

Learning Through Gift Cycles



lisa peake (lotus)

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

INTRODUCTION

kunstlab + buren
body tree mutations
on the gift as a travelling object

METHODOLOGY

what i wanted to understand and how
on other words that came
conditions on legibility
omission as method

CONDITIONS OF THE ATELIER

the materials conditions of the space
pedagogical orientations
the artists
free time
the space as something we respond to

SIBEL AND THE TOWER

tower origins
occupation and withdrawal
weaving as making
expansion and maintenance

THE BIG FAT ALIEN CAPYBARA

representation
the gifts

KUZE AND THE SHADOW KNUFFLE

delay

INTERLUDE

who is looking?
ilyza and the cutting of elsa's face

NAGA (พญานาค) WITH THE BESTIES

the gift

CONCLUSION

what the gift cannot do
who gets the one on one?
what this means for art education
what has not yet arrived

APPENDIX

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PROLOGUE

knuffel, from knuffelen... to cuddle.
the object and the verb share the same
name in dutch. something to cuddle, and
the cuddling itself.

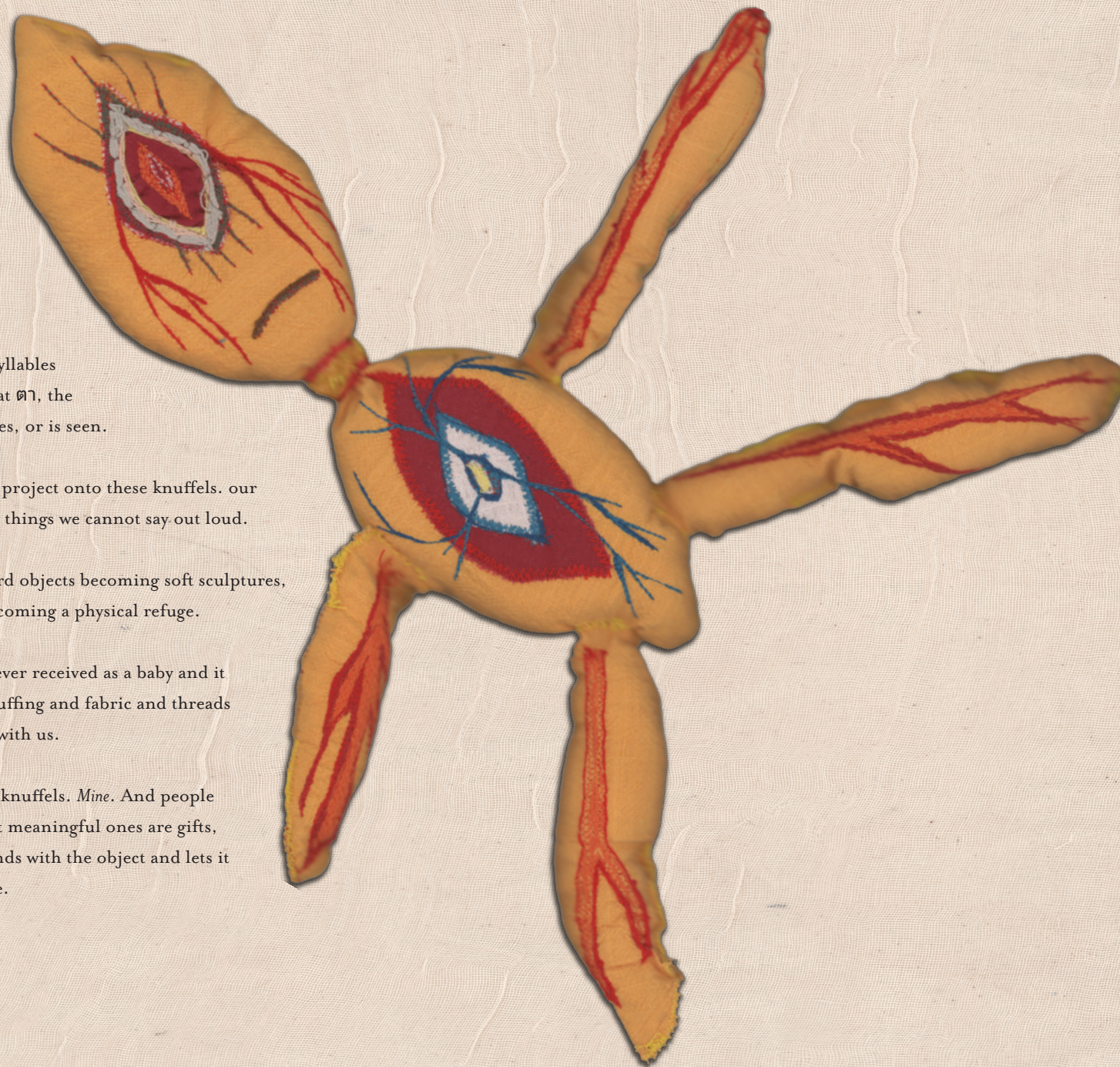
in thai, the word for doll is ตุ๊กตา. native
speakers do not consciously separate the syllables
apart, but while translating it i noticed that ตา, the
second part, also means eye. a doll that sees, or is seen.

i remember, jip once spoke about how we project onto these knuffels. our
desires and fantasies. a knuffel can signify things we cannot say out loud.

liraz once described a knuffel as literal hard objects becoming soft sculptures,
or hard feelings like grief made soft by becoming a physical refuge.

for many a knuffel is the first gift they've ever received as a baby and it
stays until its all ragged out, just a bit of stuffing and fabric and threads
trying to keep it together. but it still stays with us.

people can get really territorial over their knuffels. *Mine*. And people
really love giving them too. often the most meaningful ones are gifts,
given in the hope that another person bonds with the object and lets it
absorb some part of the relation over time.



INTRODUCTION

This project began from a noticing that handmade objects created often do not remain with their makers. They are frequently given away to form and acknowledge bonds with others. Attending to the pedagogical dimensions embedded in these acts of making and giving led to me taking a closer look at how gifts move between people.

My interest in gift-giving emerges through a combination of situated practice, attention to how others give and receive, the institutional conditions that shape the space, and theoretical perspectives that understand gifts as bearers of social relations. Across different historical and cultural contexts, practices of giving have been entangled with obligation, and power structures, as well as care and connection. Gifts can bind, but they can also compel; they can create intimacy while at the same time reinforcing asymmetries. Following these tensions allows gift-giving to proceed towards a practice whose meanings and effects shift across contexts.

KUNSTLAB + BUREN

Within this project, I focus on Kunstlab, a community that I have been part of for over five years. I use the term community deliberately here, to describe a space sustained through ongoing presence and the kinds of inconvenience and negotiation that comes with being a community that requires time rather than just through affinity alone. Drawing on (Nancy 2000, 31), community can be understood as something that is continuously in the process of becoming, requiring an ongoing attentiveness to our existence in relation to others as “singular plural.”

Kunstlab is a free, walk-in atelier for children roughly between the ages of five and twelve, located in a former kindergarten pavilion of De Toermalijn primary school in Rotterdam South.

It is a place where children, artists, makers and neighbours come together. Kunstlab functions as a third space where learning comes from shared making. Yet Kunstlab resists singular definition and appears differently depending on who is asked. wolf engelen, artist and co-founder of Kunstlab, describes it differently again: Kunstlab investigates the role of the studio in the public domain. The studio is an amoral space in which every idea can exist and be explored. This idea provokes societal consensus.

Kunstlab+ Buren is the official name of the organization, buren meaning neighbors. It emerged from a collaboration between SOHERE, a permeable artist collective and SKARLOKAAL, Ariadne Urlus. It has a specific activist history of origin, and one of the starting points of Kunstlab is that the artists are asked to develop a collaboration with the children within the studio based on their own practice. The insights derived from this: deepen the development and understanding of what Kunstlab is and can be.

While it is situated within a school environment, its structure obstructs the logics of productivity and progression that dominates formal education. This openness permits relationships to develop across ages and levels of amateurism. Throughout this proposal, I use the term collaborator when referring to all participants at Kunstlab, including both children and adults. This choice reflects the collective and reciprocal nature of the work that takes place there. While I remain attentive to the asymmetries of power that shape these collaborations, I use this term to resist default hierarchies and to acknowledge the multi-hierarchy and agency of all participants within our making environment.

BODY TREE MUTATIONS

I come to this research as an artist and art pedagogue whose work moves across different educational contexts. In my visual practice, I create bodies that mutate into trees, roots that grow into limbs, and creatures emerging from fantasies and speculations of being a tree.

This visual language also mediates the pedagogical relations that emerge within Kunstlab. I often enter the space wearing handmade garments with colourful textile creatures, limbs, and knots resembling roots... an eye that opens along a branch that is also an arm.

These aesthetic choices often shape how children approach me, they notice the patchworks and embroidery that I put into my wearables. When working with the children they often take and translate into their own works in various sorts of ways. I also bring my own knuffels and textile works into the atelier, sometimes continuing to make them during sessions. Children often respond to this by beginning to make alongside me.

Prior to this masters of art education, I spent time pursuing art psychotherapy, which partially explains my initial involvement in socially engaged and care-oriented contexts. In these settings, material-making becomes a channel for connection, and the objects produced frequently circulate as gifts. These gestures shape relationships in ways that differ greatly from both institutional exchange and market-based transactions. Gifts organize social life through a completely different logic, which is something that this research sets out to examine.



If I Were a Tree, drawing by author, 2025

This research asks how acts of giving emerge within Kunstlab as a pedagogical space for collaborative making and learning. It is guided by the following question:

How do practices of gifting function as sites of pedagogical encounter in Kunstlab, and what do they reveal about relational and affective learning within practices of making?

This question is explored through several related lines of inquiry:

- What does art-making specifically enable within gift relations at Kunstlab, and how do material processes of making generate conditions for relational and affective learning that other practices cannot?
- How do gifts emerge and move through sustained collaborative practice at Kunstlab, and what forms of agency do collaborators exercise within these processes?
- In what ways does the temporality of gift relations such as delay shape how pedagogical encounters develop, and what does this show about learning?
- What tensions arise between gift-based relations and the institutional conditions that sustain Kunstlab, and how do these tensions complicate or enrich a gift-based understanding of art pedagogy?

ON THE GIFT AS A TRAVELLING CONCEPT

The concept of the gift can appear deceptively simple while carrying complex implications. This project does not seek to arrive at a single definition. Following Mieke Bal's notion of travelling concepts (Bal, 2002), I treat the gift as a concept that shifts meaning as it moves between disciplines and contexts. Much of the literature on the gift emerges from anthropological and economic thought. I read these theories through an art educational lens, asking how gift relations operate specifically within a space where making is central. The anthropological and sociological accounts that have most shaped thinking about the gift, including the work of Hyde, Mauss, and Weiner, these are all expanded further in the appendix for readers who want that fuller context.

A NOTE ON HOW TO READ THIS

This text moves through several registers. From here, the next chapter turns to methodology, to the question of how I, as a researcher who is also a practitioner and an artist, navigate inquiry from within the space I am studying. What follows is a set of encounters: Sibel and the tower, Jasmin and her big fat alien capybara, Kuze and his shadow knuffel, Jaëlla and Chloe and the Naga. Then, woven through these encounters are the conditions that made them possible, which includes the space, its organisational logic, and its tempos of time and mess.

There is also a short interlude on looking... on what it means to document to resist certain forms of visibility. Some chapters are more narrative, others more reflective. I have tried to write this the way the learning happened. And this happened unevenly, with the theory woven in. I do this instead of anchoring and establishing theory in advance.

METHODOLOGY

I am both a practitioner within Kunstlab and a researcher studying that practice. In this project, those positions do not stay separate. My engagement moves between facilitating, making, documenting, and writing. What is produced through this movement is not knowledge in any fixed or fully transmissible sense, nor knowledge as something that can be extracted and deposited intact or banked onto others. It is closer to what Ingold might call knowing-in-practice. Where the word knowledge appears in this text, this is its meaning.

I find it useful to name three interrelated layers that run through this project, to hold them apart enough in the writing so that their entanglement can be seen. The first concerns the pedagogical orientation: the way learning and making are organised and held. The second attends to the practices that unfold within that pedagogy. The third addresses the methodology of the research itself: how I, as a participant-researcher, engage with and make material legible within this specific research context. In this project, writing operates as a form of inquiry. Writing participates in the evolving of the research, where moments are being reworked. This chapter focuses on the third layer, though the other two are never fully out of the...space.

This research is framed by a/r/tography as a methodological practice, which understands inquiry as emerging precisely through this kind of entanglement, through its grounding in lived practice, where artistic, pedagogical, and research roles are not only theorised but enacted simultaneously within a specific context.

A/r/tography sits within a broader shift across the humanities and arts-based research, where knowledge is understood as relational, situated, emerging through practice. While a/r/tography has its own specific discourse, it also draws on many of the same concerns that shape post-qualitative and new materialist approaches.

I hold this framework alongside a critical awareness of its limitations. Sara Truman (2021) usefully notes that what is often framed as new materialist thinking has antecedents in earlier work, including contributions by scholars of colour, and raises important questions about how issues of race and gender are taken up within these frameworks. I find this critique generative, though I hold it with some caution. In naming race and gender as analytic categories that new materialism fails to adequately address, there is a risk of stabilising those categories in the very act of critiquing their absence, of producing the legibility one is questioning. My own approach to these questions is developed in the *Conditions of Legibility* section.

Engaging with *Provoking the Field: International Perspectives on Visual Arts PhDs in Education* further informed my understanding of how artist-educators working within doctoral contexts negotiate the tensions between practice-based inquiry and institutional expectations. As Jennifer Wicks writes, a/r/tographic practice requires navigating the liminal space between roles such as artist, researcher, and teacher, while also responding to institutional demands (Wicks 2018, 115). Wicks reflects on her own a/r/tographic self-study, where Mexican vernacular textile traditions became a point of departure for autobiographical artmaking and writing, describing a form of active resistance that avoids exoticised representations of Mexican culture. Her resistance to these reductive representations resonates with something I navigate too, bringing my own cultural background into the work without fixing it into something legible or consumable.

When I try to describe what I was actually doing over the past years at Kunstlab, perhaps without the language of methodology, it comes down to a few concrete questions I kept returning to. I had a curiosity about what kind of conditions Kunstlab holds that could bring about different forms of gift relations, what kinds of relations emerge there, how they take form, and how they affect learning and art education. For this I stayed present, I am there as someone who is making and being in relation to the materialities of the space.

One of the things I kept attending to was how gift relations at Kunstlab differ from what happens in other educational spaces. This is not simply a distinction between informal and formal—Kunstlab has its own structures, a board, a multi-hierarchy, organisational decisions that require negotiation and accountability. However, it is a space that does not operate through fixed curricula, or through the expectation that learning will be quantifiable and timely. These differences matter for how gifts emerge.

Art education, in this research, is understood as a form of social relation, a way of being together through making that generates its own conditions. It is specifically through art-making that the gift relations described in this thesis become possible. Gift pedagogy, as I use it here, describes the learning that emerges through gift relations, as what becomes possible when the conditions of a space allow gifts to form and move.

Furthermore, temporality is also something I kept noticing, like how long it takes to be in relation to someone, what shifts over time, what becomes possible in a third month or third year that was not possible in one session. Transformation rarely announces itself. It accumulates. And it was often in retrospect when I recognized something as pedagogical...most of the time quietly changing. This research required duration because I am researching an ecology of a community. And ecologies take a long time to form, and longer to still read.

MacLure's thinking about non-extractive documentation helped me understand why I was uncomfortable with conventional ethnographic observation (MacLure 2013). This discomfort has a specific context. wolf, whose studio it also is, has spoken about not wanting to be viewed with what he calls an anthropological eye, the gaze of a researcher who observes from outside. A/r/tography gave me language for the fact that my roles are inseparable, that I could not step outside the space to observe it because I was part of what was happening there (Irwin and Springgay 2008).

Ceder's understanding of learning as something that emerges through relations rather than belonging to the individual helped me think about why the encounters mattered, because something became possible in the relation that wasn't possible before (Ceder 2019). Freire's understanding of learning as transformation, reaching a level not previously known to yourself, sits in productive tension with my resistance to speaking for the children I work with (Freire 1970). What I can name is what I noticed: Sibel learning to inhabit and teach through the tower, Kuze learning to stay in relation longer than he ever had, Jasmin finding her voice through making. These shifts are what I mean by pedagogy.

CONDITIONS ON LEGIBILITY

Because this research unravels in a pedagogical space where questions of visibility and difference may surface through interpretation, I treat positionality as part of the method by which the field becomes legible. Whilst I recognise that explaining myself in this next part risks contradiction, I do so with the hope that it does not reduce lived complexity to coherence, but instead leaves room for breath and what remains unresolved.

I have spent much of my life being read inconsistently across contexts with registers like accent, and appearance mediating how I am perceived. At times I am read as more Asian, at other times as more white, never fully aligning with either category. In some situations I am taken to be passing; in others, this passing is withdrawn or questioned. Such readings circulate as perception and are revised in relation to context.

I grew up in Thailand and lived there for eighteen years, where Thai was my first language, yet I was educated in English-speaking schools later, as my working-abroad English father believed this would enable my sister and me to assimilate more easily into Western educational and cultural systems. I was also given a “white” name and my thai mother did not reject this idea and my grandmother gave me an “unofficial” thai name. Naming, given within this logic of assimilation, participates in how I am also received. These markers do not simply describe who I am, but mediate how I am made intelligible to others, and under what conditions that intelligibility is granted.

As someone who happens to be a “mixed race woman”, such readings are also gendered and racialised, carrying connotations associated with Asian femininity that changes through different contexts. These experiences have made me attentive to how racial identity is not only claimed but continually assigned and questioned through all kinds of encounters. They have also made me cautious

of analytic frameworks that rely on stable or easily named racial positions, as such frameworks that risk solidifying what is in practice unstable and relational. This hesitation is not a dismissal of race or decolonial critique...this hesitation, it reflects a concern with how easily discussions of race can become instrumental within critical writing, where the pressure to produce clarity may reduce complex lived relations to legible forms.

My thinking here has been shaped in part by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s critique of representation, particularly in *Woman, Native, Other*, where she challenges the demand for authenticity and clarity placed upon racialised and gendered subjects. Trinh draws attention to the ways in which marginalized voices are often driven to speak as representatives of fixed categories, and to how speech and silence circulate within power (Trinh 1989).

Reading her alongside my own uncertainties has reinforced a commitment to methodological restraint, which is one that allows questions of race to remain present within the conditions of the space, without forcing them into stable explanatory frames. I refrain from assigning racial labels to collaborators. This choice is not presented as a resolution. It is a situated position, provisional by necessity, and one that remains open to revision as the research continues to unfold. In this project, children’s faces, bodies, and skin are visible in photographs and drawings, but I refrain from assigning racial categories to them or treating racial identity as an analytic variable. This is not because race is absent from the space, but because to stabilize it in writing would risk turning lived difference into a representational object.

OMISSION AS METHOD

Questions of looking and representation run throughout this project. Documentation itself operates as a pedagogical and ethical practice. How can material be presented in ways that do not render images extractive or flatten them as and with thin descriptions?

In many pedagogical contexts, documentation relies heavily on photographs of people “doing things.” Such images often shift attention away from the work itself and toward bodies as they appear to an external viewer. I find this mode of documentation both restrictive and uninteresting. This emerged through my experience of documenting within Kunstlab, where the values of the space reshaped how I understand photographic documentation. These values were developed by wolf engelen from the beginning of Kunstlab. As wolf noted in conversation, the child who often performs as soon as the camera is pointed at them knows, and reflects behavior that stems from all kinds of social expectations.

My choices of omission reflect how I perceive. In my practice, I create self-portraits and other characters as mutated trees with protruding heads, working through ideas of dysmorphia and fantasy. These speculative embodiments allow me to think through bodies that exceed what is considered normal or contained. Often, photographic documentation at Kunstlab moves away from faces altogether, focusing instead on hands at work or on the objects themselves.

By mutating or omitting ourselves within the images presented publicly, I attempt to unsettle the assumption that looking is passive or without consequence.



My mutation knuffel and dress, photographed shortly after sewing

CONDITIONS OF THE ATELIER

Gift relations are shaped by the conditions of the space in which they take place. This chapter turns to Kunstlab as an environment that has an ecology of relations. I want to examine within this chapter how its spatial, material, and organisational conditions make certain ways of being together possible.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF THE SPACE

Kunstlab operates as a space that is intentionally free in order to remain accessible. Introducing payment would alter the conditions under which relations form, shifting participation toward a transactional model in which the delay and unpredictability that allow gift relations to emerge would be suppressed. The labour of gratitude, the cycle of receiving, growing, and eventually passing on, depends on participation not being mediated by payment.

Simultaneously, free is never without conditions. Kunstlab is sustained through subsidies and institutional partnerships. While this enables non-transactional forms of participation, it also introduces dependencies that complicate any understanding of the space as autonomous or outside economic relations. The labour that sustains Kunstlab does not always circulate as a gift, and to frame it as such risks obscuring its value. Unpaid pedagogical labour is not neutral. While such labour can at times take on the character of gift, it cannot be sustained as such indefinitely.

These conditions, they sometimes enter the pedagogical encounters. My collaborators and I rely on other forms of employment to support ourselves, and the effects of precarity like fatigue and overwork sometimes come into the space with us.

Furthermore, when it comes to the autonomy of Kunstlab, for example its financial dependencies. Sustainable relationships and

vision prove to be of essential importance, both for the artists and for SKAR. Olof, the director of SKAR, really appreciates Kunstlab and does a lot of political work for us at Kunstlab. He is determined that Kunstlab be included in the new building plans no matter what. For SKAR Kunstlab is a political tool for social urban area development. And in addition to this he makes part of the room available for free. These relationships are what makes the conditions for gift pedagogy structurally possible and they require ongoing trust to sustain.

This tension does not make Kunstlab exceptional or contradictory. Gibson-Graham argues that capitalism has been represented as a “singular and self-evident totality” - the only form of economic life, when in reality it comprises just one portion of all economic activity. Using the image of an iceberg, they show how what we call “the economy” is only the visible tip: beneath it lies a vast range of other forms, gift exchange, communal labour, unpaid care, alternative enterprise, that are already present and practiced but largely unrecognised.

Kunstlab operates within this submerged part of the iceberg. It is not outside capitalist structures, but it depends on subsidies, on underpaid or unpaid labour, on the precarity its collaborators carry into the space. But the relations that form there are not determined by those structures either. Gift exchange, shared making, the labour of gratitude, these are already happening, not as alternatives to capitalism but as what Gibson-Graham calls diverse economies: economic forms that coexist with and alongside capitalist relations without being reducible to them.

PEDAGOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

Kunstlab functions on openness and non-outcome-driven learning. There is an absence of productivity metrics, which allows gift-giving to emerge as relational reasoning instead of transactional exchange. Time in Kunstlab is - most often - not segmented

into tasks that must be completed within fixed intervals. Duration stretches and compresses in response to engagement. Activities are allowed to linger or remain unfinished across sessions, resisting the pressure to resolve learning into outcomes within fixed time frames. Within this openness, we also continue to experiment with how structure can be held without collapsing into curriculum. In recent months, we introduced thematic ateliers as a way of exploring a different mode of facilitation.

During these sessions, two people take a lead for the afternoon, while others join as volunteers, with roles changing from session to session. This rotation of leadership makes hierarchy visible and negotiable and invites both adults and children to reflect on how themes are proposed and interpreted. They orient attention without determining outcomes. A theme such as mask-making or the weighing of materials, for example, does not only suggest the production of an object but opens conceptual questions.

Children engage with these themes in divergent ways, often extending or subverting the initial prompt. Sometimes they reject the themes altogether. Thematic ateliers do not replace openness but rework it, providing the structure to operate as an invitation. The atelier is mutable and responsive. The materials are not ranked by “educational value” and mess is allowed.

Mess I think is really important here as many children (and adults) don't really have other spaces like this in their lives. Mess functions as a suspension of normative expectations around order and productivity, making room for experimentation without immediate correction.

THE ARTISTS

Multiple artists work at Kunstlab simultaneously, each bringing their own practice into the space. Different studios are active alongside and intertwined with one another. One of the founding principles

of Kunstlab is that artists develop their collaboration with children from within their own practice rather than from a prescribed curriculum.

Because the artists direct the studio this way, space can open for long-term individual trajectories, sustained collaborations that would not be possible in a more structured setting. The artistic freedom this enables is aimed at both the child and the artist. It is not a hierarchy of facilitation but a plurality of presences, each with their own way of working, each contributing to conditions that none of them could create alone. The artists present make this possible together, in what wolf engelen describes as an almost natural but certainly generous way.

FREE TIME

I want to turn to Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013) for a moment here. In *Defense of the School*, they trace the Greek word for school (skholē) back to its original meaning: free time. Not relaxation, not a break from productivity, but time actually freed from the demands of the household and the political order. School, in this sense, was a form that temporarily lifted people out of their social positions and let them attend to something in common. You were not your family or your economic role while you were there. You were just someone present.

They argue that this scholastic character keeps getting expelled from contemporary schooling. School gets captured, and this can be, for example, by the family, by the economy or by meritocracy. Even leisure gets reorganised as recovery, something you do so you can be more productive afterward. Free time, in any genuine sense, becomes harder and harder to find without paying for it.

Kunstlab reaches toward this. Not fully, and I want to be careful here. Social positions do not disappear when children walk through the door. Differences in confidence, in language, in familiarity

with materials, in how much space someone feels they can take up, these things continue to form what happens in the atelier. What is loosened in one moment can reappear in the next.

The conditions of openness are not neutral. They require ongoing work to hold. But something is different here. There is no assessment, no requirement to demonstrate talent, no expectation of a finished product. Children are invited to attend to making together. In those moments, not always, and also not for everyone equally, but sometimes, something of the scholastic form is present.

THE SPACE AS SOMETHING WE RESPOND TO

The physical space of Kunstlab is always changing and we respond to those changes. Materials get moved around, sometimes areas are blocked and then reopened again. Installations that are built that temporarily reshape how the space can be used and how our bodies move through the atelier. Ownership of space is negotiated through these spatial decisions. Learning happens not only through making objects, but through inhabiting and altering the environment.

Besides from all the mess that gets made, cleaning at Kunstlab is often playful and imaginative. Maintenance is a shared labour that sustains the space and the relations within it. Cleaning is approached as a form of care that resists productivity logic. In most educational settings, cleaning is what happens after learning, also performed by someone else, restoring the space to a neutral state ready for the next lesson. At Kunstlab there is no neutral state to restore. The space accumulates, and this is the pedagogy.

Conceptual cleaning was introduced by wolf engelen and naturally has since been continuously reinterpreted and developed by our collaborators. What we refer to as conceptual cleaning draws attention to materials and their states, where we collectively negotiate when and how to engage with them, leading to new possibilities for reuse or transformation.

Because paint is often left over after sessions, for example, we developed a cleaning ritual in which remaining paint is used on structures present in the atelier. Cleaning frequently takes the form of reworking. This logic of reworking is also visible in longer-term projects at Kunstlab, such as the limonade stand and the tower, where objects are repeatedly worked on over time, painted, repainted, taken apart, reassembled into new forms. Cleaning becomes another phase of making, a way of maintaining relation to materials while allowing them to change.



ATTENTION : produit lourd et fragile
CAUTION : heavy and fragile product
Transportation / Carriage :
Fragile, handle with care
A manipuler avec précaution
Chers clients / Dear customers,
Merci de vérifier l'absence de pièces cassées (voir la page 2)

ATTENTION : produit lourd et fragile
CAUTION : heavy and fragile product
Transportation / Carriage :
Fragile, handle with care
A manipuler avec précaution
Chers clients / Dear customers,
Merci de vérifier l'absence de pièces cassées (voir la page 2)

Masterpack
300kg Max
Schö





SIBEL AND THE TOWER

“The house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in the sense of its verticality.” — Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

This chapter follows one collaboration over seven months. Objects have been bought in and taken out, the walls have been painted and repainted. During these processes, stories are told, and within that, different aspects of ourselves were explored. Sibel spoke of the tower as something that had changed because of her. These encounters are written from within that process, from the position of making alongside Sibel, learning from her, and attending to what was emerging between us as pedagogically significant.

TOWER ORIGINS

The tower was designed by wolf engelen for SOHERE and has been part of Kunstlab since 2019. Its full title is *My Tower Is Your Tower*. wolf built it as a space where children can feel unseen. The tower is part of SOHERE’s research into how architectural interventions can constitute a learning environment in which the conditions of the space are self-determined, without guidance or suggested methods.

As wolf describes it, a good design designs itself, it continuously expands its function in relation to whoever inhabits it. His autonomous work is almost always an invitation to the user to add a use to it themselves in order to complete the object. That part is usually unseen by him.

It was into this space that Sibel came.

OCCUPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

The tower was an escape from overstimulation. The atelier can feel really chaotic with all the drilling and sawing and other forms of loud making, but whilst inside, the noise would soften. We were able to withdraw into this space and concentrate. This matters pedagogically because the conditions under which a child can claim and shape a space are rarely available within “formal” educational settings, where environments are predetermined and authority flows in one direction. In the tower, it felt like our sanctuary, a place to hide from the other side. Within this space, making and storytelling were wrapped up into one another.

With foam, we turned the tower into a place of mountains with icy peaks. The foam was cut into mountainous shapes, rough at the edges but squishy to the touch. Sticker gemstones accumulated across the walls, pressed on with fingers. With the glue gun we also fixed strands of hair onto the surfaces, the synthetic kind, braided clip-on extensions in blonde and brown, cheap and shiny pressed against the wooden structure. Sibel often removed gemstones from the walls and placed them onto objects she made, or handed individual stones to me. We also pressed them on our faces, letting them travel across our surfaces.

At another point in time, the walls were painted in uneven streaks of blue, deep blue in places, the kind that swallows light, thinning out where the brush had run dry. The gemstones disappeared beneath it, still there but buried. With the blue, Sibel says, we are under the ocean. The space became vast in a way the tower’s actual dimensions didn’t allow for. That was something particular to being inside it... the outside disappeared.

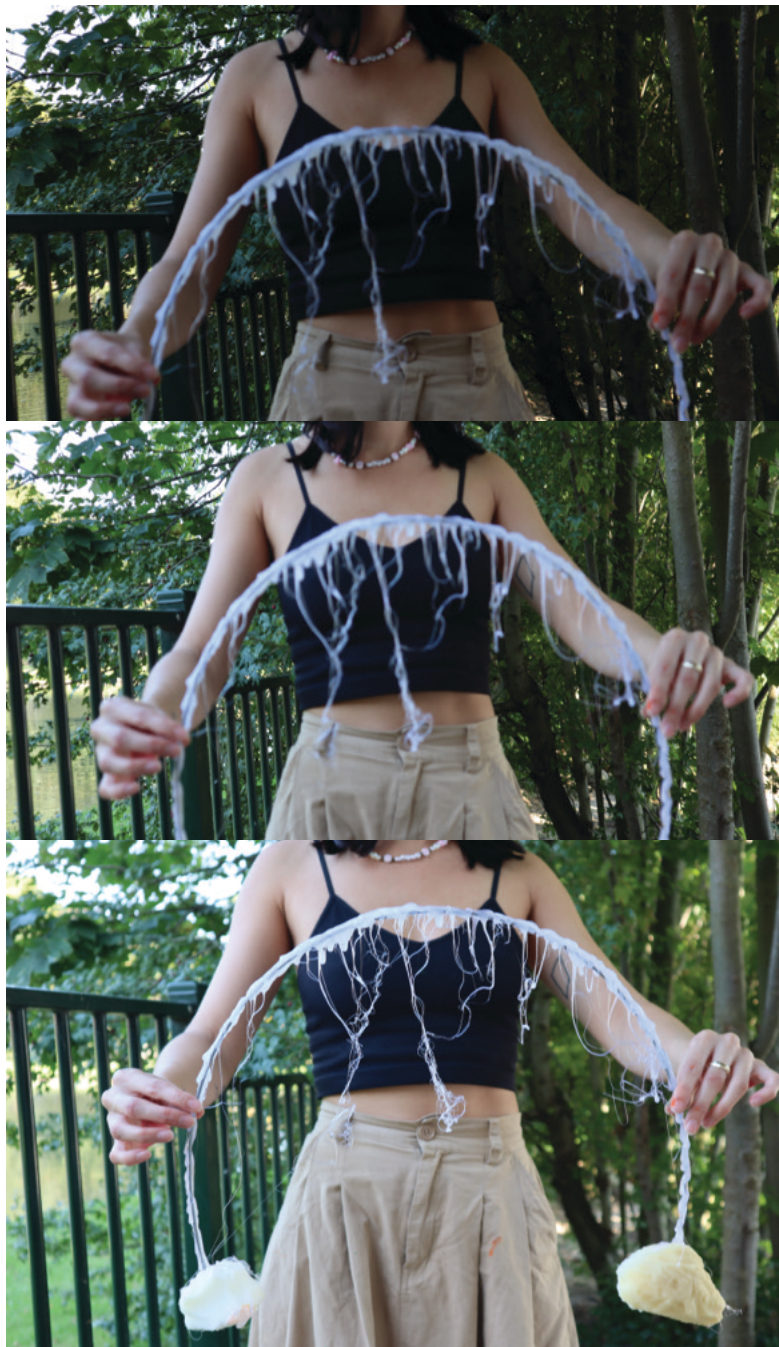
During this period of time latex was central to my own practice. It was used to resemble flabs of textured flayed skin. Latex conforms to the surface it is smeared upon, consequently making the perfect copy, an imitation of the object it was resting upon but deprived of

a form of its own. Putting aside the satisfaction from making new fleshy forms from liquid latex, there is also much difficulty. It is time consuming through the application of the many layers. Whilst waiting for it to dry, there is also an obligation to ensure particles do not get onto the liquid latex. It will stick to surfaces, picking up particles or fold onto itself, making it very difficult to pick apart without ripping.

Sibel approached the material differently. Instead of smoothing it onto surfaces, she would pull strands of semi-wet latex away from their base, letting them suspend in mid-air. Under her handling, the latex seemed less concerned with conforming to surfaces but instead extended itself into space. She also poured it directly onto other materials, often pieces of strings or yarn, forming lines that would connect one surface to another. It was like something to draw through space.

Sibel joined two pieces of foam with a curved wire and let glue drip downward from it. She called it the crying rainbow. The piece was gifted to the atelier and hung there for a while until it got absorbed back into the vortex of materials that atelier never stops reworking.





Photograph by Sibel of me holding her cringing rainbow

WEAVING AS MAKING

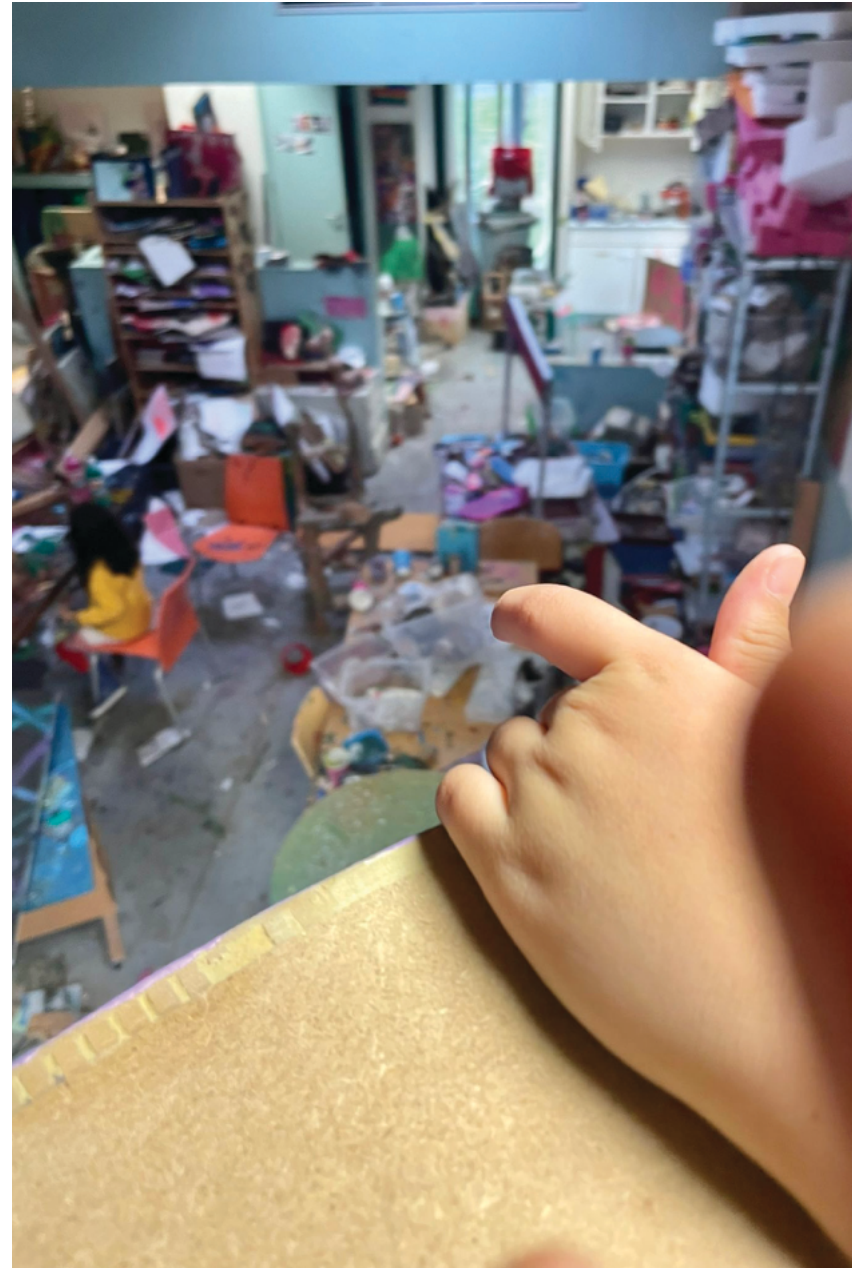
I want to turn to Tim Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment* here, in the shortest chapter in the book called *On Weaving a Basket*. He draws a connection between weaving and growing. Both, he suggests, are processes already happening. The maker is caught up within the material world, working with the forces which are already there.

Ingold drew on Heidegger here, and he argued that we cannot engage in any kind of building activity unless we already dwell with our surroundings. “Only if we are capable of dwelling,” he says, “only then can we build.” (Ingold 2000, 185) You don’t dwell after you build. It’s the dwelling which made building possible in the beginning.

For Ingold, weaving is not a metaphor for making...it is making, in its most honest form. The world of our experience, he writes, is continually and endlessly coming into being around us as we weave. There is no inside or outside to this process, no moment where the weaver stands apart from what is being made. The practitioner works from within a “reciprocal and quite muscular dialogue with the material.” (Ingold 2000, 339) Every movement, as Ingold writes, “grows rhythmically out of the one before and lays the groundwork for the next.” Only if we are capable of weaving, only can we make.

EXPANSION AND MAINTENANCE

At one point, Sibel proposed that we should go higher, that we need to build two additional layers to the tower. As the tower grew vertically, so did its interior worlds. When we proposed this to wolf he let us know that he constructed the tower so that layers could be built within it. His structure had anticipated continuation. With his help, we built these two layers being three meters above the floor and being able to look at the atelier from above.



Photograph by Merey, From the top of the tower



After some months, Sibel became obsessed with cleaning the tower. Cleaning became a form of spatial authorship, like territorial affirmation enacted through care labour.

Acts of upkeep became integral to the life of the space, as a continuation of making. Sibel treated the tower as a space she was responsible for. She made rules like that shoes had to be removed before entering. She noticed immediately when something had been moved. In doing so, she was also learning something about how to be with others, how to hold a space that was hers while also sharing it.



One day, while cleaning the first layer of the tower, Sibel lifted a circular floorboard and exposed the hollow beneath it. It isn't a room, but a shallow cavity between the structural ribs of the tower. She began placing things inside and insisted that I swear never to reveal what was hidden there. This is a form of relation in which what Weiner might call an inalienable possession, something kept precisely because not everything is meant to circulate (Weiner 1992).

Being at the top of the tower, the ceiling pressed close above us. The space between our heads and the roof was narrow but we could still sit comfortably. On top of the tower, we also created works, we would make more webs, both with the glue gun and latex which was like a membrane separating us from the rest of the atelier.

Within this fleshy membrane she glued a broken piece of a reflective red material. The introduction of the red mirror shifted the atmosphere. With the mirror, our own vague faces entered the space.

Bachelard writes that attics and towers are spaces of elevation, where vertical ascent alters one's mode of being. Height introduces distance, and distance invites reflection (Bachelard, 1994, pp. 17–26). As we climbed upward through the layers of the tower, something of this shift became perceptible.

From above, the atelier spread beneath us...

Some latex strands loosened over time, now there are none left. Sticker gemstones that have paint coated over them, blending with the wooden cylinder walls, have changed positions. The landscapes were taken out. Nothing in the tower settled into something definite. Each visit rearranged its interior slightly.

When Sibel first came into kunstlab, she was still finding her way with materials. Over seven months something changed, a willingness to let materials behave unexpectedly, to pull latex rather than smooth it, to build worlds rather than objects. She developed as a storyteller. She became someone with authority over a space. And through that authority, she became someone who could teach about what mattered in the tower. She shaped the space and through shaping it, she became capable of offering something to others. Sibel was being met, in a space that held room for her. A relation grew between us that was less observed and more mutual. Together we were weaving and dwelling.







THE BIG FAT ALIEN CAPYBARA

The story of Jasmin's Big Fat Alien Capybara began during a short break at Kunstlab. During this period, Ariadne Urlus and I hosted smaller sessions with a few children. Jasmin's family has been part of Kunstlab for years, she has several older siblings who attended but slowly stopped coming as they got older. Jasmin is one of two twins, almost inseparable and hard to tell apart, at first. They were quite non-verbal unless you had spent enough time with them to feel comfortable. Jasmine opened up through making. That is where this chapter begins.

There were a lot of things going on within this particular atelier session one day, but I will zoom into my encounter with Jasmin. She sketched a big fat alien capybara, and I helped her sew it into a knuffel. She told me its story, and in short: the alien came to earth, drank a blue potion it mistook for water, grew really, really fat, and returned to Mars. Each retelling exaggerated its fatness, making her laugh hysterically. The story grew with each telling, accumulating with detail and absurdity.

As I helped her sew this big fat alien capybara from her drawing into the knuffel, we first went to choose fabrics. During this, she was learning about different textiles, about what to keep and what to set aside. She was learning to read materials. I taught her about the different fabrics, that stretchy fabric was harder to sew for example. We have a storage room with all kinds of textiles: scavenged, donated and some bought with kunstlab money. We would go through different fabrics, feel them and put them back, taking what we need. This choosing was also part of the learning.

In another kunstlab session, some weeks later, the theme of the atelier was “heel klein of heel groot” (really big or really small). We returned to the story of the big fat alien capybara and jasmin decided her knuffel needed a small bed out, and so we carved one out of foam and glued the pieces together.

She also had a really small rabbit sticker with her that she wanted to make really big. We cut this rabbit up on a large piece of existing cardboard painted with the outline of another child’s figure. Together, we redrew the outline of the big rabbit, painted it, glued on some foam teeth and put handles on the back so she can hold it like a mask.

Vivian Paley is an early childhood educator who worked closely with children’s play stories, treating them not as a way children make sense of the world. She would document these stories and bring them back into the classroom, allowing them to be retold and performed. For Paley, children are “the most innovative researchers” (Paley 2004, 3) she knows and not because they follow a curriculum, but because through fantasy they explain their own thinking. Teachers, she suggests, often interrupt “the curriculum the children have for themselves.” (Paley 2004, 20)

Jasmin was already running her own curriculum. I chose to return to the alien capybara across weeks because I understood that her curriculum was already underway and my role was to stay with it. I didn’t correct or contain the story because I understood that the exaggeration was the thinking.



REPRESENTATION

In another studio session with Jasmine, I explained to her that I wanted to incorporate her story into my project, and asked if she would like to decide how she should represent her work within that. She made some photographs with my camera and the following week, I printed the photographs that she made of the big fat alien capybara and she drew the alien's belongings, its bed, and notes about its story on the hardcopies.

This is often how I work with the children, my collaborators. I bring them their printed images later so that the image can also be consumed on paper for slower consumption. Through this process, the image turned into a prolongation of the making itself, a space where Jasmine could narrate and reimagine her story.

BIG fatalien

KUNST

alienkuns

CAPYBARA

toen
went
to hy
very fast
endangin
to hy truck naar
mars.

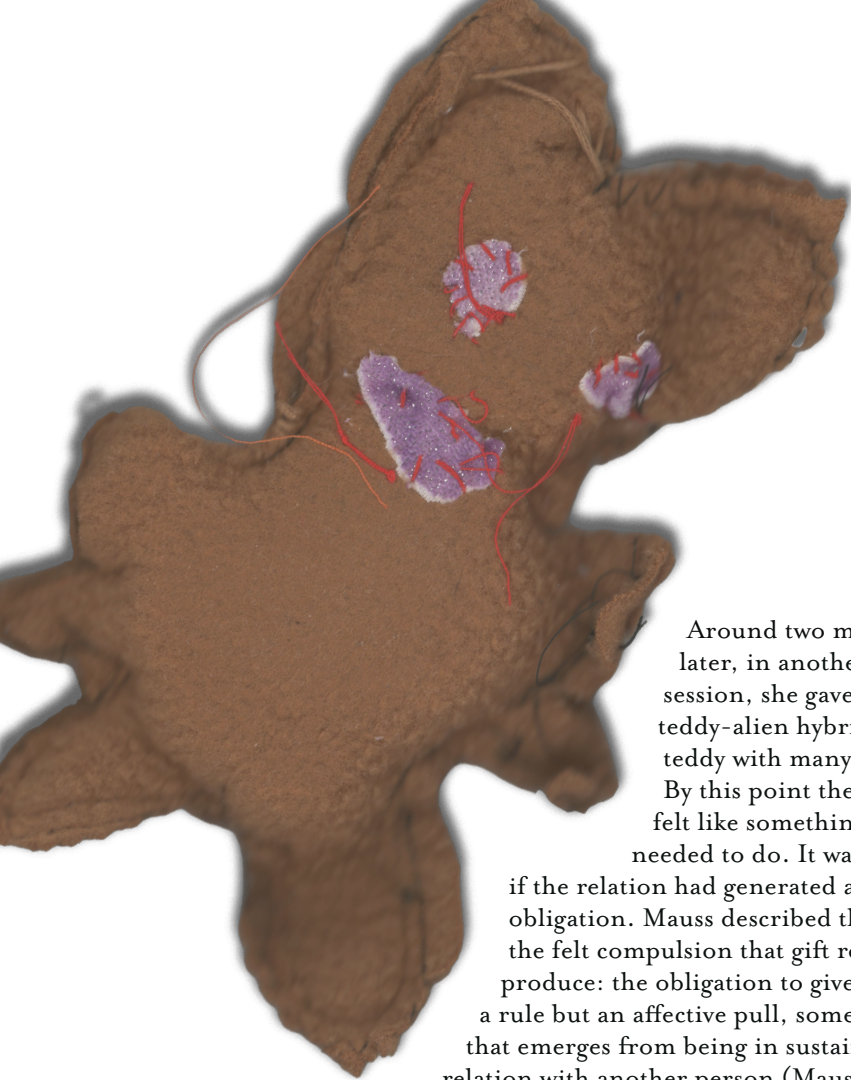
went to
earth esda
een w
geen
denke
was ver
faaten



THE GIFTS

After one of our last Saturdays together, she gifted me a painting addressed to Lotis. It arrived without announcement, carried in and handed over at the end of the session. The gift emerged from our collaboration, it was delayed and impossible to separate from everything that had accumulated between us across weeks of making together.





Around two months later, in another session, she gave me a teddy-alien hybrid, a teddy with many limbs. By this point the giving felt like something she needed to do. It was as if the relation had generated an obligation. Mauss described this as the felt compulsion that gift relations produce: the obligation to give is not a rule but an affective pull, something that emerges from being in sustained relation with another person (Mauss 1990).

Jasmine was following something, a pull toward marking the bond with something made. The teddy-alien hybrid, with its extra arms and legs, felt like the painting she also gave me, again

an extension of herself, offered as recognition of what we had built together. It's a form of socialization, gifting as a way of investing energy in making something for someone you are emotionally engaged with.

Speaking later with Jasmin's mother, I saw more of the bigger picture of what was happening behind the scenes with jasmin (outside of kunstlab). The school had been concerned about non-verbal the twins are in class. They were academically capable, completing their work and getting good grades but they weren't talking. Their mother had filmed them during a session at Kunstlab and shown the video to the teacher as "evidence" of what they were capable of in a different setting.

Some months later, the teacher told her they were talking more, and their mother believes that being at Kunstlab had helped, that the difference of the space, had created different conditions for speech. Something about making together, in this atelier had created different conditions for Jasmine to find her voice. She came in unable to speak easily and left having learned to sew, to choose materials, to annotate her own photographs, to tell a story across multiple sessions, and to give. The gifts were part of how the learning took place where something made, offered and addressed by name.

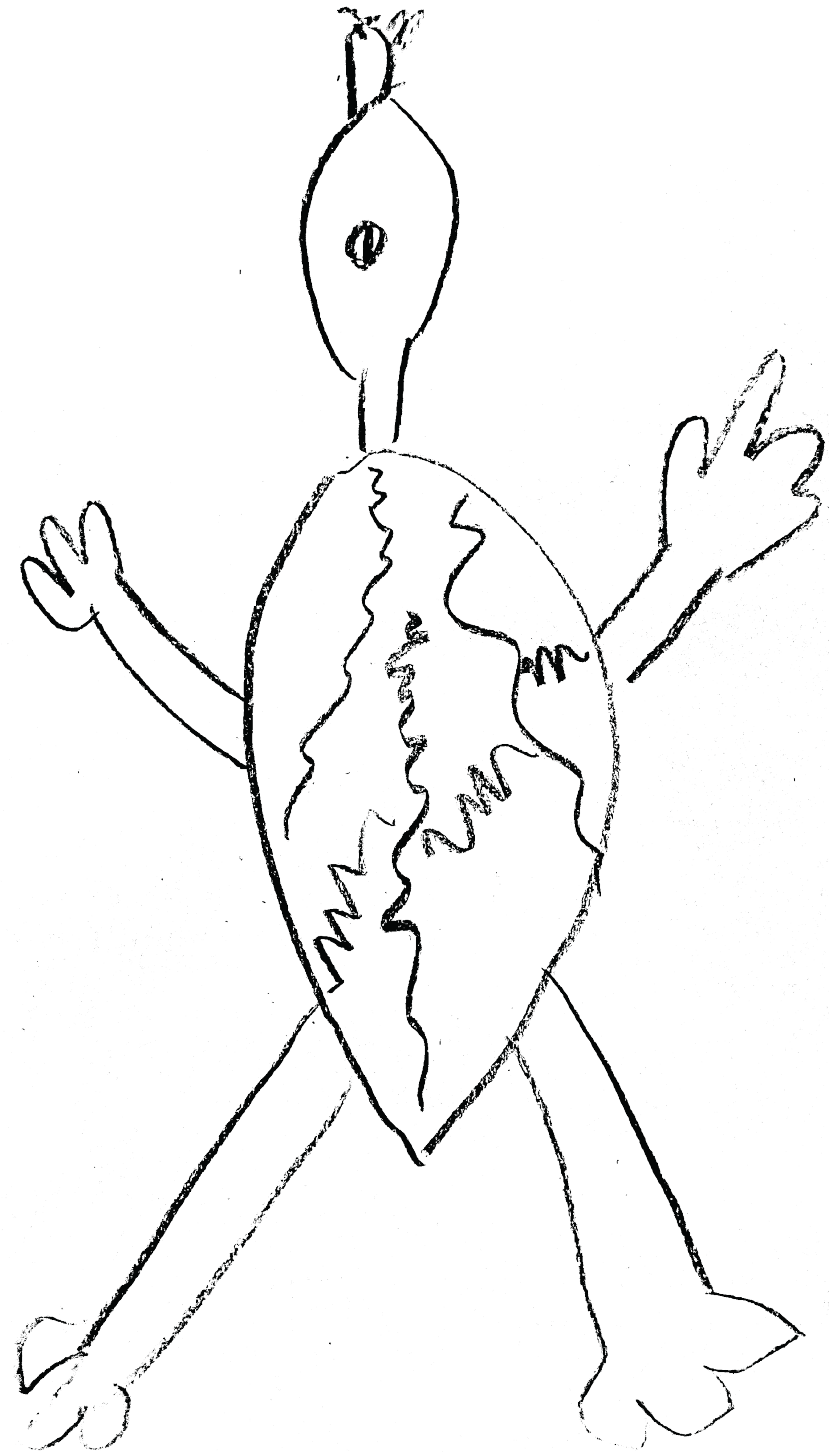
What I could not have predicted was what those conditions would produce. I know I made choices, to stay with her story, to hand her the camera, to come back. I made them because they felt right in the moment, because the space allowed for it, and because Jasmine kept showing me what she needed. The learning happened in the space between those choices and her responses, and neither of us made them alone.

KUZE AND THE SHADOW KNUFFLE

My mutation knuffel has red veiny roots and one eye. The fabric is creamy and pink-ish, slightly fleshy. During *Groot Rotterdam's Ateliers Weekend*, I brought it to Kunstlab alongside the other artists who were showing their work. Kuze saw it and wanted to make one too. The fabric Kuze chose was grey and fluffy. wolf saw this and said that it's like it's shadow.

We stitched, and stuffed it together. I guided the fabric while controlling the pedal, a method I've found helpful for beginners. The process took three hours. Kuze lost focus partway but stayed longer than I had seen before. Over time, with attention from many of us, he has gained confidence. What touched me most was that he wanted to imitate my knuffel...not to copy, but to transform it

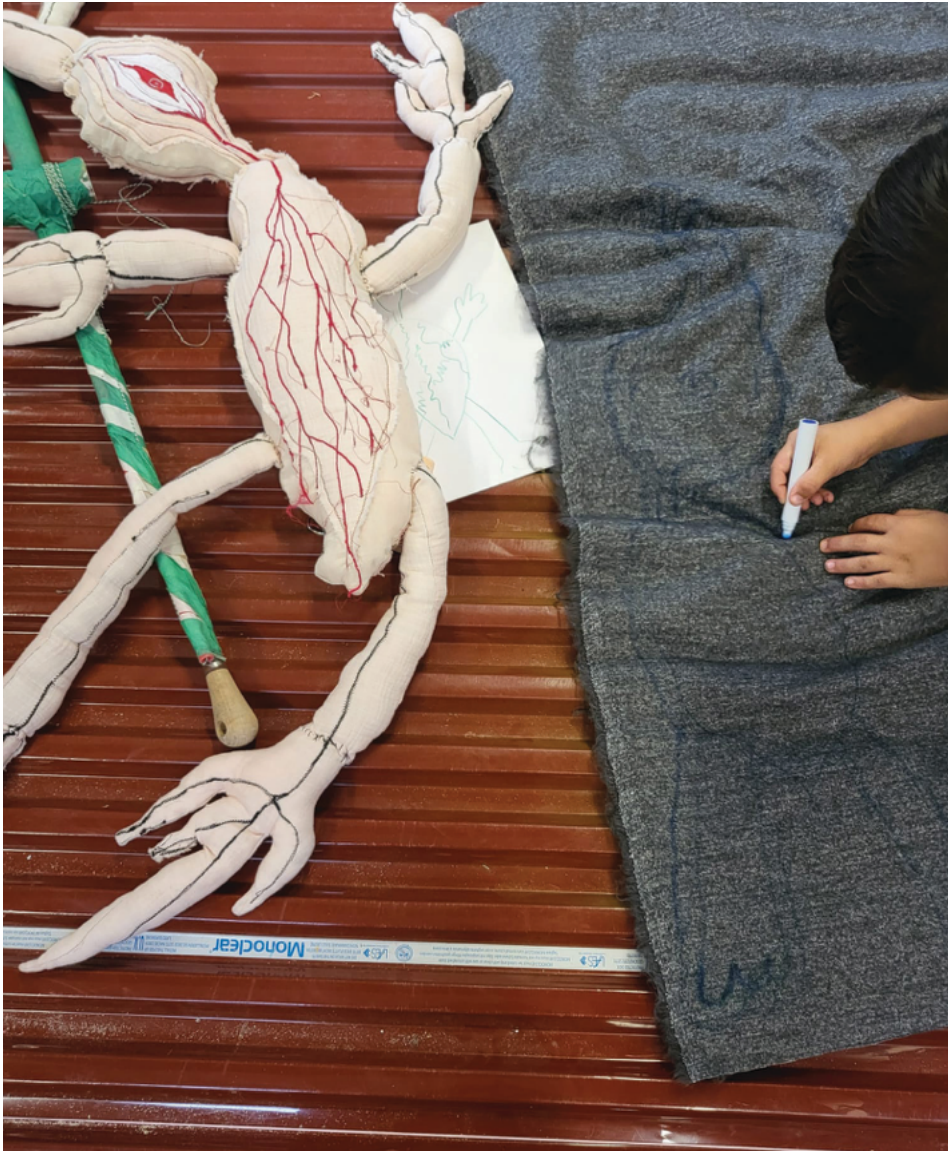
I learned knuffel-making by watching Ariadne, who has made thousands and thousands of knuffels over her many years at Kunstlab. I watched her hands before I understood the machine. That embodied watching is how it passed to me, and now it was passing again, to Kuze. Lewis Hyde describes this as how gifts move: they awaken the desire to pass them on, and as they pass they transform. wolf's shadow remark captured exactly this.



Drawing by kuze

The knuffel Kuze was making was connected to mine but it was becoming something else. In the end he didn't finish it, and he didn't even like it. That matters more than it might seem. This is not skill learning. This is not even really confidence, but from my observations something more important...he learned to stay. To remain in relation with a material, with another person, with a process that was difficult and slow. That capacity to stay with something is a form of learning that formal education rarely teaches and almost never measures. Since Kuze didn't like it, he gave me his shadow. It hangs on my wall at home now - grey and fluffy, one-eyed, unfinished.





Photograph by wolf engelen





Photograph by wolf engelen with drawn interventions by the author

The knuffel has one eye. So does the figure I drew over my own head in the photographs from that session. In photographs taken of Guze and me during a session, I drew over our faces in various ways... mutating, replacing our heads with protruding forms with one eye. How we appear, and how we resist certain forms of appearance, is something the interlude that follows takes up directly ...after this delay section.

DELAY

Returning to Hyde, he argues that a gift cannot be fully received at the moment it is given. A transformative gift requires time, because the receiver must undergo a process of becoming capable of holding and realizing the gifts and then passing it on. Gratitude is a form of work, which is an ongoing engagement that allows the gift to mature. In contrast to market exchange, which closes relations immediately through payment, gift exchange remains open and unfinished until the gift is eventually released through a return. (Hyde 2007) Delay is therefore a necessary condition for transformation.

Gifts often are returned later and meaning often arrives later. My project requires a duration. This is why the atelier is intimate and my work with specific children is long-term. After having now worked at Kunstlab for five years, I do not think I have realized my gifts given to me there after sustained presence. I am still coming to understand these gifts as I grow there, working alongside other artists, which is an experience that I felt fundamentally different from any other educational environments I have ever been in before. The ideas cannot be shared like a school curriculum as the pedagogy only exists in certain conditions. Gifts move on their own timelines. There is often a delay before their effects become visible. This temporal looseness is pedagogically significant. It opposes immediacy.

Delay is a condition of relational learning. This understanding resonates with Ernst Bloch's concept of the not-yet, which José Esteban Muñoz later takes up and reworks in *Cruising Utopia* as a way of thinking about hope methodologically (Bloch 1986; Muñoz 2009). For Bloch, hope is not oriented toward a guaranteed future but toward what has not yet come into being and what remains unfinished or possible. Muñoz draws on this notion to describe hope as something that lives in movement. Gift pedagogy unfolds within a similar temporality. The return of a gift is never assured, nor is its timing.

Delay becomes the space in which futurity resides. Seen from this perspective, delay serves as a horizon within which learning can occur.



...

INTERLUDE

AN INTERLUDE...WHO IS LOOKING?

This interlude turns to how those relations are shaped through visibility. Being seen and concealing oneself are part of how participants negotiate relation within the atelier.

A buffer exists between what happens in the studio and what becomes public. Not everything that is made is meant to spread around. Not every face is meant to be seen.

This, too, is a form of care.

At Kunstlab, this relation to visibility is often negotiated differently. During an end of a kunstlab session, I was busy cleaning up in the atelier and there was this girl behind the tower hidden and out of the way, wearing my textile mask.

I noticed the reflection of this child staring at herself in the mirror of a cabinet behind the tower, hidden. I stopped cleaning for a moment and looked at her looking at herself, and asked if I could make a photo. From a distance, she nodded and met my gaze as I made this digital image.





Amal moving through different masks and forms of self-imaging in the atelier.

Right: mask-making with Jip van der Hek.

Both images are video stills.



Ilayza came in one afternoon carrying an Elsa doll from Frozen. One of those mass-produced Disney dolls...She came into the atelier with this intention: to grab a pair of scissors, and cut away Elsa's hair and face.



Then, she took her own fabric, resembling the colour of her skin, and sewed it over the sunken hollow with fluffy white stuffing. After, she embroidered her own face onto it....or rather one closed embroidered eye.

The doll was then on Ilayza instead. She was refusing the identity offered by the object and replacing it with her own. The cutting came first, she had to unmake the given face before she could make hers. She needed embroidery to finish what she had started. So I taught her.





Ilayza covered her face with a bloody hello kitty foam mask and transformed a printed photograph of herself by repainting and collaging.

NAGA (พญานาค) WITH THE BESTIES

Jaëlla who lived down the street of Kunstlab often came into Kunstlab, orienting her participation around a one-on-one relation rather than the collective space. I wasn't always able to give her this one-on-one as sometimes she would come in late and I would already be working with another child or simply that we did not have enough people in Kunstlab so I would need to keep a more overview of the whole atelier.

A few weeks ago she got excited learning that I was Thai as her "bestie" is also Thai. In a different session, she brought her bestie Chloe, and they came in with a clear intention of making gifts for each other. That was the point of the session. They set up in the corner of the atelier and I went to join them.

During that session, they began painting a shared scene of a typical blue ocean sea scape situated in Thailand. Chloe talked to me about her mother moving to The Netherlands as an eight year old girl, although she dreams of moving back home and tells her of the places there whilst also trying to teach Chloe the language. As we painted, we spoke about the regions that we knew of, me from my memories and Chloe from the stories her mother told her.

As they were painting, we talked about the Naga, a water deity and serpent-like figure in Thai mythology, often described as moving between worlds, between land and water, visible and invisible. In some stories it appears as a protector of rivers and temples; in others, as something more ambiguous, shifting form, emerging and disappearing. It is not always clear whether it is there or not.

I remembered visiting a temple as a child, where enormous dark marks were wrapped around its slowly decaying stone. The legend was that the Naga had coiled itself around it.

As we painted, the story moved between us...but not completely, sharing words that Chloe knew in Thai, me sharing some more, Jaëlla also eagerly wanting to also learn. The scene they painted was similar but not the same: both landscapes, one with the Naga, one without.

For me, what happened in this session is difficult to pin down and name. Earlier in this project, I was hesitant to bring my own heritage into the space. I was cautious, as I described in the methodology, about making cultural or racial identity too legible or too fixed. But Chloe having a Thai mother created a different kind of opening. It's not solidarity and also not shared identity, but we shared bits of language, a mythology, and her mother holding onto something at a distance, just like me.

Back "home" the way we speak, the way we express ourselves, seems to live somewhere else in us. And over time, being here in the Netherlands, trying to assimilate, parts of it become harder to reach. In that session, something of that returned not clearly, but in constellations of core and memories.

This shift in my own position is part of what this encounter makes visible as an a/r/tographic moment. The roles of artist, researcher, and educator did not sit separately. They go together. I was telling a story from my own life, making alongside two children, and attending to what was being produced between us...and all at once.

THE GIFT

At the end of the session, they both gifted their paintings to me. I found myself responding almost automatically, “I should also make you both paintings too, right?”. Chloe nodded, smiled and said, “Yes.” In that moment, the gift did not remain open or indeterminate but began to take on a more structured form of reciprocity. Unlike the other encounters in this project, gifting here organised the encounter from the beginning.

Jaëlla and Chloe arrived already knowing they would make something for each other, but yet in the end the gift found a different recipient than intended. The process remained open even as the gesture of giving was anticipated.

In that moment, the gift also generated a new obligation, between them and me. I had not planned to give anything. But the relation made it feel necessary. The intention to give made how we came together different. But the gift itself moved freely...toward where the relation had actually formed. And something of the Naga passed between us in that movement. It was partial, not entirely visible, finding its way into the paintings and the obligations of giving and receiving.





photographs by wolf engelen

CONCLUSION

This research began from a noticing, that handmade objects children create often do not remain with their makers, and that something pedagogically significant was happening in those acts of making and giving. What it has arrived at is more complicated than that initial observation. The gift has proven to be something with a life of its own that sets its own pace. Not all relations at Kunstlab operate through gift, and the language of the gift can obscure as much as it reveals. To name something a gift is already to make a claim about the relation, and that claim is never without its own asymmetries.

WHAT THE GIFT CANNOT DO

The gift is not a model for pedagogy. It is one way of understanding how pedagogical encounters can develop within practices of making, a relational mode among others and in tension with other systems. If everything that circulates between people were understood as a gift, the concept would lose its meaning. Not everything at Kunstlab is a gift, and not every moment of care or attention carries gift logic.

The encounters described in this project are also not representative of all relations within Kunstlab. They are the relations in which gifting became visible to me and that I decided to zoom in on. Other forms of relation, other kinds of learning, may remain under-articulated within this framework. My framing produces the field I am analysing, and the moments I identify as gifts are not neutral observations. They are shaped by what I find significant, and what I am capable of recognising at this points in time in my practice.

There is also a risk of aestheticising what is in practice complex and sometimes difficult. Relations at Kunstlab can break.

Collaborations can feel strained. There are sessions where nothing coheres, where attention is scattered. I am aware that my writing tends toward what is alive and generative. It is a form of selection, and it forms what the project can claim.

WHO GETS THE ONE ON ONE?

A condition that has made gift relations possible across all the encounters is sustained one-on-one engagement. Sibel and I worked together for months. Jasmin's gifts emerged across weeks of small-group sessions. Kuze's shadow knuffel took three hours of concentrated shared making. In each case, duration and focused attention were what allowed something to multiply.

Furthermore, attention at Kunstlab can often be distributed unevenly, shaped by the dynamics of the space and by my own affinities and capacities. I find myself drawn into certain collaborations more than others, and these are often the ones that continue over time. In the case of Sibel and the tower, my attention became concentrated over seven months and other participants inevitably received less of it. What is made possible through sustained engagement with one person is, at the same time, a withdrawal from others.

I also choose who I want to learn from. This is part of the gift pedagogy. The collaborations that developed were formed because something was being exchanged that felt worth staying with. A child who kept returning and kept showing me something I hadn't seen before. The gift logic runs in both directions.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ART EDUCATION

A handmade gift is not equivalent to a purchased one. In the commodity form, the work that went into making an object disappears behind the finished thing, it appears as if it arrived by itself. Marx describes this as commodity fetishism: a condition in

which social relations between people are obscured and replaced by relations between objects. A handmade gift resists this logic because it keeps those relations exposed. The traces of the person who made it remain, in the fact that it was made for someone specific rather than for anyone.

It is within this that the encounters in this project took place. What art education specifically enabled here was the conditions under which making becomes relational, where the object that results carries the time and the relation inside it. A handmade object keeps that history visible, circulating that relation outwards, and inwards...it keeps moving. wolf, who designed the tower, describes his approach as follows: a good design designs itself, it reveals its possibilities through the relation one establishes with it. Gift pedagogy operates within a similar logic. The conditions are held. What grows within them is not up to us.

What became visible across the encounters is what those conditions can produce. Sibel learned to inhabit and teach through a space she wove. Kuze learned to stay in relation with a difficult process for longer than he ever had. Jasmin found her voice through making and gave what she made. These transformations happened through coming back.

What this might mean for art education beyond Kunstlab I cannot fully answer. Gift pedagogy is not a method that transfers. The encounters emerged through very particular conditions: duration, voluntary return, shared making, and the absence of assessment. However, the questions it raises don't stay inside Kunstlab. What kinds of spaces allow relations to develop slowly enough for something like this to happen? what changes when learning is not organised around measurable outcomes but around sustained engagement, and the possibility of becoming significant to one another through making? These conditions are not unique to Kunstlab. but they are difficult to sustain anywhere that is structured around efficiency and curriculum.

WHAT HAS NOT YET ARRIVED

The gifts described in this project have not all been fully realised. Some are still in motion or still waiting to be passed on, this too is just a condition of what it has been studying.

My position as a pedagogue is not to conserve learning through gift cycles as a way to remain responsive to the complexity of how relations are formed and sometimes strained within the space. That responsiveness, to what is unfinished, to what is still arriving is perhaps the most honest thing this research can offer.

APPENDIX

THEORIES ON GIFT EXCHANGE

I didn't want to interrupt the flow of the conceptualization chapter, which I had removed, so I gathered this information here instead.

The following section engages with key anthropological and sociological formulations of the gift, tracing how exchange, obligation, and circulation have been theorised.

Hyde draws extensively on anthropological examples while bringing the gift into conversation with artistic practice in contemporary capitalist contexts. Hyde writes as a poet and cultural critic, and while his work is deeply attentive to artistic process, his understanding of creativity is not grounded in materially situated, hands-on making in the way the foundation of my own practice is. Nonetheless, his work offers a way of thinking about creativity as something that circulates relationally rather than functioning as property to be exchanged or owned. Hyde will return throughout this project, for example, in his account of delay, in his understanding of how gifts awaken the desire to pass them on.

Much of the foundational scholarship on gift exchange has emerged from anthropology, often through Western frameworks interpreting non-Western social systems. One of the most frequently cited examples in this literature is the Kula ring in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea. In this ceremonial exchange system, shell necklaces and armbands circulate continuously through a wide network of participants across different islands. As described by Bronisław Malinowski, who conducted long-term fieldwork in the region, no single exchange within the Kula is meant to be closed or settled. Within the Kula ring, the value of an object is the relations that it sustains. To hold on to an object for too long, or to interrupt its circulation risks social consequences including gossip or exclu-

sion from future exchanges. Gifts do not belong to individuals in a proprietary sense. Exchange here operates through ongoing social bonds, instead of through monetary equivalence or one-to-one reciprocity.

Annette Weiner's return to the Trobriand Islands complicates this dominant account. In *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea*, Weiner revisits the same communities studied by Malinowski and argues that his focus on the Kula ring mistook a highly visible and spectacular exchange system for a total social logic. Even though the Kula plays an important role in establishing prestige and political alliances among men, Weiner demonstrates that this framework fails to account for the practices through which inheritance and collective identity are maintained. Weiner is explicit that both Malinowski's ethnography and Marcel Mauss's subsequent theorisation of the gift are shaped by male-centred accounts that privilege public ceremonial exchange.

This emphasis obscures the central role of women's practices in maintaining social life as certain forms of wealth were controlled by women. She also coined the terms *inalienable possessions*, where she shows that not all value is meant to circulate. Certain objects must be retained in order to anchor ancestral continuity. Some things must be kept for others to be given. Weiner's intervention is crucial because it unsettles the assumption that circulation is the primary or most valuable form of relationality. Her work complicates exchange-centred theories of the gift and opens space for thinking about relational value beyond movement and reciprocity alone.

Marcel Mauss drew extensively on ethnographic work by anthropologists such as Bronisław Malinowski when writing *The Gift*, which remains one of the most frequently cited and formative texts in discussions of gift exchange. He synthesised multiple ethnographies (Melanesia, Māori contexts, Indigenous North America, ancient Rome, Hindu law) and used them to propose a general social logic

of gifting. The move of going from description to theory is why it became a reference point rather than another anthropological account. He famously articulated the triad of the obligation to give, receive and reciprocate. While different cultures have developed distinct gifting practices, Mauss argues that in many societies exchange was not primarily governed by market logic, but by social relations and collective obligation. In developing his argument, Mauss draws on the Māori concept of *hau*, understood as the vital force or spirit that accompanies a gift. He extracted the *hau* from Māori cosmology and reframes it to support a general theory of reciprocity to illustrate how gifts carry more than material value, maintaining a connection to the giver and generating an obligation to return.

Mauss's mobilisation of *hau* exemplifies how Indigenous concepts were abstracted within Western theory in order to stabilise a universal model of reciprocity. While this move has been widely critiqued, the persistence of felt obligation within gift relations has nonetheless been observed across social and pedagogical contexts. In these settings, reciprocity does not operate as repayment, but as an affective pull to remain in relation. This dynamic becomes especially visible in spaces where exchange is not regulated by price or equivalence.

While these accounts offer a foundational understanding of gifting as a social and relational process, they primarily address the circulation of already-formed objects. I remain attentive to these accounts as ways of tracing how gifting has been understood as a social force across different conditions.

All photographs are by the author unless stated otherwise



Photograph by Enrico, Gift for Merey

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. *Profanations*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books.

Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bal, Mieke. 1994. *Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting*. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International.

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

Biesta, Gert. 2014. *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Blanco, Pablo J. 2011. "Gift Giving and Receiving in Child-Centered Play Therapy: An Ethical Response." *International Journal of Play Therapy* 20 (1): 29–38.

Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Butler, Octavia E. 1987. *Dawn*. New York: Warner Books.

Butler, Octavia E. 1993. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

Ceder, Simon. 2016. *Towards a Posthuman Theory of Educational Relationality*. London: Routledge.

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Fraser, Nancy. 2022. *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It*. London: Verso.

Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions.

Hyde, Lewis. 1983. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.

Irwin, Rita L., and Stephanie Springgay. 2008. "A/r/tography as Practice-Based Research." In *Being with A/r/tography*, edited by Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, Carl Leggo, and Peter Gouzouasis. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

MacLure, Maggie. 2013. "Researching without Representation? Language and Materiality in Post-Qualitative Methodology." *Qualitative Inquiry* 19 (8): 658–667.

Mallard, Grégoire. 2019. *Gift Exchange: The Transnational History of a Political Idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume I. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.

Masschelein, Jan, and Maarten Simons. 2013. *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue*. Leuven: Education, Culture & Society Publishers.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. London: Routledge.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Paley, Vivian Gussin. 2004. *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parker, Rozsika. 2010. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.

St. Pierre, Elizabeth A. 2019. "Post Qualitative Inquiry in an Ontology of Immanence." *Qualitative Inquiry* 25 (1): 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418772634>.

Suwatthanasilp, Imhathai. 2020. "ผลงานของอิมหทัย: ศิลปะจากผมที่ยังมีชีวิต [Imhathai's Work: Living Art Made from Hair]." *a day magazine*, October 8, 2020.

Trinh, T. Minh-ha. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Truman, Sara E. 2021. *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects*. London: Routledge.

Weiner, Annette B. 1976. *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Weiner, Annette B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

