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COVER SHEET

From the abyss to the afterglow: On the practice of vibrant contemplation as a mode of artistic research

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Abstract:

Through a form of critical autoethnography, this study diffracts aspects of the author's artistic practice through the intimate process of mourning to delineate a particular mode of knowledge production within artistic research that queers the relationship between the inside and outside of epistemic and ontological perspectives. The first section considers the abyss as a figure between grief, the unknown, and modes of knowledge production within artistic research. The second section bridges the work of theorising as a form of reconfiguring the world through the study of diffracted light, and further delineates the practice of vibrant contemplation as a method of entangling art practice with theorisation processes beyond a dichotomous opposition between art and science. The final section contemplates the figure of the afterglow as a material-discursive phenomenon that emerges from the temporality of mourning vis-à-vis artistic research.

Keywords:

mourning, critical auto-ethnography, theorizing, light, diffraction, poetics

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Original page description: The original page has a black background on which text, images and videos are spread out in a large canvas format. The text blocks have sections in two different colour formats: white (in regular format below) and red (in italics below). The white texts correspond to what the author calls the 'outside' perspective of critical autoethnographic writing and the red ones correspond to the 'inside' perspective, where he includes sections of his personal journals with an underlying poetic tone. The images and videos included on the page show artistic material experiments as well as the documentation of the author's research process, in and outside his studio, with the diffraction of light. The audio-visual media are placed alongside the main body of the text in direct relation to the text's argument, with the exception of large videos of light diffraction experiments placed in the background, which break with the linearity of the text. A schematic drawing of a spiral acts as a key element that is repeated throughout the layout of the page, visually linking different elements together. The page can be navigated in both a linear and nonlinear fashion through scrolling in two axes (X and Y), with the aforementioned graphic elements acting as bridges between sections in an attempt to reflect aspects of the research process mentioned in the text.

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Video: *Recording: Sea diffraction at Cote D'Azur.* A b/w video of the sea on a calm day. The video is shot against the sun, whose reflections make the water glow. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2513214> to watch the video.

Stepping outside a question uttered in the abyss

In mourning, I find a strange, unsettling comfort in the presence of diffracted light. Remember that light that escapes between the curtains on a warm summer morning? Or that light that touches the surface of running water and presents us with an accidental spectacle? Faced with the darkness of loss, I close my eyes only to contemplate a wave of light that lingers in my eyelids for a few seconds, blurring the

binaries of light and dark, blurring the curtains between two seemingly disparate worlds, revealing the presence of things as yet unknown to my reasoning. This liminal space, inaugurated by absence and sorrow, eerily inside and outside of present time, placed between the binaries and surrounded by uncertainty where the experience of things past and yet to come hide within the dark, I shall call the abyss. Could an artistic inquiry on diffracted light reveal fundamental aspects of such an abyss?
(Zanotello 2021a)

It was a few months after my partner passed away that I uttered the above question in my personal journal. The work of mourning and bereavement seem at first glance not to share much with the endeavour of artistic research, but something about the time, space, and experience of the abyss opened by loss offers, upon closer inspection, a relation to the threshold within which the process of knowledge production within art seems to touch: the threshold to an unknown with agency, an unknown of things yet to come, or an unknown of things that are as yet unnamed, unrecognised, or even ineffable. In congruence with such thought and relation, the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant wrote while reflecting on historical trauma and grief that ‘no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown’ (Glissant 1997: 8). But mourning demands an opening to ‘a transformation that one cannot know in advance’, as philosopher Judith Butler (2004: 21) would probably add, just as this artistic research, still in its infancy, requires. Both mourning and research encompass a period of time in which identities tend to shift in relation to a process of knowledge production that is, at once, affecting and shifting the perspectives of the individual (artist, mourner) while engendering an unforeseeable entanglement with the world (culture, aesthetics). In such a sense, the abyss as the unknown seemed in the first step like an unavoidable place to start reflecting on my practice as both an artist and researcher, as it had a gravitational pull that was rather unavoidable. Given that loss is an event that essentially alters one’s way of being, understanding, and acting in the world, it intrinsically alters one’s practice too. In her work about mourning, Butler infers that ‘one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever’ (Butler 2004: 21). Hence, I ask, could the same be said of the process of research through my artistic practice?

Photo: *Studio during experimentation process.* A digital photo of a table top with sparsely placed text notes and analogue photographs. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2513320> to see the image.

The first question was uttered as an attempt to step forward into researching what I had felt in my personal experience and its relation to what is culturally and epistemically constructed within my own process of doing artistic research. But the very naivety and circumstantial form by which the question was uttered already made explicit a recurrent problem within artistic research: that of the requirement of formulating well-defined questions that is ‘often at odds with the actual course of events’, as the academic Henk Borgdorff (2011:56) has remarked about the production of knowledge within artistic research. Within the abyss as the unknown, we find an indeterminate space of questioning, and in there, time as contingency. Questions, it

seems, act as placeholders and temporary utterances within artistic research, just as within such abyssal thought, while the problems they entail can unfold and see the light of clarity through a time beyond linear causality.

Let us first attend to a problem present in the initial relation of this inquiry: that of the abyss, the production of knowledge, and the unknown. The writer Rebecca Solnit asserts, while writing about the 'being lost' of both loss and the creative endeavour, that 'the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found' (Solnit 2005: 5). She claims that 'it is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar', and that scientists, too, operate in such boundaries by trying to 'transform the unknown into the known', while artists 'get you out into that dark sea'. Through such popular polarisation between the arts and sciences, a problem arises, since artistic research seems to operate in the space between the two poles, or rather in the struggle of making things explicit while providing 'a specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content of art', as Borgdorff (2011:44) adds. It seems therefore, that a core aspect of artistic research is operating within different thresholds of language (both verbal and non-verbal) and articulating the liminal spheres of knowledge production that escape the polarisation between the arts and sciences. Resonating with such thought is the position of philosopher and design theorist Kathrin Busch, who states that 'in this liminal sphere of "wild" knowledge that is still unstructured, non-conceptual, and uncanonized, knowledge can flourish that was once termed "event" in philosophy, and which is characterized by the fact that it does not occur within the space and framework of the expected' (Busch 2009: 6). Through this perspective, research, and most prominently, artistic research, can be said to perform at the vicinity of the abyss as a space of liminality and close affinity to the unknown and the unfamiliar.

In the opening chapter of his seminal work *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Édouard Glissant invokes the sea as the space of transformation of the abyss into knowledge, and further argues for a poetics capable of articulating such a space of transformation and becoming. To speak of a poetics means speaking about a specific articulation of language that relates to, bridges, and navigates through that which is unknown or ineffable. Language is a core aspect of research, as it is a material through which knowledge can be both constructed and shared. But a poetics is capable of conveying meaning that may be beyond the scope of descriptive language. In line with Glissant, we will take this further to argue that a poetics articulates knowledge at a threshold that lies outside the current Western, Eurocentric epistemology that seeks to 'grasp' phenomena in categories that aim at a contestable universality of knowledge. In a parallel line of thought, Busch states that 'an art or a poetics of knowledge can emerge that questions the actual construct of the sciences' (Busch 2009: 4), thus altering the very hegemony of science and the way we know the world, which is perhaps one of the fundamental epistemological problems that artistic research seeks to elucidate. This is not an attempt to diminish scientific endeavour, but rather to assert that the boundaries between art and science are porous, and even more, that a poetics is capable of operating within a threshold of knowledge across the abyss that seems to divide them. A poetics can henceforth be seen as a discursive entanglement of practices, as the 'middle ground' upon which relations (between subjects, matters, and processes) take shape. A poetics of knowledge implies research as 'an aesthetic, rather than primarily a methodological, endeavor' (Pelletier 2009: 267), and is, therefore, a key component in the pursuit of artistic research. Interestingly

enough, the physicist and theorist Karen Barad, who is known for her agential realism theory (and perhaps also for diffracting different disciplines together), states that a poetics can ‘lure “us” toward the possibilities of engaging the force of imagination in its materiality’ (Barad 2012: 14), whereas the force of ‘imagination puts us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate, that which travels along the edge of being’, once again, on the edge of the abyss.

Let us return to our initial considerations in order to address a second aspect of the question uttered in the abyss. This question, it seems, is based on a rather personal and contemplative observation of my subjective experience of the abyss and of diffracted light, but the question seems to be open to a field that is not only personal, but shared. After all, both research and art work by making things public, as it is in the public sphere that discourse takes shape and knowledge is negotiated. But in order to do this, a different kind of textual articulation seems necessary to both make sense of and make explicit the relations between a personal experience and a common ground of knowledge production. This is the practice of theory, or rather, as author and theorist of performance studies Stacy Holman Jones points out, of theorising: ‘Theorizing is an ongoing, movement-driven process that links the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting, aesthetics and criticism in what performance studies scholar Della Pollock describes as “living bodies of thought”’ (Holman Jones 2016: 229). In the back-and-forth effort to make explicit an experience gathered in the personal sphere through storytelling, on the one hand, and to theorise about such an experience through conceptual and quotative articulation, on the other, a bridge between the personal and a collective discourse is merged. ‘Bridging analysis and action means acknowledging that the claims we make in our work—about and for each other—are always, as Haraway puts it, “claims on people’s lives”’ (Holman Jones 2016: 234). This ongoing process of knowledge production, such an ‘active bridging’ between the two perspectives—an ‘inside’ that includes biographical narrative and expressive writing, and an ‘outside’ that includes a citational mode of writing with and through theory—is what Holman Jones calls ‘critical autoethnography’ (Holman Jones 2016: 234). Following on from the question posed in the abyss, we thus step into a second perspective of writing, in continuation of the initial excerpt:

According to Karen Barad, diffraction patterns display ‘shadows in “light” regions and bright spots in “dark” regions.’ She analyses the two-slit diffraction experiment in quantum physics as an example that ‘queers the binary light-darkness story’. The experiment can be traced back to Francesco Grimaldi who first postulated the phenomenon of diffraction, noting that ‘a body actually enlightened may become obscure by adding new light to that which it has already received’. With this observation in hand, Barad asserts that ‘darkness is not mere absence, but rather an abundance’. If adding new light produces the abundant in obscurity, could subtracting light instead reveal the fundamental in clarity? Closing my eyelids to inspect the abyss seems to hold the assertion true. By such a manoeuvre, the abyss moves away from being an image of dark emptiness and instead becomes an image of abundance without clarity instead. So, what kind of ‘bright spots’ — foundations, concepts, poetics — within the abyss might the method of light subtraction further reveal and bring into clarity? (Zanotello 2021b)

Video: *Experiment: Cutting light together-apart.* A video of diffraction patterns being formed by shining a laser pointer through a diffraction grating sheet. The materials were performed by hand and filmed under low light conditions where only the patterns are seen on screen. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2513339> to watch the video.

Something quite peculiar happens through the performativity of writing as theorising. It does not function as a description or explanation of something that has already been done, experienced, or written about. Rather, it becomes something different with and through the act of writing. By alternating the two perspectives of writing, it is possible to move in and out of both the personal and the public spheres in such a way that the boundaries between subject and object become fluid. In the above example, through the act of writing—with Karen Barad and her reading of the concept of diffraction—a new question has arisen in my own private journal, one that would not have been present before, had it not been for the theorisation of the question uttered in the abyss. By bridging the personal and the public through theorising and storytelling, we are able to arrive at hypotheses and questions that transcend both individual experience and culture, and thus acquire public relevance. The potential and commitment of critical autoethnography is that it enables ‘becoming and embodying the change I seek in myself and in the world’ (Holman Jones 2016: 235). It involves a process of transformation and materialisation, and one that is embedded in uncertainty. Della Pollock, an author and theorist who has written about writing as performance, writes that ‘the process of theorising is not a journey to a predetermined destination, but instead, a “detour” by which we encounter the unknown, positioning the scholar/artist/author “in the precarious spatial and temporal position of becoming different”’ (Pollock 2006: 2, as cited in Holman Jones 2016: 236). Thus, an object of pursuit—that which is sought—is never clear, but always open and in a constant state of becoming something else through the process of researching and writing. As questions raised within the abyss, they change as the transformation progresses. And here we can finally find our way across the abyss as the unknown, but also as the abyss created by loss and the work of mourning that it entails. Both are spaces of precariousness and transformation. Both are, at the same time, culturally and psychologically relevant. Mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo an unknown transformation; and so does artistic research.

There. We have finally stepped outside the abyss.

Photo: *Studio during experimentation process.* The recording of an afterglow is displayed on a screen placed on the floor. A pile of texts and drafts are positioned below it and the artist stands next to it. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2834482> to see the image.

We can therefore understand the abyss as such a space; a space that embodies the unknown, a space that lacks clarity, but a space of intense transformation and vibrancy. It creates an experience that has a pull, that seems to open a chasm to the unknown and that

triggers an active process of thought. It is therefore liminal in nature—the abysses happen between things—and within its chasm relations take shape. Such a recognition is both a curse and a blessing when it comes to artistic research. It is a blessing, because it is from the abyss that the unforeseen seems to emerge ‘out of the blue’: creativity and curiosity are nurtured by the gravitational pull of the unknown, by the thirst for something unforeseen, or by the need to seek out the change we want in the world. It is a curse, for to acknowledge such a space of profound difference is to acknowledge a threshold to what can or cannot be grasped, understood, or achieved by language alone. Something in the abyss escapes language and is, in essence, utterly ineffable. When it comes to grief, we speak of pathos, pain, and longing. When it comes to science, we speak of the unfathomable, the indescribable, the incalculable. When it comes to art, we speak of affect and indeterminacy—even when the contingent abyss becomes partially palpable. Such a space of transformation is actualised at the edges of knowledge, but is a space that involves a relation not only to ‘the world but toward the abysses man carries within himself’ (Glissant 1997: 24). With such a thought, we are therefore enacting poetics as a means of knowledge production. ‘By rediscovering the abysses of art or the interplay of various aesthetics, scientific knowledge thus develops one of the ways poetics is expressed, reconnecting with poetry’s earlier ambition to establish itself as knowledge’ (Glissant 1997: 137–38). Or so has written the poet-philosopher.

Questions asked in the abyss may not have direct answers, but they can redirect the course of inquiry ‘to another shore’. I have uttered the questions about light and reason in order to raise new questions about our common methods of producing meaning and sense. While the critical autoethnography of Holman Jones and the performative writing and theorising from Pollock provide powerful lenses for making sense of individual experience vis-à-vis the cultural, artistic practice can involve more than metaphors, words, and stories. Our question turns to the entanglement with matter and the practice of art as a method of knowing instead.

Bridging through: The practice of vibrant contemplation

We then try to elucidate the particular means by which art, or rather, an artistic practice is able to produce theory. Theory and knowledge relate to each other through the observable and/or experienceable phenomena or matters of fact. It is therefore important to consider what such things are, how they are constructed, and how they operate systemically. To do this, we must first acknowledge that what at first seems to be an epistemological question is bound up with an ontological one when it comes to the work and power of the art object as matter and the artistic process as inquiry. To assist us in this endeavour, we will further our dialogue with Karen Barad and engage with the thoughts of political theorist Jane Bennett whose theories fall under the umbrella of ‘New Materialism’, a contemporary branch of continental philosophy that seeks to no longer privilege the human dimension of a dualistic ontology over body and matter. In other words, we will draw on such thinking as a means of understanding how knowledge might emerge through or from the artistic objects/processes themselves, and how their agency affects the act of theorising beyond a subject/object distinction. While such theories by no means exhaust nor encompass the vast field of theories that share similar characteristics (such as affect theory, object-oriented ontology, some positions within art theory, post-colonial studies, epistemologies of the South, among others), they provide us with

a place to start this section as an experiment that puts them to test within the framework of artistic research and this particular inquiry about diffracted light (Barad) and vibrancy (Bennett). We begin by bridging through two quotations:

'Doing theory requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority. Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world.' (Barad 2012: 2)

'By "vitality" I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due.' (Bennett 2009: viii)

Video: *Feather diffraction*. A video of a black, blue and white coloured feather spinning under low light conditions, exhibiting diffraction grading characteristics as it shines. The feather and light source were performed by hand, although this is not evident from the video. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2514526> to watch the video.

On the one hand, Barad states that theory engages with the world's aliveness, but it is in itself a living reconfiguration of such a world. On the other hand, Bennett understands such aliveness as a vibrancy that emerges from, traverses, or is contingent upon both human and non-human bodies, claiming for an attention to the vitality of matter. Both acknowledge that their stances cross the work of power, or the way the world is configured through politics, albeit in a partial perspective. An artistic practice that seeks to produce knowledge and theory is always engaged in an attempt to reconfigure the world that articulates the vibrant materiality of things, since the object of art is composed of more than the work of philosophy and words. The question is: how might an artistic practice reconfigure the world (or produce theory) through what Bennett calls the 'force of things'?

In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett claims that objects contain 'thing-power': 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett 2009: 6). Things have a way of pulling attention in such a manner that semiotic processes of meaning construction emanate from and move through them. Understanding such a subtle force of things requires the decentralisation of human perception within the ecology of things. How can an inanimate object—to borrow an anthropomorphic metaphor—*speak*? Bennett, Barad, and others whose work falls under the umbrella of 'new materialism' not only recognise the agency of matter and things to act without the necessity of the human, but also recognise the fallibility of the nature/culture and subject/object dichotomies when it comes to the primacy given to language and representation within the humanities and sciences. 'Why are language and

culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?' asks Barad (2003: 801) in her essay on 'how matter comes to matter'. Indeed, as she might argue, if language is incapable of grasping the totality of the world, then artistic practice and research are therefore sites where things might 'have a say' in how discourse and meaning are shaped. Structure, position, colour, texture, size, shape, movement, timing, sound, silence, duration, organic matter, inorganic matter, landscape, and so forth: all have a say in the assemblage that an artistic practice can compose. But acknowledging that things have power through their own vitality is not enough to attest to how things might do theory, or become entangled in the act of theorising.

Mixed-media: *A juxtaposition of a video and two digital photographs.* The video displays the artist's hand performing the experiment with a feather on top of a mirrored surface and a diffraction sheet. A laser pointer shines through the materials and we see the scattering and diffraction of light unfolding organically. The photographs show two table tops at the artist's studio, one with scattered texts and the other with tools and prototyping materials used in the experiments. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2921242> to navigate there.

Moving away from Bennett's thing-power and the commitment to decentralising human agency towards new conceptions of matter, we enter into how a thing or matter performs outside language, in order to understand how this in turn might affect the work of theory. Barad states that 'performativity, properly constructed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words', and she goes on to say that 'the move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality [...] to matters of practices/doings/actions' (Barad 2003: 802). It is within this performative framework that artistic research seems to maintain its mode of knowledge production: for it is precisely in the act of performing (practising, doing) with matters other than descriptive language that it might compose its standing grounds for theory. In arguing for this perspective on science, Barad draws on Niels Bohr's epistemological framework, which does not separate the scientific description of realities from the apparatuses of measurement that produce them. In other words, she takes into account the performativity of the apparatuses of measurement, which is intrinsically linked to how science reconfigures the world through a partial perspective. Conversely, we can say that an artistic epistemological framework is inseparable from the material-performative practices that produce it. If we want to attest to how things might do theory, we ought to look at the specific modes of material-discursive practices that produce the work of theorisation.

By way of an example, let us return to the end of the investigation in the previous section to pick up where we left off in my autoethnographic account of the abyss. In my investigation of diffracted light and the possibility of putting it into practice to illuminate the abyss within mourning, I have turned my studio into an experimental site for exploring the hypothesis of 'subtracting light' as a principle for revealing the abyss. It is perhaps useful to recall the starting point of Barad's point of departure in using the term 'diffraction', in particular, how she states that diffraction patterns illuminate the 'indefinite nature of boundaries' by 'displaying

shadows in “light” regions and bright spots in “dark” regions’. For her, the ‘relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of “exteriority within”’ (Barad 2003: 803). For my particular inquiry, searching for bright spots ‘in the abyss’ meant searching for unknown kinds of exteriority within. In other words, it meant pursuing, through an experimental process of diffracting light, an understanding of difference (or ‘exteriority’) present within the very experimental situation: between the vibrancy of the matters enacted, the theories engaged, the abyss felt within, and the autoethnographic theorisation of what happens in between.

Mixed-media: *A juxtaposition of three videos and two photographs.* The videos showcase different iterations of the hand-held experiments with a laser beam and silica stone with diffraction properties. Although the stone is visible, we see mainly a beam of light crossing it and scattering into different patterns and directions in red. The photographs, placed behind the videos in conjunction with a spiral drawing, showcase a wide spectrum of bright colors. These are documentation images, experiments with a diffraction sheet, water and a spotlight. In contrast to the previous images, the light portrayed in these images is fluid and colourful. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2514671> to navigate there.

The matter of light, when diffracted through different materials, unfolds. White light, apparently homogeneous, contains a spectrum of difference in an intense form. Diffracting light unfolds its expansiveness through the thresholds hidden in darkness, causing a sense of both wonder and strangeness of witnessing something new, outside sorrow, but weirdly unfolding through it. The experiments depend on very specific and localised positionings of different materials that either scatter, concentrate, cut, and distort a single ray of light into a complex phenomenon that is difficult to predict in advance. An object interfering with a beam of light produced not only shadows, but also ‘bright spots in dark regions’ and patterns hidden in the unknowns of the situation. We might suggest that diffracted light exhibits a difference that is contingent on the assemblage of different objects that interfere with it. In metaphorical language, light is equivalent to the phenomenon of reasoning—think, for example, of the terms ‘enlightenment’ and the expression ‘shedding light’. So the experiments could be constructed as an exploration of the metaphor of light as reason, and unfold into the meanings that such a relation would entail. But to postulate in this way is still to arrive at a form of description and representation, whereas to theorise would mean that the qualities of the experiment and the events it entails actively perform or diffract with theory in their making. We therefore turn to the performativity of doing the experiment itself, a performativity that is inherently intertwined with the human, who is not placed at the centre of the experiment but is part of it, and to the processes of theorisation that take place through and after such acts that elucidate an ‘exteriority within’.

Mixed-media: *A juxtaposition of two videos inside a spiral.* A larger video shows a hand holding and moving back and forth an acrylic plate against a light source. As the light shines through the material, the dust on its surface refracts the light giving the impression of out-of-scale stars or particles. A smaller video shows a diffraction grading sheet moving

back and forth a light source, showing a fluidly unfolding spectrum of colours that seem to expand and contract with the transparent surface of the sheet. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2514672> to navigate there.

Performing such experiments not only included the non-human within the process of theorisation, but also meant affecting and being affected by it. The acts of choosing the materials and how to hold them together, as well as choosing the perspectives to grasp them through images, meant choosing moments that seemed to lure in a form of thinking that was foreign and unforeseen. Seeing through the thresholds of light that unfolded as I moved the materials with my hand influenced my thinking with a wondrous encounter with something unpredictable. *Faced by the abyss, it meant extending its dark void into a multiplicity that couldn't help but unfold through the light. The experiments challenged a binary, solid, and homogenous image of reality — light/dark — and instead showed one built in infinite difference.* In other words, performing such experiments have revealed the abyss not as a binary fissure or limit of thought, but as one whose constellations and thresholds unfold in infinity. 'Being in touch with the infinite in/determinacy at the heart of matter, the abundance of nothingness, the infinitude of the void and its in/determinate murmurings, the muted cries, and silence that speaks of the possibilities of justice-to-come' (Barad 2012: 9). And this touch, or openness, has an impact on how meaning is constructed. Engaging with matter in its vibrancy opens up unforeseen ways of thinking with and through experience; ways that both alter and co-constitute the act of theorising ahead.

An artistic form of theorising—as this essay has hopefully shown so far—requires not only the act of thinking with theory and thinking with matter, but also the act of looking at it from a threshold distance, far enough to see the iterative process of research as an object of inquiry. It is this act that we call contemplation. To contemplate is to look at something fully and thoroughly. It requires a degree of detachment, but only partial and temporary (*when contemplating the sea, I look at it from the shore, while my feet are still wet with its waters, my nose still breathes its salty air, and my body still moves with its waves*). Contemplation requires a way of thinking that does not try to grasp and conquer, but to acknowledge, to examine deeply, and to be open to what the 'scenery' brings to the senses through meaning. When we speak of a possible vibrant contemplation, we speak of a process of theorising that runs with the vibrancy of matters through both affect and thought. A vibrant contemplation looks at theories that become with matter, just as the very act of contemplation is a vibrant matter of thinking and theorising. *Vibrant thinking moves, leaps, steps aside and out, and does not stand still. Like light, it radiates, diffracts, becomes. Contemplative thinking looks at the present long enough until the very process of making sense itself becomes clear.* As theory, it examines, reflects, and understands thoroughly. It is in the collision of the two that we find the foundations of our practice of artistic theorisation.

We can therefore understand vibrant contemplation as a contemporary method of inquiry into and out of artistic practice. It can be understood as a kinetic method of thinking, as it moves in and out of phenomena and practices in order to generate knowledge through theorisation, shifting positions of 'looking at things' that are both within and from a distance to allow for different, yet unforeseen, perspectives. As such, it is not trapped by a fixed subject and object,

but rather it navigates between the processes of making sense, between matter and thought, through the material-discursive thresholds of the unknown (the abyss) in their innermost vitality.

Diagram: *Vibrant Contemplation*. The vector drawing of a spiral where a continuous line intercalates repeatedly with a slightly dislocated dashed line from top to bottom. A caption indicates that the dashed line corresponds to an 'inside(-outside)' perspective of research, and the continuous line corresponds to an 'outside(-inside)' perspective. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2514733> to see the diagram.

If artistic inquiry entangles practices and matters that are unaccountable (thing-power), they relate to a continuous line; while the categorisation of descriptive language and the regulatory (academic/cultural/financial) forces that fall upon it in the act of writing, relate to a descriptive, discrete one. While it is true that writing through a critical autoethnographic approach subverts this conundrum, words have power through the discretisation of experience that would otherwise flow freely from any strictly human form of meaning organisation. It is therefore through the kinetics of moving inside and outside both practices—a partial inside that compromises an experimental, experiential, affective entanglement with matter, and a partial outside that aims at contemplating difference and opening new pathways of thought through writing, that research gains emancipation from the regulatory apparatus it may entail.

The proposed diagram stretches the cycle of vibrant contemplation through time. An artistic inquiry that equates matter and writing within the same plane of research, alternates between a partial inside (continuous, affective) and a partial outside (discrete, language) through diffraction: or the 'cutting together-apart' from Barad. Each cut diffracts the course of research into a new, albeit nearby and altered, direction. *A sort of crossing over*. In doing so, the individual and the collective, as well as the human and the non-human, all have an effect in the process of meaning construction. *They scramble open through indeterminacy*. In such a form of radical openness, the practice of vibrant contemplation includes both the exteriority within and the interiority outside, in a manner that queers the binary of subject and object toward the direction of the unknown and unforeseen (again, the abyss). Lastly, the spiralling diagram alludes to a kinetic dimension that our (so far) spatial metaphors have not been able to fully account for. We must therefore touch the dimension of time and the work of memory.

On the present tense of the afterglow

Back in my studio, I found on top of my table scattered papers of written stories, fragmented poems, notes and drawings from my ongoing research into the contradictory experience of time after loss. Populating the middle of the room, a bucket of water, various screens, diffraction sheets, heating elements, recorded videos and controllers remained from my past explorations on reenacting time with light. In my phone, I found a series of videos I had recorded of such experiments,

mixed on a timeline with other utterances from my everyday life that I had found worth recording. The room, however, had lost the blue texture of winter and was filled with the growing warmth of spring and a new meaning, now reflected in my eyes as they touched the timeline on my phone's screen. As I watched the vibrant end of a sunset through my window, the afterglow covered the sky, leaving the things found in my studio both alive and frozen under the still shadows of time. I recognised the impulse once more, and gifted the scene with a naive recording. (Zanotello 2022a)

Video: *Time-lapse of an afterglow in Venice.* A video loop of an afterglow where the blue-tinted sky turns black, as the warm magenta, purple, orange color of the afterglow shines in the clouds. The video is looped back-and-forth. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2515396> to watch the video.

The afterglow heralds a time when day spills into the night, and night spills into the day. Occurring just after sunset, it is a time when the sky takes on a distinctive mix of magenta, purple, orange, and blue colour, in between what is recognised as day and what is recognised as night, depending on the degree of luminosity and the relative position of the Earth around the Sun. It is therefore a period of liminality and transition, where the memory of a day mixes with the expectation of a night; hence it is a time when past and future meet 'without touching' (Morton 2017: 79). For the philosopher Timothy Morton, whose work on ecology and object-oriented ontology provides a perspective in the queerly temporal and ecological dimension of things, 'the future is also an abyss' and the present is always an illusion, for it is indeterminately situated somewhere where 'past and future are sliding over one another, not touching' (Morton 2017: 79). He claims that a thing 'is a junction of two abyssal movements' where 'appearance is the past; being is the future; nowness is the relative motion of future over past' (Morton 2017: 79). Within such a framework, the afterglow can be seen as both an example and a metaphor for the illusory experience of present time; one that, as Morton argues, is linked to the abyss as a two-way movement in time: the abyssal pressing of a contingent and unknown future over an abyssal past 'otherwise known as trauma' (Morton 2017: 79) that conditions the appearance of the present. To account for the present as a liminal time is to account for it as a period of transformation.

The period of time after loss, characterised by grief and mourning, has similar characteristics. However, we need to take into account the specific abyssal movements of time involved in such a period, for both the past and the future seem unbalanced and fractured by loss. On the one hand, the abyssal past moves across with enhanced intensity because the conditioning that the past exerts on the future is at once too strong and too weak. The conditioning seems strong because the weight of loss, of pain and longing, seems to demand constant attention. It is too weak because, for the subject in mourning, there is no further logical conditioning for the futures that might be or might have been. There is a lack of clarity and orientation. This in turn makes the abyssal movement of the future unstable and increasingly indeterminate.

The present is suddenly not what it used to be. I pause to catch my breath, while contemplating my feet above the ground. The apparent stillness of the moment is

confronted by the rush of memories trying to weave a thread of events that have led me to this particular point in time. A point in time. Do you remember when time felt more like a continuous line instead? When she was there, a thread was possible, and it held us both together. But being gone — not being there — broke time apart. Today, above this ground, the eerie past constantly populates the present, pushed back by the haunting of futures that never came. Pressed by the past and the future, the present has lost its linear continuity and became a point, making it impossible to experience duration. Loss has made the present both dense and empty, and therefore, a contradiction. (Zanotello 2021b)

Mixed-media: *A juxtaposition of two videos and a photograph.* The three elements show experiments conducted in a studio where voice is transduced to the intensity of light. One video shows one single heating element shining brightly as the artist's voice activates it. Below it, is a photo of the studio showcasing a line of such elements being constructed. At its side and on top of a spiral vector, a vertical video of the line of lights is shown, reflecting on top of screens placed in a grid on the floor. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2921245> to navigate there.

Hence, we speak of a fractured, contradictory experience of time when dealing with loss. It is not a definite state—like the afterglow, it lasts only for a limited, unpredictable time frame. But such a contradiction is also present in the work of imagination that artistic research entails. For Morton, 'creativity and enjoyment are a "disabled", malfunctioning relative motion between past and future, appearance and being' (Morton 2017: 79). But it can be argued that in the case of artistic research, such a contradiction is tolerated, or even further, encouraged. If artistic research performs the act of theorisation, and theories are, as we have seen with Karen Barad, 'living and breathing reconfigurings of the world' (Barad 2012: 2), theories can, perhaps, elucidate and reconfigure one's relation to the malfunctioning contradiction that haunts the experience of present time. And it is at this point that we might recall the practice of vibrant contemplation not only as a method or mode of artistic research, but as a practice that, in the case of mourning, involves a process of healing and care.

To contemplate the present is to look at it from a distance, without touching it. Contemplating time does not seek to change its contradiction: it allows it to unfold. A vibrant contemplation of a contradiction of time reveals it through the vitality of things. Engaging with things in their vitality allows for other temporalities, in their own contradictions, to become at least partially sensible to the human. By becoming sensible, the contradictions of time loosen their abyssal strength, as they are now subject to contemplation in the present. It is through such a queer ability of seeing—or rather, feeling—from within and from afar at once, that the possibility of accepting paradox (Barad's 'together-apart') in relation to the individual happens. In this way, things that would otherwise haunt us from the chasms of the past and future abyssal movements allow the contradiction of time to change and unfold vividly beyond what was previously felt and known. Such a practice in this case is indeed an act of queering the sense of time towards a non-dichotomous way of knowing as a means of caring for the contradictory experience of the present.

Mixed-media: *Documentation video and a photograph.* Both elements are part of the documentation of an artistic installation where a grid of eleven TV screens is placed on the floor, displaying the videos of a day passing into night, featuring blue tones and videos of light reflected on top of water flowing from an unknown source. Below it, assorted A3 sheets of paper filled with text are spread out. On top of it, a sculptural element containing three heating elements in a series emits a warm red tinted light accordingly. The video shows the artist in the activation performance sitting by the installation on a white chair, reading from a paper. As he reads, the line sculpture shines, filling the room with a warm light according to the intensity of his voice. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2515527> to navigate there.

In *Every abyss is a poem yet unfinished* (Zanotello 2022d), the abyssal movements of time in relation to loss are made present through the diffraction of contemplative moments. The installation is activated by a reading performance where the artist, in mourning, sits and reads a text. Placed on the floor, audio-visual recordings of days turning to night and the multidirectional flow of water are arranged in an open grid of uneven orientation, creating edges and breaks where one would expect continuity, forming a movement of time that is multiple and dislocated. In the corner, the recording of an afterglow is surrounded by broken texts, unfinished essays, and poetic accounts taken from my personal research journal (fragments that are partially presented in this exposition in *the afterglow's color*). Reflected on the surfaces of the screens, a line of light shines through time in the afterglow of what is left of a poem, long after the words have gone and affect lingers. The warming light can be understood as a durational object activated by the performance of one of such texts. In the above video documentation, a part of *That Which Stays* (Zanotello 2022e) is heard. The artist attempts to cross the ineffability of the abyss by diffracting light, text, and voice upon an archive of his memories. As he reads, the intensity of his voice is translated into the intensity of the light and the heat it generates, touching the audience's skin from afar. Once the reading is finished, the line of light repeats the pattern, rhythm, and intensity of his voice through the duration of the exhibition, thus alluding to a memory of something past that persists vibrantly in the present.

The installation and performance attempt to enact different temporal contradictions for further contemplation. Through its material vibrancy, both enact a version of reality as seen through the artist's lens in mourning vis-à-vis his attempt to elucidate it through research and theory. Presenting time in this way enacts a moment that reconfigures one's perception. Both the installation and performance attune to a liminal space of affect that lures and invites the observer to break time together and apart; to become sensitive to the nuances of time in its abyssal contradiction as seen through the lens of another. Through the encounter of an observer and the intimate contemplation enacted by the artist expanded as light and warmth in the room, the performance invites the observer to look at the installation from within and from afar all at once, thus participating in the engendering of meaning and theorisation.

(...) I wonder if anything can be said not to produce something that stays. For what stays, stays with the 'coulds', the 'shoulds', the hopes, the dreams, and the abyssal

cliffs of the unknown. I claim and argue for attention to things that linger. Anchors not made out of iron, but a warm immanence of will. I claim for the contemplation of the afterglow, for it stays, spilling over from day to night and night to day, blurring the boundaries from here and there, blurring the boundaries of the now, the already gone and the not-yet. For it is there, in that gap, that both words and images meet, exchange their courtesies, and forge their friendship. In that gap, they play and negotiate with the work of vibrant memory. In that gap they stay, ever unfinished, and therefore, complete. (Zanotello 2022e)

After the performance, the audience is literally left with the vibrancy of a light that shines and warms as it touches the skin, carries the texture and rhythm of the voice without words in repetition, and lingers throughout the remainder of the exhibition. After the first presentation, some members of the audience reported experiencing a shift in perception, where the space seemed to be filled with something from within itself, eliciting a form of beauty as well as opening a space for inquiry through one's own emotions and memories. As such, beauty can be seen to be 'owed to duration, to a contemplative synopsis', as the cultural theorist and philosopher Byung-Chul Han has recently argued while making a plea for the art of lingering, inscribed in what he calls 'vida contemplativa'. Resonantly enough, he goes on to say that beauty 'is not a momentous brilliance or attraction, but an afterglow, a phosphorescence of things' (2017: 48). In this sense, both the aforementioned installation and the performance can be seen as sites where such phosphorescence—the afterglow—of fragments of the present research is turned sensible. The experience and feeling of such light mingled with words alludes to an affective dimension of spoken language that lingers in time, an experience that resembles and feels closer to the work of emotion and memory than the work of pure reason—something that sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos would call 'warm-reason' (Santos 2008: 87), a way in which heart and mind jointly construct the world or the process of feeling-thinking (*sentipensar*), as first mentioned by sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda (Santos 2018: 100).

Photographs: *Documentation photographs.* In the photographs, we see the artist performing the reading of a text and the room (a ship) filled with the afterglow colours of the warm light shining. On top of the screens of the installation, we see the reflection of the light sculpture and the audience standing around the installation and performance. Behind it, an inverted spiral comes from top to bottom, closing in. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1744157/2509165#tool-2515522> to see the photographs.

This idea speaks to the temporality inscribed in artistic research itself, one in which performing theorisation can take shape in different acts or practices whose temporalities roll over each other without touching, diffracting each other. Writing, performing, enacting, experimenting, testing, sampling, dancing, sculpting etc. — in a sense, all forms of practice can operate both together and apart, both from the partial within the researcher/artist's perspective and from the partial afar within a cultural one, diffracting each other through a liminal afterglow of time. In this sense, performing theory, or rather theorising, either by engaging with a vibrant materiality

of things or by contemplating the discursiveness present in them, is perhaps less of a narrative endeavour than a poetic one; for there are always aspects—abysses—between any temporality of doing that are indeterminate. Such artistic utterances function as testing grounds and necessary intermediate steps of research towards yet unforeseen paths. Performing them in space and time is a strategy for opening both discourse and perception to such indeterminacy, and thus for opening theorisation to those aspects of the world not fully grasped by the intellect and yet unforeseen. It is in this encounter that the force of imagination takes place and ‘puts us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate, “that which travels along the edge of being; it is not being, but the opening of being toward-the-world”’ (Yusoff 2013, as cited in Barad 2012: 14).

That is, henceforth, a poetics of knowledge in the making.

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