

# IMAGE out of DARKNESS

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Come inside.  
quiet chamber.

Image:

the red of dying blueberry leaves  
soft squish of pine earth.

Hands dialoguing with birch arms  
coaxing in, poking out,  
coaxing in, poking out

a womb,  
erasure by snow.

Slick cold of glassy bounds,  
blurring bodies.

Rocks scratched out of darkness  
into wet heft of blanket green.

Close your eyes.

\*text from Kuvan Kevät catalog

## SUMMARY

This document is a narrative reflection on my past year and a half in Helsinki, Finland, living artistic practices to create a multifaceted master's thesis project that traces concepts of "image" and "darkness."

It begins by telling the narrative of my formative first 6 months in Finland. I reflect on "darkness" as it transfigured from my physical experience in the dark of Helsinki winter, to an internal poverty, and then an artistic concept. I describe my first participatory artwork that was the ground for formulating significant elements of the thesis work.

This first section centers around a long journal entry written during early months testing emergent ideas of using my body as a camera and introduces the influential ideas of David Abram and Susan Sontag.

The next section details the beginnings of the main thesis work, *Silence Chamber*. The intent of this chapter is to answer the where, what, why, and how of this situated woven branch structure, its surrounding environment, and my rituals. This chapter is significant as it reveals the complexity of my first intensely durational, site-responsive work. It begins the embedding of my most vital source: the extensive chamber journal I kept throughout my process.

The most substantial section goes through each of the essential chamber practices: the participatory sensory experiences facilitated with visitors inside the structure. I chose these practices to describe in detail as each supports evolving questions of darkness, image, and perception.

The next section considers the reasoning behind why I refused to photographically document *Silence Chamber* or allow any visitors to do so. It concludes with comparative justification by addressing the work of several other artists.

The final main body section describes the artworks I made for Kuvan Kevät as an attempt to translate the site-responsive work to the university gallery space. I give space for words scribbled in the dark when experiencing my installation as a visitor instead of the artist.

I use the conclusion to identify some core aspects and values in my practice, and imagine their continuation. I end with contemplating what is carried from the process of the thesis work and my ongoing practice of sensory inscription in the ensouled body.

## FACT SHEET

### Forest in Rastila, East Helsinki, Finland:

***Silence Chamber***, 2022-2023, woven birch, aspen, and rowan branches, fallen snow (sometimes melting), on-going visits facilitated for participatory interaction, invitations made with [THIS](#) instruction sheet and set of practices, dimensions intentionally unknown.

This work was also a refusal of photo documentation and is meant to only be encountered through embodied experience or internal images. Visit the chamber at [these coordinates](#) or listen to an imagined journey to the chamber site [HERE](#)

This primary thesis work was an emergent response to the land near where I live and my growing relationship with the site. The chamber is woven from branches fallen from the trees on the site. It merges with the rocks and its shape was determined by preexisting forms. Its state is continually altered by shifting elements of changing seasons. It evolves by people inhabiting it. It is a place to crawl back inside the earth, rest your eyes from visual stimulation and cultivate internal silence. The chamber is a holding space for imaginings or memories to surface or a darkness out of which images can emerge.

### Kuvan Kevät, 6.5-4.6, 2023, 3rd floor K348 in Mylly building of Uniarts Sörnainen Campus:

***Antechamber***, 2023, participatory installation: forest matter, sensory touch-scape, poetic soundscape, dimensions variable. See video documentation [HERE](#), photos [HERE](#)

\*The audio embedded in this document is from this piece, all audio fragments [HERE](#)

***Silent Dialogue***, 2023, woven branch structure for two heads, participatory performance, 100cm x 50cm x 50cm. See video documentation [HERE](#), photos [HERE](#)

**Professor:** Daniel Peltz

**Supervisor:** Georgie Goater

**Examiners:** Hanna-Reetta Schreck and Teemu Lehmusrusu

\*All participants who have been referenced or quoted in this text have granted their permission for their names and thoughts/experiences to be published

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Thanks to organic paper master Irma Tonteri for the generous help; my awesome chamber building assistant Pirita Putkonen; BA students Viljamaria and Mahmood for the building help; Raphaël Beau for being a constant loving support, voice coach, and sounding board; friends that offered generous feedback, assistance, editing help and encouragement: Doğa, Lola Barraud, Salla Ville, Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen, Samuel Putkonen, Heini Korhonen, Ben McGrath, Nicole and Corey Janz; mentors Sarah White and Michael Grubb; Azra Tayyebi for courage and inspiration to step into the darkness; Don and Laura Coffin, my ever supportive and open-minded parents for following my journey with immense love.

Thanks to everyone that visited the *Silence Chamber* and brought a rich presence– you all have been feeding my ideas and evolving the work. So many of the words I have written would not exist without sharing these experiences with you.

And lastly, thanks to the birch trees next to S-market for the constant graceful greeting; the forest of Rastila- all the trees, branches, birds, blueberry bushes, rocks and so on that upheld, formed, and inspired my work.

## PREFACE

This degree paper is my attempt to weave together the narrative of my evolving questions that first emerged from the concept of “darkness.” It will begin with describing early practices and experiments that led to the main thesis work *Silence Chamber* in Rastila forest. It will follow with the two artworks which were alternative translations of the forest site work, created for Kuvan Kevät. I will relate concepts of the “darkness” and “image” to my reasoning for refusing to photographically document *Silence Chamber* and contrast this to the work in the exhibition space.

When writing I will follow a chronological path, but ideas are not linear and so at any juncture, you may branch along a Kairos axis to make connections between paragraphs that have been forced apart by this top-down, structured document (suggested paths are indicated by \_/ ). When you see the word “IMAGE” you are meant to read it as an action, prompting you to let the words elicit a mental image. Each is a word-painting of an embodied memory produced by my personal sensory encounters. You may consider them as an alternative to embedded pictures. You may try reading them out-loud.

Every dated text in italics is from my *Silence Chamber* journal (the practice of journaling is expounded on in appendix I pg. 58). At other junctures there will be links to audio fragments. These texts were inspired by entries in the journal and were performed and recorded for my installation *Antechamber*. Using spoken word was inspired by indigenous oral traditions and my interest in creating a mythology of site that is passed through verbal telling. Photographic documentation is tangential, as what seeing it produces is a question of my research. For this reason, most photographs are linked to make their revealing an intentional act.

I will note that belief in God is apparent in my text. However, I intentionally rarely reference God using the name “God” to be sensitive to the baggage that comes with this word. I also often find it ineffectual for the characteristics of the Divine I wish to communicate. For that reason, you may come across other words capitalized– like Source, Mind, and Reality –to imply an encompassing entity or fundamental power/intelligence. You will find the sense of an outermost limitless limit, or a holding space like I relate to *Silence Chamber*. I will not state any specific beliefs as I feel what comes through my artistic practice is the best explanation of my faith and spirituality. For me, to believe is to practice and to live “as if.” Belief is perhaps a making manifest through attention.

# 1. INTO THE WEAVE

## 1.1 Into the Darkness

I had prepared myself to survive the darkness of Finland by making friends with “darkness” as a concept to inspire my work. Now here in the dark shiver of January, after several years of artistic practice performing to camera, I had no desire to pick-up this photographic apparatus. For several months I lived in the dim of a hibernation dream-state. Darkness began to permeate my state of being, urging me to reckon with it both personally and artistically.

I had purged and packed up my life in the US and moved to a country real only in my 2 years of dreaming about it. I moved from the humid, hot sun of Tennessee, to the cold grey of Helsinki in January. I was plunged into a personal kind of darkness by the harsh contrasts of culture and climate. Laying aside the potential of all that my life was enmeshed in, all that had reliably fed me for the past three years, required a certain death. Like a plant pulled up and left to wilt and die in the sun, I made space in the ground in hopes for a life closer to what my soul longed for. But why had I chased this ground of opportunity? For what purpose did I strive to make artwork? All artistic vision was sapped and I wrestled more with finding myself in this visionless-ness than with the diminished dose of daily sunshine.

During my third week in Finland, I met a woman who is blind during a church community fellowship. I remember being caught by the tangible strength of Azra’s soul and her fierce openness. Questions began spilling out of me: “how do you experience art?” I was suddenly mortified that for most of my career I had referred to myself as a “visual” artist, but if this were true then my new friend couldn’t directly experience my artwork. This reality struck me not so much as a grievance to her, but to me as the one disadvantaged without any real way to share with her. My whole identity was wrapped up in creating meaning through artwork dependent on sight to engage it. The matter hit me more acutely when she said, “it’s not me with the handicap, but all you who are sighted because you require constant illumination.”

With my camera seemingly buried with the plants hibernating under the erasure of snow, and my visual art images dissolving into imagining a sightless reality, what was left to pick up?

I fought my existential visionless-ness as an unwanted absence, as if something went missing because right in the middle of my path someone turned out the lights. This negative perspective manifested in a perceived absence of resources I felt I needed to make my work. Slowly, through the wise counsel of my professor and a mentor, I began to embrace this state, this darkness, as the very materiality of my next work and to recognize the abundance

surrounding me. The darkness became a tremendous opening, an abyss of potentiality through which my next work could emerge.

I began to see internal darkness as a valuable and rare state of poverty. I stumbled upon the words, “God himself had to come to nothing in order to say anything.”<sup>1</sup> I started thinking about my own “coming to nothing,” how the bereaving process of my move was a necessary descent in pursuit of saying something with my art and life. I began to see my lack of desire to pick up my camera as a signpost to direct the evolution of my artistic practice. If the Divine had to be stripped of heaven-bound divinity, what might be the highest kingdom of my cultural heritage as a visual artist? – the IMAGE. But how to become poor of images? And how to make artwork that doesn’t depend upon the privileged sense of sight?

## 1.2 Dialogue with Darkness

*When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.*

*When your vision has gone,  
no part of the world can find you.*

*Time to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes  
to recognize its own.*

- David Whyte<sup>2</sup>

Our culture is abundantly rich in images. Saturated by the visual, our eyes are constantly stimulated with a barrage of strategically composed shapes and colors, and far away realities indexed into digital pixels. For several years, I have felt the taxing toxicity of posting and scrolling on Instagram. The plunge of my move allowed me to finally release myself from this platform’s tether. The deafening visual noise sapped my desire to add to it. Yet, I continued to take pictures on my phone as a way to document my new life and share it with friends and family back home.

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<sup>1</sup> Source unknown, quote I wrote in my journal

<sup>2</sup> David Whyte, from “Sweet Darkness” from *The House of Belonging*, (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press, 1997), *On Being* 12/12/2016. <https://onbeing.org/poetry/sweet-darkness/>.

Sometime in February, I picked up Susan Sontag's *On Photography* and read: the invention of the camera has heroized vision.<sup>3</sup> I realized the phone camera has propagated vision to become an appendix of the body as if technology transmogrified our hands into more eyes. Even the way we use our eyes seems to have evolved into a photographic seeing<sup>4</sup>, a concept introduced to me by Susan Sontag (see quotes in appendix V pg. 66). I began to notice how I have the urge to prey upon every moment, seeking to entrap it into immortal digital data. I noticed those around me were also often caught up in packaging the present to try and carry it into the future, instead of inhabiting the present in their body. It seemed my culture chases the image as if it were reality. ( *Refusal of Documentation* pg. 40)

*Silence is one of the great victims of modern culture. We live in an intense and visually aggressive age; everything is drawn outward toward the sensation of the image...that which is deep and lives in the silence within us is completely ignored.* – John O'Donohue<sup>5</sup>

For many years I had been contemplating creating a visual silence chamber: a space where people could rest their overstimulated eyes. A space where we might let go of the need to serve our visual culture that is structured around the power of sight and capitalizes on an economy of attention. I wanted to demote sight and raise up the other senses in an attempt to dismantle habitual modes of image capture and instead create embodied memories. What if darkness, an utter stripping away of sight, was the needed space for this kind of silence?

Silence can easily be boxed into ideas of peacefulness, quiet or natural sounds, slipping into categories of another thing or quality of space to be acquired. The silence that I was after was more of this poverty that I had been experiencing– an emptiness, like the space of a hungry stomach or ungrasping hands. Underneath the false guarantee and appeasement of material possessions, is a state of deprivation – a naked existence that's only true provision is trust. We come into this world with nothing and we take nothing when we depart.

Now, in the frigid January of Helsinki, winter spoke to me as earth's period of this silence as poverty. The winter season is when the natural cycle of hibernation strips everything to its core and the cold freezes the activity and motion of growth. What was once fluid and moving becomes solid and still. What was visually complex becomes simplified by the white elision of the snow's covering. Everything is a blank slate hungry for impressions. Every day I would go for a walk and notice how the few hours of sunlight and grey skies dim the visual atmosphere and soften edges. I had to trust along with the earth that spring will come in due time. Winter

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. (New York, NY : Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1977), 89

<sup>4</sup> Sontag, 1977, 89

<sup>5</sup> John O'Donohue. *Anam Cara*, (New York, NY : Cliff Street Books, 1996), 108

is a necessary season of privation for humble opening, a barren ground of surrender so when the time comes, nourishment can be imparted. The poor are the ones with space to receive something and the stillness to remain with open hands for when the gift arrives. If we don't surrender into the poverty of silence, how can we hear the messages embedded in the earth, in the patterns of reality– the fundamental structures of existence?

**IMAGE:** Desert of white interrupted by incidental divot formed by dance of a single leaf  
dangling erratically from a delicate branch. Branch emerged from somewhere incomprehensibly under,  
*varpu* three pronged and head-heavy with leaf, leaning into snow. Snow's erasure momentarily toned by slight shadowing of carved crater.  
It is not windy, yet somehow the leaf flutters continuously, then sinks, skipping beat, and re-throttles in altered rhythm. A spastic crescendo and then continued in a slightly different register. Leaf somehow tuning with itself, tuning with invisible animator, with eye.

\**varpu*= Finnish for twig

I have almost always made pieces that have been fully formed in my imagination. For the first time, I decided to create a piece that I knew nothing about. All I knew was that I had an insatiable desire to make a space pitch-dark. So, I dived into the resources readily at hand and leaned into a state of receiving in the unknown. In May, I turned out the lights in the Vapaan Taiteen Tila bunker space and sealed off every little leak of light until it became a pitch-dark passage. Thus emerged the experimental work *Dialogue with Darkness*. For almost two hours I moved, hummed, and felt my way through the bunker space in a sightless existence. With no ability to see my hand in front of my face, I felt my body had become immaterial. I invited classmates to pilgrimage to this liminal space and join me with an "offering" (a song, poem, prayer, question, sound, or simply silent presence) to enter into dialogue with the darkness. Darkness provided a physical environment to begin to dissolve the ego by its visual dissolution of the body's outline. How might we meet darkness not as something terrifying and handicapping, but as a friend that opens us up to the internal landscape of our souls and the spaces of encounter where our souls become enmeshed? Enveloped equally in the thick atmosphere of blackness, we encountered each other as imageless creatures.

I had no preconception about what would happen. What transpired was surprising and exciting. I knew I now needed to build a permanent visual silence chamber in the forest, where

darkness could meet the essential aim of my work– to remerge with the earth in poverty, in the holding space of silence. It was time to close my eyes and devote myself to listening amongst the trees. ( / The Silence Chamber pg. 18)

### 1.3 Cannot be Captured

#### [AUDIO: fragment 30](#)

During the months before building the chamber, I traced methods of image making from how we use our phone camera, back to primal methods using the body. How might my body be a camera, a wondrous technology that I can exercise? Using the metaphor of the camera proved useful, though later, I recognized this made the body out to be another capturing device, when my aim was the animal self with innate corporeal superpowers.

In art making, when I relied on the camera as the constant mediating eye between me and my subject, I was constantly interrupted by navigating this technology. The subject of my photo documentation became a flattened object, a visual symbol to serve my artistic agenda. Now, with only the breath of space between, there could be an uninterrupted conversation between my body and the body of a tree. I was no longer preoccupied by composing a frame where the aim of beauty often drowned out relationship.

I began to question my reflex to take pictures on my iPhone in daily life. For what purpose did I capture these images? Sometimes to share with a friend or as a visual notetaking. But so often it came from a place of anxiety; a need to hurry past something and the fear of missing out. I came to identify the narrative in my mind as “don’t stop for too long, there’s not enough time, you can process and enjoy later.” So, the phone snapshot was a placeholder, always waiting for me to catch up to it, to reassume presence in my body. Time was framed as a material good always in scarcity and the digital photo claimed to redeem it.

It seemed the camera had stolen the autonomy of my sensorial body and given me an appendage that reinforced cultural narratives of point-based chronological time formulated on the demand for productivity. I felt the need to reclaim my body with the same mechanisms with which the camera seized its power and to recenter myself in internally tethered time. Here is an account of my first experience testing out these ideas ( / Practice Sharing pg. 38):

*February 26<sup>th</sup> 2022- My phone dies in the cold so the temptation is eliminated. What is it that compels me to take a photo? ... When I look back at a photo I am happy to see it again mostly*

*because it jogs the memory of an experience– the entire dynamic of the encounter: how I was feeling, who I was with, and all the qualities of that day. But almost never about the visual details of the image itself. My iPhone snapshot is an anxious shorthand for memory storage.*

*Before my phone died, I took a picture of my shadow next to a tree in the late day sun –long. I can see it in my mind but faintly, flatly. What will I do with this digital file? Possess it. Be sure it gets saved to my laptop and my laptop is backed up to the cloud.*

*There is an elegantly shaped branch emerging out of the snow covering. I pause. I'm aware now of the distance I choose. I move my "lens" closer– my eyes trace its shape. The concentration is like burning or incising lines into my eye with a sharp pencil. I see one part at a time, gradually covering the surface like a scanner. I realize taking a "photo" with my eyes could just mimic the mechanism of a camera. I could stand at a safe distance and focus my eyes fixed on a singular subject letting my vision blur everything around it like a shallow aperture. At times this might be a survival skill- to be able to focus on an individual tree and identify its species, or to hone in on a task or prey (food or foe). But to take a photograph with my bare eyes and to really internalize an entire image, requires movement more like a video camera because reality is 3-dimensional and sensory. I step closer and crouch down, turn my head and zoom in. My frame is limitless. I cannot neatly decide where my image ends because peripheral vision subtly fades edges.*

*Next, I encounter a puddle turned ice in a sea of snow reflecting the gentlest icy soft blues. There are two small delicate branches sticking out of it in the center. I am held in reverie at the immense beauty and let my eyes wander in absorption. Gradually they drift to include the majestic pines at the far away edge of the forest and a ski path directly behind. I squat down to be more at eye level with my branch friends and stay there for what feels like a very long time. There is no light-prescribed exposure duration. Exposure– how wonderful that it's me who's being made sensitive to the elements instead of hiding behind a camera. And this is not a meditation, I can be appropriately distracted and curious– swiveling my head to look at the skiers passing by in the expanse of snow or listening to the children with their parents walking near the forest's edge. All of this peripheral activity becomes part of my image memory.*

*I take off my gloves and place my hand on the ice. The dry pink of my skin next to the wet sheen of the blue ice. I bow by necessity, to reach my lips to the ice. I press my tongue and taste wet cold. My lips burn for some time after and this intensifies my looking, seeing now with lips that have tasted the glory of the subject. And yet even after all this sensory inscription and stillness, the scene is so overwhelmingly magnitudinous, rich and complex.*

*It cannot be captured.*

*Sensory presence of my body camera fails as does the mechanical device. There remains in me something frustrated, unfulfilled. And yet shouldn't I be glad? If it cannot be captured then I do not need to fear its imprisonment. The power of animate presence of the sensuous earth will always remain free and mysterious, incomprehensible divinity. May I always be a small, humble, and momentary witness.*

*But in the moments of attentive awareness that allow an encounter with the Divine manifest, in my exposure (even if frustratingly incomplete) there is an exchange. I sense a mutual feast. I chew for the rest of the day on my memory of these ice encircled branches in all of their facets— the sensations of cold that echo in my body, the sounds of the birds, skiers slashing the snow, my feet crunching. The depth and breadth of this sensorial-burned image allows me to move in it and keep feasting. I don't have to pull out my phone and scroll to access it. It is there, sinking into my insides, working on me, nourishing me. (/\_ What is Carried? Pg. 53)*

These experiences led me to feel that inscribing images in the body is more of a dialogical dance. Dialogue is generative. It opens us up to new perspectives and ways of seeing, not as we might achieve with a camera, but whole-bodied cognition where a narrative begins to form in the space between subject and subject.

In May, I experimented with practices to encounter artworks situated in my body instead of relying on a phone camera. I went to an exhibition at HAM and lingered with the artworks in an effort to come back into time as a narrative continuum. I write:

“As long as a photo remains detached from our bodies, contained within a phone and not the living medium of our body, it is dead. Viewing something with our eyes, instead of mediated by the camera, captures something we encounter through remembering which occurs, as Icon Belting says, by “first disembodying [the images] from their original media and then reembodying them in our brain.”<sup>6</sup> Our ability to remember isn't reliant on the image file on our phone camera, but through a process of transfer from the physical medium to the living medium of our body. ...The event of encounter [is]...an activation of our imagination, where ...The image continues to work on us as we also transform it in our minds. ...The camera has storage and recall, but it is only memory that has personal sensitivity and depth.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Belting. “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology.” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 302–19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/430962>.

<sup>7</sup> Alyssa Coffin. “Experiments in Viewing: The Dialogical Dance of Art that “Happens”.” *Mustekala*. September 10th, 2022. <https://mustekala.info/experiments-in-viewing-the-dialogical-dance-of-art-that-happens/>

I was reading *Spell of the Sensuous* at the time and finding guidance in the philosophies of David Abram. I was especially impacted by his idea of a reciprocity of perception (\_/ see Refusal of Photo Documentation pg. 40). In June, I taught a workshop about using the body as a receptor (\_/ see Practice Sharings pg. 38) and performed a 30-minute text where Abram's ideas are woven throughout. Here are some excerpts:

What if, "perception is a continuous event between my body and the body of other beings,"<sup>8</sup> (and then I write) a dialogical dance where you cannot say who is doing the seeing and who is the object being seen.

Do you feel it? You are not just the seer, you are being seen. ...This tree ...is perceiving me...is perceiving you...

Maybe perceiving is a reciprocal event. Maybe this tree wants to share in this moment. Maybe there is value in sharing what I see with the subjects of my seeing. There is an entire nonhuman world of relationships worth cultivating through image sharing. And these images are sensuous.

...With the boundaries of a frame, removed. I cannot consume with productive focus. The expanse of my body's perception is caught up in this matrix of relationships, every space between activated so that there is no front or back. I can no longer be certain where one thing ends and another begins.

...What if I were a receptor like a camera is sensitive to light? How might I take in not just through my eyes or mind but the whole of my sensuous being? What if my intimate exposure is required for illumination? What if our body is the most sensitive, high-resolution i-phone camera. These flesh and bones, a wondrous technology. Image capturing and sharing by memorizing, remembering and forgetting. Forgetting and remembering...

### **Remembering and forgetting**

By November, I had memorized all 30 mins of this evolving text as embodied spoken words and participatory movements. I resolved to let the audience witness me struggling to remember and bear with me in the uncomfortable pauses of silence. I was inspired by attending a performance which I reflect on after having the performer visit my work in the forest:

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<sup>8</sup> David Abram, actor. *Becoming Animal*. Peter Mettler and Emma Davie, directors and writers. 2018

November 9<sup>th</sup> - Staffan is actually a book. His name is Fahrenheit 451. He is Swedish. He is a living book, one of many in the library called "Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine."

*"People learn books by heart in order to preserve them for the future...Books are read to remember and written to forget. To learn a book by heart is in a way a rewriting of that book...There is nothing final or material to achieve, the practice of learning a book by heart is a continuous process of remembering and forgetting. ...What do we bring with us for the future? Not through understanding by analyzing, but from repeating it again and again and letting the book or poem come towards you, you towards it...when you memorize a book, it's not just about the story... it's the words, the rhythm, it is something more abstract... a little treasure we carry around in us, something to go to."*<sup>9</sup>

*I ponder how this is similar to my intention with storing images in the living medium of the body by using the senses as a receptor. Maybe I'm actually demanding of my eyesight and of all my senses, a sort of memorization process. To inscribe something inside you to be a living image, you must trace its every detail over and over not just with your eyes but with your fingertips and nose and mouth... Even now with this journal I question whether I write all of this only because of a frantic need to capture and the reassurance of knowing it will be recorded here, that I cannot forget. but to later read and memorize what I have written here would be to store inside myself a treasure to carry with me.*

*And it will be about remembering and forgetting. The living medium of the body is both a wondrous technology and problematic, temporal and limited. And it's not just about memorizing this image that now you can see in your mind like a story, like Staffan sees a book; rather it's the way the branch curves, the damp cold of the ground, and how your stomach was clenched in anxious anticipation that day. It's the flow of everything touching - air and sky and trees behind it - and how you move your body to inscribe rhythms inside of you.*

How often do we look closely to remember and take a photograph to forget?

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<sup>9</sup> Mette Edvardsen, et. al, *Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine: A Book on Reading, Writing, Memory and Forgetting in a Library of Living Books*. Mousse Publishing, 2020

## 2. SILENCE CHAMBER

[AUDIO: imagined journey to the silence chamber site](#)

*Sensory perception, here, is the silken web that binds our separate nervous systems into the encompassing ecosystem.*<sup>10</sup>

### 2.1 Become like a rock

[AUDIO: fragment 18](#)

In September, I moved to Rastila in east Helsinki by chance of a HOAS placement. In October, I began to build the visual silence chamber in a nearby forest. This was a way to build relationship with the land I was calling home, and connecting my apartment home to this forest home. Choosing to root my thesis in a place that I go to repeatedly was an intuitive decision to practice this repetitive looking, lingering, and memorizing that had been building in me. A large blank-paged notebook and a pencil became my documenting device. I made marks with my hand to form letters and lines to sketch what I saw or remembered seeing (see appendix I pg. 58 for journal images). One of my first entries in the journal begins with: *The process journey*. Here are the words I scribed about finding and settling on a site:

*Scouting: How do you know a spot is right?*

*How do you choose a site?*

*Did the site choose me?*

*When native peoples first ventured on a new land, how did they decide to stop and stay in a place? Choose to build on a site? What was it that compelled them? Perhaps like me they wandered over the same ground for many days, making note of natural resources, where the ground sloped and where rocks could provide a good fortress. They too perhaps were arrested by beauty – an unexplainable moment in a landscape where light conducts the composition of trees, rocks and underbrush just so everything shimmers with a certain magic. It feels that in these places the very elements are thin, less physical, more porous to let in the underlying dance of light particles of Divine animation.*

*The site beckons to me. Once I've seen it, I cannot get it out of my mind, the place where my imagination plays.*

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<sup>10</sup> David Abram. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 134

*On the day it is time to decide and begin building, I let this beckoning guide my body through the forest. Not remembering how exactly to get to any of the locations I was considering, I intuitively wander, trusting this process of being compelled at each crossroad in a flash of unexplainable tug. It feels like falling – when I arrive I know because I don't want to move, I feel solid ground and suddenly the desire to go down more unexplored paths, and discover what else might be out there, vanishes. All at once there was only ever one place, my curiosity turns towards deep time layers...*

To stay is to acknowledge there is more here than I can (yet) see.

To stay is to become like a rock in the quick current of our mobile culture. To become like a rock is to attend.

## **2.2 Site of Attention**

### **[AUDIO: borders](#)**

*November 1<sup>st</sup> - I read in the news how Finland will build a partial wall on the Russian border. For control. For security. I wonder where the material for the wall will come from, if the earth groans in relinquishing its source metals. And where will the blueberry bushes go?*

Rastila is a predominantly immigrant suburb and along with some of east Helsinki has a reputation of being unsafe. Far from city-center, it is a hybrid urban/built and natural environment, slipping back and forth between forest and apartment buildings. There is a beautiful enmeshing of sea-side habitats, children's play forts, and human infrastructure.

*November 7<sup>th</sup> - "What does it mean for me to build a fort amongst the primitive play forts of my own species? Why do humans have a habit of building structures even when they provide no shelter or protection? Are they spaces for imagination? Where does this impulse in children come from? What are the instincts of my species in a forest habitat? When art is public, when art is not labeled art, when it is vulnerable to other humans, animals and weather, when it is lived and ephemeral... An artwork built outside on public land is also boundary-less (like picking berries). There is no frame or white wall or roped off area to show where the art is and where it ends. There is nothing to protect it, nothing to claim it untouchable, to say "mine" or "Art." What I build is a stick fort, it is sticks woven, it is branches from trees, it is fallen limbs of the very trees that stand tall and watch me. Any human or animal may crawl inside when I am*

*not there. To them, I will be the mystery builder, some distant god. Are they grateful? Or do they inhabit it as their own... treat it carelessly?*

My site cannot so simply be named “forest.” This becomes increasingly clear each time I make the walk from my HOAS apartment building to the large rocks where I weave sticks between. There is no place where I can definitively say the forest site has begun. A site defines the ground that holds the chamber structure or the event of me building it. And I have sited the chamber between two rocks. I have given something that was once a vision in my imagination, a physical manifestation in a locale. If a site’s borders are determined by its events, then perhaps the site starts and ends (or returns) at my apartment. This is the place where I think chamber, write chamber, and put on and take off layers of warm clothes and boots to come and go, to and from— all in tethered proximity to the heart of the site: the chamber. For me the site has become all that is expanding out from the heart in widening circles, like the quick ripple of rings in water. The relationship to the word “sight,” suggests a “site” is everywhere/anywhere one gives attention. And sight occurs in many more ways than with eyesight. How do I cultivate a site of attention?

### **2.3 The Weave of Unknowing**

Living the vast concept of “darkness” in a forest ecosystem and surrendering my process to its seasons, led to possibilities slipping through my fingers, numerous like sand. To try and singularly grasp any one emergent concept or direction would be foolishness. For any reader interested in all that grew out of the silence chamber and forest site, you will have to wait to read my future book. Here, I will attempt to summarize.

I was interested in making an artwork that was living and evolving from the moment the idea came into my head and began to take shape in my imagination, to its being a structure merged with the landscape and enduring the changes of seasons. My aim was to build a dark chamber big enough for 1-2 people to provide visual silence; weave branches between rocks to make a frame; fill the frame with small branches; apply clay to seal and make dark (hope it works). My requirements for the site were a lot of fallen branches, rocks for support, and a sloping ground so that entering requires crawling slightly underground to get up and into the frame.

In November, I found clay nearby. Pirita, my assistant, and I raced against the dropping temperatures. It rained nearly every day and our hands slipped on the slick wet of bark as we heaved and tugged branches through tight pathways. The buckets of clay waited like patient

cargo ships on the sidelines. In late November, I had to take a few days off for travel. When I returned, the first snow had come and the clay was frozen solid.

It is not easy to let go of a vision for an artwork, but in this case, I remember that it wasn't the loss of possibility to apply clay and seal the chamber into darkness that was the most devastating, but the fact that after so many weeks of being close for every little shift of the seasons I had been absent from my forest home during its most significant transformation. It felt like time had raced ahead of me and I was left behind in autumn.

November 25<sup>th</sup> - *With each visit the work evolves a little bit more. I journey with it as it reveals its growing and shifting states to me.*

Slowly I embraced the snow as a gentle salvation. After a few more snow falls I am able to pack it in all around the frame making an alternative type of seal. Though not opaque and light-blocking, it created an atmosphere of diffused light that was insular and visually serene. Going inside felt like burrowing underground and then coming up into the intimate embrace of an arctic stained-glass cathedral; the snow softly glowing between overlapping triangles of branch weave.

November 25<sup>th</sup> - *How am I making frames for sight or absence of sight? Obscuring and revealing the matrix of site (sight) as an ecosystem. Can there be seasons of concealment-darkness- hidden in winter, and seasons of air/openness in spring and summer? What is the visual "reset" I wish for? Is it transformation or a return to an original state?*

The surrender to the snow forces me to question and recalibrate my aim. There is no clear answer, only to keep weaving and see what emerges. Yet in reflection I wonder if darkness eluded me because it was never meant to just be about the absence of sight or some mechanical reset of eyes, but about darkness as a hovering nothingness out of which images emerge. The intended dark enclosure of a visual silence chamber had become, more simply, a silence chamber; a chamber for silence that holds space.

## 2.4 Rituals and Protocols

### [AUDIO: time fragments](#)

Every day I went to the forest to weave the chamber, I didn't bring my phone. I never knew how many hours I worked. In the absence of a screen, I looked up more and felt increasingly embedded in and sensitive to the subtle shifts in the atmosphere of light.

This practice of detaching from my phone also became a way to resist the urge to take pictures to document the work and focused me on my practice of creating embodied memories or sensory inscriptions. Every visitor to the chamber was asked to silence and put away their phone before beginning down the path to the site (see instruction sheet linked in Fact Sheet pg. 6). No one was allowed to take a picture of the chamber. This protocol was a way of priming participants for the silence chamber practices and inviting them to create embodied sensory experiences as take away "images." ( / Refusal of Documentation pg. 40)

Taking a photo of the structure felt like it would immediately render the work static, time stamped, and frozen in the false testament of a singular moment. Even the wording of this sentence indicates another reason for my resistance: taking a photo immediately implies that it's of some *thing*, necessitating that there is a subject. As I wrote in May 2022, "The object that the camera is pointed at is isolated from its surroundings, necessarily to contain it within the frame. To draw up borders requires conceiving the world as boundaried. Perhaps we are training our eyesight to process things as isolated objects. I think of the subject in a photograph as something concrete, indexed reality, when actually the act of photographing is making it abstract. That is to say it is abstracted from the matrix of relationships, separated out from the structure of reality." Because one essential aim of the work was to re-merge with the earth and practice perceiving in a way that gives attention to the relational ecosystem, the photograph was a clear disruption of this intent; yanking the chamber out of the environment in which its existence was contained.

**IMAGE:** birch trees clustered, four and four in mingle. Backdropped by the blue of S-market. Majestic white bodies, like swans, elegant tendrils of branches swaying over a murky patch of grass sidelined by trash-strewn concrete of suburb. Resilience seeping from roots, sense a sort of forest leakage, an imaginal inverse of directional force – an expanding out from the heart of the forest across the road. Greet with lips to powder-soft paper bark. Sneak a kiss, whisper love.

I always cut across to the sidewalk through these birch trees next to S-market and then walked through the forest to the site in silence, just noticing and arriving in layers. Whenever I approached the chamber, I always paused before it. If I was wearing a hat, I was met with a nagging sense that I ought to slip it off. This then became a ritual of reverence, a way to greet the forest with my full attentive ears, to lay bare my head, and tilt it up to acknowledge the full form of these majestic organisms.

*December 1<sup>st</sup> - Rituals create meaning where there is no inherent meaning (Daniel Peltz). So to take off my shoes (or hat) or to be silent is to create "holy ground." Acts of reverence enact the sacred by a shift in our perception. I relate differently to the forest of the "site" than the forest passed through earlier on the path because the chamber has become the locus of paying attention.*

I recognize now that these intuitive rituals became ways for me to attend with a whole-bodied awareness, practicing the type of attention that is necessary for using my body as a receptor.

Sometime in February I became curious to expand the circle of my relating. I had devoted so much intimate presence with the chamber from inside it or right around it. I had fallen into habits of almost always arriving from the same path, my first sight of it being the side I had come to think of as its "front." I now wanted to disrupt this rut of perception and explore what it is to experience intimacy from a physical distance. How do proximity and intimacy correlate? So, I begin walking circles around the chamber pausing every couple of steps to look at it.

*February 27<sup>th</sup> - What do I call the front? The side from which I first discovered the site it seems. The perspective of the landscape that inspired the shape. I realize now that I did not respond to every dimensional viewpoint in my making, but the side defined as the "front" (does this relate to my colonial discovery and arrival?) If I say THIS is the front, then I must acknowledge there's a side or small section of my chosen subject that I will NEVER see. I shift to the right; now the chamber is divided in my sight by a tree. I might have arrived from this viewpoint and claimed that the front. Always there is some visual information hidden from me, not visible, obscured by the stasis of naming.*

I practiced attending, really seeing it. I felt the space between my body and it, and noticed how it merged with the landscape. Each time I made a slightly larger circle. I played with my eye level and orientation, often crouching down or looking at it with my head tilted to the side or

standing high up on a rock. This practice became another important way to retrain my photographic vision and come back into full-bodied receptivity.

In December for the winter solstice, I seized the opportunity to meditate on darkness. I invited people to be with me in silence inside the chamber for up to two hours during the shortest, darkest day of the year. Five people came and to close our time together I read a liturgy I wrote for the occasion. Here are some excerpts (for the entire liturgy see appendix II pg. 61):

*What happens when the image vanishes? Does reality persist in touch? Do we exist even when we are not seen? When we possess no mirror, no portrait or profile?*

*What imaged us? What imagined us out of the darkness?*

*Today, on this winter solstice, we let the fortress of language dissolve, and let silence speak. Let our breath fill this dark lung.*

*Winter beckons us inside, to rest our eyes and reset. In the dark chamber of our internal landscape, the darkness is a gift. It embraces us, holds us in stillness.*

*... Darkness is a space of silence. Listen. A hovering expanse out of which images emerge. Here we are in a womb where potential rests in this house of belonging. Here time is erased with the boundaries of the self. Darkness summons us, binding us together in its embrace.*

*Plant your breath now and wait like a seed that's only hope is darkness.*

## **2.5 Invitation**

### **[AUDIO: tervetuola](#)**

In December, I began inviting people to visit to test out how to facilitate experiences in the chamber. With each person there came new perspectives, fields of knowledge, and shared experiences. Slowly I built a score of rituals and practices. I developed a detailed invitation and instruction sheet where all the possible practices were listed (see in appendix III pg. 63). It became increasingly co-curated and I realized the importance of the practices relying on mutual intuitive responsiveness. By beginning listening inside and outside, the experience emerged out of silence into a dialogue with our internal worlds, each other, and the forest.

In January, I decided to publicize regular hours when I would be available to guide people through a shared experience. I sent out emails once a week to invite a list of about 115 people from my Helsinki communities. Every time someone visited, I commissioned them to invite a friend by verbally describing their experience to elicit curiosity through the imagery of imagination. On many occasions, I would meet a stranger at the chamber who asked to visit after such an invitation. This practice of not advertising through social media or images, and rather relying on word of mouth, was important to my interest in indigenous oral culture. It was a preliminary attempt at embodied image sharing and an oral mythology of the site.

**“I want to sleep here.”**

*The shore is brailed by detritus: shelled  
& detonating with the sea. I'm done  
with talking visually about shit, de-  
scribing: what's light to those who only know the sun  
as an oven in their loaved bones?*

- Cameron Clark <sup>11</sup>

*December 6<sup>th</sup>- Azra comes. With Helmi eyes and a white cane that acts as an extension of her  
finger tips. She is not daunted by the snow on the forest floor, the sequence of foot-bending  
rocks on the narrow path, or the blank canvas in her body of a place she's never walked.*

*“If I fall, that's just life”*

*We arrive and stand in silence. It feels even more silent knowing that for her there's no visual  
subject to merit the reverent silence. I ask if I can describe it to her. I attempt to evoke the  
chamber's image using feeble words to call it into existence for her, like God in Genesis imaging  
the heavens and the earth into reality.*

*But my words are not the language that paints what she calls “images” in her mind. I have  
given her fragments she says, frustratingly partial but intriguing. The gaps evoke her curiosity. I  
wonder if the chamber exists to her in its imagistic absence.*

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<sup>11</sup> Cameron Clark. From “The Blind Poet Explains How to Draw the Sea.” *Image* 117.  
<https://imagejournal.org/article/the-blind-poet-explains-how-to-draw-the-sea/>.

*When she “sees” an image of people’s faces upon hearing their voice or when she looks in the mirror it is not just recognizing contours of tone of a particular voice, it is some separate mental phenomenon that plays on the inside, describing in her language what someone looks like. This language is unconscious or at least below the rational thinking that constructs alphabetical language because she cannot describe, at least not with words, what that person looks like. It is an emotional landscape, perhaps like an aura- the energy field that composes and radiates out from a person. It forms without any intentional effort. It is not gathered in through touch points like fingertips feeling a space until you can create a mental map. For her, maps of places and spaces form automatically.*

*Azra never learned to read, not even Braille. She learned English and Finnish solely by listening, disciplining her ears to be attentive, following the language development of a child -- immersion, making sounds, mimicking and slowly stumbling to produce words and be corrected over and over... always listening.*

*I imagine even this verbal alphabetic language is more of a sonic, intuitive, emotional landscape for her, not the rational brain-centric and sight-reliant language we are taught. Perhaps she feels words more in her body. And when I hear her pray, I believe this to be true- there is a tremendous power resonating out from her core, a tonal energy that transcends the assigned meaning of a word’s sound combinations.*

*We go inside the chamber. I wonder what this means for her. She says she feels the temperature difference, the insulating effect of the snow. It is the body memory of camping in a tent. Helmi knows too; she is calm and lies down.*

*“I want to sleep here.”*

### 3. CHAMBER PRACTICES

#### 3.1 Silence

How do we hold space? The way I propose in the silence chamber is of course silence, but not merely ceasing to speak words. Silence is a practice of holding space. It's an internal posture that finds its frame through attention and an opening of the body.

*Silence*, the first practice in the chamber and the ground for the entire experience, goes like this:

Lie down or find a position where you can fully relax into your body. Take this time to arrive. Take deep breaths. Settle into a stillness. Notice your thoughts, the sounds inside your body. Then slowly move outwards to listen to the sounds immediately outside your body, then the sounds outside the chamber and then in expanding circles, stretch your hearing to the furthest sound you can perceive. When you become aware your attention has come back to your thoughts, simply begin these radiating circles of listening again.

I was not concerned with traditional meditation such as emptying the mind or directing attention to an internal state or external element. I was interested in how we are constantly cycling between the realm of thought and sensory presence in our animate world.

February 25<sup>th</sup> - *I use my finger, then a stick, to poke a hole in the snow filled pocket between branches to make a tiny view to the outside world. Emil simultaneously uses a stick to dig a hole in the ground, but it is very frozen and he is struggling. He notes the metaphor- connecting his internal struggle with the impasse of anger, digging towards darkness, in contrast with my action of seeking light. I note that one isn't better than the other; perhaps the mind of the land is simply a mirror of our internal realities.*

The practice of silence is enacted through a posture of vulnerability and connectedness with earth by lying on the ground on our backs, belly exposed. This defenseless orientation is like a surrender to the earth. By sinking into stillness, I can tune internal landscape with external landscape, assimilating my psyche with the ecological intelligence around me. Silence creates space for being present in the ongoing encounter between our flesh and the flesh of the earth<sup>12</sup>, the happenings here and now. This practice is one of attending to everything that is

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<sup>12</sup> David Abram. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 133

already speaking: the wind in the trees, our breath, the song of birds, a buzzing fly, the distant roar of metro, a dog etc.

## Mirroring Mind

In *Becoming Animal* David Abram relates mind to landscape: “the mind I’ve carried within me settles into the wider mind that enfolds me. Changes in the terrain begin to release and mirror my own, internal changes.”<sup>13</sup>

I wonder if the space between our mind and the encompassing mind is where we become human. Where Logos meets flesh. Is this the space where creation happens, where new thoughts and images are born?

When I survey my phone-addicted culture I wonder if the screen is a different type of mirror, a mirror of facades or even lies. It shows us how we ought to look and who we need to become in society. And this mirror images us further and further away from the Source of our clay body, this “wider mind that enfolds.”<sup>14</sup> It feels like a picture of a picture of a picture, mimesis in a trajectory that has no end, no relational echo.

<b>IMAGE:</b> Swipe phone into sleep. Screen becomes a black mirror. awake.	Do not disturb. Mirror black a reflection space.	mode moon. darkness to dream
Placed face up on ground, shivering leaf-laden branches, frolicking. eager branch. Snow drips onto present.	Tilt screen and screen, magnifying glass pool.	images play across its surfaces. slip in another portal to

When I return to presence in my body and step into the picture, into Nature itself, I find myself looking into a mirror that reveals my true nature. The image isn’t of individual me, it is the face of belonging, it is perhaps not an image at all, it is a mutual mimesis, a reflexive exchange between my being and the Mind of the earth.

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<sup>13</sup> Abram, 2010, 133

<sup>14</sup> Abram, 2010, 133

## Where are You?

During a chamber session me and the participant are always going between silence and spoken words. When words bubble up again after a long period of silence, there is often a palpable change in tone; we speak differently. There's a sense of release from the need to say everything and what is said is always remarkably honest. Speech is slower and soft, it takes its time. Words draw from the many images and thoughts that are surfacing in the holding space of silence.

November 30<sup>th</sup> – *The chamber isn't a shelter, isn't a structure, isn't about the craft of woven branches. It is an outward pressing forcefield, it is the bending of spacetime, the strength of interlocking fibers of tree and air to hold against the noise of the world. It is not a container because it doesn't preserve something in static isolation. But it is a holding space- opening by collapsing, a lung, an inbreath that must eventually flow out. I want to hold silence to (contain) absence. Like a bubble surfacing and bulging up and out on the surface of water, a fragile membrane, strong yet permeable. Carving space in souls, in minds in the busyness of life. Protecting people from the endless Chronos march, drawing them down into darkness.*

It is not the structure of woven branches as some architectural entity that magically holds space; a church is not its building. I believe it is the spirit that is invited and cultivated by continual practice of holding space through silence. The more I am present in these woven branches, the more I experience the collaboration of their physical presence facilitating my internal world. Here are some examples of what participants answered to the question "where are you?" after some time in silence in the chamber:

December 8<sup>th</sup> - Maris says: *He is in a burrow. Somewhere snug. An embrace. A protective shelter from the harsh world outside.*

Raphaël says - *I am in a celestial dome, where the stars have become more numerous than the heavens. ...I am in a womb that has been pushed up from the earth.*

December 9<sup>th</sup>- Doga says: *I am in a nest. I am covered by a blanket like a child's play fort. I feel warm inside (like the sensation of home) even though my body is cold.*

January 18<sup>th</sup>- I write: *I realize that today I need the chamber to be a cage. Suddenly this no longer has only negative connotations. A cage is what holds me still, captures me- today for this 60 or so minutes. Instead of always rushing through the world, getting places and*

*“evolving,” I STAY. I listen to the whispers of the earth, sink into this friendship with the chamber, fall in love all over again.*

February 8<sup>th</sup>- Sini says: *I’m nowhere else, just here.*

February 14<sup>th</sup> - Gesa says: *I am weaving through time... I say: I am half inside and half outside. I am with the distant sounds. I am riding the metro and walking my dog....the dog I don’t have.*

As the body relaxes into a physiological state of safety, fight or flight defenses disarm, and an opening is created for other impulses to emerge. Buried thoughts and memories surface.

### **3.2 Holding Space: Memory and Image**

#### [AUDIO: questions](#)

When I write “hovering nothingness out of which images emerge,” I can only describe what I mean through the chamber practices. The first practice that emerged to this end was *Memory*. It was an agreement between me and the participant to hold an awareness for what memories might be surfacing and to speak them out as we felt compelled.

Dec 1<sup>st</sup>- *I ask Georgie, “Where are you?” She says she is in a womb. And in a memory, an internal image of the chamber as she first beheld it from the outside. So she is simultaneously inside and outside. She is present in her body and yet drawn into the past- surfaced memories of camping and times in the forest that could not have surfaced if she were still on the metro. Memories spring up in silence.*

December 21<sup>st</sup>- *Salla begins to have the feeling of memories being in her summer cottage in the forest, yet in summer. Her memories of warm days become internal warmth. Warm images/memories have the power to warm the psyche and affect the sensation of the body.*

December 22<sup>nd</sup>- *Iris reflects about images of a refugee camp surfacing during the time in the chamber. We talk about how our brains are paths to places we’ve never been, a memory of something we’ve never experienced.*

February 6<sup>th</sup>- *I put my feet up to rest on the weave as I love to do and then Stefania says “memory” and suddenly I feel the sensation of my mothers’ feet on my belly lifting me to do “airplane.” I find myself saying, “I felt like I was flying...or maybe I was flying.”*

The second practice, of an origin most mysterious to me, is *Social (waking) Dreaming* (or previously just named *Image*). It goes like this:

I count to three and together we close our eyes. We attempt to let go of our rational brain and instead let an image surface without judgment. We explore the image with curiosity, letting it slowly reveal itself to us. After some time in silence, we begin to share our images out loud by describing what we see. We continue to let our imaginations form these moving images and follow them like a dream. We may ask questions about the other person's image or we may find ourselves imagining what they have described. Our "dreams" may begin to merge and influence each other.

I am interested in where images come from, the images that we only ever see in our mind's eye. The images of dreams, whether waking or sleeping, are layered with a meaning that exists not in how we might name the entities that we see, but in the space between them, in their movement and in the qualities that evoke a universal language: color, smell, taste, shape, texture, gesture.

February 14<sup>th</sup>: *I count to three and we both close our eyes- one, two, three. letting go of the rational brain we let images surface in us and slowly reveal themselves as we move through them. Like dreaming awake through our shared imagination. She sees a nest turned upside down, like a womb. I see myself somehow miniature, digging into the earth with my bare hands. The soil is warm and I have an insatiable desire to dig deeper and deeper straight down. but I hit rocks. The path is slow and un-linear, unlike my desire.*

*She enters my imagining, describes how the body is a part of the earth; the rocks, root systems and worms all moving through the body. She has her period that day and relates the release of blood from her uterus to this nest, an opening and merging of the body, the reds and browns of blood co-mingling with the soil. I rest into her image, feeling the hormones of my own pending period ease, settle into her cycle, feel her blood flow as my own. I am no longer certain in this imagining if I am me or I am her. All bodies become mutual hosts.*

(see appendix VII pg. 72 for more examples from the chamber journal)

This internal world of images is not our own in that we cannot isolate it from the field of the sentient world we are immersed in. I believe it is the place where we are connected to the collective unconscious, the Source of all images, that begets all of creation in its image. To hold space then is to clear out the clutter of our own brain that wants to keep thinking only on one level of cognition (often the primal survival brain, always strategizing our next move) and to

create space where this collective cognition, this knowing that we share with all sentient beings, can find a crack to surge up into our awareness. The practice of dreaming awake as opposed to sleeping, gives a bit more possibility for exploration; creating new associations and tethering feelings with images as a form for expression that verbal language cannot access. Even as the elements in the images shape shift we can listen to what they are trying to tell us in this object-less/nameless image-language. Some days in a chamber session the message isn't urgent, the waking dream image is simply a way the participant says something to the effect of: "I'm at peace, I'm present in the forest, I feel safe" etc.

*"Sentience is not an attribute of a body in isolation; it emerges from the ongoing encounter between our flesh and the forest of rhythms in which it finds itself... Mind arises and dwells between the body and the earth..."<sup>15</sup>*

Does this imagistic knowing make way for the embodied experience in the chamber to infiltrate into the psyche, letting the forest minister to the participant's internal landscape? How does the encompassing Mind find voice when we create space, an internal darkness to listen for the light of images?

### **3.3 Body as Receptor and Perception**

#### **AUDIO: Camera**

When the snow was covering and sealing the chamber into a dark enclosure with only light beaming through the entry slot, it became a sort of pinhole camera (camera obscura). This was a delightful revelation since the work began with my disillusionment with the camera and my desire to get inside this apparatus that had so long been mediating between my body and the environments I was interacting with. Now the environment was the camera and the camera was the environment, and I was inside it. I began to approach the chamber more as a space to experiment with what it might mean to be the light-sensitive receptor, to relate with my sense of sight in new ways, and experiment with natural capacities of my body (atrophied by reliance upon the camera eye) as a receptor to inscribe the sensuous world inside me. The chamber provided an apparatus for this phenomenological research.

Dec 9<sup>th</sup>- *The chamber at times has become my camera. I had a desire to inhabit this device, to be its eye or its refracting lens. To be born out of its dark body, to choose the frame with my*

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<sup>15</sup> Abram, 2010, 110-11

*body. ...We always talk about light with photography, but not as much about darkness. A pinhole camera makes this more evident- it requires darkness with only a prick to let in a small thimble of light, focused, directed; sharpening reality onto our insides.*

How does the constant overexposure to images in our culture create a light saturation, overwhelming our retinas, weakening their ability for visually attuning to the world? And how might this external phenomenon also cause an internal overexposure, burning the eyes of our soul into spiritual blindness?

The first practice that became a sort of antidote to this body and spirit atrophy was *Body as Receptor*:

We will playfully explore the environment of the chamber, gather it in through our senses, and be curious with our movement, letting our explorations affect each others.'

The participant would decide when to break the initial stillness and listening by beginning to silently move around the chamber, exploring every section and crevice. I encouraged them to be curious and playful, gathering in through all their senses. I led by example, often beginning by pressing my feet up onto the frame, testing its strength and playing with the creaking whine of the branches in response to my pressure. Or, I would close my eyes and let my hand fall behind my head and begin to touch whatever I found, exploring its wondrous texture, sometimes lifting a small rock or branch to rub against my lips or cheek or turn it over and over in my hand, only then opening my eyes to relate this haptic knowing to the quick access of visual information. Sometimes I would sense the participant in their discovery and let them find their own methods for using their body as a receptor. Other times, I would name what I was doing as an invitation or to spark ideas for how to continue the exploration.

February 25<sup>th</sup> - "Where are you?"

*somewhere between                      between compassion and tension, he says.*

*I have begun to touch the rock with my eyes closed, letting my fingertips explore its dense cold.*

*Then they slipppp ppp down to the soft wet cold of the ground, then to the surface chill of the branches. I invite him to join me. To notice how what we touch feels different when sight is absent, how perception is uniquely activated through nerve endings of skin. What does it mean to read the forest with the touch of our hands, the way eyes read a book? I invite him to touch these forest elements with first tension-                      pressing, firm contact, or tight grip,*

*muscles tensing, stiff. then compassion- a soft brush, a tender caress. How does the quality with which we touch something change the way we experience it?*

Without failure, every time I did this practice I discovered something new: a crevice between the rocks I never noticed until I stuck my head between them, the depth of cavity beneath the smaller rock that remained a mystery until one day my hand ventured there. Other elements were a result of the different times of day, weather, and season, such as a different atmosphere of light and shadow, the appearance of spider webs, the surprising green pillow of moss, tiny pale green blueberry blossoms, or the sound of snow dripping steadily as it melted somewhere between the sun and our body heat.

The second practice that became a sort of antidote was *Perception*:

I will guide you in using your eyes to create visual sensations. (it was continually added to by the occurrences with participants and so I will not be able to detail every emergent practice)

I asked the participant to focus their eyes on a negative space of bright sky in the branch weave. Together, we held our eyes fixed, focusing on this spot and letting everything around it begin to blur. I suggested to them to play with squinting their eyes or opening them more and to just notice the visual sensations and phenomenon that occurred. Whenever I felt it was time, I asked the participant to close their eyes and notice the flash of the weave pattern appear on the inside – an experiential reminder that light is not so easily contained and defined in its behaviors. Light particles dance seamlessly between inside and outside. We are not closed circuits; shutting our eyes does not make something vanish. Light, like breath and water, is phenomenological evidence that the world is very much alive in every space between.

*February 25<sup>th</sup>- I find one spot where no snow covers and I can see the softly swaying branches of the trees outside- beyond. For a long time, I flicker my eyes between this inside and outside, eyes closed and then eyes open. The weave and lightness of the snow when my vision is blurred become a glorious divine cathedral. Something so beautiful it's deeply familiar- this inner sanctuary*

With eyes now closed, I asked the participant to recall image memories of the chamber from the outside as they first saw it, to picture it in their mind from every angle as they walked around- what is the shape, color, form etc? Then I invited them to open their eyes and relate that visual knowledge to the sensation of their body now inside the structure and to let their eyes wander, noting form, volume etc.

The last exercise that I did repeatedly was to begin with eyes closed, flash them open, find a visual detail to fix on and then immediately close eyes again. Then repeat: roll them to a different location and flash open again. I would softly utter the cadence of this patterned exercise until I felt it was flowing and then tell the participant to do this until they landed on a detail that they felt compelled by and wanted to linger with. We would fix our eyes on that detail and begin to visually trace it as if to memorize it. After this visual inscription was exhausted we would alter our proximity by sitting up and getting close and repeat the exercise with the new visual information available with the addition of tracing it with our fingertip, inscribing it into memory through haptic knowing. Finally, we would lean back to our original position, but this time try to hold our entire field of vision in our awareness; everything surrounding the detail to the furthest edges of our periphery. I would prompt them to notice how the detail is borderless and to situate it in the web of visual relationships. Sometimes I would reinforce this with the prompt to jump their eyes out to another point and then come back to the detail, or to focus on a spot just next to it, to further grasp its position in the relational matrix

Investing time playing with how I use my eyes to look at something became essential to my practice as a kind of training for my eyes to (re)build attentional, ocular strength. I had noticed that my use of the camera developed in me a photographic vision that approaches the world in subjects to frame and capture, with only a brief moment of focus to assess what's in front of me. A deep visual read of something I encountered was rare. I wasn't visually sensing the world around me as boundaryless bodies in relationship even if ideas of interconnectedness were present in my thinking. The weave of the chamber provided a unique environment to practice these ideas through visual attention. The branches created numerous irregularly shaped frames of the forest just beyond, images of constantly recomposing fragments of leaves, pine cones, swaying branches, birds and sky. These branch frames became viewfinders to examine the trees with an unusual focus because only one small section of trunk or one pine cone dangling from a branch could be seen at a time. After looking closely, tracing every detail, I would slowly move my head, like a telescope, to shift the frame to another section. I would then relate this more photographic attentional practice to other modes of visual experience, such as how when I move my head rapidly from side to side (or squint in the right light) the branches begin to blur and disappear revealing more of the forest just beyond them, merging inside with outside.

### 3.4 Exiting Ritual

February 17<sup>th</sup> - *The chamber door slot forces you to grovel, crawl, slide, on your belly scrambling, on wet rock slab, dirt of pine needle ground, awkwardly pulling, weight of your body up, against gravity, in. Remember your animal body.*

Before you can be born you must crawl back into the womb.

When the participant was ready to leave I would guide them in an exiting ritual. It formed intuitively because entering the chamber was an experience of reemerging into the womb of the earth and I wanted exiting to be a mirror experience. I had the participant close their eyes and lower themselves onto their back facing downhill towards the opening slot. Then I directed them to let their body slide until they felt the change of light on their eyelids, tilt their head back, and open their eyes to take in this upside-down world. I encouraged them to trace what they saw with their eyes, notice the movements and the sounds, and use this moment to inscribe a final “image” inside their body memory to carry home with them. Then I had them slide halfway out and lie there for a moment looking up at the sky and then back at their legs inside the chamber, resting into this sensation of being half in and half out. Lastly, sliding all the way out: the final birth.

#### [AUDIO: exiting ritual](#)

December 8<sup>th</sup> - *What is the “proper” orientation of the body? Where does my body encounter the other or itself? The image of itself?*

*This time I go out head first on my back and when I pause with my head partially out, torso still in, I am seeing the outside framed by the inside. I am being born back into the earth, I am the eye of the camera, the light sensitive paper, the conducting lens, the point of receipt of light after a period contained inside the darkness of the camera body.*

February 6<sup>th</sup> - *When Stefania is doing the exiting ritual, head poised in the frame, they are laughing so hard. Why? But in the moment it doesn't matter, I begin laughing too. It's relief, lightness, the sense of belonging that rushes in and overflows. They're laughing maybe because they feel a rebirth, the hope of entering anew, even if only a little bit clearer.*

### 3.5 Internal Chamber

The chamber is a holding space. It carves out spacetime to dwell in that is not tethered to the site or the structure. Chamber is inside you, always accessible. You carry it with you wherever you go.

February 7<sup>th</sup> - *Daniel never made it to the chamber because on the way to the metro he was stopped by a blind man asking to be guided to K-market. They go to the wrong one. There is no landmark like the big rock shaped like a whale. K-market is the landmark. We walk all the way along the forest path towards the chamber, then turn back without ever seeing it.*

A month later I receive this email from a professor:

*Hi Alyssa,  
3/20/2023*

*I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate receiving news from your silence chamber; even if I probably will not be able to actually visit or inhabit the silence of the chamber, it's somehow gratifying to know and be able to imagine its existence and the shelter it provides in a nearby forest.*

*Thank you!  
Riikka*

[4:50 PM, 2/7/2023] A text message from Daniel Peltz: *perhaps we are supposed to have a talk on the metro, I started to do the protocol on the subway, silently calling for silence, then a while later for story, listening to a story from there from here, wondering about the portability of the space, the idea of the mishkan in judaic history as this portable sanctuary,*

I researched it and read: "Mishkan was the portable sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness. Mishkan comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to dwell"; the tabernacle was considered to be the earthly dwelling place of God." <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hila Ratzabi. "What Was the Tabernacle (Mishkan)? A Portable Sanctuary in the Wilderness." My Jewish Learning. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-tabernacle/>.

February 25<sup>th</sup> - *Sanctuary: a harbor from the world, a safe space, protecting from the outside so there's time for healing*

### 3.6 Practice Sharings

*I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.*

-William Wordsworth<sup>17</sup>

I hosted three practice sharing sessions during May at the Silence Chamber site. For two hours several participants and I experimented with my evolving practices for using the body as a receptor. Here is the description that I published:

This session will be an introduction to share and invite you into my practices of using the body as a receptor. Come play with me exploring the possibility of "body as a camera" and living memory. I will begin by introducing the ideas behind my practices of embodied capture and the reciprocity of perception. The following sessions throughout May will be guided walks immersed in the forest site I have been working at in Rastila where we will practice collectively. What might it mean to inscribe a sensory image as opposed to recording a digital image? How can embodied memories work on us? I am interested in what remains when our technological appendages are stripped away and what invisible abundance is available to us. This workshop will cultivate our most primal human powers that come with the presence of the body in direct, intimate contact.

The primary aim of these practices was to test out my ideas by actually living them out in practice with others to help expand my understanding of them through the diversity of

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<sup>17</sup> William Worthworth. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." *Poetry Foundation*, 2015  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud>

personal engagement. The essential research question relates to this Wordsworth poem: what sort of attention and sensory engagement is required for the wealth of the living world around us to be retained in our imaginal memory (the flash on the inward eye), work on us and feed us when we lie indoors (which is perhaps to say when we are shut off from the sensuous earth by walls). Lastly, what sort of positive effect can these sensory memories stored in our bodies have? How might they “fill our hearts with pleasure” in the same way a trauma fills the body with echoes of fear?

See appendix IV pg. 64 for my list of practices for using the body as a receptor or “embodied capture.” I will not detail these practices, score of each sharing day, or what emerged, as the research is vast and the experiments ongoing. I plan to continue to share and develop them with participants over the next several years.

## 4. IMAGE

*Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct presence.*<sup>18</sup>

### 4.1 Refusal of Photo Documentation

December 22<sup>nd</sup> - *The chamber cannot be captured, it is always in flux. Now, the slow drip of snow, tomorrow maybe ice or another layer of snow. A photograph says "here is the art!" It claims it is fixed and finished. But this is false, a shiny façade, too fragile, threatened to extinction by familiarity, by expectation of unchanging sameness.*

The decision to refuse to document or allow anyone to photograph the silence chamber was not a precise moment of reason. It emerged from a growing distaste for my image-saturated life: from my art photography that aestheticized my body relating with Nature and made mute the physical endurance of my performative actions, to taking pictures on my phone in an constant anxiety of not being able to keep up with obtaining what was in front of me and the frenzied need to remember, to friends and family texting me photos to share about their life more than they called me and shared their heart, to social media platforms that I was increasingly recognizing to seduce my eyes into an addictive "knowing" – glimpsing other people's lives through an odd advertisement of personal life, a voluntary and permissible voyeurism. These growing aversions to the photographic image compelled me to stop posting on social media and question moments when I had the habitual urge to take a photograph. I became uncomfortably aware of the thoughtless accumulation of iPhone pictures at which I rarely looked back.

And so, it was with these considerations that I pursued to demote the sense of sight and reliance on the photographic to know and share. The refusal of the photographic became more about creating space for practices that might help shed photographic seeing and re-sensitize the sensory and emotional body to participate in a reciprocity of perception<sup>19</sup> with the animate world. Ideas of participation in the sensory field and of the reciprocity of perception came from my reading of *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram in which he draws from Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl (see quotes in appendix VI pg. 69-71) . Yet it was through lived phenomenological inquiry, a direct participation in and experience of the

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<sup>18</sup> David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012). 40-41

<sup>19</sup> Abram, 2012

phenomena of these ideas, that gathered my practice towards the absence of the photographic.

The photograph has a way of flattening the experience of a dimensional world and making the visual encounter into a one-dimensional image object. Consequently, the photograph felt like a violation of the embodied, sensory and multidimensional practices that I was hosting in the chamber. The photograph would simplify a work about silence, holding space, and the spiritual dimensions of the internal landscape, into a diluted idea of a place and a visual outline of a structure. A photograph of the chamber felt more like a token symbol faintly gesturing at the real— a vast forest filled with dancing sounds, tastes, textures, and smells.

Perhaps most importantly, because my original aim was to demote the sense of sight and immerse people in darkness, a visual document would have only reinstated power to the dominance of the eyes. It would suggest that I made the woven branch structure to be an object of beauty to be consumed by sight. The lack of photo documentation created a kind of darkness, ushering people into the dark canvas of their minds where they were invited to imagine the chamber. I think this produced a different motivation for those who visited. Seeing a photograph first might have impelled visitors to confirm an assumed visual knowing which can lead to passive engagement because the work has already been presented to their mind as a one-dimensional object to behold. But in my case, visitors came freshly curious, eager to adjust an imagined image and flesh out an idea of a potential experience. The threshold for encountering and knowing the work through listening and touching felt to be wide and unhindered by predetermined mental models.

Another interest was the lack of ownership due to using branches and assembling them on public land. The photograph, publicized as a document of an artwork that I assign my name to as its maker, extracts the chamber as something wild (intertwined in a natural system) into something privatized: art as commodity. I was more interested in what it might mean for me to not own or be able to exponentially share and circulate an artwork as exclusively mine or be able to sell prints of it as I have done readily in the past. I feel that this choice has produced a relationship with the work that is truly one of love and not contaminated by the drive for profit or success.

My final instinct was that I wanted to move away from making an art object that was representational, referring to something else, standing in the place of something absent. ( *Antechamber* pg. 45) I was interested in whether it was possible to allow a form and its material embedded in its source site, to be the thing itself, always present. In other words, even though I have named this structure “silence chamber,” I pursued it as something also

NOT silence chamber ("holding space" being the closest to name it as unlimited and unfixed) and tried to relate to its branches as tree-arms that I have rearranged into a weave that is an extension of the rocks, the rocks an extension of the ground. In this way it is simply just one element entangled as part of the land.

To read supporting quotes from *On Photography* by Susan Sontag and my reflection on them see appendix V pg. 66.

## 4.2 Lenses of Contextualization

I will note the value of the photographic documentation, as it has served my performance to camera in the past, is to create a visual access point for the viewer. Documentation is a way to share a work that was an event in time with a broad audience that could have never journeyed to the location (such as the forest in Rastila). In the absence of a participatory performance, the photograph works through mirror neurons; the viewer is activated by observing a body performing a motor act as if they were doing the act themselves. In this way, I recognize the power of the image to awaken possible ways of being in one's body even if only imaginatively experienced.

My *Silence Chamber* structure can be contextualized in relation to Andy Goldsworthy's earth works which he readily photographs. Goldsworthy says, "Each work grows, stays, decays — integral parts of a cycle which the photograph shows at its height, marking the moment when the work is most alive. There is an intensity about a work at its peak that I hope is expressed in the image. Process and decay are implicit,"<sup>20</sup> This statement seems to insinuate that the viewer's disembodied, conceptual knowledge of these processes is sufficient and its climactic state is the only one worth visual attention. All the power rests in the photograph which simultaneously reveals a work we might never otherwise see, while also flattening it into a purely visual document, disembodied it from the intensive labor of human and nonhuman processes. Even if his process is one of submission to earth's elements and the cycles of impermanence, in the end, he dominates by always succeeding to conquer these earth works in the eternal preservation of the photograph. Works that only exist in an outdoor context in a sense get abstracted and brought indoors by being accumulated into coffee table artbooks. His more permanent installations and commissioned works feel more like aesthetic monuments. They take on a certain qualitative energy by the very nature of the properties of their durable materials. Outside the chaos of his creation process, the embodied experience of precisely cut

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<sup>20</sup> Andy Goldsworthy. *Hand to Earth. Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976-1990*. (H.N. Abrams, 1993)

and ordered stone isn't that much more sensorial, alive, or ecologically intertwined than his photographs.

In contrast, Robert Smithson is enthralled by entropy which he calls "de-differentiation."<sup>21</sup> He sees the artist and their tools merge as eventually everything undergoes a process of decay and sinks back into its primordial state as raw material of the earth (dust or rust). "Culture has lost its sense of death..."<sup>22</sup> Smithson writes. We privilege and assign value to certain stages of life, certain states of being, certain sensations and emotions. Yet we forget that for anything to be built there must be destruction. The seed must die in the darkness of the soil. (/\_ Rituals and Protocols pg. 24)

While it feels that Goldsworthy strives to encapsulate and capture his intimacy with a site by translating the work with methods of preservation, Smithson embraces and exposes the work's obvious displacement and fragmentation from a site to the gallery space. Instead of distilling his work into photographs, he deliberately fragments it, thus fully acknowledging the distance from the actual site and the impossibility of representation:

*"The Non-Site [an indoor earthwork] is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site... it is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it—thus The Non-Site."*<sup>23</sup>

I see the silence chamber uniquely positioned in relation to traditional earth works by being woven intuitively in direct response to the living landscape; merging with its elements and becoming part of it. It is neither ephemeral, nor very durable. It has no prime, climactic state. I am equally interested in its life from freshly fallen branches, to weak and decaying woven structure. By refusing to photograph it, it resists becoming an aesthetic object, iconic in form (a widely circulated visual) but stripped of the specificities of place.

There are so many layers to an earth site, not just of sediment into the core of the earth, or the blurred layers between nature and culture, but also on the level of entangled spirit and matter. When I think about the *Silence Chamber*, I think of the nestled chambers within a chamber that radiate up and out: first our internal chamber, then the space held by the woven branches and then the chamber of the atmosphere formed by the dome of clouds over the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Smithson. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968)." Sagan, Dorian. *Textures of the Anthropocene: GRAIN, VAPOR, RAY*. (MIT Press, 2015), 18

<sup>22</sup> Smithson, 2015, 24

<sup>23</sup> Robert Smithson. "A Provisional Theory of Nonsites (1968)." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. ( Jack Flam. University of California Press, 1996), 364

chamber. There is a tertiary world and art is often too narrow, tethering us to some primary or surface-level world, or a flattened one such as in a photograph. I am interested in creating “art” that is most alive in the spaces of relational encounter between these layers of worlds.

My refusal of documentation may be compared to the protocols of Tino Sehgal. While he resists museum practices of collecting and conservation, and a history of documenting artworks, I am more interested in the effects on the individual participant in my work; moving them from viewer to embodied “encounterer.” Sehgal’s pieces circulate from person to person in the form of narratives, movements, and instructions on how to perform the piece. Conversely, I am interested in my work circulating as sensory embodied memories and internally inscribed images. Rather than the public sphere or exhibition space, central to my aim is the private imagination of the embodied participant embedded in the earth’s ecosystems.

## 5. KUVAN KEVÄT

Despite my essential aims being met in the forest, I decided to take the university context as an opportunity to wrestle with the exhibition space. My refusal of photo documentation proposed a unique challenge for how to share my work in Kuvan Kevät (the thesis exhibition). How might an artwork represent *Silence Chamber* as a sensorial “image”? The abundant embodied experiences at the chamber site couldn’t be translated, only passed through a mirroring, a shared related experience. The artifacts of a nearly 100-page chamber journal emergent from experiences with around 50 visitors provided an immense amount of content. However, I was hesitant to reduce the work to its linguistic documentation. So, I set out with the intention to make an artwork that instead might distill the core concepts of my thesis research and the essence of the silence chamber/ forest site. I decided I wanted to go back to the previous year’s obsession and create a pitch-dark room to envelop people. What emerged in the darkness was *Antechamber*: a participatory installation composed of forest matter, a sensory touch-scape, and poetic soundscape.

### 5.1 Antechamber:

*[dark space] touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space.... [dark space] does not spread out before me but touches me directly, envelops me, embraces me, even penetrates me completely, passes through me, so that no one could almost say that while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light. The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it, becomes one with it. - Eugene Minkowski <sup>24</sup>*

I set out to make maps that ended up to be more like dioramas, a loose translation of the forest site’s topography. I cut the main piece in half to make two segments, islands of sorts, for bodies to move between. One island included a miniature model of the chamber made of woven twigs. All the materials were sourced from and composed in the forest site in Rastila, creating even more intimate familiarity with its topographical nuances and living matter. The diorama surfaces were designed not for aesthetic appearance, but specifically for touch. Touch was the primary sense through which the artwork was “read” and “seen.” The pitch-dark room was filled with sounds from the forest and every 2 minutes a dim light came on and then quickly faded. With it came my voice performing fragmented poetic texts – all words derived from the chamber journal. I played with the texture, volume, tone, and pacing of my voice to relate the sound of words to the qualities and touch of the thing itself. This was an attempt to

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<sup>24</sup> Eugène Minkowski. *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*. (Northwestern University Press, 1970). Quoted in Claire Bishop. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. (Routledge, 2005), 84

retether the abstraction of alphabetic language back to the sensorial field of living encounter. The concepts in the text fragments spoke of the nature of touch, time, perception, silence, the camera, and darkness. I was interested in the darkness of the room, dissolving boundaries of the inhabitant's body, and creating another kind of chamber where they were immersed in a different perception of time and space. The title points to its other intention; to be a portal to or the small room before *the* room (the silence chamber and the real, living forest).



*Antechamber*, May 2023, Photo: Alyssa Coffin (see more photos [HERE](#))

[AUDIO: touch fragment](#)

### **Experiencing the installation as a visitor (forgetting the artist) and writing in the dark:**

I see towers black like buildings coming up from the carpeted floor, in a padded institutional sterile room. The towers hold islands of different sizes and shapes. The room is not so defined, its corners hidden and boundaries ambiguous because of the buffering of black curtains all around. There are sounds of birds being pumped from speakers, but they are not birds, they are just sounds. Their artificiality has a tin to it. They are too consistent. My suspension of belief is broken, but I am seduced by the visuals and this compels me to linger and simultaneously to flee this strange environment. There is a digital sun that is a temporary salvation in this poetic dystopia. It comes at presumably regular intervals but every time feels like a different length – is this perception altered by the presence or absence of the voice? Or by what occupies my mind?

The islands are covered with a miniature landscape. The materials, recognizable from the forest, have been planted, somehow artificially adhered to boards. It feels like manicured landscaping, but with raw forest material; as if the elegant shape of ferns was planted here and a birch bark bridge across a small “pond” over there, then a row of trees and a gravel path between and so on. Yet in other places it feels more unorganized and haphazardly arranged.

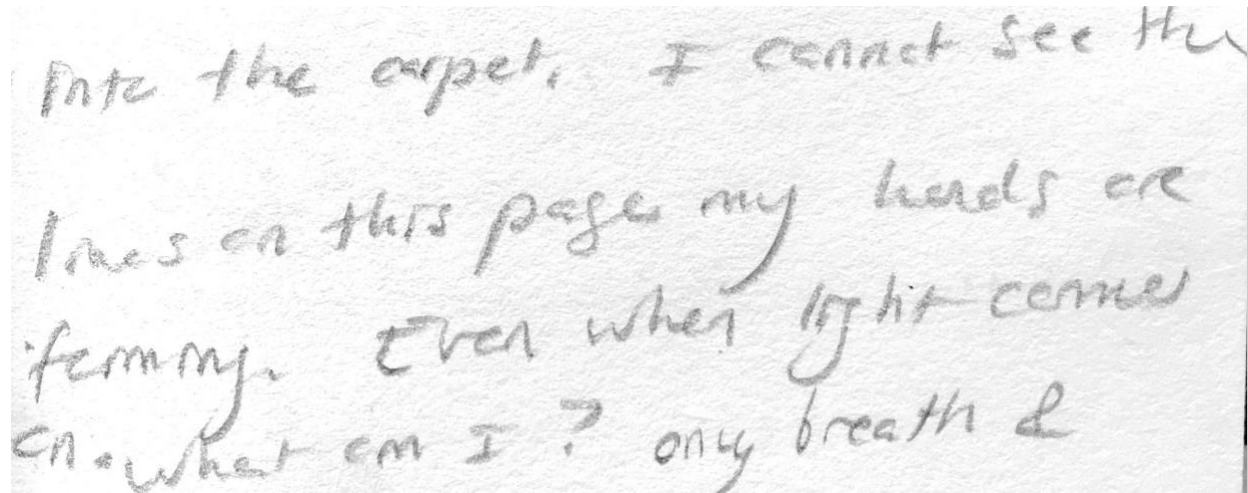
The voice is soothing; it lulls me as a sound frequency and the words don't feel like words, just essence of voice, here with me, talking with me (not to me). The voice has its own agenda, but its gaps catch me and pull me with it. The soothing tone makes me want to lie down, so I do. I let the carpet host me and I look up at the islands from a distance. I see a dramaturgy that cycles, maybe 30 seconds to a minute-long scene, and then the curtains close again into darkness. Maybe this is a new form of theater.

I get sleepy— darkness tells the body to sleep, speaks to my circadian rhythms. I start to cry; the space is heavy with peace. The darkness holds space for my emotions to surface. My senses and my own thoughts become loud. I feel a soft coaxing: the voice, the bird sounds, and the nature materials all seem to summon and elicit my emotional body to take over my state of being. It is so dark in between there is no scale or measurement of darkness, it is only what I imagine to be the complete absence of light. I cannot see even the faint outline of my own limbs; borders are erased.

My sense of time is distorted. This installation room feels so shut off from the “real” world that perhaps I am dead and have been buried for years or perhaps I have only just for a few seconds fallen into a pit or a dark dream and will awaken suddenly with a cry. When the light comes on and then begins its gradual fade I'm not sure from this distance if it's actually allowing me to see in what I would normally call seeing. It is creating strange shadows and illusions and blurs edges into a haze that makes them blobs of fuzzy color and tone that blend right into the next thing. However, when I am close – between the fragments of the diorama where the light is centered and spills most brightly— I am cut by this sudden visuality; bright objects with clear borders telling about themselves. They are objects that my mind begins to name: rock, branch, moss.... but then the light gradually leaves me with only their tactile sensation to continue to believe that I'm correctly identifying them.

I am pulled down into a memory, I become the memory. I am the girl crying stubbornly on the carpet, face buried into fibers, staining it with tears. I cannot see the lines on this page that my hands are forming. Even when light comes on from this distance it isn't enough to make out words. What am I? Only breath and movement and the feel of the pencil between my

fingertips. I can only guess at the movement of my hand, how I imagine it to be making lines, producing marks on the page that assign meaning.



Sample from my time in the Antechamber writing in the dark

When I touch the natural materials, they are just a texture that makes a sound in the interaction of hand to surface. I touch them in certain ways and they produce certain sounds, but this sound has no real relation to their visual character. They could be anything in the darkness and I could imagine the sound to be something else.

My touch makes me aware of how reckless I can be and how my movements are alerting this mini landscape. Everything is quite dry and brittle, making it fragile and easy to break when touching. I think about the taboos of touching artwork and the hesitation of many visitors to do so and yet how, when walking in a forest, we often are not concerned with where we walk or how we step and the damage it might inflict. On this permissible scale, after a month of hundreds of visitors touching the dioramas, the expedition of curious hands proves to be similar to a walk in the woods.

Where am I on this page? When light comes back on I am seduced again by the beauty of the landscape, light making it dramatic and illusionary. There is a tantalizing mysterious quality. It is cinematographic. I get excited for this movie to continue as if there had been an intermission of silence and black screen. I go between waking and sleeping. Light is energy that directs my movement and charges actions, while darkness freezes or stills me into one place. I sink and rest and everything becomes quiet. I have no fear of bumping into something or touching the unknown. The darkness summons me to stay right here, with what is already beneath my hand. It reveals to me that what I'm already in abundant contact with is enough; everything is already done. Everything outside this room can hurry on, in all its visual

commotion, without me. I can stay here and become rooted. I have no agenda to travel or discover or get somewhere. I have no more to achieve or the need to hurry to finish absorbing this artwork. The artwork somehow dissolves itself and asks, “will you stay?”

Only when I just begin to settle into this place of peaceful stasis, it ignites the tempter again before my eyes; the light flashes on and asks me to wake up and move as part of the demands of this visual reality. This cycling tension between darkness and light is rigorous. It demands a lot of my senses. The value of this constant shifting is that, instead of the artwork giving me a sensational experience of a singular environment (pitch darkness), it continually reminds me of my faceted humanity and multisensory existence. It also makes me painfully aware how sight impacts my perception and understanding of what is around me; how my eyes are so seduced by the image that I almost immediately neglect all my other senses.

## **5.2 Reflecting: Alternative Pathways**

It became clear by the end of May that this type of immersive installation in such a large group exhibition, even when given its own space where it didn't need to compete with other artworks, was not a feasible context for the work. Visitors were trying to see 42 other artworks and most often did not have the capacity to spend adequate time in *Antechamber*. Some seemed to solve this by returning at a separate time or day when they could be devoted to only immersing themselves in *Antechamber*. However, many visitors, if they were attentive enough to locate the work at all, found that the request to take off their shoes and enter a pitch-dark room was too demanding. They either turned away in a hurried fluster when they realized this was not a quick check mark of viewing, or they stuck their head inside the curtain hesitantly, perhaps assuming there was nothing to see, and turned away. Others tentatively went inside and approached the piece only to mutter “I can't see a damn thing in here” as if the artwork was just mistakenly poorly lit.

At first these pitfalls of the work felt disheartening because, of course, I wished for people to be immersed in the atmosphere I had created. However, in the end I feel these responses only reinforced what I was seeking to draw attention to. Asking people to take off their shoes was a twofold demand: exposing the bottoms of feet to feel the forest matter on the floor and ritualizing the act of crossing the threshold into this dark chamber (“holy ground”). To neglect or refuse this demand seemed to be testament to a lack of sensory curiosity, patience, and reverence in our culture. To assume that darkness indicates a void or an absence of anything worth encountering and that sight is the prerequisite for experiencing art, is evidence of how our culture privileges visuality.

When the university threatened to disallow the piece as I'd designed it because of there not being enough light, causing concerns about hazards and liabilities, I was almost amused. I told them I would be happy to cancel the piece before I agreed to altering the main area around the piece where it was crucial to be in pitch-darkness (I did make a concession for an exit sign creating a glow around the door and the unavoidable crack of light coming through the curtain people passed through). I cried and laughed thinking back to the driving sentiment from Azra: "it's not me with the handicap, but all you who are sighted because you require constant illumination." I fantasized about putting a sign on the door saying something like, "the artwork has been canceled due to a lack of illumination for sighted people. Only blind persons allowed to enter."

Overall, I feel *Antechamber* failed to translate the essence of *Silence Chamber*, perhaps because the phenomenology of my practice could not find air to breathe in this form and context. However, I feel the work balanced its concepts on its own "failure" or shortcomings. With *Silence Chamber* moving away from being a representational art object, the *Antechamber* fulfilled this role as an artifact and became a placeholder in the absence of the chamber/forest site in the gallery. I felt all the work was premature, especially my text, amateur vocal performance, and the hastily crafted dioramas. Yet they all served to point at something not there: a living ecosystem of relational experience. This man-made miniature forest landscape in a room named "digital studio," composed with wires and screens, felt to be a pseudo dystopia. The grief I experienced at the work falling short of my ideals revealed a lot to me about the heart of my work, where my practice is most alive, and in what forms it can be authentically shared.

### 5.3 Silent Dialogue

*Perception is an ongoing improvisation between my body and the bodies of other beings.*<sup>25</sup>

I was interested in creating a smaller version of *Silence Chamber* that could be inhabited by only two facing heads. I think I needed an artwork that could be more organic, experimental and not pre-conceptualized in the same way I approached making the chamber. I decided to activate this woven branch "helmet" as a tool for participatory performances initiated spontaneously around campus. I would walk around carrying it and then set it down in different locations until I caught the curious eye of a visitor. I would then invite them to pick

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<sup>25</sup> David Abram, actor. *Becoming Animal*. Peter Mettler and Emma Davie, directors and writers. 2018

up one end and place it on their head with me. Then I would count to three, and together we would take a deep breath and close our eyes. It was up to them when to end the experience by simply opening their eyes and beginning to slowly lift the structure up and off.



*Silent Dialogue*, May 2023, Photo: Kevin Doyle (see more photos [HERE](#))

I was interested in creating moments of listening and groundedness in the busy gallery setting. I envisioned the contrasting noise and motion surrounding me and the participant as we stood without seeing in silence and stillness. I didn't know before I started performing it what the effect or sensation would be. How might communication happen through the shifting of body weight felt indirectly through branches? How might listening to each other in this way develop into a dialogue? I performed the work with visitors on three separate days during the month of May. Each time I learned more about how to invite people, how to listen to their energy and movements through the branches versus how much to play and provoke the dialogue.

It was an incredible surprise when I did it for the first time at the Kuvan Kevät opening; I could feel every slight shift in the other person's body weight, an immense sensitivity to their corporeal presence. The branches functioned like the thread between two cans or a telephone wire. The woven branches between us acted as the conductors to create a complete circuit of proprioception communication. I felt closer to the superpowers of animals that think with the

whole of their bodies. I thought about the other person more as a creaturely presence that I could sense through so many other pathways than sight. To read some of my fragmented memories of comments from participants, see appendix VIII pg. 73.

## 6. GENERATIVE WEAVING

### 6.1 Imagining Continuation

When thinking about where to go from here, it is helpful to identify some core aspects and values in my practice that have emerged through this thesis work. For one, I increasingly see my practice as an invitation to other ways of engaging and moving through the world. I have a desire to continue to host, in multiform “chambers”, a silent listening and attending. In a reciprocity of dwelling in such chambers, how might there be an inner unfolding of dark corners of our shared being where the light for healing is found? My practice leans more and more towards a form of embodied spiritual art therapy (or perhaps ecotherapy). This makes sense as my work prioritizes tending to our own souls first, seeking our health and healing as inextricable from that of the planet.

I’ve learned it is vital for me that my practice never becomes subsumed with a solely human audience. I wish to make artwork for trees as much as for humans. I hope that my sustained exposure and presence to all the organisms and soil that compose the forest, nourishes them as much as it does me. I want my practice to activate an invisible dialogue on a biochemical and spiritual level between all beings and spaces between. At the core, I sense a desire to re-merge our heart, mind, and body back into our earth home.

*February 14<sup>th</sup> - Gesa writes: “I feel like I was taken home and beyond. I hope I can reconstruct what I felt yesterday when I said this hope for the human species. I came from such an integral space... I think something surfaced in me, like a belief that I wasn't even so conscious of having: I would describe it as the question around what can a human being be other than causing destruction to the environment.*

*When lying there in such deep connection, ... time traveling with the web of the twigs and branches through all the engagement that has met them through you and that would not be there without you engaging in and with it, I felt a sense of the meaningfulness of human existence. That relates to hope for me. Hope that the human potential can find a purpose that integrates and collaborates with the environment in a constructive way.”*

Gesa’s words remind me of my own hope for my work: that it might open a space for people to encounter a home that is a house of love and belonging, a place where our species is merged in the interconnectivity of a primordial collaboration. I believe this shift in our encounter begins with our perception; how we engage all our senses in participation with the sensorial earth.

## 6.2 What is Carried?

All these words written here feel flimsy when I am in the forest and lie in the chamber. I realize all my writing and describing is actually fiction— it is the abstracted memory of a direct sensory field. The handwritten words from the edges of my memory recorded in the chamber journal, along with the words typed here, are testament to the wild ephemerality of alphabetic language and its increasing abstraction from the living world. The only true story is in my participation in the here and now, the embodied flux of internal and external perception.

Perhaps the words of this thesis will come into a reader's mind and then pass through with few finding a nesting place to be carried forward in an ensouled body. What might remain when we forget, when all is stripped away? What is the substance of our survival?

### [AUDIO: stripped fragments](#)

What I recall from every chamber session is not the specific words that were exchanged, but the sensation of lying on the ground, the orientation of my body next to the participant's, the unique atmosphere of light, the cold skin of a lichen-crushed rock pressed to my dry lips, the silky bark of the branches as I wove my fingers into the weave, the distant screech of the metro, the tone of the participant's voice. All my image memories are composed of a sensory language that lives on in the medium of my body. And perhaps I can give equal tribute to the *Antechamber* and *Silent Dialogue* that reverberate through my body memory as forest matter sounding in the dark, the tonal landscape of my digital voice, and the weight of branches on my head.

To retrospectively become conscious of these sensational and imaginal reverberations, is to draw upon a great well. I can lift clear water and drink meaning that speaks in a truth untethered from the construct of words, time, and space. Concepts of "darkness" and "image" still feel opaque and vastly unexplored to me. But what I do take away from this thesis is the meaning felt in the sensorial animal of my body; the truth and meaning embedded in the patterns, rhythms, and textures of the sensuous earth.

What I long to create and share cannot be contained in an object or a PDF; it is lost as soon as it is named "art" made for the gaze of aesthetic consumption. Rather it is blood and flesh, bone and branch.

February 26<sup>th</sup> 2022- *Now instead of approaching a scene and working to compose and capture a photograph, I allow Nature to work on me. When I am still, I can receive it in all its*

*movements, sounds, and light play. Gathering a moment of encounter into my body is to store it in fertile ground. Instead of merely visual information stored digitally in a device or in my brain, it is sensory information stored in a way distributed throughout my entire body; a memory that continues dynamically alive in my internal landscape. I can feel its vitality reverberating, because something has gotten inside me energetically instead of merely imagistically. I wonder what might be activated in me, what do I carry inside me? Did the branches and ice feel my witness? Do I impact elements of this earth by offering my sustained exposure?*

To practice is to live, to live is to practice. Practice is what transforms me and, by extension, what is around me. Cultivating embodied memories to carry inside me, that cannot be taken from me, is to store up the substance for spiritual survival. So, I will continue to practice: detaching from my phone camera, paying attention with all of my senses, storing up a well-spring of sensory experience to echo in my body and feed me when all else is stripped away.

[AUDIO: image fragment](#)

*October 2<sup>nd</sup> - I visit the chamber to facilitate an experience with a friend after a long period of absence from this work. For months my friend has imagined this work but never seen any photos of it. When she encounters it and places her hand on the branch weave, she begins to cry. She tells me she is moved by the generosity of its presence. I think about how even as I close this thesis with flimsy words, the chamber wordlessly remains, open for any curious enough to enter. Its becoming continues; slow decay maturing it further into the forest ecosystem.*

*While lying inside, my backside slowly dampened by wet soil, I get an image of someone sitting on a wicker chair they had woven by hand, it breaking, and the person falling through. When I open my eyes I look up at the strong weave of branches arching over me. I think about the difference between striving to create the ground that holds our weight, and the ground that is already abundantly beneath us, holding us up, bearing our weight as flesh of its flesh. I can no longer conceive that my own hands wove this structure; I am more certain of the truer story alive in my imaginal body: that when I rest*

*into the ground*

*that already exists,*

*I find*

*I am encompassed.*

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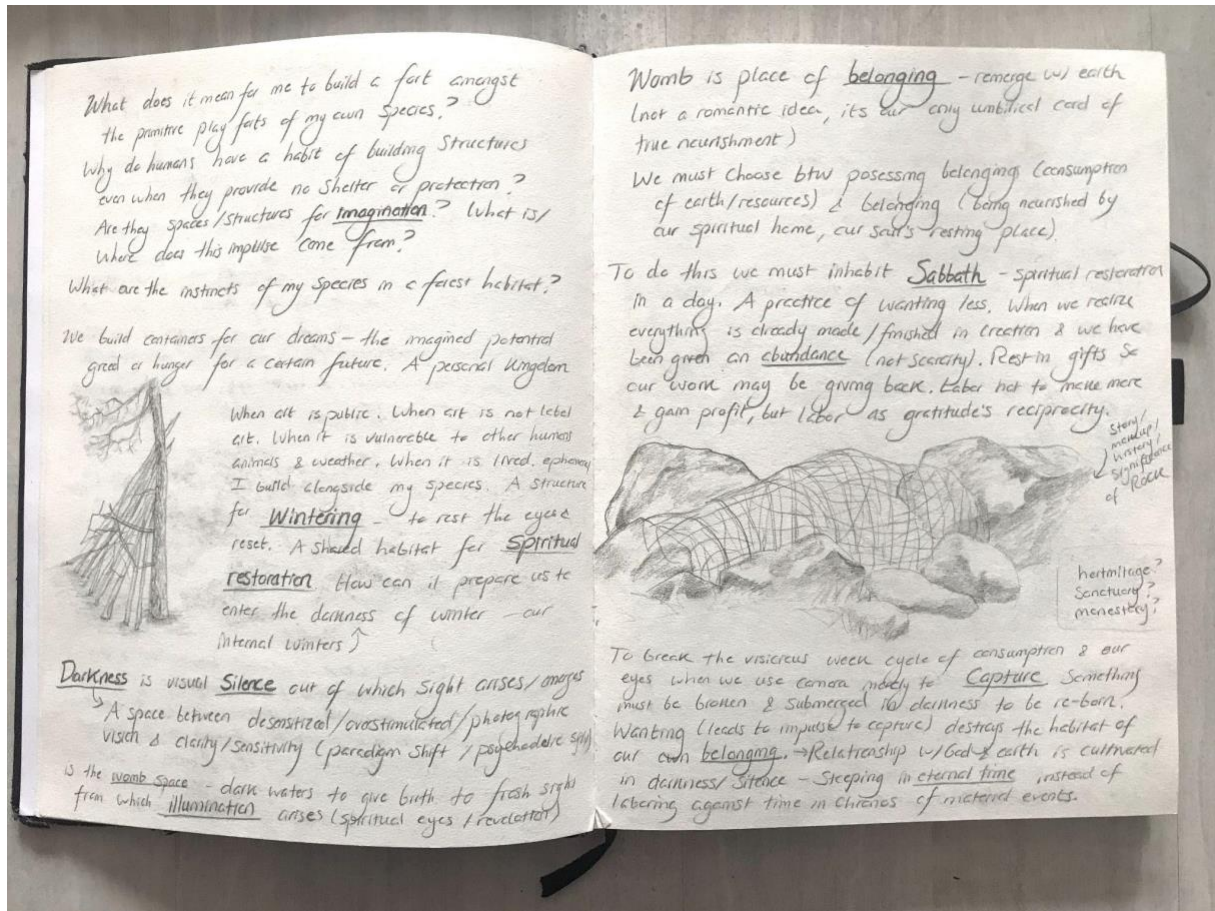
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## APPENDIX

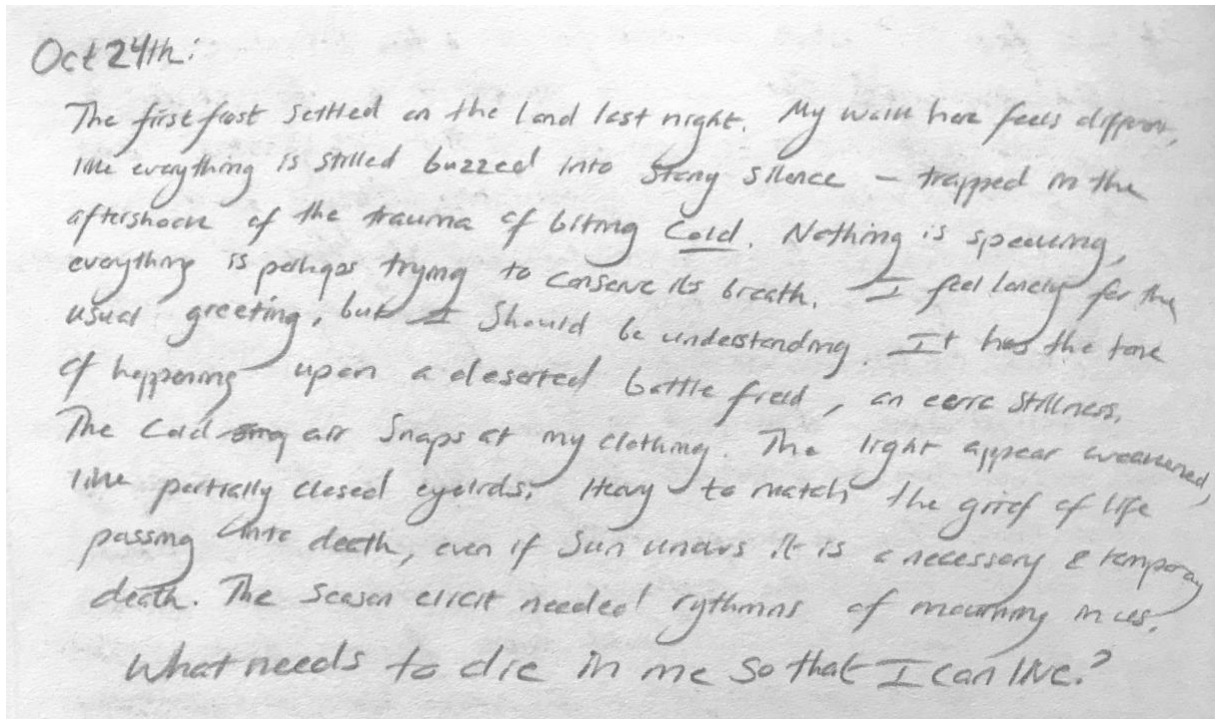
### I. Marks of the Hand: Chamber journal practice and pictures



To write by hand is a primal form of documentation, one of direct contact of the body with the mark-making that forms written language. The paper and pencil, sourcing back to trees, became a way to more intimately relate to the forest site. The act of writing became not just getting letters onto a page to record thoughts, but more like drawing as my handwriting varied with temperature (how easy was it for my hand to grip and move), mood, energy level etc. In this way, drawing letters is a form of mapping a day or a moment. The core elements of handwriting are rooted in personality (for example my handwriting is forward slanting indicating my driven-ness and goal-oriented nature), though constantly shifting subtly as we evolve as creatures.

When Lola see my chamber journal she says, "your handwriting is the memory of the body"

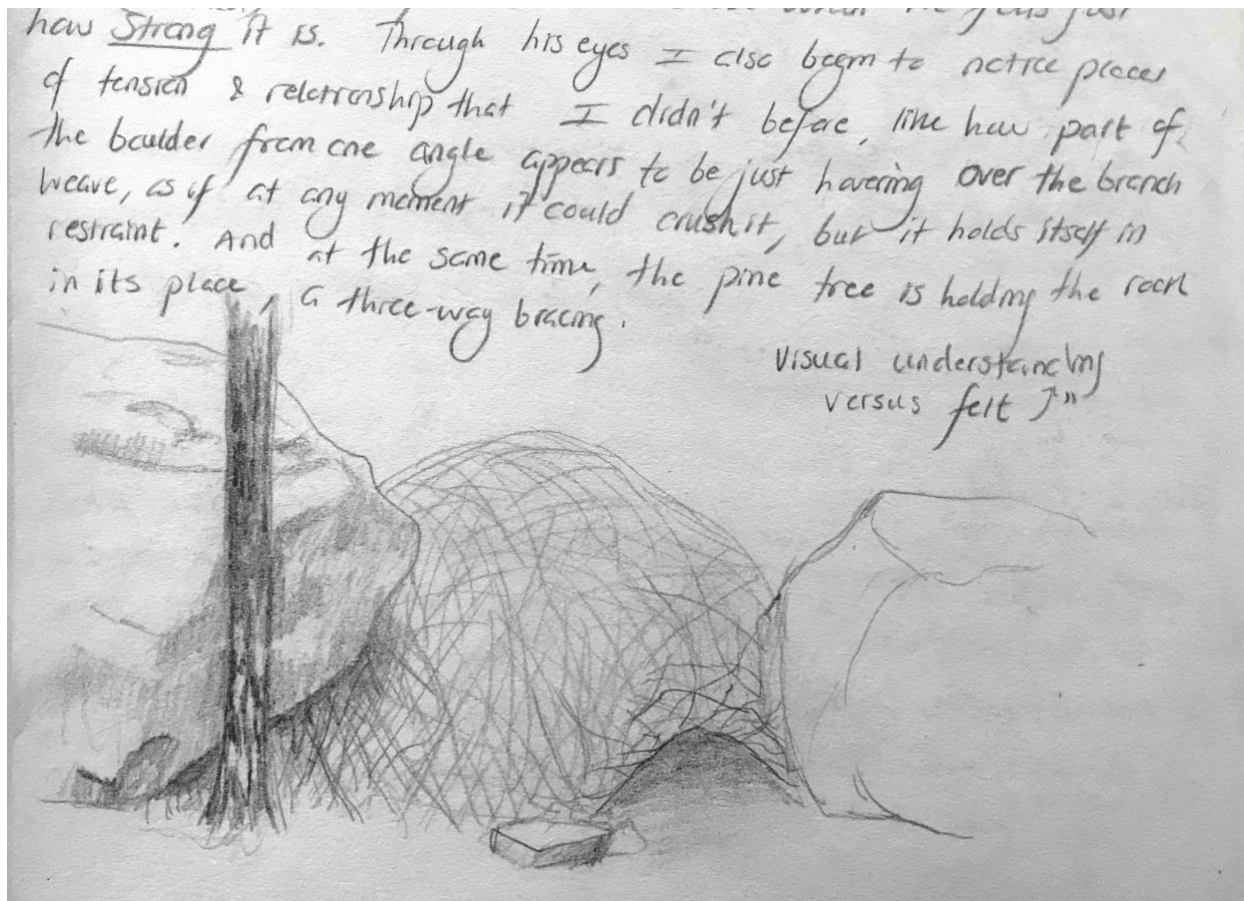
Writing is a powerful means through which I connect thoughts transpiring in my mind to the intelligence of the surrounding ecosystem. The marks reflect the weather, the weather reflects my mood. Here is an example of this merging of hand and air, mind and matter. You will notice my marks feel visibly stiff, marked by cold and the heavy wet air:



As an extension of the handwriting, drawing became essential to my journaling. As another form of slow, embodied documentation, it seemed to emerge without prompting. It felt good and right to translate the visual data coming to my eyes into marks made by my hand on the paper. Drawing requires close looking- something I trained myself to do as a child and then later studied in a BFA in illustration. Sadly, it had been a very long time since I had allowed myself to use drawing as a sort of note taking and exercised the sharp focusing of the eyes it demands.

My iPhone camera had superseded my “eyes to hand” as a quicker, more efficient method of capturing details I encountered and wanted to remember. I began to realize that to allow time for drawing was an active defiance of the impulsive image capturing and the impatient pace of life with technology that I was questioning. Drawing produces a different kind of intimacy and knowing, one that simplifies into the wonder of shapes and lines, shadows and light, texture and form.

Drawing allows natural composition to be revealed: the composition of a small surface area of one rock, or noticing the way a rock and tree live in a unique arrangement of relationship to each other. Here is an example how drawing helped me tune into a new revelation of composition, highlighted to me during the visit of scientist Bjorn Kroger:



## II. Darkness Liturgy

*Rocks extend themselves to offer darkness, quiet weight.*

*Surfaced from underworld recesses by the slow scratching of layers.  
Now we, contained inside.*

*The darkness threatens to erase our limbs. We fear not being able to locate the self.*

*What happens when the image vanishes? Does reality persist in touch? Do we exist even when we are not seen? When we possess no mirror, no portrait or profile?*

*What imaged us? What imagined us out of the darkness?*

*Today, on this winter solstice, we let the fortress of language dissolve, and let silence speak.  
Let our breath fill this dark lung*

*Winter beckons us inside, to rest our eyes and reset. In the dark chamber of our internal landscape, the darkness is a gift. It embraces us, holds us in stillness.*

*Rest down into your body. Feel its weight on the ground.*

*Recall how every night you slip imperceptibly into the darkness of sleep and get lost in the images of your mind.*

*But how often do we listen to these mummering that flicker behind closed eyes in visionless slumber? Give our attention to ephemeral images, seek internal abundance?*

*Outside is the noise that reminds of the of busyness of life, the chaos of our thoughts manifest. The demands that move against the stillness of the biting cold, frozen ground. Frenzied motion persisting against slowed and dormant rhythms.*

*What sits in the dark recesses of your mind, the abyss of your imaginings?*

*Darkness is a space of silence. Listen. A hovering expanse out of which images emerge. Here we are in a womb where potential rest in this house of belonging. Here time is erased with the boundaries of the self. Darkness summons us, bindings us together in its embrace.*

*Darkness is a blanket hiding you away in its protective fort from the hunt outside where voices are shouting, prodding you on in this hunger for capturing.*

*Inside darkness is whispering is saying "everything is already done and everything unfinished carries on without you." The linear march of chronos is fading.*

*Plant your breath now and wait like a seed that's only hope is darkness.*

*Listen with internal eyes. Wait. Sink down into eternal waters. In the hovering lung, rest.*

### III. Chamber Practices

After taking time to arrive, you may begin to activate any of these practices either by saying the title word or simply by doing:

**We will begin with this practice:**

**Silence:** We will rest into stillness and quietly listen inside and outside ourselves, and then inside and outside the chamber- stretching our hearing beyond the visible limits of the site.

**After a period of silence, you may begin to initiate any of these practices, always returning to silence as the ground in between:**

**Breathing:** We will play with our own audible breathing rhythms and let them be affected by hearing the other's breath.

**Body as receptor:** We will playfully explore the environment of the chamber, gather it in through our senses, and be curious with our movement, letting our explorations affect each others.

**Perception:** I will guide you in using your eyes to create visual sensations.

**Social (waking) dreaming:** We close our eyes and after some time in silence begin to share the image that surfaces in our imaginations. We will follow it like a dream.

**Memory:** At any moment we are invited to share a memory that has surfaced.

**Story:** You can ask me to tell you a story about the site, my time making the chamber or something that happened there.

**Question:** You may pose a question and I will engage in silent contemplation of the same question with you.

**Where are you?:** At any point during the experience you may ask me this question or I may ask you. Take a moment to journey through your internal landscape and reflect on this question. We may share out loud if we want.

**When you are ready to leave:**

**Exit:** I will guide you in the exiting ritual.

**\*other/new practices may emerge in the space between us. There is nothing that is not allowed. I only ask that you are aware of giving space for silence and attention.**

#### IV. “Body as a Receptor” or “Embodied Capture” Exercises

**Fixed gaze-** focus on one object/element or detail and let your eyes blur the rest into a backdrop. Gather in only this one area. Hold your gaze for a long exposure. Notice how duration affects your embodied image.

**Scanning/tracing-** burn an image in your mind by using your eyes to trace outlines/shapes. Notice every detail by letting your eyes scan, wandering over the surface to gather in each nuance.

**Dynamic/3D-** gathering in a moving image by recognizing the connecting points that lead your eye from one detail to the next. Change the normal orientation of your body, play with varying your proximity and vantage point to continually change the framing of your subject/scene. As you turn, notice that there is no longer a front and back to your image inscribing – it shifts on all axes. Practice awareness of the interconnectedness.

**Phantasmagoria-** “a changing scene made up of many elements” – move through your surroundings as a painterly dreamscape. Be a moving camera/receptor by walking or dancing. Practice loosening your joints, turning your head and changing levels. Notice how your scene/subject increases or diminishes in size with your proximity. Notice any optical illusions- the shifting shapes of shadow and sunlight, reflections and horizon lines. Practice releasing any need to capture a particularly pleasing composition and letting what you see flow through you as a fluid dance

**Reverse work-** Be still and let your subject/scene be the source of movement. Notice how subtle movement becomes grand in your stillness. Don’t think about how to capture what you see, just feel its effect on your body. Instead of making an image, let it work on you. Offer your presence, your attention, your curiosity. Bear witness to its activity. Tune into the invisible exchanges happening on a biochemical level.

**Respons(ense)ibility** - step into the frame of whatever it is that your eyes have focused on and take part in whatever it was you felt compelled to make an image of. Go from passive observer to witness and participant. Respond to what you see.

**Seeing through touch-** reach out and trace something with your finger tips or another part of your body. Perhaps you close your eyes and let the sensitivity of your skin describe it to you, discern its shape and familiarize you with its contours. Notice textures and temperature.

**Taste** - usually thought of in the context of eating and ingesting, but we can taste without consuming. It is a way to take in sensory messages and become acquainted with something. Let your lips greet a tree or plant, place your tongue on it. Your tongue can also feel, taking in textures and temperatures.

**Smell**- often we forget to breathe deeply and are only aware of scents if they are intrusive or strong or come with the act of tasting – usually eating. Stop and take in deep wells of air, gather the scents into your body. Greet something by pressing your nose into it.

**Sound**- often the sound of our own thoughts overtakes our consciousness, dulling our sensitivity to external sounds. Be still and notice your thoughts. Focus your ears first on the sounds that are closest to you- your own breath and then gradually expand outwards moving your receptivity in expanding circles to more and more distant sounds.

**Latent Soundscape**- there are so many sounds latent within things that require playful interaction to be released. Move the object of your curiosity or strike it with something to test its sonic potential.

**Inside Out**- Imagine your perception inside your subject looking out from inside it. Look out from its body and see yourself looking at it. Imagine you're inside it, looking out, seeing yourself looking at it...

## V. Key Reference Quotes from *On Photography* by Susan Sontag (and reflection notes)

“It is common for those who have glimpsed something beautiful to express regret at not having been able to photograph it.” Pg 85

“You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it.” Instead of just recording reality, photographs became the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism.” Pg. 87

***Reflection:** By allowing visitors to photograph the chamber I would be reinforcing a certain sense of claim upon reality, a way of instilling appearance as a way of naming and knowing. Instead, I wished for them to be left with only the lived experience in the body, the artifacts of sensorial inscription. This became important to me because of my interest in how the body keeps record of trauma leading me to believe that positive experiences might create records, sensory image memories stored in the body, with a positive effect upon the psyche (maybe even healing versus the damage or disordering of mind/body that comes with trauma/PTSD).*

“The photographer necessarily insists on the preeminence of one sense: sight. And...the habit of **photographic seeing**— of looking at reality as an array of potential photographs – creates estrangement from, rather than union with, nature.” pg. 97

“The earliest photographers talked as if the camera were a copying machine; as if, while people operate cameras, it is the camera that sees. The invention of photography was welcomed as a means of easing the burden of ever accumulating information and sense impressions.” Pg. 87-88

“Nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world. It became clear that there was not just a simple, unitary activity called seeing (recorded by, aided by cameras) but “**photographic seeing,**” which was both a new way for people to see and a new activity for them to perform.” Pg. 88-89

“When ordinary seeing was further violated – and the object isolated from its surroundings, rendering it abstract –new conventions about what was beautiful took hold. What is beautiful

became just what the eye can't (or doesn't) see that fracturing, dislocating version that only the camera supplies." Pg. 91

**Reflection:** *This violation of the sense of sight seems connected to the evolution of the environments for displaying art images- namely the gallery which serves to do exactly this: take the living process of a material that is in relationship with the artist and the world, and abstract it into a finalized, bordered (often framed or roped off, "do not touch") object onto a white wall that visually isolates it from its context. In reality there is an interconnection (ecosystem) of a matrix of relationships. So to photograph the chamber, and even more so to put those photograph on display in the thesis exhibition, would have been to abstract it from the very ecosystem it sprung from and that it sought to beckon people back into connection with.*

"Photography is commonly regarded as an instrument for knowing things. When Thoreau said "you can't say more than you see," he took for granted that sight had pride of place among the senses. ...[the camera] changed seeing itself, by fostering the idea of seeing for seeing's sake." Pg. 93

"Thus, one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings." Pg 98

"And, being images themselves, some photographs right from the start refer us to other images as well as to life... Indeed, the very extent to which that photograph is unforgettable indicates its potential for being depoliticized, for becoming a timeless image. ..." photography can only say, 'how beautiful'... it has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment." Pg. 107-7

**Reflection:** *In this way the photograph may render the chamber into a motif that is related to other motifs or images and recognizable and namable forms- this already happens upon first glance of a visitor. I wonder if this is because our eyes are evolved photographically to approach a foreign object initially as only an image that we try to place in our knowing. This leads to people saying "nice cottage" or "igloo" or "it looks like a \_\_\_\_ animal or creature" (that's not to say i don't appreciate these associations and often they feel more like an activation of the imagination). As an image motif the only appropriate response to the chamber is, "how beautiful!" which again flattens it into abject meaning, into "an object of [purely visual] enjoyment". This derails its intent to point to something much more complex and dire (in light of the environmental crisis)- that humans are forgetting their very nature as Nature, and our shared life/collaborative existence to live in reciprocity.*

In fact, words do speak louder than pictures. Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning. What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it does what no photograph can ever do – speak. Pg. 108

**Reflection:** *When we turn to photographs to speak for us- like profile pictures and galleries and threads on social media or photographs framed on our walls- we turn away and dwell almost inclusively inside (meaning both indoors and in an insular, ego-centric flattened world of identity mirroring) from what can and is actually is speaking: the animate earth. We fail to listen to the voices of the birds, the wind, the trees, the animals and all living beings. So the whole world is the image; Reality is the body of law of being in which we are immersed and so to look at myself is to look at a part of that image.*

Photography's realism creates a confusion about the real which is... analgesic morally as well as... sensorially stimulating. ... its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum without walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation. Through the camera people become customers or tourists of reality. ... photographs make the entire world available as an object of appraisal. Pg. 109-10

The urge to take photographs is in principle an indiscriminate one, for the practice of photography is now identified with the idea that everything in the world could be made interesting through the camera. But this quality of being interesting,... is an empty one the photographic purchase on the world, with its limitless production of notes on reality, makes everything homologous. ... by disclosing the thingness of human beings, the humanness of things, photography transforms reality into a tautology. ... Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what is seen through photographs really invites an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment. Pg. 111

## VI. Additional Key Reference Quotes from *Becoming Animal* and *Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram

### ***Becoming Animal:***

“I can hardly be instilled by this **intelligence** if I only touch down, briefly, on my way to elsewhere. Only by living for many moons in one region, my peripheral senses tracking seasonal changes in the local plants...only over time can the intelligence of a place lay claim upon my person. ...the mind I’ve carried within me settles into the wider mind that enfolds me. Changes in the terrain begin to release and **mirror** my own, internal changes.” pg. 133

“Sentience is not an attribute of a body in isolation; it emerges from the ongoing **encounter between** our flesh and the forest of rhythms in which it finds itself, born of the interplay and tension between the world’s wild hunger and our own. The impulse toward thought grows from the **gap between** our thirst and an unexpectedly dry creekbed, as our curiosity finds consummation in the magnetism between our tongue and a prickly hedge studied with blackberries... Mind arises and **dwells between** the body and the earth...” pg. 110-11

“I was thinking, yes, but in shifting shapes and rhythms and dimly coloured vectors, thinking with my **senses**, feeling my way toward insights and understanding that had more the form of feelings blooming in my belly than of statements being spoken within my skull. ... the drift of my thoughts was instilled and steadily carried by subtle alterations in the **landscape**. Walking in the woods kept my thoughts close and complexly patterned, well emerging into the wider meadows opened my ponderings out onto broad vistas of feeling, yielding **insights** into the expansive arc of my life and of the world’s unfolding.” Pg. 112

“As we come to recognize these transcendent essences, or ideas, behind their material instantiations, and as we learn to contemplate these universal ideas and in their purity, our mind gradually frees itself from prison of the body and attains that **transcendent, eternal state that is its truest home.**” Pg. 119

“Gradually confounding clear distinction between **inner and outer worlds**, as the elfin mood at dusk blurred the **boundaries between** daytime and nighttime, dissolving the sharp edges of trunks and softening the boulders.” pg. 121

“What if mind is not ours, that is earths? What if mind, rightly understood, is not a special property of humankind, but is rather a property of the **Earth** itself, a power in which we are carnally **immersed.**” Pg. 123

“Such **reciprocity** is the very structure of **perception**. We experience the **sensuous world** only by rendering ourselves **vulnerable** to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweavement: the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within that terrain.” Pg. ??

“Sentience is not an attribute of a **body** in isolation; it emerges from the ongoing **encounter** between our flesh and the forest of rhythms in which it finds itself, born of the interplay and tension **between** the world's wild hunger and our own.” Pg. 110

### ***The Spell of the Sensuous:***

“The world and I **reciprocate** one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings for me in return.” pg. 33

“**Phenomenology**...would turns towards “the things themselves,” toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy... phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to described as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, **sensorial experience**. ... simply to pay **attention** to its rhythms and textures, **not to capture** or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse loads of appearance— and ultimately to give a **voice** to its enigmatic and ever-shifting patterns...” pg. 35

“The “real world”... is rather an **intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions**, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The **mutual inscription** of others in my experience, and...of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or “reality.”” Pg. 39

“**Phenomenology**...which would strive not to explain the world as if from the outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our **participation** in the here-and-now...”pg. 47

“**Perception**, in Merleau-Ponty’s work, is precisely this **reciprocity**, the ongoing **interchange** between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of **silent conversation** that I carry on with things in a **continuous dialogue** that unfolds far below my verbal awareness...” Pg. 52

“I find this silent or **wordless dance** always already going on – this **improvised** duet between my animal body and the fluid, **breathing landscape** that it inhabits. “ pg. 53

“...my hand is able to touch things only because my hand is itself a **touchable** thing and thus is entirely part of the **tactical** world that it explores.

...

To touch the coarse **skin** of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one’s own **tactility**, to feel oneself **touched** by the tree. And to see the world is also, at the same time, to experience oneself as **visible**, to feel oneself **seen**. ...We might say that we are organs of this world, **flesh** of its flesh, and that the world is **perceiving** itself *through* us.” pg. 68

## VII. Additional Chamber Journal quotes

March 2<sup>nd</sup> - *S. tells me he has made the positive forms of the branches into the negative space and the sky and snow inbetween into the positive forms. In this way, the spaces between begin to bulge out, taking on volume. We play with our visual perception to change the narrative of what is the subject or the “important,” tangible matter and instead assign value to the negative in between spaces, the perceived absences. It’s easy to regard the air/sky as empty space when really it’s the encompassing atmosphere that we breathe and sustains life.*

*S. ponders, “what would it be like to be someone else?”*

*I muse back, “what would it be like to be some-thing else, like this rock?”*

*We dream together about our potential long, rock-life; the millions of years of slow metamorphosis and the observations only possible with stasis.*

*I close my eyes and see a flower trapped in a crystal, encased in some perfectly clear multifaceted geometry. It is preserved, held in time— fresh, pink, alive. But frozen, it doesn’t decay nor grow. S. asks me questions and I discover the crystal is actually plastic, synthetic man-made to look like a real gemstone. It encapsulates only the head of the flower and the stem is free-floating. The entire thing is hovering in some non-space. ...then S. sees an entire field of these weightless crystal encased flowers, their heads knocking into each other making an eerie sound. ...I wonder if the crystal is our human-constructed world fixated on capturing and preserving with unchanging order. It feels prophetic: pointing at our paradoxical desire to not destroy the natural world. In our efforts to protect ecosystems, perhaps we freeze them at a distance from us, fixing their beauty and life into a different form of death— one of static untouchability.*

March 3<sup>rd</sup> - I tip my head back to look upside down. Suddenly, I’ve been flipped underground, the forest floor is the top layer of dirt covering me. The chamber weave is a seed pod and we are held in its shell, a dark expectant holding. I have the sensation of floating underground and imagine beings walking on top of us in a somewhere near, but unseen world of light and air. J. comments that when he first arrived he felt like he was in the inside of the outside.

“I feel like I am a tiny person inside my body” J.says. ...what he thought of as “me” was contained inside a larger organism. ...like a white or red blood cell, a tiny soldier fighting in the body... I wonder if the chamber has a way of making the “I” or ego small and bringing a bodily awareness of being part of a greater organism, the cosmic body, our human nature entangled in Nature.

## VIII. *Silent Dialogue feedback*

You are in your world, I cannot share it- I have mine, but our worlds are contained together in the branches, connected.

It created a circulation loop: from the branches pressing down onto my head through my body to the floor and then to your feet up through your body and back to my head through the branches.

I feel the distinct weight of the branches pressing down on my head. It is grounding and meditative. It helps to know, even though we don't see, that the other person is there. It felt as if there was something I was sending you and you were sending me.

I know the branches can snap, I was afraid of how fragile they felt.

I could smell the branches. It brought me to the forest. I could see the trees. It was calming. Thank you.

It was such a relief to not have to talk, to feel protected from the noise and social pressure all around me.

The soundscape became an oceanic atmosphere, vast and distant, yet enveloping me.

I feel all the subtle shifts. I thought I was the one being still, but then I realized I can't hold my body static, I have to find flexibility and allow for movement in order to find the stillness and hold my center of gravity. It's a give and take of leaning forwards and backwards. We listen and care for each other with these edges of balance.

What if it were for three heads or the structure was longer so the connecting weave between the two heads was a great distance? How delayed would the communication be?

It's unlike contact improv because there are no visuals, only imagined movements, it's hard to *know* how to respond.