to its potentially infinite continuity (or circularity), but from a feminist perspective, perhaps it is precisely not—it does justice to the fact that everything is connected to everything else, all the time.*²²

In hindsight, his letter taught me that I could consider my ‘feelings of refusal’ and my preference for ‘the unfinished’ or ‘provisional’ as part of my methodology.

22 Marek van de Watering in his letter to me 14.01.2026, original quote: *“Bij veel action research, en bij FAE in het bijzonder, denk ik dat het belangrijk is om te mogen zeggen dat het niet duidelijk is en hoeft te zijn wanneer het begint en waar het stopt. En of het überhaupt begint of stopt. Want de behoefte om duidelijk te beginnen en te stoppen is vaak institutioneel, opgelegd en artificieel. In traditionele academia is action research door de mogelijk oneindige continuïteit (of circulariteit) een probleem, maar vanuit een feministisch oogpunt is het dat het misschien juist niet – het doet recht aan dat alles met alles te maken heeft, de hele tijd.”*

23 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *‘The Feminist Classroom’*, Basic Books (1994): p.13

24 Dorothy Berkson cited by Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault: *‘The Feminist Classroom’* (1994), personal communication, Tenth Annual Gender Studies Symposium, Lewis and Clark College, April 1991. Basic Books (1994)

TO
MAKE

It is only recently that I have dared to call myself a feminist teacher out loud, that I embrace my **fragmented, messy** way of working, and consider this a form of knowledge. I like the idea that I can also view my graduation project and practice as Feminist Action Research. It **feels encouraging**. And as I carry out my research, my vocabulary expands and my **confidence grows**. Isn't that exactly what feminist theory and teaching should do?



In interweaving these different elements, *whispering voices in my mind would sometimes ask,*

what makes this or that teaching practice “feminist”?:

*Is it the content alone, the pedagogy, or both?²³ The reason I consider these ways of working, these methods and approaches, as part of ‘my feminist pedagogy’ is because those of us here who are doing it came at it through thinking about feminist theory. We have chosen to call it feminist because we arrived at it through that **route**. I call myself a feminist teacher because that is the particular mode of analysis that I use **to arrive** at what I am trying to do.²⁴ I’d like to think these are some of the ingredients for the feminist, intimate classroom I want to teach in and be a part of.*





In search of ways to tie all these sources and ‘forms of knowledge’ together, I stumbled upon the ‘Relational Citation System (RCS)’ which starts from the idea that *all knowledge is communally generated. RCS treats oral transmission and collaborative thinking as legitimate and valuable scholarly sources that should be properly credited and traced along its lineage.*²⁵ As the designer, Deborah Khodanovich, is currently in the process of finishing her own master thesis on the subject, RCS is unfortunately not available yet as an alternative for MLA, APA or Chicago. Her approach has made me realise that I was missing a visual method for citing, one that can be used to refer to various forms of knowledge creation such as; Direct Conversation, Secondary Transmission, **Unknown Sources**, Co-authored Knowledge, **Common Knowledge**, Published sources, **Published Gossip**, Recommended Sources and Mediated Sources. I think it’s a brilliant initiative that ties in very well with how my own research—and much of the work of others—comes about: fragmentary, nonlinear and relational.

Until I am able to use this method of citation, I believe that working with ‘notes in the margins’ is the most appropriate approach for my research. Sometimes these notes are simply intended to refer to a particular source, but at other times they are more detailed, forming part of my process, as a **patch** in the cloth.

CITATION LEGEND

In-text prefix:
Caret (^) symbol

Footnotes prefix:
Asterisk (*) symbol

CITATION TYPE	TYPE THIS	GET THIS
Direct Conversation	^direct	↔
Secondary Transmission	^second	↗↖
Unknown Source	^unknown	→
Co-authored Knowledge	^co-author	✱
Common Knowledge	^common	◇
Published Sources	^source	✱
Recommended Source	^recommend	✱→
Published Gossip	^gossip	✱↖
Mediated Citation	^mediate	✱✱

25 Deborah Khodanovich, '*Relational Citation System*', 2026.

Legend of '*The Relational Citation Style*', Deborah Khodanovich, 2026.





In approaching my thesis as a ‘patchwork’, a large part of my ‘theoretical framework’ is woven into various sections. During my first year of MEiA I visualised my genealogy.²⁶ The exercise aimed to identify the **moments** in our educational and professional life that have been significant, whether **happy or sad**, including the people and places that were part of these experiences. Doing this gave me new insights into how my different roles in life overlap and influence each other. But it also made visible that the people who gave me ‘a leg up’ in my personal, educational and working life were mostly **women and my father**.

Previous and recent experiences in my own life, **stories of women** around me, and current (political) developments in The Netherlands and abroad make it very clear that the fight for gender equality is far from over. *The particular political currents of this moment make it as important as ever not to take feminist spaces, including classrooms, for granted, and to be vigilant of the faces inside and outside of the university that threaten them.*²⁷

This reality can make me very angry sometimes and I know I’m not alone in this experience. Dominant patriarchal structures do not only oppress women, but anyone who doesn’t fit the white, Western, male, heteronormative and able-bodied norm.

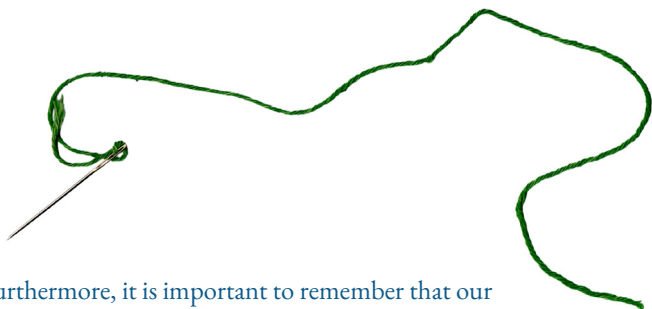
*Feminist studies and related critical fields, including queer and critical race studies, are under persistent fire as conservative, right-wing politics are on the rise globally.*²⁸

26 This was an exercise given by my then tutor and now supervisor Renée Turner during my first year at MEiA (2024-2025).

27 Annelies Kleinherenbrink, et al., '*The feminist classroom: Pedagogies, contestations and horizons*', Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 27.2/3 (2024): p.96

28 Annelies Kleinherenbrink, et al., '*The feminist classroom: Pedagogies, contestations and horizons*', Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 27.2/3 (2024): p.98

29 Ruth Lewis, et al., '*Safe spaces: experiences of feminist women-only space*', SAGE Publications, (2015): p.3.



Furthermore, it is important to remember that our educational system, however much it may have been reformed, is rooted in a patriarchal system, the **traces** and consequences of which are still felt by women on a daily basis. In their paper ‘Safe spaces’: *experiences of feminist women-only space*’ Ruth Lewis, Elizabeth A Sharp, Jenni Remnant and Rhiannon Redpath refer to this as “the **wallpaper**’ of sexism; the backdrop which becomes unremarkable because of its routine familiarity. Like **wallpaper** that one sees everyday, the gendering of space becomes the norm and, because it is so normalised, becomes unremarkable.”²⁹

Precisely because this wallpaper is still present, it is important to offer an alternative.

I want to share stories and encourage others to do the same. I want to trust my gut, and my research has helped me realise that all the 'gut informed' interests and methods I already have and apply in my practice, can be substantiated from feminist theories.

As artist Andrea Fisher stated: "*My work is driven by informed intuition*"³⁰ I like this quote a lot, because it seems to acknowledge intuition and take it more seriously, as a valuable form of knowledge. In addition, *intuition can function not only to facilitate personal growth, but also to bring together different perspectives, different ways of seeing the world, in an evolving web of relations and meanings.*³¹ For me, approaching the concept of 'intuition' like this, could also be a way to 'validate' or 'legitimise' some of the words that keep recurring in my research and process.

Such as,

intimacy,

"gut-feeling",

to sense,

to stumble

and others.

30 Renée Turner told me this quote during one of our sessions, she heard Andrea Fisher say this during a talk in the early nineties.

31 Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *'The Feminist Classroom'*, Basic Books (1994): p.81



Rituals



loss



Intimacy

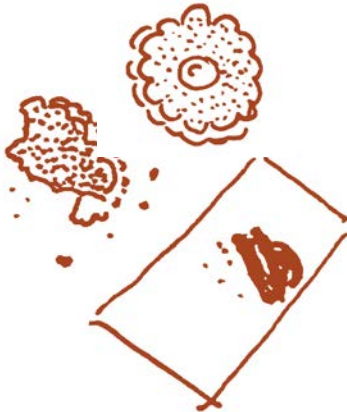


vulnerability

Intuitively	<i>Listen in circles</i>
Conscious decision	To hold lives
A certain outcome	<i>Stretch</i>
The power of questions	<i>Fold</i>
Carried	<i>Movement</i>
<i>Life lessons</i>	<i>To foster</i>
Patchwork	<i>To touch</i>
Loose threads	<i>Provisional</i>
Recognition	<i>Multiple roles</i>
Coffee and lemonade	<i>Appropriate form</i>
Intertwined	<i>Action</i>
Fragmented	Feeling of urgency
Intimate/Intimacy	The right way
Laughing a lot	Good enough
Your story	Considered act
Non- linear	<i>When it begins and where it ends</i>
Unfinished	Feelings of refusal
Hope	Feels encouraging
Limited	Confidence grows
Contextual narrative	<i>Route</i>
Trust	<i>To arrive</i>
Loss	Unkown sources
Rituals	Common knowledge
Stitches	Published gossip
Messy	Patch
To embrace	Moments

Happy or sad
Women and my father
Stories of women
This reality
Traces
Wallpaper
To share
To trust my gut
Gut informed
Informed intuition
Web of relations
To sense
To stumble

De Dames







De Dames³² (*The Ladies*) – *A feminist classroom example*

Alongside my work as a visual artist and lecturer at the University of the Arts in Utrecht (HKU), I also work as a Dutch language teacher for a women-only group at Stichting Dynamo in my neighborhood in Amsterdam. I've been doing this for several years now and I really enjoy it. This class is open to women from different backgrounds and each with different reasons for being in The Netherlands. Currently, the group consists mainly of women from Arabic speaking countries, but this has varied over the years. Most of them have been in The Netherlands around one to three years, but some of them have been here much longer and have been a part of the group since I started volunteering in 2021. For me, working with this group of women is a way of putting my feminist ideals into practice and that's why it felt like the most logical place to start my research.

Stichting Dynamo is a very **informal** meeting place, where we share meals and have fun together while learning a language. Besides being classmates, many of 'De Dames' also became **me friends** with each other. As a result, I experience these classes more as meetings rather than formal lessons in which we talk about topics that are relevant for the group. This makes it relatively easy for me to approach them. They are aware of my studies and always participate very enthusiastically when I want to try something new.

32 When I refer to the women's group at Dynamo, I always call them 'De Dames' (The Ladies). I can't quite remember how it started, but that's how we lovingly address each other now.

33 Ana Olga Rallón and Anna Carolina Peñaloza-Rallón, *Write On, Women! Discovering Personal Skills through Feminist Pedagogy and Narratives*, HOW Journal vol 28. No 1, January/June 2021, Bogotá, Colombia, 2021: p.163-182.

Until now, the focus of these lessons has mainly been on conversation, but recently the women have also expressed a growing desire to improve their writing skills. Inspired by the research of Ana Olga Rallón and Anna Carolina Peñaloza-Rallón³³ on the effect of improving writing skills among women in relation to a more **emancipated classroom**, I came up with an exercise: I gave all participants an envelope, a stamp and my address, and asked them to write me a letter (of at least five sentences) about **a day in their lives**.

Once I received the letters, I brought them back to class to discuss them and to correct any grammar ‘mistakes’. Due to various practical reasons that sometimes arise in volunteer work, but perhaps in educational settings in general, we were unable to use our usual space and ended up sitting in the café of the local library. While sipping coffee and tea, the ladies read their letters aloud one by one. Everyone **listened attentively** to each other, applauded when difficult new words were used, and, as always, **we laughed a lot**. When I asked for feedback, they told me that they really liked the assignment, but they also felt a bit insecure sometimes, writing it from home. Which is why we agreed to also practice writing texts together in class.



I also saw this exercise as a way of **giving space** to their **‘voices’**³⁴ and characters in the documentation of my research, without necessarily having to photograph or film them.

Sketch made by Indy van Teeffelen, during one of the sessions with ‘De Dames’, spring 2026.

34 In this paragraph I use the term ‘voice’ as I understood it from: Frances A Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom: An Inside Look at How Professors and Students are Transforming Higher Education for a Diverse Society*, Basic Books (1994): p.18: “.. ‘voice’ originally meant for us the awakening of the students’ own responses. It meant their ability to speak for themselves, to bring their own questions and perspectives to the material. It seemed to connote the connection of one’s education to one’s personal experience, a connection that members of marginalized groups must often give up when they seek “mastery” through the dominant discourse. [...] We have since come to think about these classrooms as arenas in which teachers and students fashion their voices rather than “find” them. As students bring their own questions and perspectives to the material, they use relevant personal experiences to shape a narrative of an emerging self.”



Beste Maite

Ik ben met vrienden geweest naar
Arts wij hebben de dieren gezien
wij hebben lekker gegeten
wij hebben een fijne dag gehad
het was heel gezellig.

groet

B ♡

Letter from S. to me, October 2025.

Letter from B. to me, October 2025.

Beste MAïte:

Vandaag is het zondag, een rustige dag
zonder werk. Het het geluid van de regen
is het echt geweldig.

Ik werd om 9 uur wakker, nam een
warme douche en poetste mijn tanden
Ik maakte het ontbijt klaar; Mijn
man had ook geen werk, dus we hebben
samen ontbeten en over van alles
en nog wat gepraat. Daarna gingen
we winkelen en kwamen terug om
punch klaar te maken, ~~en~~ vervolgens
keken we samen naar een actiefilm die echt
geed was; Tenslotte gingen we slapen.

Het vriendelijke groet.

H.

Hallo Maite

Ik reisde naar Marokko en bleef daar
een maand.

Ik verbleef bij mijn ouders. We eten
samen, dronken samen en gingen
ook naar de bruiloft.

Ik vond dat interessant. en ben ook
naar het strand geweest. het was
geweldig. het weer was mooi.
mijn vakantie was geweldig met mijn
man en mijn zoon.

groetjes,

S.

Lieve Maite,

Ik ga je vertellen over mijn weekend. Op Zondag stond ik om 7 uur, ~~stam~~ douchte ik en trok ik mijn kleding, Ik waste mijn kind en kleed hem uit.

Ik at mijn ontbijt met mijn kleine gezins, heb ik mijn ~~häs~~ schoon gemaakt.

We maakten ons klaar om te gaan naar het Ballorig, daar waren we mijn schoonzussen en hun kinderen ontmoeten.

was gezellig, en mijn kind heeft zich vermaakt, En vond hij spelletjes in he Ballorig interresant. wij hebben patat gegeten.

Om 7 uur 's avonds kwamen we terug naar huis.

Ik maakte het avond eten, en mijn man waste ons kind. Na het eten mijn kind ging naar bed.

Ik waste de borden af. daarna bleven ik en mijn man om een serie te kijken. Dat was mijn dag.

Hoe was jouw weekend?

Met vriendelijk groetjes, O

Beste Maite,

Vandaag is het zaterdag. IK ben de hele dag thuis gebleven, want ik ben niet naar buiten gegaan. In de ochtend heb ik gekookt en daarna samen met mijn man gegeten. We hebben gezellig gepraat en tijd met elkaar doorgebracht. Het weer was slecht, want het regende en het was koud. Toch vond ik de dag leuk, omdat ik samen met mijn man was. 'S Avonds heb ik nog een beetje Nederlands geoefend en daarna een kopje thee gedronken.

Groetjes,

Y

DOORBRENGEN

"DE HEBBEN TIJD MET ELKAAR
DOORGEBRACHT."

ROMANTISCH

VERVOLGENS

TEN SLOTTE

"VAN ALLES EN NOG WAT"

"WE HEBBEN OVER VAN ALLES
EN NOG WAT GEPRAT"

VERMAKEN

"MIJN WIND HEEFT ZICH
VERMAAKT"

VERBLIJVEN

"IK VERBLEEF BIJ MIJN ANDERS"

"HET GELUID VAN DE
REGEN"

In the nearly five years that I have been a volunteer, I noticed that if classes are canceled for a while or if there is uncertainty about the date and time, people often stop coming. Which is why, during the period when I was confined to my home, I wanted to find a way to maintain contact with them. I decided to write them a letter in which I briefly explained my absence and made a suggestion for an exercise to learn Dutch from home, based on the new words in their own letters.

The first time I saw the women again, I told them about my miscarriage, and it was a meaningful moment. It soon became apparent that three of the eight people present had experienced something similar.

*“For me,
it was twenty years ago,
but as a woman, you
never forget something like that.”³⁵*

It was very special to be able **to share** this with them and I noticed that all women who had experienced something similar talked about it while touching their bellies. Our conversation was an embodied experience. It was beautiful, intimate and I felt so understood and seen.

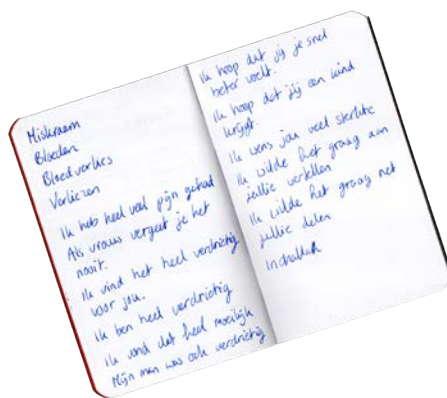
I do not mean to say that as a teacher you should always talk about your private life. But I do think that the atmosphere we created together at Dynamo made me feel **comfortable enough** to share my personal story with them. It’s easier to open up when someone else dares to do the same; sometimes it’s as simple as that.

³⁵ N, during the Dutch class at Dynamo, November 27th, 2025, original quote: “Voor mij, is het twintig jaar geleden, maar als vrouw, vergeet je zoiets nooit.”

From an educational point of view, it also showed something interesting: traditional integration often follows a set pattern, with **little room for sadness**, for things not going as we had hoped. We learn a language through scenarios in which we explain to people who we are, where we're from. We learn 'the right words' for when we want to go shopping, ask what time it is and when we're looking for directions. But we don't learn the words to tell someone how indescribably sad or difficult some things are.³⁶

Some of these exercises are very useful and contribute to women's emancipation. They enable women **to navigate** society and their own lives independently.

36 This paragraph is partly based on an email exchange with my buddy Lisa Peake on 07.12.2025 and 16.12.2025 and a letter from my tutor Marek van der Watering on 14.01.2026.



List of words and sentences discussed during the Dutch class on November 27th 2025 (too intimate for documentation, written after class).

I'd like to think that starting from personal experience can offer a different approach for learning a language. An approach in which Dutch – or any other language – is not seen as the most important thing to learn, but functions as a tool for learning new words and phrases, and for expressing a feeling or experience within a larger whole. And *when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess.* Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. [...] It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking *confessional narratives* to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. But most professors must *practice being vulnerable* in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit.”³⁷

37 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge (1994): p.21

In the past five years that I've been working as a volunteer, I have kept the notes from the 'whiteboard', resulting in a growing archive that provides insight into the topics that are discussed during our meetings. →

HET SUIK

BVIK

MISSEN

OP FINDER HALVE

ER FEEST A

OP SLOT

Looking back at these examples of interaction with ‘De Dames’, I view our space as a very clear example of a ‘Feminist Classroom’. In some situations, when discussing certain topics, the fact that it is a ‘women-only’ group can certainly contribute to this, but I don’t think that’s the only reason.

Considering that Dynamo is a place where both I as a ‘teacher’ and the women as participants share aspects of our lived experiences from time to time, I find myself wondering which elements of this context I can translate into my work at an institution such as the HKU? And how could HKU learn and grow from this?

When I returned to my classes at HKU after being absent for a while, I decided not to share everything with my students. It felt too **private and vulnerable** and I worried that some of them might be too young to understand.³⁸

I decided to ‘*hold the elephant in the room*’³⁹ — and shared that I had a lot on my plate privately. I told them I was back, but not fully present yet, and that that’s also part of life. I also addressed that some of them might have seen me sharing professional successes on social media. These were all true successes, but co-existed with me **feeling terrible**. I think it’s important for my students to know that both things can be true at the same time.

38 I find it important to emphasize that I do not mean this in a condescending way. I learn from my students every day. But I do think that the fact that we are in different phases of our lives sometimes plays a role in how we understand each other.

39 In the paper ‘*Caring about the elephants in feminist classrooms*’ different approaches to addressing the so called ‘elephant in the room’ are explored. The writers argue that “*the affective presence of elephants calls for feminist pedagogical approaches that can navigate and orchestrate the accompanying affective energies and intensities. [...] The question is not whether we experience intensities and discomfort, but how ‘to acknowledge and work with the affective reaction and then elaborate from there.*”.: Mante Vertelyte, Meretege Riggelsen Gjording, Iram Khawaja, Mie Plotnikof, Dorte Staunes and Jette Sandager, ‘*Caring about the elephants in feminist classrooms*’, Tijdschrift voor genderstudies 27.2/3, 2024: p.267

After the class, four female students lingered in the classroom. They came over to me and “*just wanted to say*” that they thought my vulnerability was “*so brave*”, that they appreciated the fact that, despite everything, I decided to “*show up*”— and that they sometimes missed this “*feminine energy*” in their studies.³⁹ Their reaction really touched me, and it was only later that I realised this might actually be a very good example of me, as a teacher, taking ‘the first risk.’⁴¹

40 In this paragraph I paraphrase from a conversation I had with four female students at HKU, December 2025.

41 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge (1994): p.21



B

HET KO

U ROUV

BELOVEN

ONT NIET

TE VRE DEN

ONTE VRE DE

There is something really special in sharing a space with people that face similar difficulties. *"I think that when you can relate to someone, their otherness begins to dissolve because you have something in common."*⁴² When it comes to the women of Dynamo, this 'women-only space' was created out of practical reasons: the organisation noticed that a lot of women couldn't attend the other Dutch classes because they were scheduled on times when they had to care for their children or other family members, so the class was rescheduled to nine in the morning. Once in practice, it became apparent that most of them felt very comfortable learning around other women.

In *'Safe spaces': experiences of feminist women-only space* a clear distinction is made between being 'safe from' and being 'safe to'. The use of the term 'safe space' has increased in recent years at institutions such as HKU. But sometimes I wonder: Do we actually know what we mean by that term when we use it? Unfortunately, the world is not a safe space, but hopefully, a classroom is a place where people feel *safe to engage in dialogue, to debate, challenge, learn; safe to express, to emote; safe to develop one's consciousness, to demonstrate one's creative talent, to fulfill one's potential*. And if you feel safe enough to experience all these things, surely this will help prepare students for the 'unsafe' world outside of our classrooms.⁴³

42 Billie Zangewa, *'Transformation as a common theme, Billie Zangewa interviewed'*, 12.10.2020, Rebecca Rose Cuomo, BOMB Magazine.

43 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Ruth Lewis, Elizabeth A Sharp, Jenni Remnant and Rhiannon Redpath, *'Safe spaces': experiences of feminist women-only space*, (2015): p.6



I always feel very safe and very much myself in ‘women-only’ spaces, but they can also make others feel excluded. I think it would be relevant to investigate this further in the future, because at HKU I teach classes with more diverse gender identities. I see it as my responsibility as a teacher to ensure that all my students **feel welcome, heard and seen** in my classroom. But how do we include women who are not cisgender within a ‘women-only’ group? *“Feminist theory (especially trans-inclusive and intersectional feminism) reminds us that “woman” is not only biological or anatomical. Someone may not share experiences like menstruation or pregnancy but still share things like vulnerability to misogyny, identification with femininity and experiences of exclusion. So the feeling of being left out is also real.”*⁴⁴

⁴⁴ My buddy Lisa Peake in one of her e-mails to me, 22.02.2026.

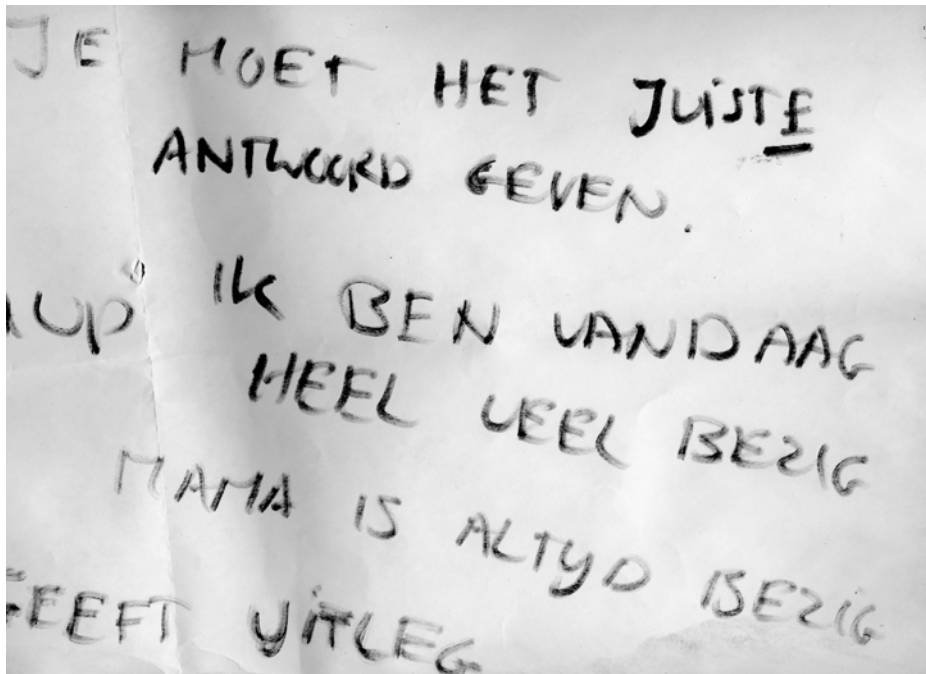




For me, a ‘women-only’ space does not mean that non-binary or transgender people would be unwelcome. On the contrary. Whenever I use the word ‘woman’, I like to think of the definition as Céline Semaan uses it in her beautifully titled book *‘A Woman is a School’*: “*To be a human who identifies as a woman regardless of the nation-states’ definition of femininity and without limitation of gender norms imposed and established under patriarchal colonial rule.*”⁴⁵

However, in the context of my voluntary work, I don’t think I can ignore the fact that this might also give rise to cultural differences. Despite these possible differences, it is my personal experience that there is a **very strong willingness** among the women at Dynamo to understand and respect each other and others.

I’d like to think of Dynamo as a place where from time to time, ‘borders’ are bridged and “*our consciousness is broadened.*”⁴⁶ And perhaps precisely because it’s a ‘women-only’ space. But I’m also aware that this is **too big a question** to be answered within the scope of this thesis alone. So, I don’t have an answer yet, but I do think it is an important question to ‘hold’ and address within the process.



46 In this paragraph I loosely refer to: Joke J. Hermesen, 'Het tij keren' (Turning the tide), Prometheus (2019) p.74-75.

In this book, she explores to what extent the insights of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt can still be of assistance in the transition to a sustainable, humane and inclusive society. She also describes how she was once a member of a neighborhood council, where she worked alongside twenty local residents from diverse cultural backgrounds to promote social cohesion in the neighborhood. *"These were particularly educational and inspiring meetings which, quite apart from the projects we developed, succeeded in achieving their objective simply by virtue of being a multicultural neighborhood council. During the discussions we held, we got to know each other's stories, viewpoints, concerns and backgrounds, on the basis of which we developed various initiatives in the neighborhood. We crossed multiple borders of a national, religious and cultural nature, thereby putting into practice not only the plurality advocated by Hannah Arendt – which she saw as the cornerstone of democracy – but also our ability to think 'with a broadened consciousness'."*

Original quote: *"Het waren bijzonder leerzame en inspirerende bijeenkomsten, die, afgezien van de projecten die we ontwikkelden, als multiculturele wijkraad op zich al in hun doelstelling slaagden. Tijdens de gesprekken die we voerden leerden we elkaars verhalen, standpunten, zorgen en achtergronden kennen, op grond waarvan we diverse initiatieven in de buurt ontwikkelden. We staken meerdere grenzen over van nationale, religieuze en culturele aard en brachten aldus niet alleen de door Hannah Arendt bepleite pluraliteit, die zij als de pijler in de democratie zag, in de praktijk, maar ook ons vermogen om te denken 'met een verbreed bewustzijn'."*

THE TABLE SETTER



SETTING THE TABLE

To further integrate my various roles, I came up with a profession that encompasses them all:

The Table Setter.

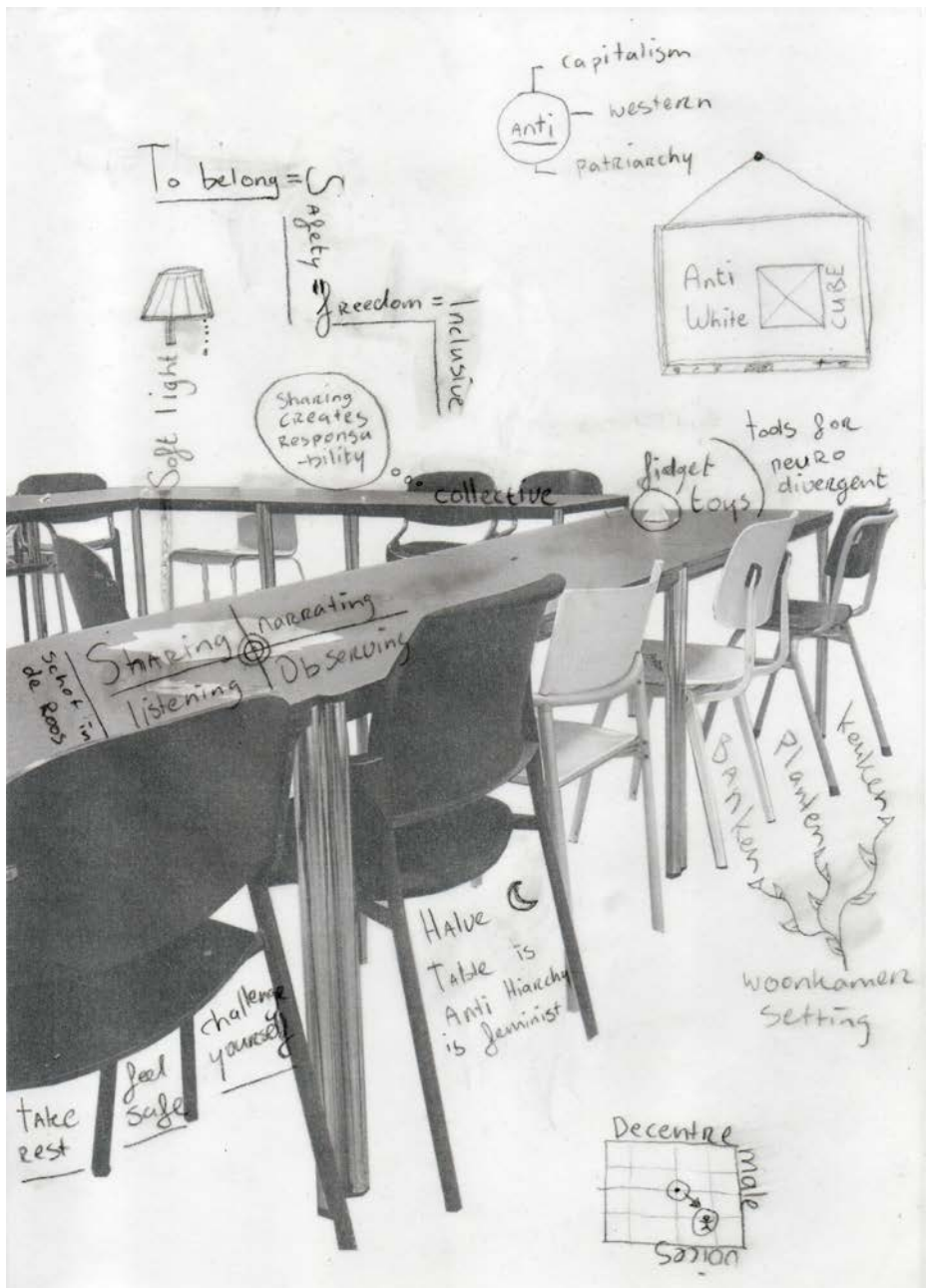
Whatever aspect of me is being addressed, I always want to create an environment that is **inviting**, but I don't want to control how people 'eat', react, behave. As the one 'setting the table', I do however have a certain kind of power, and I see it as my responsibility to use this **power** wisely.

For example, my own living room table has played an important role in my (visual) research. This small, round, second-hand table represents **empowerment**. It was the first thing I changed in my home when a previous relationship ended. Although 'the table' started as a symbol, it has become an important part of my research. It's where my teaching takes place and it has functioned as a tool for me to 'map' my thoughts and process.

Looking for a way back into my research last fall, **I ended up at the table** again. Because I wanted to keep writing from my own experience, **my living room table** seemed like a natural place to start. I've always preferred round tables because at a round table there is no hierarchy. Revisiting the work of photographer Jacqueline Hassink⁴⁷ I realised that, through my teaching, I want to create 'tables of empowerment'.

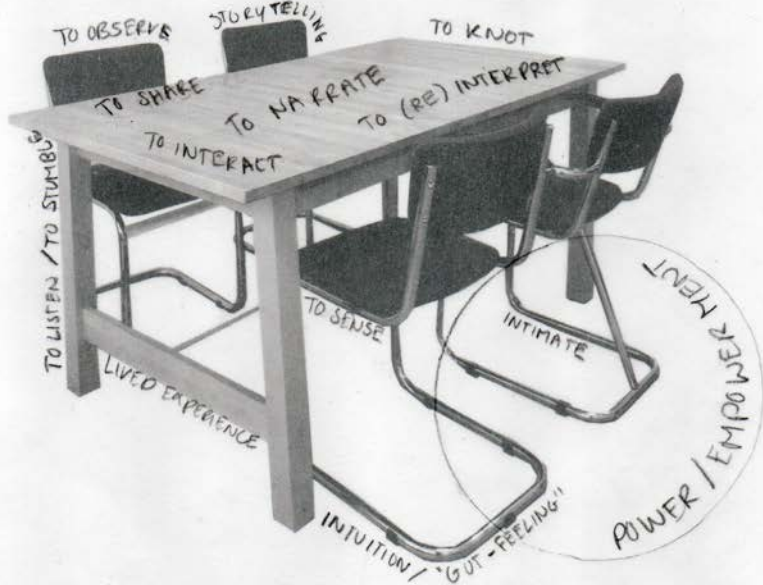
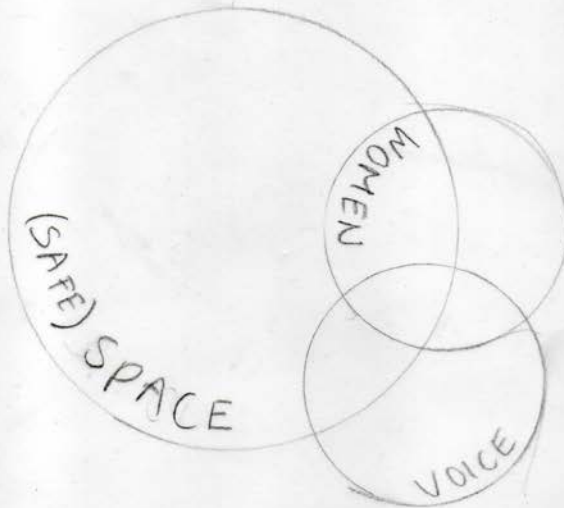
⁴⁷ In this paragraph I refer to: Jacqueline Hassink, *The Power Book*, published by Chris Boot (2007), which also includes the series *The Table of Power* (1996)

← Throughout my research, I used the table multiple times 'to map' my thoughts and process.→



Map made by Ariël Peper (HKU student), including elements that are most important to her in a classroom, spring 2025.

THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM



How would you define feminism?

Does feminism play a role in your life?

Does feminism play a role in your teaching?
And if so, how?

What kind of classroom do you think
of when I talk about "The Feminist
classroom"?

What would it look like?

What are the ingredients?
according to you?

What would you consider a
feminist (teaching) practice?

What does it mean to have a
feminist (teaching) practice?

If you could change something about
the classroom, what would it be?

If you could change something about the world, what

Can you recall
you felt em-
education

Can you recall / share
within your teaching / education
that you consider feminist
practices?

? And if so, how?

ing /classroom / education?

all I share a moment when
empowered within an
heral setting?

all I share a moment
education would it be?

What do you need to feel empowered?



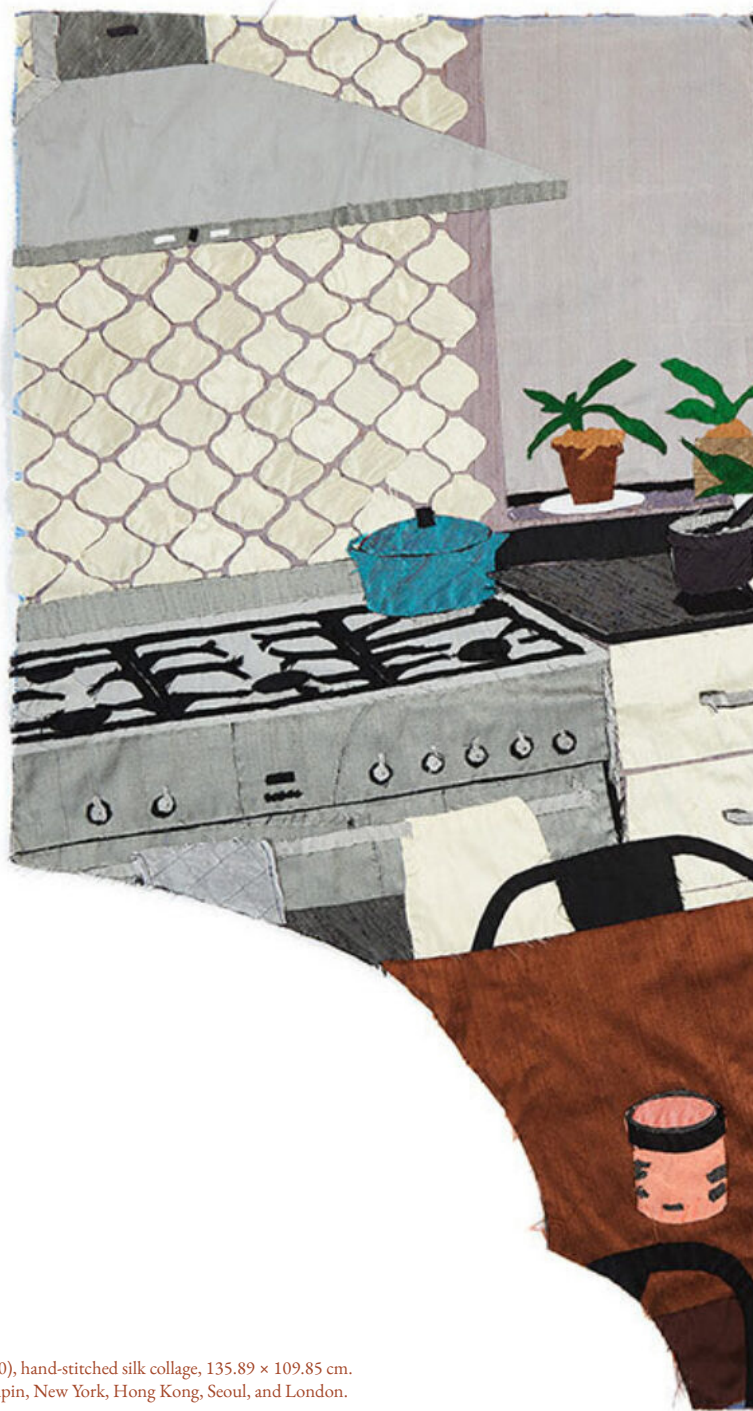
Visiting ‘Good Mom / Bad Mom’ at Centraal Museum Utrecht (NL)⁴⁸ also made me become more interested in the kitchen table as a woman’s (artistic) workplace. The exhibition was about motherhood in all its different forms, about **caring**, **politics of the womb** and **emancipation**. One of the works that really stuck with me is the textile piece ‘**Mother and child**’ (2015) by artist Billie Zangewa. “House-work, childcare but also processing textiles has long been considered **a woman’s work** by society. It is labour that is **often invisible**, undervalued and underpaid and, moreover, has often been done by women of colour. In her silk collages, Billie Zangewa puts Black motherhood at the centre. She highlights ‘everyday feminism’: a woman enabled to take care of her own children at home, rather than other people’s children. ‘**Mother and child**’ shows a calm **domestic** situation in which care for the child and artistic practice (in the form of the many rolls of yarn on the table) are allowed to co-exist.”⁴⁹

In an interview with BOMB Magazine, Zangewa elaborates on the ‘missing pieces’ in her work: “The **missing pieces** were initially an accident, but I took the opportunity to express my position that we are all **flawed** and that instead of being ashamed of our flaws, we claim them as part of who we are. They represent the idea of perfection in **the imperfect** and also the childhood traumas we’ve all experienced that have shaped us. Really what I’m saying is: Let’s **be gentle** with ourselves.”⁵⁰

48 “Supermama. Regretful parent. Raven mother. Single mom. Consciously non-mother. Wishing mother. Bonus mom. Adoptive mother. Co-mother. Never mother. There are countless variants of motherhood. Good Mom/Bad Mom is an exhibition about motherhood, about caring, about the politics of the womb, about emancipation.” Centraal Museum Utrecht, ‘Good Mom/Bad Mom’, 29.03. - 14.09.2025, curated by Laurie Cluitmans & Heske ten Cate.

49 Laurie Cluitmans and Heske ten Cate, ‘Mothering Myths: An ABC of Art, Birth and Care’, Valiz, (2025): p.89
50 Billie Zangewa, ‘Transformation as a common theme’, Billie Zangewa interviewed, 12.10.2020, Rebecca Rose Cuomo, BOMB Magazine.





Billie Zangewa, *'Heart of the Home'*, (2020), hand-stitched silk collage, 135.89 × 109.85 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.



I really appreciate that she allows for these 'accidents' and has the courage to be transparent about them, regardless of whether others might see them as 'unfinished'. I also see a connection between this way of working and the way in which I myself try to weave together the various elements of my research, in which some parts stand out clearly, whilst others are still missing — or stay left out.

Her work also made me think about the need to reclaim the table as a place where, in addition to cooking and eating, work, action and dreams can emerge. The table also plays an important role in the context of my volunteer work at Dynamo. It's where we learn and talk, drink tea, share stories and occasionally dance around. In a way, I see these tables as the silent witnesses to my practice.

That is why I came up with the idea of making a tablecloth that could travel with me to the various places I teach and where my research takes place.⁵¹

Working with textiles was new to me, but as I was looking for a more embodied way of making and for something I could easily do in collaboration with others, this intuitively felt like the right medium. I wanted to work with others because however personal, this story is not just mine, and neither is the tablecloth.

By approaching it in this way, the tablecloth also served as a collective 'notebook' to which all the different participants were invited to contribute. In providing fabric, making stains, writing on it, or leaving their mark in any way they like.

By using only pieces of fabric donated by the participants, this cloth could also give space to other ways of telling a story in addition to providing textual documentation. If there's *one thing the written word can never do is to physically touch*.⁵² *Cloth holds the sometimes unbearable gift of memory. And its memory is exacting: It does not forget even the benign scars of an accident: red wine on a table cloth, water on a silk blouse, dark patches beneath arms on a humid summer day.*⁵³ In the tablecloth, these stories are told through patches made of worn out T-shirt's, a scarf that used to belong to a mother, and children's clothes they've grown out of. Through buttons, scribbles and written words.



51 This idea was partly inspired by our collective tablecloth in MEiA year 1 (as a result of 'CIADE', taught by Irina Shapiro, 2024-2025), *The atlas of collective joys and sorrows*' (2026) by artist Emilia Martin and Jesse van Oosten's thesis, *Learning in the space between words*' (2023).

52 Victoria Mitchell, 'Textiles, Text and Techne', (1997), The Textile Reader edited by Jessica Hemmings, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, second edition (2023): p.4

53 Jenni Sorkin, 'STAIN: *On Cloth, Stigma and Shame*', *The Textile Reader* edited by Jessica Hemmings, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, second edition (2023): p.54

Like Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag', I imagined it functioning as a tool that would 'bring energy home' and in which no 'Hero' takes part. *"If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again — if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time."*⁵⁴

54 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ignota (2019), first published in *Women of Vision* (1988): p. 30-32.

I also refer to the term 'Hero' as used on p.35 of Le Guin's essay; *"Finally, it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag an he looks like a rabbit, like a potato. That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them."*

55 Annelies Kleinherenbrink, et al., *The feminist classroom: Pedagogies, contestations and horizons*, Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 27.2/3 (2024): p.95

It made sense to try this experiment in different contexts because I increasingly wondered:

What actually makes a feminist classroom? *Is it a classroom in which feminist topics or authors are discussed? Or one in which a specific feminist approach to teaching and learning is practiced? How do teachers and students create and maintain the university classroom as a feminist space?*³⁵

In consultation with Dynamo, I decided that throughout my research, I will work on this tablecloth with anyone who wants to join me after the regular Dutch lessons. It is important to maintain these ‘regular’ lessons, because they offer stability for many people. The teaching method we use for this is something they can bring home and easily fall back on.

During my process so far, I had conversations with several people, in the women’s group that I’m teaching but also in smaller settings with colleagues, family members, friends and peers. Some sessions were more intimate than others and some I recorded in order to write about, while others remained stitched on or into the table cloth.

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As soon as we started working with our hands, a different way of learning (or a different kind of knowledge?) became apparent in the Dutch class. As we began sewing, the **stories** came. A story about how one of the women already had a lot of experience with embroidery and really enjoyed it, but now has little time for it because she has a young child to take care of. Another **story** was that of a woman who used to teach how to make Persian carpets for wall decoration.

There were many stories about handicrafts in different cultures. But also about how one of the women was pregnant again after experiencing a miscarriage last year — and how that worried her sometimes. Another story was about a difficult and **frightening birth** and how, *as a woman, you never forget something like that.*⁵⁶

There was a story about the situation in Iran and how difficult it is when you have limited contact with family and friends. About what it is like to be a mother caring for a child with autism. How strong you have to be to do that. How much we admire you for it. About how you have to adapt when you move to another country or culture, show respect, but also how important it is to be able to make **your own choices as a woman**. They spoke in Dutch without hesitation, shared their **stories and opinions**, without thinking too much about finding ‘the right words’.

“When I work with my hands, I don't think, and that's very healthy.”⁵⁷

56 N, during the Dutch class at Dynamo, 27.11.2025, repeated by F & O, during the Dutch class at Dynamo, 05.02.2026, original quote: “Voor mij, is het twintig jaar geleden, maar als vrouw, vergeet je zoiets nooit.”

57 F, during the Dutch class at Dynamo, 05.02.2026, original quote: “Als ik met mijn handen werk dan denk ik niet na en dat is heel gezond.”

On 22 April 2026, I took part in ‘Conversas’ at TENT Rotterdam. A project initiated by MEiA alumna Constança Saraiva, where people come together to get **to know** each other and **share projects**, stories, or interests. Each gathering features three Conversadores (conversation starters), who each share something with the group for 30 minutes. As the name suggests, Conversas (meaning ‘Conversations’ in Portuguese) creates a space where both the Conversadores and the people visiting can engage and benefit from **shared experiences**.⁵⁸ This, too, was **an intimate gathering**: we were a small group, we took our places in **a circle** and **tea** was offered. The main difference from previous sessions in which I worked with the tablecloth, being that, alongside some **familiar faces**, there were also a few ‘strangers’ participating.

I didn’t want to prepare too much beforehand, as I wanted to go in with an **open mind**. But I had decided that I wanted to share a bit about my research so far. I shared my thoughts on how in education, and especially in art education, there are often moments when personal stories come up unexpectedly and how we as teachers are not really taught how to navigate these situations. I talked about how I’m currently searching for ways **to give space** to moments in which vulnerability arises within my teaching practice, and how I think the answer might lie in feminist theories and methods.

Within the **intimate setting** of Conversas, I was curious to know whether there would be anyone there who would like to share their own thoughts on or experiences of vulnerability in an educational setting. I thought it could be nice to explore this topic further, and in the meantime everyone was warmly **invited to contribute** something to the cloth, if they wanted to.

But as I began to explain my process, other questions soon arose, and the conversation took a different turn. We discussed the difference between paid and voluntary work and the extent to which this can affect collaboration on a project. And how this patchwork seems to function as both **a method** for learning a new language and a metaphor for how I want to approach my research and teaching practice.

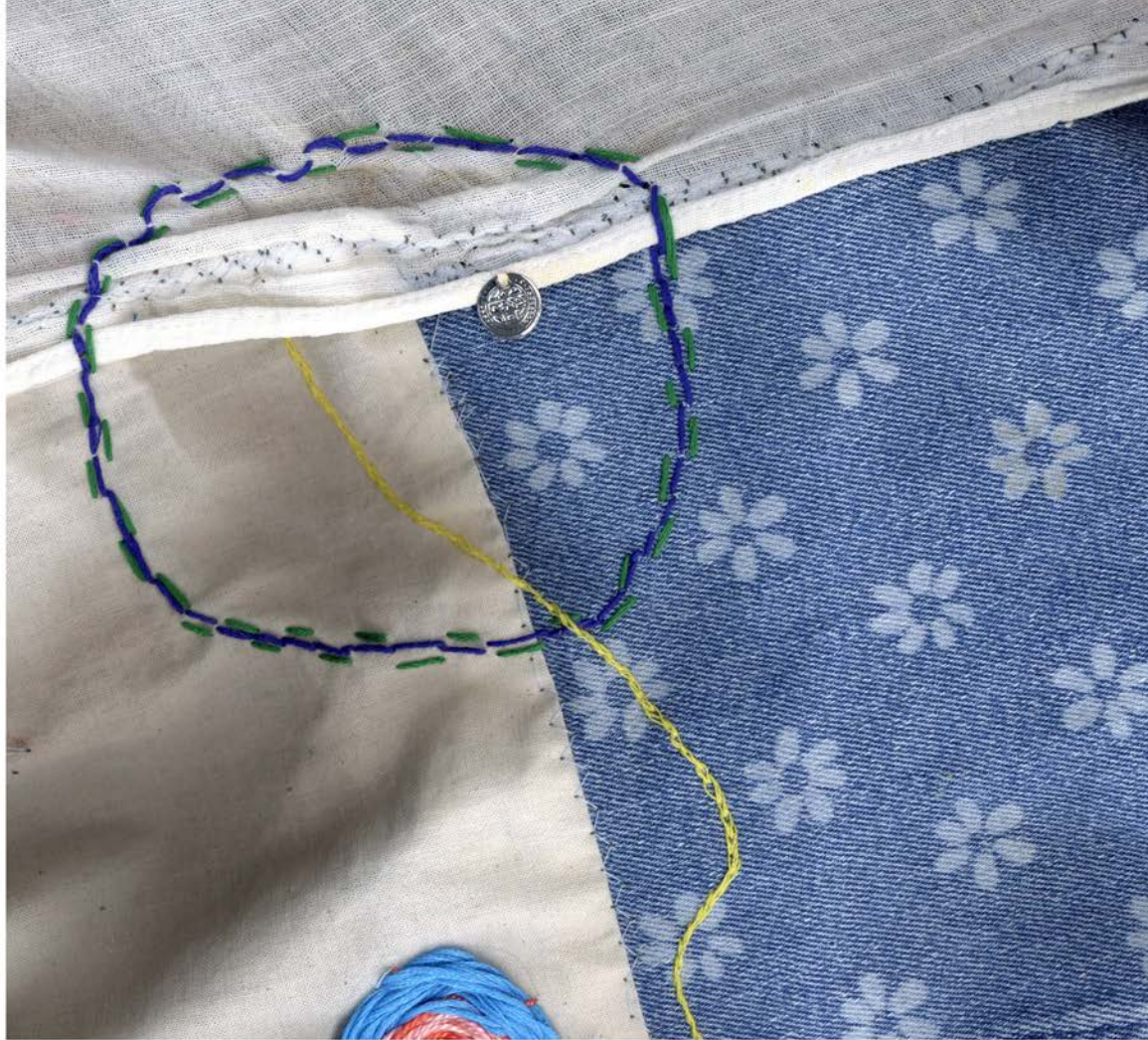
⁵⁸ Conversas, 2026.

⁵⁹ With this comment, the participant referred to: Sarah Corbett, *How to be a Craftivist: The art of gentle protest*, second edition, Unbound (2024).

Three of those present were my lovely classmates, Rita, Mari and Marianna, who set about sewing and drawing on the cloth **without hesitation**. After a while, three others and I myself joined in as well. Four of the roughly fifteen people present were men, and at one point one of the women asked how they viewed my project and the collective tablecloth in particular. One of them spoke very openly and honestly about feeling a sense of **'discomfort'** — he wasn't quite sure how to respond to the situation and was more used to 'working with his head'. But at the same time, he also shared his thoughts on how this might be a 'good activity for men'. I really **admired his honesty**, but at that moment, I was quite surprised by his feeling of 'discomfort'. Another man asked why it was important to work on this with a group of women and what 'feminism' meant to me. The other two shared that they found it lovely and enjoyable, but also wondered to what extent they were 'allowed to take up space' and afraid of 'doing it wrong' and 'ruining the artwork'.

There also seemed to be different understandings of the word 'feminism', which some interpreted as, or used in the same way as, 'feminine', whereas to me these are two different things. You can be feminine and a feminist, but not all feminists consider themselves feminine. One participant also pointed out that this way of working could also be seen as a form of 'craftivism' or **'gentle protest'**.⁵⁹ An interesting idea because I've never really thought of my work in that way before. I don't see myself as an activist. I'm not out there, on the barricades. I simply started working this way because it felt like the right, most suitable approach. But perhaps this means that I could actually consider my way of working as a form of Feminist Action Research?

DAVID ARTHUR





During this conversation, I didn't feel like explaining why it might be important for us, as women, to work on this tablecloth together. I didn't want the conversation to focus on that and I don't always feel like defending or explaining my motives. If you consider yourself a feminist, you're being asked this question all too often. But this can also be a 'weakness' of my research, because the beauty of a place like Conversas is, of course, precisely that it allows for discussions with a diverse group of people. Both men and women, people who work in the art world and with other fields of interest, local residents and people who live further away. I did mention that to me, these 'women-only-moments' are very special — though, as far as I'm concerned, that doesn't mean men aren't welcome to contribute. Even though the conversation took a different turn, it was still a valuable experience because it got me thinking about how I could make working with the tablecloth more **inviting** or **welcoming**. To what extent am I willing **to take responsibility** for this? Although, to me, it's not a requirement that everyone takes part in the stitching or writing on the tablecloth. Observing, feeling and listening can also be a form of participation.

The day after participating in 'Conversas', I saw 'De Dames' at Dynamo again. They asked me if we could **cook and eat together** instead of having a 'regular' lesson. This happens quite often, to celebrate birthdays, the end of Ramadan or Christmas or before a long holiday break. This time, Moroccan couscous was on the menu and the women came in **carrying** bags full of groceries, bowls, pans, other kitchenware and some of them also **carrying** their kids. They immediately took over the (very small) kitchen — in the most delightful way — and worked together like a well-oiled machine. The small electric stove turned out not to be suitable for their cooking, so they had **to improvise**, which meant that it took much longer than planned. But they made it work.

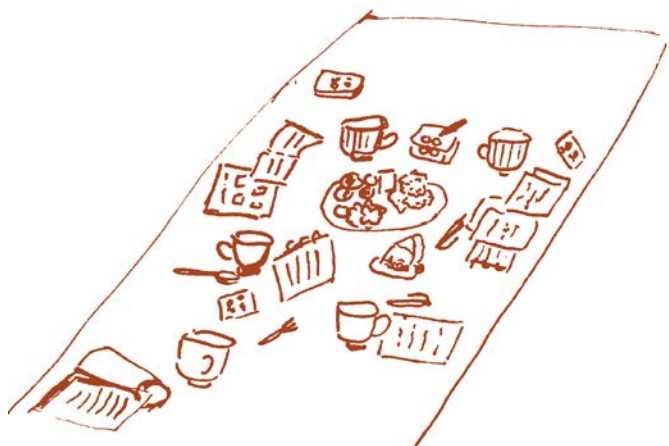
Later on, something special happened: an Australian woman walked in and shared that she would like to take part in creative activities. She explained that she was traveling the world with her partner, that she had just spent three months in Morocco, and that wherever she went she visited community centers because she saw it as ‘the best way’ to get to know a place. During her travels, she makes all sorts of things, mainly working with textiles. But because she can’t take everything with her, she gives most of her creations away. And so a spontaneous exchange arose between her and the women from the Dutch class — over a plate of couscous and a set of crocheted ‘coasters’, one of which I happily stitched to the table cloth.



Based on these encounters, I think you could say that this tablecloth serves as a conversation starter, a form of documentation and archiving, and as a means of encouraging embodied learning. The cloth has been a way to find 'meaning' through making. It has been an intimate process so far, which I enjoy working on very much, despite the sadness sometimes. When I look at this tablecloth I think of hands touching fabric while talking, sharing and laughing.

Because the cloth is still growing and changing in both shape and form, it's only natural to wonder when it might be 'finished'. But I'm starting to think that this tablecloth is something I can continue to carry with me, even after graduation.





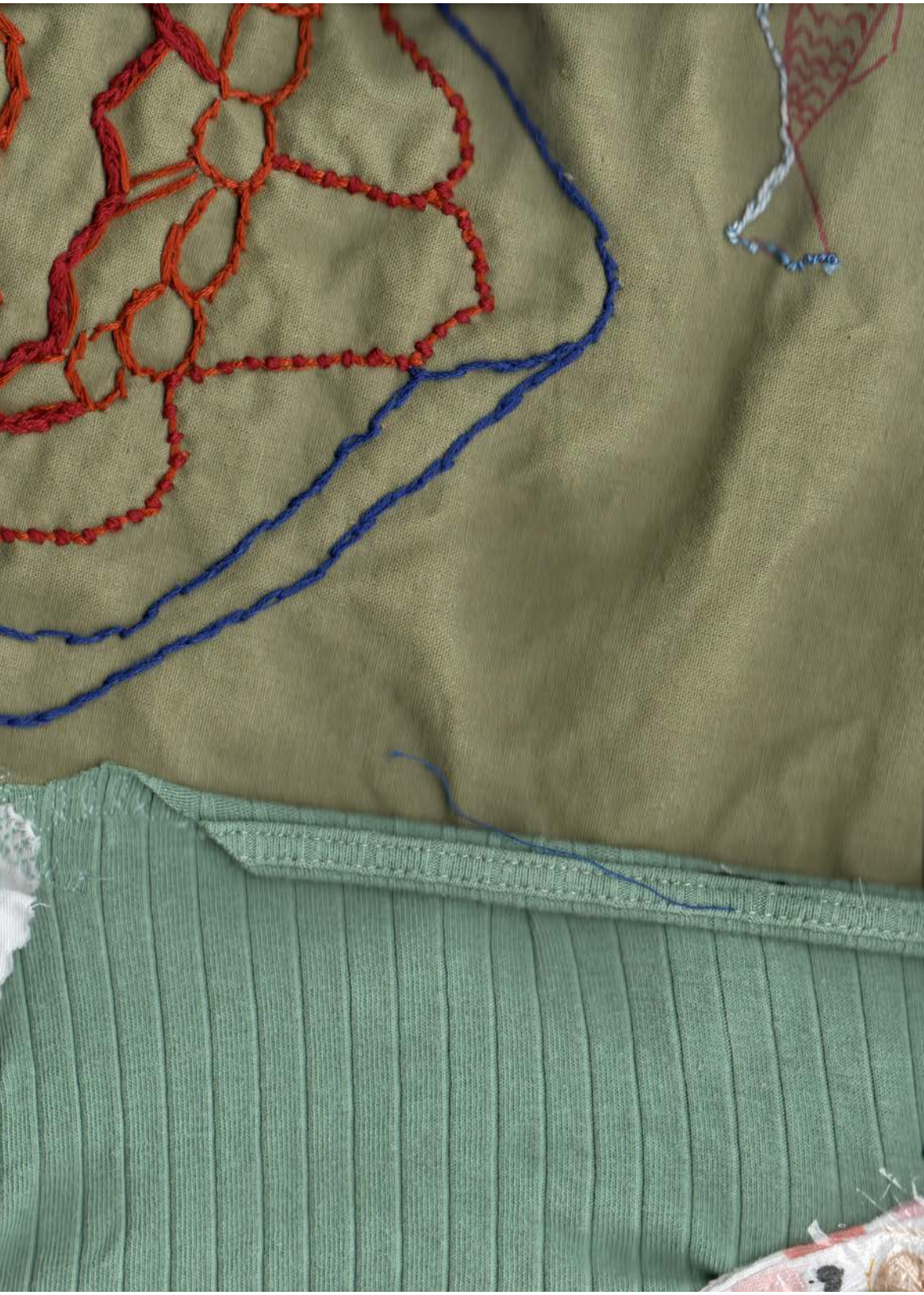
Reflecting on these different experiences at both Conversas and Dynamo, I realised that these moments within this ‘women-only’ group are so precious because I’m allowed **to be there as a ‘whole’**. It’s a place where I never have to be ‘cautious’ and where all of us can be present: those who were born, those who are yet to be born, and those we will carry with us forever. If there’s one place where I feel welcome, and where people are good at making others feel welcome, it’s the women’s group at Dynamo.

I think the visit from the Australian woman – as a **temporary stranger** taking part in **our safe space** – is a very good example of this. She stepped into a situation she was unfamiliar with, with complete openness and curiosity, and was welcomed in the same way.

It makes me wonder to what extent it’s even possible to apply this ‘way of working’ to other contexts. Perhaps the strength lies in trying it anyway, to think of ways ‘to set the table’ that can offer the same sense of intimacy in other groups and settings. Or would this only be possible if certain people are invited and others are not?

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Informal
Friends
Emancipated classroom
A day in a life
To listen attentively
Laughing (a lot)
To give space
Voice(s)
To share
Comfortable enough
(little) room for sadness
To navigate
To confess
Confessional narratives
To practice being vulnerable
Too private
Too vulnerable
Feeling terrible
To linger
To show up
Feminine energy
Similar difficulties
To relate
To dissolve
To care
Learning around other women
Safe from
Safe to
To feel welcome
To be heard
To be seen
To be a human
Regardless (of)

Very strong willingness
Too big a question
To 'hold'
Inviting
Power
Empowerment
I ended up at the table again
My living room table
Tables of empowerment
Politics of the womb
A woman's work
Often invisible
Mother and child
Domestic
Missing pieces
Flawed
The imperfect
Be gentle
Accidents
Courage
To weave
Still missing
Stay left out
To reclaim
Occasionally dance around
Could travel with me
Making stains
To physically touch
Scribbles
I imagined
Take it home
Container for people
Eat it

Share it
Store it up
What is sacred
I am a human
Initimate
Stitchted on or into the table cloth
Story/stories
Frightening birth
Your own choices as a woman
Stories and opinions
To know
Shared experiences
Intimate gathering
A circle
Tea
Familiar faces
An open mind
Intimate setting
Invited to contribute
A method
A methaphor
Without hesitation
Discomfort
Admired his honesty
To take up space
Gentle protest
Inviting
Welcoming
To take responsibility
Cook and eat together
Carrying
To improvise
To find meaning through making

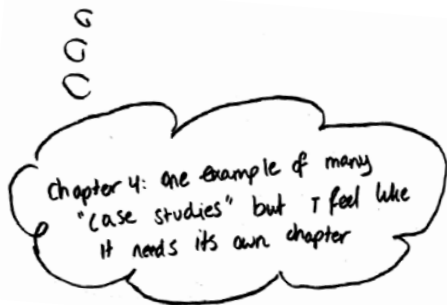
Hands touching fabric
Talking
Growing
Changing
To be there as a 'whole'
Temporary stranger
Our safe space

*Art as an
act of Care*

IV



Art as an act of Care



In recent years, I have felt a growing need to take on a more active role in society, both as a person and as an artist — which was one of my reasons to apply for MEiA. I already meet this need in part through my role as a teacher, but it is also reflected in my work as a volunteer and in the various participatory projects in which I am involved as a visual artist.

During my bachelor studies in Photography at the HKU, I came to realise how much I enjoy working with others. Over the years, this has led to a variety of experiences, both with creators from different disciplines and with people who have little or no contact with art in their daily lives. One of the first times I consciously chose to create work in a social context was in the summer of 2018. Shortly after graduating, I took part in the second edition of 'Het Vijfde Seizoen's' (The Fifth Season) 'summer school'.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, this place doesn't exist anymore, but it used to be an artist residency programme in a mental health institution in Den Dolder in which professional artists created work in and around the context of psychiatry. The summer school offered young and emerging artists the opportunity to gain a similar experience as the artists in residence in a short period of time. Under the guidance of artists Marieke Zwart and Dirk van Lieshout, we explored the fields of psychiatry, language and art and worked towards an exhibition.

This **experience** has had a positive effect on my role as a teacher because it has broadened my **perspective** and consciousness.⁶¹ It is my personal opinion that it is our task as human beings, but also as artists, designers and creators, to not only operate from our own individual perspective, but **to pay attention** to the people and themes in our society that may not always receive the attention they need or deserve. Or, as Ellen Dissanayake beautifully puts it:

*“Art plays a necessary role in directing our **attention** towards things that are important or should be considered important.”⁶²*

When I first started MEiA, I was still finishing my teacher training trajectory (BDB-B), for which I was asked to create an educational design for something that I felt was missing in my practice at HKU. Although I feel very much at home in the photography department, photography can be quite a solitary medium — and I think it would be valuable to introduce students to different ways of working from time to time.

Because of HKU's existing connections with various healthcare institutions, as well as my own experiences and interests, I chose to focus on the healthcare sector within the field of social art practice. I designed a seminar in which students would be introduced to such a practice in an accessible way. Although this design was supposed to be 'hypothetical', I always regretted not being able **to put it into practice**.

I was therefore very pleased that, more than a year and a half after completing the BDB-B programme, I was able to run a pilot of this seminar in collaboration with my colleague Anne Leijdekkers at the beginning of 2026. As many people who teach within a large organisation might recognise, it took a great deal of organisational effort to finally **make this happen**. Even though there are already things I would do differently next time, I could not have anticipated how closely it would align with my research when I first designed it.

60 'Het Vijfde Seizoen', summer school, 2018

61 The term 'broadened consciousness' loosely refers back to the text by Joke J. Hermesen I cited earlier on: Joke J. Hermesen, 'Het tij keren' (*Turning the tide*), Prometheus (2019) p.74-75.

62 Ellen Dissanayake, as referred to in: Dora Vrhoci, Florian Weigl, 'Art and Care: Reflections on the To Mind Is To Care Exhibition', V2, Lab for the Unstable Media, (2021): p.7

The seminar period at HKU is traditionally intended to offer short courses in which first and second year students from different disciplines can meet each other. Based on a brief description, students can pick a seminar of their choice. There are seminars that focus on a specific technique, a particular place, collaboration, or, as in our case, a specific theme. The group Anne and I worked with consisted of students from a variety of disciplines.

As a teacher, I'm connected to the Photography and Image & Media Technology departments. My colleague Anne teaches in the Film programme, and has a background in theatre and her own practice as a visual artist. Both of us like to explore the boundaries of the media we work with and try to incorporate this into the courses we teach. For us, this seminar has been an opportunity in which we could try out new things without having to relate to a certain curriculum or learning trajectory.

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Art as an Act of Care:

In this seminar, students are introduced to social art practice in healthcare in an accessible way. The first week will focus on 'Informing & Inspiring'. Through 'mini-lectures' given by guest lecturers from both the healthcare sector and the arts, as well as excursions to various healthcare and arts institutions, students will gain an insight into the field, its possibilities and its pitfalls. Week two will focus on 'Working Together & Creating'. Inspired by the material and examples covered in week one, students will work towards a presentation.

Questions that will be addressed:

- What is social art practice and what are its boundaries?*
- What is the purpose of social art practice?*
- What skills do you need to sustain a social art practice?⁶³*

63 Description of the seminar as it appeared to students in the registration tool.



White board with texts and drawings by the students of the seminar 'Art as an Act of Care', january 2026.

We kicked off the seminar with a visit to Stedelijk Museum Schiedam where the exhibition ‘The roundness of loss’, curated by Hanne Hagedaars was on view. Inspired by her acclaimed book *‘Missen als een ronde vorm’* (The roundness of loss, 2023), the museum presented a selection of works by artists exploring themes of **loss and endurance**, but also of **resilience and vitality**.

“In her book, Hanne Hagedaars discusses how various artworks can help ensure that you do not completely lose someone and how you can keep them — or yourself — alive. While writing the book, she discovered that the absence of a loved one can be easier to bear when you feel connected to a larger whole, when you believe in more than ‘nothing’ — whether in life after death, a soul, a God, or a societal ideal worth fighting for.”⁶⁴

Lisa Diederiks, who is part of the museum’s educational team, gave us a short introduction to the exhibition and emphasised how, as an institution, they consider it particularly important to connect an exhibition to the neighborhood. Diederiks shared how it has proven difficult to initiate projects with schools for this exhibition because teachers often find it challenging or feel hesitant to discuss the topic of loss in the classroom. In the ‘Stadsgalerij’, a space dedicated to projects from or with Schiedammers, nine residents talk about their losses — *“because everyone knows what it’s like to miss something or someone.”⁶⁵*

I think this was a great start to the seminar because it showed the students, with their different backgrounds and experiences, that you don’t have to be a professional artist (yet) to create something that **carries meaning**.

When I came across Hagedaars’ book a few years ago, I already thought it was wonderful, but now that I am going through a grieving process myself, this exhibition touched me on a different, deeper level. **It hit me in my gut**. Both the book and the exhibition feature a wide range of works by both well-known and lesser-known artists, including pieces created by Hanne Hagedaars herself: a self-sewn trouser suit, a shiny yellow dress, a sporty white jumper. All in miniature and made exactly as Hagedaars remembers her mother’s clothes. *“I wanted to create a ritual for my mother. These little clothes became that ritual. I realised afterwards that this ritual brought me closer to her. I wanted to show with these clothes that anyone can make something for someone else, invest time in that person. It doesn’t have to be beautiful. You don’t need to have any training. I’m not an artist. But the time you spend making it is, in essence, time spent with the person for whom you’re making it.”⁶⁶*

64 Stedelijk Museum Schiedam 2026.

65 Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, 2026.

66 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: Lucette ter Borg, *Hoe kunnen we liefde voelen — en verbeelden?*, An interview with Hanne Hagedaars, NRC, 16.08.2023

I was especially moved by a small embroidered piece, dedicated to her daughter, who only lived for one day.⁶⁷ I don't think it happens very often that the curator of an exhibition also adds their own work, but in this case I find it very fitting, because within this sensitive subject matter, she also dares to be vulnerable herself. I admire that.



⁶⁷ Hanne Hagenars, *'Voor Martha'*, (2021).

The short video work *'Tela Bordada São Paulo'* by Teresa Margolles has also stayed with me. In 2019, Teresa Margolles received an invitation to take part in the São Paulo Biennial. For her contribution, she decided to draw attention to the numerous murders of transgender women in Brazil. In 2018 alone, 125 transgender people were killed as a result of violence — one of them was Priscilla. Margolles brought Priscilla's friends and the transgender community together and launched an embroidery project as a tribute to the murdered woman. Together, they dragged white sheets across the crime scene, in order to 'soak up' the mud and any traces of the bloody murder. The participants then drew figures on the sheets and embroidered the images with thread. Whilst drawing and embroidering, they reminisced about Priscilla and shared their own experiences as transgender people.⁶⁸

*"The feminist art historian Janis Jeffries penned the now famous phrase: "To craft is to care." And this single piece of embroidery 'cares' for Priscilla and her fellow sufferers. Embroidering together is a healing activity, for comfort is drawn from the conversation that arises during this ritual and from the bond that is formed. The time they spend embroidering is a gift for the deceased; this little bit of time is for her. The cloth, filled with evocative motifs, commemorates Priscilla and her fellow sufferers, emphasising life itself and the beauty of every life."*⁶⁹

It is only now, months later, that I realise how much my approach to working on the tablecloth has been inspired by Teresa Margolles. Of course, the tablecloth I'm working on differs from this project — there are no traces of blood. But I believe that remnants of shared stories and conversations, of the meals we've had, of laughter and tears are still present in the fabric. And just like Teresa Margolles, I'd like to think that working together on this tablecloth is a form of care, in which we choose to spend time together, and a bond is formed as we sew.

68 In this paragraph I refer to and cite from: *'Missen als een ronde vorm, De kunst van het doorleven'*, hand-out accompanying the exhibition, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, (2026).

69 Hanne Hagenaars, *'Geweld is een taal. To craft is to care'*, 09.06.2022, Mister Motley.

BELANG VAN

DE PLEK



zwaar hart...
"zweepelagen" in mijn buik/
veerkracht

Feminism / Activism

—
storytelling

Sarah

"CARE IS NOT A
ONE-WAY STREET
→ A BLANKET OF
MANY THREADS"

playing games together

CO-EXIST

The art of
noticing The
little Case

Martha

"FRICTION IS
NEEDED IF YOU
WANT TO BREAK
TABOOS"



2. kies een werk dat het
meest met zorg te maken
heeft.

Jeugd

mixeerd

keisbaar

veel

eigen

BOOSHEID

verlies
verwerking

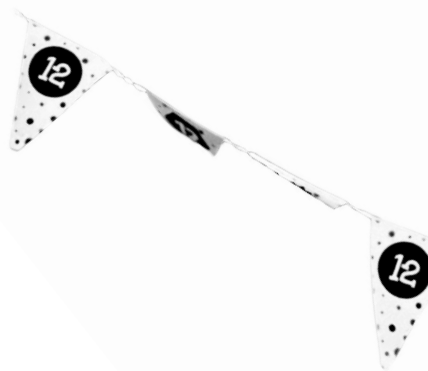
Making is
Caring

Fien

The second day of the seminar took place at HKU, where we were assigned a classroom that we could use for the rest of the seminar period. Unfortunately, many of these rooms are dull and uninviting. I often feel like they don't provide the appropriate resources or setting for teaching my classes, and that I need to make adjustments to the space in order to create the right 'table setting' for my lessons.

Since most of the students did not know each other yet and we thought it was important to build a sense of community in a short period of time, we first asked the students **to take care** of the space together. We asked them to think about what the space needed in order for it to feel like 'theirs' and gave them time to make adjustments. If needed, they were allowed to purchase items from the second-hand shop for a maximum of five euros per person.

Within twenty minutes they completely transformed the space. Flowers were placed on the table and garlands hung from the ceiling. A few students took a photo together, which they placed in a second-hand frame on the windowsill. The white walls were covered with posters and the collective notes we had written so far. Afterwards, we had a potluck lunch together, during which we spoke about **sharing food** and if this could also be considered a form of care or a form of teaching. One of the students pointed out they experienced **teaching as a form of care**.





In organising the seminar, one of the biggest challenges was that there was a lack of available funding, while we really wanted to invite guest speakers. Considering payment as a form of care, we decided to be completely open about this in our conversations with the people we invited. We asked them how we could make their talks as convenient as possible for them and whether there was any other way we could give something back. In the end, we used the small budget we had left for ‘materials’ to buy book vouchers as a thank-you gift for our guests.

I found it remarkable that, despite our lack of budget, almost everyone we approached agreed to talk to the students, simply because they thought it was important to discuss the topic of ‘care’. Not wanting to take up too much of their time, we decided on hosting online talks only. Despite the fact that these conversations took place through a screen, they were all very **intimate** and open. Looking back, I think it was mainly because all of the guests chose to be vulnerable right from the start — without becoming **too fragile** or **too private**. As bell hooks argues, the lecturers taking these ‘risks’ meant that the students felt invited to be equally vulnerable.





On this first day in our classroom we also had our first guest speaker, artist Marieke Zwart. Marieke was one of my teachers during the summer school in 2018 and has remained an **inspiration and friend** ever since. She has a practice as a visual artist and works as a teacher at the 'Royal Academy of the Arts' (KABK) in The Hague and the preparatory course at the 'Gerrit Rietveld Academy' in Amsterdam.

Over the years, she has worked on various projects in which care has been a recurring theme. Her most recent project *'She saw, I saw'* (2025) takes place in the Bijlmermeer, a neighborhood in Amsterdam where she also lives, focuses on maternity care and obstetrics provided at home. From 2023 to 2025, Marieke accompanied two professionals on their home visits, where she recorded **intimate acts of care** in small rooms using her pencil and her camera. Which she later translated into large drawings and collages in her studio.

This type of care is considered Dutch cultural heritage,⁷⁰ yet this type of birth care is under pressure due to budget cuts and staff shortages. The project shows how indispensable the work of these two care professionals in Amsterdam Zuidoost is.

Marieke openly spoke about her doubts as an artist and how the creative process, to a certain extent, will always remain a search. What is the added value of an artist who wants to create work about care? Has she ever considered becoming a healthcare worker instead? How does the process unfold, from observing the moments she wants to capture to developing these observations to drawings and paintings in her studio?

70 Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland, 2026.

71 N.K.G. Publications, 2026.

72 Marieke Zwart in her artist talk during the seminar *'Art as an Act of Care'*, 21.01.2026.

Within the publication of the project, Marieke deliberately gives full access to her process of working and drawing: all drawings, sketches, documentation material and photographs she's made over the past two years are available to the reader. In doing so, she exposes what otherwise would have stayed hidden.⁷¹ In this respect, I think her approach is similar to that of other feminist writers and artists I have mentioned so far. It's a way of working that appeals to me. All these different elements (or patches?) might feel fragmented at first, but actually paint (or weave?) a more complete picture.

As a first exercise of the seminar, we asked the students to think of a space or area in Utrecht where care takes place, asked them to initiate an interaction with someone they don't know and translate this experience into a medium of their choice for the next class.

To conclude our conversation, I asked Marieke if she had any advice for the students before starting this assignment — and she told the students to be honest: “*check if you feel it and keep it real.*”⁷²

Because care is not a theme or subject that you can fake.





Marieke Zwart, *Joyce Aboagye working with baby*, (2024).

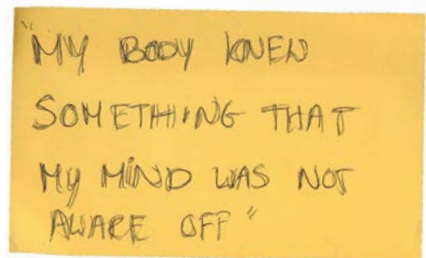
Charcoal, Pastel, Acrylic paint, tracing paper on Montval 300 grms, 168 x 105 cm.



Our second guest speaker was visual artist and filmmaker Peter Pflügler, and he too managed to create an intimate atmosphere. He spoke openly about the process behind his project *"Now is not the right time"*, in which he explores the impact that carrying a 'secret' can have on a family.

"When I was two years old, my father went into the woods, with the intention of never coming back." The suicide attempt of Peter's father was concealed from him for twenty years, yet he had always somehow know.⁷³ An open discussion ensued with the students about creating work that stems from personal experiences. How do you give shape to such a process and how do you ensure it doesn't become too private? According to Peter, it's important to keep in mind that *"everything that's personal is also universal"* — and therefore relevant to make and share with others. For him, it is sometimes easier to approach a subject that hits 'close to home' as an artist, rather than as someone's son.

We discussed the topic of 'care' and the role it plays in his projects and way of working. For Peter, care is a theme that recurs in various aspects of his practice. For him, it is not a one-way street, but rather *"a blanket of many threads."*⁷⁴



"MY BODY KNEW
SOMETHING THAT
MY MIND WAS NOT
AWARE OF"

⁷³ Eriskay Connection, 2026

⁷⁴ Peter Pflügler in his artist talk during the seminar 'Art as an Act of Care', 23.01.2026.

Note by one of the students of the seminar 'Art as an Act of Care', january 2026.

After this first week, I found myself overwhelmed, overstimulated and extremely excited, all at the same time. I was glad that this was finally happening — while at the same time my energy levels were not yet as they should be. I wondered if I wasn't making a mistake I had made many times before: wanting too much in too short a time. Is it even possible to provide a caring classroom, a feminist classroom with people that don't know each other, in two weeks time?

Teaching this seminar also reminded me that it's a lot more tiring to teach a new course, than to teach a programme you have been familiar with for a few years. Or, as is the case with 'De Dames' at Dynamo, when you've already known each other for a longer time. But I also felt that my colleague Anne, the students and I were **figuring it out together.**

Looking back, I have tried in various situations **to foster** a similar sense of intimacy found at 'De Dames' in other contexts: within this seminar, at Conversas and during several of my one-on-one meetings with friends, peers and colleagues. Of course, it will never be quite the same. However, I do think that within this seminar, we have managed to help students realise that a classroom can be an intimate, **gentle and caring** space, whilst facilitating such an environment is also part of their professional development.

During the second week of the seminar, the focus was on creating your own work, and as teachers we tried to encourage them – without obligation – to seek out opportunities for collaboration.

I was pleasantly surprised with the variety of presentations and gestures they came up with.

As a ‘feminist act’, four students collected signs used during protests for women’s rights. They themselves hadn’t been to a demonstration before and they had felt a bit nervous about it, but they really wanted to join in, because they experienced ‘feminism as a form of care’. This was their way to bring the protest and its message to the academy.

One music student sought out a collaboration with a professional musician with a chronic illness. They had a beautiful conversation about how he could no longer make music, but still enjoyed listening to it. Another group wrote a performance based on their shared experiences regarding alcoholism within their families, and how that was never talked about. They performed the text as if they were sitting together around a dinner table, all dressed in white.

The projects these students came up with were impressive, especially given the short timeframe. For me as a teacher, however, it was particularly valuable to be able to experiment more with my teaching methods and with a theme that I choose myself, without having to adhere to a fixed curriculum or assessment criteria. However, I do think we tried to do too much in too short a time.

The students’ feedback indicated that, although the discussions were experienced as interesting, they sometimes found them too heavy, or that some of them would have liked to have known in advance what topics would be discussed.

It made me wonder whether I should give readers a ‘heads-up’ on the topic of my research, but something has been holding me back. Perhaps it’s a different experience to read something and feel vulnerable than to listen to someone speak about a sensitive topic. For this reason, I do think it would be a good idea to amend the seminar description.

During these two weeks, we asked the students to keep track of their notes and associations, which we collected on one of the walls in the classroom. You could also consider this a collective notebook, that functioned as a means for the students to keep track of their process while developing their own vocabulary around the theme of ‘care’.



zitstoel franen
 doolfeven leren
 leven
 met./zonder
 Ritueel water
 bloemen uur
 muziek
 spullen

For me, care is
not tied to a
fixed 'place' or
'system'.

(variety of) experiences
Perspective
To pay attention
To put into practice
Make this happen
To explore boundaries
Loss
Endurance
Resilience
Vitality
To feel connected
To carry meaning
Hit me in my gut
A ritual (for a mother)
To invest time
Time
(daring) to be vulnerable
Tribute
To draw comfort
Ritual(s)
Remnant(s)
To take care
To share food
To teach (as a form of care)
Intimate
(choosing) to be vulnerable

Inspiration
Friend
Intimate acts of care
Might feel fragmented
To keep it real
To carry a secret
To give shape
To figure it out (together)
To foster
Gentle
Caring
To develop a vocabulary

In search of rituals



My miscarriage was an intensely sad but also traumatic experience; I have deliberately left out many details in this thesis.

I experienced a lot of pain, did not receive adequate (medical) support and had to find **my own way through** our healthcare system in search of the right treatment. People can say very strange and sometimes insensitive things when they feel uncomfortable, and I learned that choice of **words matter** when you are supporting people through such a process. Maybe I will write another text or make work about these intimacies someday.

Because it is ‘not recommended’ to talk about pregnancy during the first trimester, many people who lose their pregnancy within this period endure this in **silence**, sometimes even completely by themselves. In the context and environment in which I grew up, we do not have the rituals to honor this process. With a miscarriage, there is no body to bury, no memories to cherish, and no tangible life to say goodbye to. But for **the one carrying**, it was definitely there. Not having a ritual, a place or some kind of possible ‘guideline’ to follow increased my feelings of loss, and I think we are selling ourselves short in this regard.

In search of rituals, I started reading the work of ‘other experts’ like Elizabeth Day, Marjolijn de Cocq and Jessica Zucker, and found **comfort** in their words. All three emphasise this lack of ritual, and turn to other cultures to show how things can be done differently.

Their writing took me back to Indonesia. Last summer, my partner and I traveled across the island of Sulawesi, where my father was born and a large part of my family still lives. During our trip, we visited the Tana Toraja in Central Sulawesi, a culture and tribe where death is as present as life, though not necessarily in an overwhelming way.

For a long time, it was customary in Torajan culture to bury babies who died in a Tara tree.

“Tarra trees are chosen because they are considered sacred. The spirit of the trees will protect and guide the babies. Meanwhile, the sap they produce is considered as a replacement of breast milk for these babies. By burying a dead baby in a Tarra Tree, Torajan people believe that these babies are returned to their mothers’ womb, but the tree is also considered “the new mother”.⁷⁵

In the Minahasa region in Northern Sulawesi, my ancestors are buried in the same garden where my grandmother was born, and part of my family still lives there. Their graves are not something scary, but a place of remembrance, where **food is shared** and people gather. It is a place where the presence of the deceased is considered a given, and where the trees growing on the same soil **still bear fruit**. Thinking about this garden, I wonder if the tablecloth can be seen as a ritual that is **ongoing** and **growing**, but also as something that can create a place for people to ‘hang out’: drink tea, eat, laugh and share stories and experiences.



Tarra Tree in the village of Bori,
Toraja Utara, Sulawesi, Indonesia, 2025.

These are of course all examples of rituals that are quite **intangible**. It might feel far away from my teaching practice for you as a reader. But since working at HKU, I've encountered **moments of intimacy**, both happy and sad, on a regular basis. It makes me wonder if we give enough space to rituals within our classrooms. *"In art education, there are often moments when personal stories surface unexpectedly, which are sometimes your own, sometimes someone else's, and we're rarely taught how **to navigate** that collectively."*⁷⁶

76 My buddy Lisa Peake in one of her e-mails to me, 24.02.2026

It takes me back to the question I posed earlier:

How do we **give space** to the vulnerable within our classrooms?

The discomfort?

Without becoming
too fragile?

I don't want to prevent vulnerability, but I do think that we need to learn practices of care and consent around how stories are held — and maybe, create rituals to engage with them. This might call for a *pedagogy of discomfort*, where teachers are willing to share the discomfort with their students while constructively shaping the directions of student learning and understanding.

Rather than a 'pedagogy of discomfort', I prefer to see this as a way of working that ensures both teachers and students feel "comfortable enough".

““It is a pedagogy of holding the affectively loaded atmosphere, holding the stories in all their complexity, and responding with care and curiosity. Holding the elephant thus entails grasping, carrying, sustaining, lingering, slowing down, keeping and embracing potential taboos rather than pushing, shoving or prying open.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Mante Vertelyte, et al., ‘Caring about the elephants in feminist classrooms, Affective pedagogies in an intersectional gender studies programme’, ‘Tijdschrift voor genderstudies’ 27.2/3, 2024: p 277.

At the moment of writing this thesis, I'm teaching a class called 'Werkveldoriëntatie' in the fourth year of the Photography course at HKU. The aim of these lessons is to help students familiarise themselves with the professional field they wish to enter after graduation and, if possible, to make this transition a little smoother.

To a certain extent, the students and I are in the same boat. They're about to graduate, and so am I. In the conversations I have with them, a great deal of (self)doubt and uncertainty often comes up. I can imagine that they will need something **to fall back on**, when the academic structure that they're currently relying on is no longer there. So I decided to return to the letter, as **a ritual**, as **a closing act**.

In our last group session, I asked my students to write a letter to themselves, which I will send to them after the summer. I asked them: when we imagine **ourselves in the future**, what do we need to hear? I told them that I would also join in the writing process. As is often the case in the final year, there were only a few students present. They said they liked the assignment, thought it was ‘cute’ and they all started writing **without hesitation**. I’ve promised my students that I won’t read their letters – the contents will remain theirs – but that I’d still like to add something before I send them. I’m not quite sure what yet, perhaps some seeds to plant.

For me, this is an example of a moment at HKU when I did feel the freedom to initiate a ritual with my students. The fact that we were a small group and that these are people I've been teaching for almost four years now are important elements that contributed to this. We know each other well and trust has been built.

Part of me already knew that, every now and then, there is indeed room for gestures like these at HKU. But it is up to me as a teacher to claim or create the necessary conditions and take 'the first risk'. When teaching at a large institution, you often find yourself swept up in 'the issues of the day.' In the midst of all this busyness and things we 'need to get done', it can be hard to find the space for rituals or moments of intimacy.

Looking back, I realise that parallels can be drawn between my feelings of ‘refusal’ towards an ‘academic structure’ within conducting this research and the lack of ‘freedom of movement’ I sometimes experience in my practice as a teacher.

The last stitch (for now)

Like a patchwork, a thesis can keep on expanding. Over the past few months, I've stitched, read and wrote my way through grief — and this is the result so far. I began my thesis by writing about loss, but that's not all it's about. Starting from a personal experience, I have explored broader issues within (art) education. It's been a messy, fragmented process. I have lived my research and I don't know if I could have done things any differently, at this moment in my life. I often felt overwhelmed *and there were moments when I have been defending the instinctive way of working, not from critical voices of others but from a more rational part of my own mind.*⁷⁸

Losing my pregnancy was one of the most intense things I have ever been through, but strangely enough, I wouldn't want to live without this experience. It has grown to be a part of me. Unexpectedly, it has also contributed to this 'different way of working.' More than ever, I have learnt to listen to my body, to experience what it can teach me, and to recognise this as a form of knowledge.

78 Brigitta Nordström, *HOW DO YOU FOOTNOTE A SMILE? One Dialog about Two Extremes of Textile Research* (excerpt) (2020), *The Textile Reader* edited by Jessica Hemmings, second edition, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (2023): p.50

Practically speaking, working with textiles was new to me, but as I was looking for a more embodied way of making and for something I could easily do in collaboration with others, this intuitively felt like the right medium, the right route. What I did not expect was that this new way of working also opened up to a new way of thinking and writing.

At the very beginning of this research, I wanted to design something that I could pass on to other teachers. But life got in the way and it has taught me that not everything can be structured and planned. I no longer believe in a single recipe for working with embodied knowledge, knowledge by experience or Feminist Action Research. It's something you **learn by doing, by living life** and by bringing your experiences into the classroom as a form of knowledge. By balancing between feeling brave and feeling vulnerable in order to create space for these ways of learning and working.

If this is not an ending but a circle, I return
to where I started:

even though I lost it,
I carry it with me.
To work, to class, and
through life.

The things we carry with us change the way we teach and learn. They might complicate things and they might ask for ‘risks’ to be taken. Perhaps by sharing our personal moments of **courage** and **intimacy**, we can encourage others to join us in this act.

The evening at Conversas might have been the only time things turned out very differently than I could have predicted. One of the participants did not shy away from his sense of ‘discomfort’ but chose to address it, which I found admirable, but it also surprised me. This encounter highlighted **the possible ‘weakness’** of my way of working, or at least at that moment. It showed me how a method that feels so ‘safe (to)’⁷⁹ for me, can feel unsafe or uncomfortable to someone else.

Looking back, I wonder if I should have ‘held the elephant’ better and expressed my sense of surprise—which could have led to an interesting conversation. At that moment, I brushed past his comment more than I would usually do. After all, I was a guest at a table set by someone else, with a fixed timeframe and other participants I had to relate to.

To a certain extent you could compare this situation with **the limitations** of a ‘women-only’ space, in which I feel very much at home, but which might make others feel excluded. Both for my work within the HKU as for my broader (educational) practice, I think it could be interesting to reflect further on this and think of ways to ‘set the table’ that can offer a sense of intimacy and foster vulnerability in different contexts.

79 With this term I refer to: Ruth Lewis, Elizabeth A Sharp, Jenni Remnant and Rhiannon Redpath ‘*Safe spaces: experiences of feminist women-only space*’, (2015): p.6, in which a clear distinction is made between being ‘safe from’ and being ‘safe to’.

In my conversation with Dieuwke, it was as if she was holding up a mirror to me. She pointed out that while talking, I often refer to others, perhaps because there are parts of this story that I'd like to keep to myself — or that I, at any rate, don't want to be part of an 'academic discourse'. Some intimacies simply cannot be captured in scholarly structures or assessment criteria. I realise now, that I've been rather **stubborn** throughout my process and have said 'no' to suggestions from others quite a bit. Dieuwke suggested that this might be **'my mother's heart'**, wanting to protect what's 'mine' and that moved me.

Looking back, our conversation exposed a tension between vulnerability and safety, between what I want to achieve (as a teacher) and what someone else might need. I learned that the intimate, feminist classroom calls for a dynamic process and dialogue about what this type of space could be, unfinished and **in motion.**

It's during these moments of movement, where I feel most at home and where my messy, fragmented and feminist way of working is more easily introduced. They allow me to be more of an initiator or facilitator, to be the table setter, rather than someone that leads the conversation.

Because these *hesitant, in-between spaces of ambivalence and gesture allow for the kinds of unguided thinking and undetermined being, making, and writing which might take us somewhere new, but which are not themselves geared towards progress or conclusion*’ [...] *Modern academia too rarely allows for this kind of ‘unguided’ thinking that isn’t ‘geared towards progress or conclusion’, but good scholarship, good thinking, must be driven by curiosity and imagination; it must be open, always, to the unexpected; it must be allowed to reside (ambivalently, hesitantly, vulnerably) in the gesture. Now there’s a utopian request – not to end with (this is not a closing) but to release into the wild.*⁸⁰

80 Kaye Mitchell, *‘Afterword’*, as published in *Gestures: A body of work*, Alice Butler et al., Manchester University Press (2025): p.320

In search of comfort, I came across a lesser-known scientific source of solace known as microchimerism: *“During pregnancy, foetal cells cross the placenta and enter the mother’s/pregnant person’s body, where they can remain for decades – sometimes forever. Similarly, maternal cells can enter the foetus, creating a permanent biological connection between a mother and her lost baby. These cells can settle in various places – including the brain, and aptly – the heart. [...] Through microchimerism, science affirms what many of us already feel: that our lost babies, however briefly with us, remain part of us.”*⁸¹

81 Miscarriage Association, 23.05.2025

82 In this paragraph I refer to: Andrea Fisher, *“My work is driven by informed intuition”*, Renée Turner shared this quote with me during one of our sessions, she heard Andrea Fisher say this during a talk in the early nineties.

To me, this seemed to ‘prove’ something I had already felt, that I already knew. A kind of knowledge driven by my body, by my informed intuition.⁸²

My partner and I decided to bury some of my ‘cells’ beneath a little plant that now sits on a bookshelf in our living room. As a form of ‘knowledge’ and as part of our household. I enjoy looking at it often, and sometimes I talk to it. It’s growing in all directions, with various side shoots and leaves. Like a ginger root or a Tarra Tree. 33



Epilogue

A few weeks after our loss, my partner and I decided to go for a walk in the woods. To get out of our house and take our minds off things. In the forest, a blind man came walking towards us. He had two dogs with him. A golden retriever guiding him and a large grey dog running free, with a bell around its neck. We passed the man, but the dog with the bell decided to follow us, in search of people to play with. She dropped her stick at my feet and looked at me expectantly. I threw it away, but she kept coming back. We told her to go back to her owner — who had long since disappeared from view. But she stayed, continued to follow us, dropped her stick again and again, looked at me, and it felt as if she could see right through. You can go, it's ok, I told her. Until she suddenly ran off and the sound of her bell fell silent.

My own way through
Words matter
Silence
The one carrying
Comfort
Sacred
Returning to their mothers womb
Food is shared
Still bear fruit
Ongoing
Growing
Intangible
Moments of intimacy
To navigate
To give space
Too fragile
Rituals to engage
Comfortable enough
Pedagogy of holding

carrying
lingering
To fall back on
A closing act
Ourselves in the
future
Without hesitation
Gestures
It has grown to be a
part of me
To listen
To recognise
Learn by doing
By living life
Courage
Intimacy
Possible weakness
Limitations
Stubborn
'My mother's heart'
In motion
Informed intuition

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Colophon

The Intimate Classroom

To all the women I know and learn from

A graduation project by Maite Vanhellemont
Master Education in Arts, Piet Zwart Institute,
Rotterdam, NL

Supervisors: Çağlar Köseoğlu & Renée Turner

This project originated from beautiful moments that I was able to share with others, each of whom contributed in their own way: 'De Dames' from Dynamo, my classmates and Lisa and Mari in particular, the participants at Conversas, strangers and friends, my supervisors, my parents, my bonus mother, several of my students at HKU and my partner in life and loss, Hans.

All images are my own, unless stated otherwise.
The design of this thesis – five different booklets in five different colours and three different sizes held together by a ribbon – refers both to the tablecloth I worked on during my research and the writing style that emerged from it.

Edited by Maite Vanhellemont, Hans Vermunt and Britt Kroon.

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Rotterdam, NL

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This project originated from beautiful moments that I was able to share with others, each of whom contributed in their own way: 'De Dames' from Dynamo, my classmates and Lisa and Mari in particular, the participants at Conversas, strangers and friends, my supervisors, my parents, my bonus mother, several of my students at HKU and my partner in life and loss, Hans.

All images are my own, unless stated otherwise.
The design of this thesis – five different booklets in five different colours and three different sizes held together by a ribbon – refers both to the tablecloth I worked on during my research and the writing style that emerged from it.

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