

**KAROLINA RUPP**

# **SEALING PRACTICE**

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# SEALING PRACTICE

**KAROLINA RUPP**  
**MA PERFORMANCE PRACTICES**

A Thesis presented by Karolina Rupp to Master Performance Practices.  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts in  
Performance Practices.

**HOME OF  
PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICES**

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# 2024

## SYNOPSIS

Considering the urgency to alter current forms of human and more-than-human relations, especially in light of the climate crisis, Sealing Practice unpacks and disassembles human and more-than-human dualisms, anthropocentrisms and hierarchies. It understands these interrelations as fluid, horizontal, interlinked and with a high potential for co-making, especially in art practice. Through a rhizomatic-tensegritic-assemblage-hydrofeminist lens, Sealing practice works with various somatic practices, particularly ones that focus on fascia and motor imagery, as well as liminal beings and things, such as the seal, shaman and fender. This undertaking is carried by a marine vocabulary and humour and absurdism are interwoven throughout to provide refuge from the heaviness of the environmental disquiet present. In addition, the more-than-human is perceived as an active collaborator in art-making, entering this research via the method of being-looked-at, participating not only in a finalised work but also in the making process. The Sealing Practice thus asks: to what extent is it possible to interweave the human and more-than-human through somatic means focusing on fascia? How can creatures and materials of in-betweenness aid in bridging the binary between the human and more-than-human? And how can humour and absurdism provide alternative entry points to approaching humancentric notions regarding the more-than-

human? Sealing Practice has brought forward new questions regarding care and ethics towards the more-than-human and begun to unpack somatic and imaginary potential for interweaving while reintroducing the membrane as a valuable mechanism in connection. Finally, this practice originated *speculative absurdism* as a method for performance-making, dismantling, through fictitious and absurdist means, existing human and more-than-human relations.

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Thank you to my parents for their support. Thank you to Etienne, Ingvild, Jess & Rachel for being there. Thank you to Brian Heylin for being the sexiest selkie cat in the world.

Thank you to Maria Vysoká, you made this worthwhile!

## **DECLARATION**

I, Karolina Rupp, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, 'Sealing Practice'. No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

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## INTRODUCTION

Stemming from an initial engagement with (natural) found objects through (mostly site- specific) sculpture, installation, and performance, object agency, for example, how chicken wire pushes back into your hand when tackled, became a focus in my artistic performance praxis. This focus was underlined by Jane Bennet's (2010) notion of *vitality*, indicating that things have their own propensities. How humans relate to objects is mostly anthropocentric, with hierarchies in place and a clear distinction between human and object or human and more-than-human<sup>1</sup>. In my practice, where engagement takes place from body to body, so to speak, these humancentric distinctions did not hold true. This started my voyage to unpack and disassemble these human and more-than-human dualisms and hierarchies, understanding the relation instead as fluid, interlinked and with a high potential for co-making. Besides my own interest in this enquiry, how humans have been treating more-than-humans has led to a more than precarious situation, the climate crisis. Donna Haraway introduces the term *plantationocene* (Mitman, 2019), illustrating how humans treat the earth like

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<sup>1</sup> *More-than-human* was chosen here instead of *non-human* or *other-than-human*, as the latter two are characterised by their opposition to the human, whereas *more-than-human* provides a wider "definition of animated beings by recognizing the possibility of liveliness, or at least agency or personality, to any entities with whom humans interact" (Chamel and Dansac, 2023, 1).



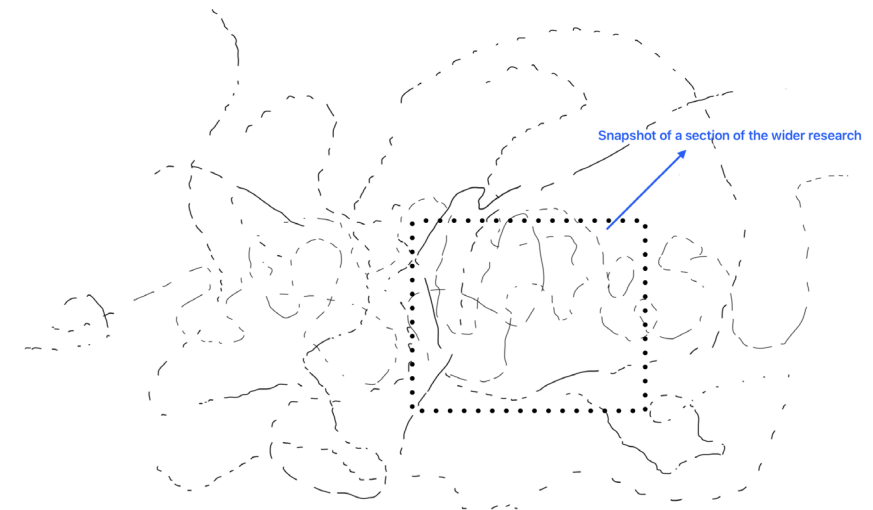
a plantation set out for their needs. Therefore, finding and developing alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the more-than-human is urgently pressing; however, to ensure not being overcome by absolute despair, humour and absurdism provide refuge in this study.

During the last two years of the MA Performance Practices, this artistic research (or voyage, as stated above) accelerated, and a multiplicity of experiments, observations, insights, training, writings, readings, and performances took place. However, due to the limited scope of this paper and the ever-morphing and continuous nature of the process and practice, a snapshot is introduced. This specific snapshot has been chosen as it provides a representative sample indicating how this investigation has been and is being conducted.

This snapshot is taken from a wider artistic research practice, tackling human and more-than-human dualism and hierarchies, referred to as *sealing practice*. The neologism developed during the process of my wider research and originates from both the aquatic and terrestrial mammal, the seal, a *liminal* (in-between) creature requiring access to land to rest and reproduce and to the water to feed, as well as the sealant, an adhesive or binder<sup>2</sup>. With the aid of a marine and watery vocabulary, the sealing practice concentrates on

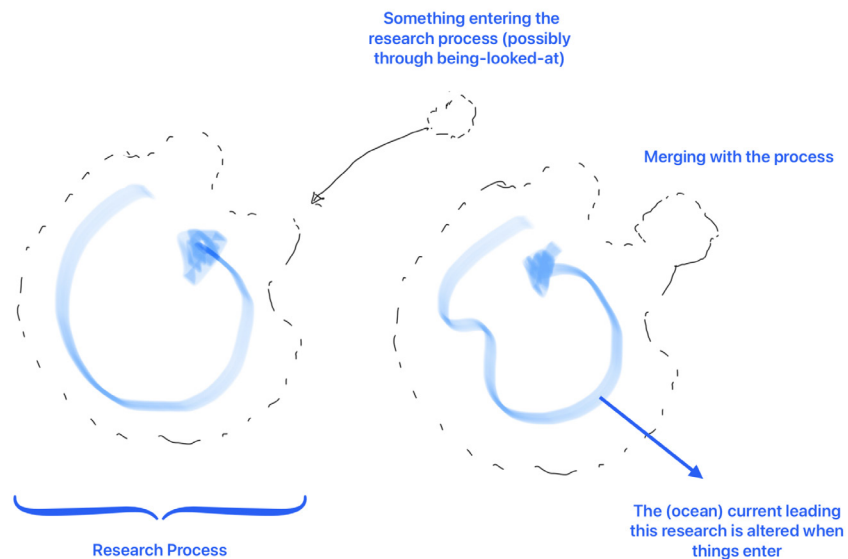
<sup>2</sup> Although listed in its etymology (Merriam-Webster, 2024), the term does not allude to the act of seal hunting.

the (human) body, the somatic (originating from my physical sculptural practice), particularly fascia (connective tissue),



and the liminal as catalysts for connection. Emerging from the in-between is a shamanic character acting as a medium between the human and more-than-human. The more-than-human elements (hereafter referred to as *lookers*) entering this practice do so through the method of *being-looked-at*, looking at me, rather than me looking at them, ensuring more-than-human agency in art making (co-making). This entering influences the research process and its trajectory, making this research somewhat practice-led<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> This research is both practice-led, as it is "concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice" (Candy, 2006), and practice-based, which "is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (Candy, 2006).



The sealing practice contributes to a rethinking of human and more-than-human dichotomies and hierarchies through embodiment, explicitly relating to objects and animals and, more specifically, seal kinship. The humorous and absurdist aspect allows for a lighter engagement with the grievous environmental circumstances resulting from human-centric visions and treatments of the planet. Additionally, performance-making is expanded to include not only more-than-humans as part of a work but also as active co-creators during the making process.

This thesis has three components. In *What waters are we in?* (context of study), the concept of the binary and subsequent

theoretical and philosophical developments overcoming such dualisms are introduced, for example, posthumanism. Then, horizontal hierarchies highlighting interweaving, intra-acting, and co-making with the more-than-human are discussed. After this, liminality, somatics and absurdism are theoretically situated and elaborated upon. Lastly, a closer look is taken towards conservation practices.

*Learning to seal* (design of the study and findings) begins by introducing the hypotheses and approaches of this study. After that, four subcategories are introduced: supportive/general, somatic, seal and the more-than-human and alter ego. These sections contain the methods, procedures followed, and findings within this snapshot. Moreover, descriptions, analyses and findings of four performative experiments and showings conducted are also woven into these sections. These are (i) a guided meditation at WEST Den Haag, (ii) a performance during Uitmacht in Arnhem involving a seal image called *Mystic*, (iii) a site-specific action at Lauwersoog with Rooisbos tea and (iv) the final performance as part of this study programme *Seven Fenders and One Rope* involving a fender, guru and seal image. Available (links to) documentation and thick descriptions can be found in the appendix at A-1 to A-4.

*New drops in the ocean and possible ripples* (contextualisation of findings and future steps) is divided into four subsections: Somatics, Speculative Absurdism, Becoming Membrane and Ethics and Care. The first two relate to the hypotheses outlined in 2.1, whereas the last two are new findings developed during this research process.

Regarding terminology and writing style, multiple aspects deviate from the traditional academic format within the entire text. Throughout, categories and sections have been established for clarity of reading and to aid my own understanding of the wider artistic research. These categories, however, are in no particular order, underpinning the non-hierarchical notions present. The various elements categorised, are really all interwoven rather than separate. Writing in both authoritative and inner voice intra-connects the various layers of engagement, some being more direct than others. The same is applicable to the use of multiple tenses throughout, such as writing both in the past and present tense, as this aids the creation of a non-linear time network across the research trajectory. Also, the word "I", referring to the researcher, was substituted with the word "eye". The reason is that "I" is a singular entity and letter, whereas "eye" is a multiple, a network, consisting of 3 letters, which allows a moving away from an individualistic and egocentric viewpoint often associated with anthropocentrism. Additionally, "eye" links to *lookers*, a foundational aspect

of this research elaborated upon in chapter two under the subheading of *being-looked-at* (2.3.3.1). By inserting eyes into the body of this text, the text is able to look at the reader, demonstrating a fleshy form of agency. Thus, this research's haptic and somatic aspects are emphasised by incorporating a reference to a physical body organ. Occasionally, words are also tinkered with to resemble and link to this research's wet, watery and fluid aspect, resulting in, for example, "interwave" rather than "interweave". Lastly, the words guru, shaman and alter ego are used interchangeably, defying definition and fixity of this character.

# CHAPTER 1: WHAT WATERS ARE WE IN?

## 1.1 POSTHUMANISM - FROM BINARY TO INTERWOVENNESS

The Western world carries a tradition of binary thinking exemplified by René Descartes' mind-body dualism (Skirry, 2024). Breaking this binary perspective is Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he stipulates a return to the living body as starting point for philosophical enquiry (Overthink Podcast, 2022). The living body, physically housing the mind, is understood as a multiplicity (mind and body) rather than a separate entity from the mind. In addition, Merleau-Ponty reiterates that objective thinking still originates in the subjective living body, exposing hierarchies that place objective thinking on a pedestal (Overthink Podcast, 2022). The revealing, unpacking, and subverting of such hierarchies is also strongly present in the field of decoloniality, where "a pluriverse of cosmologies, epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, cultures, languages, norms and practices" (Hayes et al., 2021, 888) is being worked towards, mostly by dominated and subaltern groups.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome is a strong undercurrent in this study. The rhizome refers to a model of

thinking based on a plant stem, such as a ginger plant, that grows horizontally and has no beginning and end but rather a middle or *milieu* (Sutton and Martin- Jones, 2008, 3-5). It provides an extension to and simultaneously moves beyond the dominant Western approach of representing our thinking by means of a tree. To elaborate, a tree grows vertically and is connected to a lineage based on seeds that then grow into trees, indicating causality and hierarchy as major elements in this thinking model. In addition, it is understood as a single entity, introducing binaries of tree versus Other. However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the tree is not an individual but rather part of a wider network, a multiplicity, a rhizome, such as a forest (Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008, 3-5). As a non-hierarchical and horizontal way of interacting and being linked together in the world, it emphasises a wider connectedness amongst earthlings (regardless of their make-up), which forms the basis of posthumanist enquiries. *Posthumanism*, as well as *ecofeminism*, harbour various approaches to interweaving, interacting and coming together with the more-than-human. Staying with Deleuze and Guattari, their notion of *becoming animal* underscores this enquiry. *Becoming* forms a keystone of their philosophical contribution, a view on identity that is not fixed and constantly in a state of movement towards a final form, although never reaching this (Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008, 3-5). My research practice finds itself in a fixed state of becoming, of becoming seal. Expanding this into

the multiple is Karen Barad's neologism intra-action (Barad, 2012), providing an alternative view on how interrelatedness can be understood. More precisely, intra-action alludes to the coming together of two entities that initially did not exist individually, who then, through interacting, become a thing. In this research enquiry, this concept is especially applicable to the notion of co-making with the more-than-human, resulting in assemblages through performance-making, by, for example, bringing the *lookers* together with a space.

Additionally, theorist Rosi Braidotti focuses on the disappearing of binaries as "what comes to the fore [in posthumanism] instead is a nature-culture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self" (Braidotti, 2013, 8). Based on this, the emergence of multi-species ethnography and the shift to include zoe (anthropologically understood as killable life such as animals or plants) in the *bios* (valuable life), thus placing it next to humans rather than under them, is very much in line with this enquiry's priority on horizontal hierarchies (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010, 545). Donna Haraway introduces the notion of the Chthulucene, "in which [the] human race will confront its arrogance and 'superiority' and humbly make kin with the biological critters coming from the under-ground" (Shields, 2018), in my research from under-water. Expanding this watery aspect is the notion of *hydrofeminism*, as introduced by Astrida

Neimanis, which “brings together a feminist sensibility with an ecological one” (Neimanis, 2018). By realising that we are bodies of water, “a separation between nature and culture, between an environment ‘out there’ and a human subject ‘in here’” (Neimanis, 2018) can be refused. Within Neimanis’ work and in this research, water is understood as a glue-like thing present throughout connecting entities, underlining togetherness within this research and in a wider intra-planetary existence.

Within the realm of making, in Laura Burns’ “somatic approach to [their] ongoing encounter with the River Wyre, Lancashire” (2021), land is understood as the key collaborator. Furthermore, they “explore the capacity for land to witness and propel human ethics and expression through the porous and influx body” (Burns, 2021). The corporeal interweaving of human and more-than-human (in my case, the more-than-human seal rather than river) with historic trauma (in this research, anthropocentric ideologies), places Burns’ work, just like my own, in a liminal space, “opening the capacity for the body to be ‘in two places at once’” (Burns, 2021). Burns’ work is multiplicatively interlinked with this research enquiry, through elements of liminality, site-specificity, co-making, water, and especially the somatic engagement with the more-than-human. The porous body in Burns’ piece, as well as in this study, underlines Stacy Alaimo’s notion of

transcorporeality, which defines a body as being “open, [porous], to the entering, trespassing and hosting of external agents, environmental factors and other non-human bodies” (VestAndPage, 2023). This insight opens up Alexis Shotwell’s work *Against Purity* (2016), which unpacks the impossibility of human tendencies wanting to recover primordial states of purity. Following Shotwell, who proposes Donna Haraway’s speculative fiction to liberate old ways, new futures can be imagined instead. Speculative fabulation is implemented in this artistic research trajectory as a core method for moving beyond traditional means of knowledge production.

Engaging with both living more-than-humans, for example, animals and materials, such as rope, in a reciprocal way, co-creating, melting into each other, listening, and responding to their agencies is at the core of this research enquiry. Co-working with materials might not seem as straightforward as interweaving with the living. Here, Jane Bennet’s new materialist work *Vibrant Matter* (2010) provides a foundational component in the problematisation of object- human cognisance as she states that “found objects (my examples come from litter on the street, a toy creature in a Kafka story, a technical gadget used in criminal investigations) can become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own, a perhaps small but irreducible degree of independence from the words, images, and feelings they provoke in us” (2010, xvii).

Thus, every object has in it a sense of liveliness that is inherent to its materiality (Bennet, 2010).

Bennet's new materialist view can be expanded by looking at *speculative realism* (an aspect of post-continental philosophy), specifically Graham Harman's *Object Oriented Ontology* (OOO). OOO proposes that "things, animals, and other non-human entities experience their existence in a way that lies outside our own species-centric definition of consciousness" (Kerr, 2016).

## 1.2 CO-MAKING

As more-than-human co-making plays a crucial role, it is necessary to take a closer look at Claire Bishop's notes on performance participation (2010). In my artistic research practice, participation is understood as co-creation and relates specifically to more-than-human agencies. The three reasons participation is desired in artistic work in general are, firstly, that it promotes empowerment and thus creates an active and emancipated subject. Secondly, in order to create a more non-hierarchical dynamic, authorship lies no longer exclusively with a single entity but is rather shared amongst the collective participants. The more-than-human thus can be understood as co-creators of the work. Lastly, the notion

of community has been largely influenced by capitalism and according to Bishop, participation has the potential for a "restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning" (2010). Our humancentric perspective towards the more-than-human, especially when linked to capitalistic worth and value, underlines the potential of more-than-human participation concerning collective meaning-making in an ecology that includes more-than-human beings as well. An example here is Maja Smrekar's work *Hybrid Family*, which establishes a connection between the human and more-than-human through an embodied approach that is "related to the theory of becoming-animal by rethinking the social and ideological instrumentalization of a woman's body and breastfeeding" (Smrekar, 2016). In this work, Smrekar breastfeeds her puppy. Instead of working with dogs, eye work with seals, although less directly and without focus on women's bodies, but more than human agency instead. In addition, Mette Ingvarsdén's *Artificial Nature Project* asks how "one [can] address the force of things, materials, objects and matters as something that acts upon humans" (Ingvarsdén, 2012) and does so by having materials fly through the air on a theatre stage, creating a mess of various things that then later are moved "into motion by dancers, composing a body that is no longer made of human flesh but rather of a floating, flying mass" (Ingvarsdén, 2012). In my work, however, the more-than-human is unpacked, particularly as co-maker rather than



as something having an effect on humans, as this has already been established in my sculptural practice.

### 1.3 LIMINALITY

The notion of liminality, or the in-between, imbibes this study thoroughly: the seal is a creature living both in the sea and on land, requiring both to survive, a cyborg, as Haraway (1991) would phrase it; the wetsuit, as a second skin, shields from cold water while requiring a layer of water between it and the human skin to insulate properly; the shaman is a medium between the spirit and the everyday world. The focus on the liminal is possibly influenced by my background in Anthropology, where ritual, or more precisely, *rites of passage*, as stipulated by Victor Turner, was thoughtfully unpacked. Rites of passage house three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation (Turner, 1969). These phases are present in the performative experiments conducted in this research, for example, in *Seven Fenders and One Rope*. In addition, they provided guidance when intra-acting with the more-than-human (please find a specific example proposed by Bill Plotkin in the appendix under B-1) as rituality and spiritual practices, as proposed by Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac (2022), can possibly provide a practice to relate with (not to) the more-than-human. Ann Liv Young's alter ego Sherry (Arts/ Posthumanities in Medicine, 2014) performed

at the psychiatry convention in Madrid in 2014, crossing borders amongst what is real, performed, and invented. Although this work focused on healing practices, it influenced the development of the guru and their situatedness within spiritual practices.

### 1.4 SOMATICS

Somatics, or body-based practices, with their focus on proprioception, interoception, and the body's physical structure, such as muscles and bones, are fundamental to this research. Knowledge stemming from somatic practices is often complicated to verbalise or communicate and, through this difficulty is somewhat invisible. Therefore, established systems and their vocabulary provide support, namely Structural Integration by Tom Myers and Awareness Through Movement (ATM) as developed by Mosché Feldenkrais.

#### 1.4.1 Fascia and Structural Integration

Fascia, made of elastin and collagen while suspended in ground substance in the (human/ mammalian) body, acts as a net-like lubricant for muscles and holds them in place. Fascia is also the thing in-between, connecting two things, as pointed out by Kerstin Kussmaul (2016), an artist and researcher specialising in somatic practices, dance and



Myoreflex Therapy. Kussmaul produced a site-responsive choreographic work called the *matter of fascia*, in which Lake Rototoa in New Zealand is evoked through materiality and kinesthesia of fascia, highlighting a joint becoming of place and all its actors, human and more-than-human (Kussmaul, 2021). Similar to Kussmaul, this research understands fascia as (embodied) connective tissue, bringing together two things, in this case, the human and more-than-human, by altering the physicality and, as a result (through the neurosomatic connection of mind and body) the attitude of the human.

To understand this material better and its potential for (embodied) connection, Structural Integration by Tom Myers was consulted and practised. It is based on the initial concept of Anatomy Trains developed by Ida Rolf, known as Rolfing. Myers categorises the fascia into various lines, such as the Spiral Line or Lateral Line. These lines allude to the fact that the current anatomical structure of humans still houses evidence of evolutionary beginnings in the water. This insight underlines Neimanis' notes on bodies of water and water as connective glue amongst entities. The Lateral Line, or side line, runs from the ear to the feet (Myers, 2021, 357). When the right lateral line contracts, it causes the left side to stretch, which then triggers the spinal stretch reflex, contracting the left, stretching the right and so on (Myers, 2021, 357). This wave-like side-to-side motion can be observed in fish through

swimming as well as in humans at the age of 3 to 6 months when they start creeping (Myers, year, 358). The adult walking motion, however, is based on flexion and extension instead of side-to-side motion. This sagittal motion is also observed in dolphins and whales (Myers, 2021, 358). Unpacking these fascial anatomies provides awareness of an existing wet biological interwovenness and connection between human and more-than-humans such as fish.

#### 1.4.2 Feldenkrais and Motor Imagery

One part of the Feldenkrais method is *Awareness Through Movement* (ATM), practised through group classes where the participants are guided through a sequence of gentle movements to improve bodily awareness and movement qualities (Feldenkrais Method, 2024). ATMs sometimes use *motor imagery*, a technique where movements are not physically executed but visualised or imagined. Motor imagery, as supported by numerous studies, results in "the same plastic changes in the motor system as actual physical practice" (Mulder, 2017, 1). This method reinforces the existence of a neural-somatic connection, providing, together with verbal guidance, as a tool for activating this method (as practised in Feldenkrais), the theoretical grounding for the somatic component of this research. Considering that humans are capable of imagining movements that have a direct impact on their physicality, this research enquiry proposes

that this method, as taught by Feldenkrais, can be utilised for imagining speculative fabulations and connections between the human and more-than-human that are grounded in the human body, altering its physicality. This study conducts experiments involving guided motor imagery of object and human and seal and human intra-action. These possible alterations of the physical body can bring about embodied changes in human and more-than-human relationships and hierarchies. An artist who implements techniques from the Feldenkrais method is Anne Juren. In her performance *Phantasmical Anatomies* (On Enclosed Spaces and the Great Outdoors, 2018), she guides the audience into a meditation that starts with a body scan with a special focus on the mouth. She invites the audience to become aware of their tongue, visualising it becoming longer and longer and eventually lying next to the rest of their body licking the floor. Juren thus works with human anatomy, modifies it and brings it site-specifically into the participant's environment. However, she remains on the surface (literally) and does not introduce foreign bodies to the imaginary exercise with which an active merging occurs, such as in my work *Seven Fenders and One Rope*, where the seal is merging with the human body.

## 1.5 HUMOUR AND (POST-)ABSURDISM

Another aspect of this research is the underlying current of humour and absurdism. The humour present in this research abstains from comedic methods that rely on hierarchies, such as superiority, which includes, for example, degradation, sexism, etc. (Billig, 2005). In addition, Freud's *Jokes* and their relation to the unconscious only peripherally aided this enquiry. Instead, the pivot is incongruity, specifically regarding anthropocentric approaches to the more-than-human. To quote Beattie in Rothbart, "Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them" (1976, 37). An example within my research (in the performance *Seven Fenders And One Rope*) is the use of a mask that covers the mouth by being worn incorrectly (the mouth is supposed to be exposed), limiting the clarity of speech. In more general terms, Thorsten Brinkmann's absurdist aesthetics and practice give rise to works such as *Gut Ding Will Es So*, 2003/4 (Brinkmann, 2024), in which he films himself engaging somewhat clumsily and non-habitually with found objects such as a mattress. Absurdism, on the other hand, is understood from a post-absurdism perspective (Bennet, 2015, 115). This research is influenced by Beth Henley's approach to absurdism, especially in her play

*Crimes of the Heart*, where she writes about situations that are not philosophical or universalised but rather about localised female bodies in the everyday, showing “domestic situations that are quite ridiculous and absurd” (Bennet, 2015, 119). The focus on the localised and the already present, in this case, the relationship between human and more-than-human, and its wider context, has been adopted in this investigation, thus highlighting the absurdity of existing anthropocentric perspectives concerning the more-than-human.

## **1.6 CONSERVATION**

Moving closer to working with animals, the seal specifically has a long history of being used and abused as a show animal in the circus trained for human entertainment. However, other approaches are also present, for example, Mordecai Ogada’s critical perspectives on conservation. They are informed by a focus on community-based conservation (Dr. Mordecai Ogada), where he advocates for integrating people and wildlife rather than creating separate zones to host game, for example (Ars Electronica, 2023).

# **CHAPTER 2: LEARNING TO SEAL**

## **2.1 HYPOTHESIS**

This research project is based on three initial interlinking hypotheses that all aim to subvert human and more-than-human relations that are underscored by anthropocentrism, hierarchy and duality or othering.

Firstly, (a) to what extent is it possible to interweave the human and more-than-human through somatic means focusing on fascia? Secondly, (b) how can creatures and materials of in-betweenness (seals, wetsuits and shamans) aid in bridging the binary between the human and more-than-human? Lastly, (c) how can humour and absurdism provide alternative entry points to approaching humancentric notions regarding the more-than-human?

## **2.2 APPROACH**

For this research, four overlapping approaches were selected, acting as one interwoven lens through which this study was conducted. These are the rhizome, tensegrity, assemblage and hydrofeminism. All four approaches share qualities associated with fluidity, interconnectedness, and

non-hierarchical structures as well as highlighting multitudinal rather than individual constructions and processes. These aspects underpin the underlying ethos and position of this study, namely that of how human and more-than-human relations can be understood as interwoven rather than separate. In addition, the material practice and process of this research, which relies on co-making with the more-than-human, is supported. The approach is inextricably interwoven within the subsequent methods while giving them a general wash, for example, of wetness, through the presence of hydrofeminism.

### 2.2.1 Rhizome

In this study, the rhizome is understood as a metaphor for unpacking the multiplicity of elements and species and how these relate, specifically focusing on the melting away of binaries and hierarchies between the human and more-than-human. In addition, the rhizome also provides grounding for an embodied practice, connecting my body haptically to bodies of the more-than-human, as described under 2.3.2.3 Haptic studio practice.

### 2.2.2 Tensegrity

The neologism tensegrity was fused by Buckminster Fuller from the terms *tension* and *integrity* (Gurstelle, 2016, 103). “Tensegrity describes structures composed of three or more rods held in place by a network of tension wires. No rod may

touch another rod” (Gurstelle, 2016, 102). This concept has roots in engineering, architecture and sculpture. However, it is also integrative to understanding how fascia and its attached anatomy, such as muscles and bones, are connected in the body (Myers, 2021). Within this research, tensegrity is an aid to understanding fascial relationships while simultaneously providing a conceptual framework for the various elements within this investigation and their linking and relying on each other for stability and flexibility, for example, the guru as a liminal creature while simultaneously a carrier of absurdist action in a costume made from wetsuit material (neoprene) relating back to marine vocabularies in the performance *Seven Fenders and One Rope*.

### 2.2.3 Assemblage

Assemblage stems from the French word “*agencement*, a term that refers to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well (De Landa, 2016, 1)”. The focus of an assemblage is on co-functioning and symbiosis and with that the creation of relations amongst various different elements (De Landa, 2016, 1). In the visual arts, assemblage refers to a technique where the assembling of disparate elements results in a new work of art. The elements used are predominantly everyday objects, as, for example, demonstrated by the dada artist Kurt Schwitters, who worked with scavenged materials (Tate, 2024)).

Considering that this research was born out of a visual arts practice with a focus on found objects, assemblage was chosen as an approach in order to emphasise the materiality present in the making process. Assemblage allows this materiality to be perceived differently through a shift in perspective brought about by combining it with unrelated elements or by placing it into a space that decontextualises it. An example of this approach in very literal terms is the placement of the fender into a dance studio where water and boats are absent, as done during the performance *Seven Fenders and One Rope*.

#### **2.2.4 Hydrofeminism**

Hydrofeminism, as elaborated upon earlier (1.1), understands bodies as bodies of water and water as a sort of glue that, therefore, binds across species and entities. This allows for a less isolated perspective on bodies, but rather one that highlights situatedness, non-permanence and relationality (Neimanis, 2023). Throughout this research, and together with the *lookers*, a watery and marine vocabulary is being established, enabling the body of this research to become (somewhat) watery and fluid.

### **2.3 METHODS, SUBSEQUENT PROCEDURES FOLLOWED AND FINDINGS**

The methods utilised are divided into four categories: 2.3.1 Supportive and general methods, 2.3.2 The somatic, 2.3.3 The seal and the more-than-human, and 2.3.4 The alter ego. Each method is described, after which the procedures stemming from this method are mentioned, and, if applicable, related findings emanating from the initial application of said method and resulting procedures are introduced. In addition, the four main performances / performative experiments conducted are interwoven into this section, illustrating their interconnectedness within the methodology of this research.

#### **2.3.1 Supportive and general methods**

##### **2.3.1.1 Notebook keeping**

Throughout the study, a notebook was utilised both in analogue and digital format keeping track of experiments and practices and their outcomes as well as acting as a platform for reflection predominantly written in diary form. These formats brought about different haptic qualities and effects. For example, working with the analogue notebook reinforced a haptic connection to the material, in this case, pen and paper. Moreover, video and photography aided in safeguarding the visual aspects of said experiments and practices.

### 2.3.1.2. *Marinating and Emergence*

In addition, and working in tandem, providing time and space for *marinating* and *emergence* allowed for new linkages to transpire. To elaborate, marinating in this context denotes giving time for letting things sink in, such as texts or studio sessions without actively analysing or reflecting on them immediately. In order to guarantee effective marinating, at least one day, for example, after a major experimentation session, was spent away from the research project.

Emergence, on the other hand, as stipulated by Falk Hübner (2024, 135-140), refers to strategies such as conducting experiments, wild collecting, reviewing notes and mind wandering. These strategies ensure that unforeseeable linkages and trajectories can appear within the research process. Throughout this research process, all four strategies were implemented and honoured. However, wild collecting fell somewhat into the background as the focus was on working with lookers instead.

### 2.3.1.3 *Literature review*

A thorough literature review was conducted in order to position the research within its wider field. Moreover, this review provides information of comparable artistic work, which then has the capacity to inform about present artistic strategies applied in his field.

### 2.3.1.4 *Interesse*

Importantly, throughout this research process, *Interesse* (interest) was practiced. This refers to holding an “attitude of openness... [that] emphasizes the quality of interacting over the instrumentalization of the communication for external goals. Philosophically *Interesse* connotes the ontological primacy of the in-between, i.e. of relations” (Oosterling, 2021, 207). This attitude preserved a focus on in-betweenness and relations, and was especially helpful when confronted with esoteric material during research phases that is somewhat incongruent with my own beliefs.

### 2.3.1.5 *Anti Method*

Despite the careful development and selection of methods chosen for this study, an undercurrent of *anti-method* was nourished to honour the origins of this research process lying in the visual arts, which “by its very nature...[is] ‘anti method’... (chance, chaos, randomness, anarchy, etc.)” (Gray and Malins, 1993, 6). This meant that at any point the proposed research methods could be demobilised and replaced with more applicable responses in the present moment. Employing anti-method as method enabled and supported the strong focus on fluidity and flexibility in this research. For instance, transporting fenders by car and later carrying them by hand while they remain connected by rope posed an interest in the action of carrying - bodies as carriers of water, fascia as carrying muscles and organs.

### 2.3.1.6 Feedback

Feedback related to the performances and performance experiments conducted was either requested verbally or in writing from audience members (please see an example in the appendix under D-1).

## 2.3.2 The somatic

### 2.3.2.1 Watery Exposing

Firstly, eye frequently exposed my body to water, for example, through swimming or surfing in the sea, thus ensuring a corporeal sense of the water and developing a watery body memory. This was mostly done in the North Sea. The exposure of the body to water was expected to have an indirect effect on the research, priming the receptibility of the body.

By being in the water more frequently than usual, eye noticed a change in sentiment after the submerging sessions. The water brought about an attitude of openness and playfulness, as well as a lightness in perspective that eye was able to bring into the studio. This mental state aided the forging of haptic connections with the more-than-humans beyond rational means, embodying an approach of floating, ease and presence. An example is the aligning of the fenders to form a surface on my studio floor, on which eye was playfully floating, feeling carried and supported.

### 2.3.2.2 Somatic Movement Practices

Various somatic movement and exercise systems were practised during this research, such as Yin Yoga, Meridian Stretches (Makko Ho), and Butho (due to its link to watery fluidity). These systems increase embodiment and bodily awareness of fluidity and flexibility.

Through practising Yin Yoga and Meridian Stretches on a regular basis, eye found that it affected my confidence with regards to being able to go deeper into a stretching position and thus stretch further over time. Somehow, this sentiment was translated metaphorically to the potential of stretching beyond the human, which, as a result, supported the underlying research enquiry. Butho, on the other hand, provided insight into becoming the more-than-human. For example, in the session that eye had attended, stones were introduced first as co-performers, while at a later stage, the participants were encouraged to embody a stone of their choosing and move accordingly. Practising Butho translated into the notion of becoming stone, yet with that also the realisation that in this research, it is not the focus. To elaborate, eye, as a human, am not interested in becoming the more-than-human explicitly through, for example, mimicking movement patterns of the more-than-human. Instead, the focus is on the connection to the more-than-human becoming more porous, fluid and horizontal. This finding and realisation also connect to my



experience with site-sensitivity at the Wadden Sea, which is elaborated upon later.

Undergoing the 12-step Structural Integration Sessions, as stipulated by Tom Myers in his work on Anatomy Trains, provided entry into the concept of fascia. Fascia “is able to wrap, interpenetrate, support, and form the bloodstream, bone tissue, meningeal tissue, [and] organs” (Bordoni et al., 2023). It is a ubiquitous, glue-like connective tissue resembling a rhizome, as it has no centre and its shape is net-like, consisting of a multitude of interdependent layers at different depths in the body “forming a three-dimensional mechano-metabolic structure” (Bordoni et al., 2023). This structure is also a sensory organ housing mechanosensors which, through detecting pressure or stretch, influence the state of the fascia, shapeshifting from almost liquid or fluid to stiff and rigid (SciShow, 2019). It is linked to emotion regulation, possibly due to its connection to the autonomic nervous system, as everything that moves through the body has to go through the fascia, an example being hormones (SciShow, 2019). With my focus on this connective tissue, eye visited a physiotherapist who applied a sliding touch of various intensities to my body. This method was chosen to establish a sense of interiority based on fascia, and, quite simply, develop a sense of how fascia feels in my body. At the time of writing this, session ten out of twelve is scheduled.

While undergoing the Structural Integration programme, and especially during the sessions, the feeling of separation between outside and inside was no longer recognisable in my body. Eye felt that there was no longer a border between my interiority and exteriority, in this case, the hand of my therapist - eye was no longer able to differentiate the sensation, as in, what was my leg and what was her hand. This was a valuable insight into how sensed borders can melt away, supporting my enquiry to disassemble human and more-than-human separations. Another finding was that through the perpetual softening and re-imbibing of my fascia by means of the above method, my body started to reorganise itself in order to find stability in flexibility. Through this experience, eye am inclined to understand the human body as more-than-human. Things happen to and with my body in these sessions, as well as afterwards through reintegrating what happened during the treatment, which are beyond my doing, thus demonstrating their own agency. One example is that since starting this program, my posture has changed – more specifically, my torso is more upright, and my head is less tilted forward. This 12-step programme has a timespan of about 6 months consisting of repeated visits to the physiotherapist. As a durational practice, it offers a frame in which once-off research activities, such as site visits, find a foothold. Moreover, it fostered an attitude of ‘staying with the research’, especially during moments of marinating or reflection.



Based on a regular Feldenkrais practice established over the last few years, a closer look was taken at how Feldenkrais is understood as a system of movement, especially how ATMs (Awareness Through Movement) are guided. This furnished knowledge of the more imaginary aspect of this practice, referred to as *motor imagery*, involving being guided to imagine rather than execute certain movements, which, despite the lack of physicality, still remain effective.

During the ecofeminist summer school guided by WEST Den Haag in July 2023, the opportunity arose to test some of the present research with the participating members. This involved guiding them into their body by inviting them to close their eyes and grounding their feet on the floor. After following a few exercises conducive to a feeling of embodiment (inspired by meditative practice, Yin Yoga and Feldenkrais), the participants were asked to imagine particles floating through the space that collect in front of their abdomen, forming an object of their choosing. This object was then to be placed inside the abdomen and eventually released again into the space. Throughout, the participants were instructed to feel the object in their abdomen, its edges, weight and so on. Simultaneously, they were asked to feel how their body was affected by this object, for example, whether it influenced their sense of balance. This meditative guidance format also opened and closed the performance *Seven Fenders and One Rope*, where the audience was invited to imagine a

seal coming closer and eventually merging with their body. The performance ended by encouraging the audience to let this imaginary seal exit their body again. Feedback received stipulated that, indeed, a friendly, almost maternal bond had been created between the object and seal in their respective performances.

### 2.3.2.3 Haptic Studio Practice

Haptic experimentation with wetsuits, fishing nets, and other materials or objects which entered this research (*lookers* - elaborated under 2.3.3.1), were performed in the studio as well as on-site through praxis. This was done by somatically engaging with the *lookers* on, through and with my body, placing awareness on weight distribution, balance, touch, and restricted movement, amongst others occurring in the process, thus allowing my body to be led by the *lookers*. Engaging somatically with material develops an expanded understanding of the subject matter and its broader ecology. An example is the direct engagement with the fenders, getting to know their rubbery texture, weight, bounciness, and level of squeezability, amongst many more, while providing space for fender agency to occur. This agency appeared, for example, when eye clumsily lifted the fender, and it fell – back on the floor, it is now placed in a way that invites a new form of engagement with it. The underlying premise for this strategy was to connect from body to body, as bodies, corporalities, regardless of shape, form, kind, etc., are equally

present in time and space. This praxis time was influenced by the multiplicity of findings, for example, bringing in insight from the Structural Integration sessions (the melting away of borders) and testing this with the fenders. The melting of the sensation of separation occurred more on warmer days (possibly due to the watery sweat layer on my skin) and when being in contact for a longer period, usually from four minutes onwards – similar to how long stretches are held in Yin Yoga.

### 2.3.3 The seal and the more-than-human

#### 2.3.3.1 *being-looked-at*

A core method developed at the outset of this research and practised throughout is that of *being-looked-at*. Expanding Jane Bennett's notion of vitality (Bennett, 2010), *being-looked-at* refers to more-than-humans (or *lookers* as referred to within this method), whose gaze is felt by the researcher and who are then considered co-makers in the research. This method proposes more-than-human agency in art and performance-making as the more-than-human chooses the researcher and artist rather than the other way around. All the more-than-human entities within this investigation have not been selected by me, but have chosen me. *Eye* bring these together with my body and the site that is worked within, and through a co-making process, new works are developed. The seal, for example, was such a *looker*. Applying this method in this research enquiry ensures a horizontal and close co-

working with the more-than-human, not only linked to the initial hypotheses of this study but also within the making process itself.

Being-looked-at brought fenders into this research. The black pendulum-shaped fender looked at me while visiting a boat supply store in Lauwersoog in the north of the Netherlands. Instead of purchasing it there and then (financial and environmental considerations), *eye* sourced various fenders second-hand from a boat supply company in Heerhugowaard, north of Amsterdam, and carried them into the studio (please see 2.3.2.3 for details of how *eye* worked with them in the studio). The fenders were later carried into Studio 4 at ArtEZ, where *Seven Fenders and One Rope* was performed. Studio 4's black floor and the surface of the (pendulum-shaped) fender happen to have the same colour, feel, texture and level of wear, creating a visual bond of sorts between the two. *Eye* understood this bond, brought about by site-specificity and site-sensitivity (elaborated upon in 2.3.3.2), as a more-than-human indication for working exclusively with this fender rather than including the remaining six as well.

#### 2.3.3.2 *Site visits: Site-specificity and site-sensitivity*

Furthermore, site-specific research and site-sensitivity provided an additional fundamental aspect to this research. As an extension to visiting Seal Rescue Ireland, time was

allocated to travel to Pieterburen Zeehondencentrum north of Groningen in The Netherlands. These centres predominantly work with stranded and/or injured seal pups, and once these are rehabilitated, they are released back into their natural habitat. In line with this research's focus on human and more-than-human interaction, these visits enable a direct observation of this interaction, while simultaneously providing information about the animal. Due to time constraints, ethical considerations and given that a visit was paid to Seal Rescue Ireland previously, an excursion to Pieterburen Zeehondencentrum did not take place. The ethical considerations emerging from the prospect of visiting the seal sanctuary became clear after eye repeatedly resisted starting the trip up north. Following a self-enquiry and reflection session, eye recognised a disposition to interact with the live animal again, firstly, because eye was no longer comfortable with being supportive of trading entertainment and exposure for health and recovery. To elaborate, the seals are rescued and given the medical care to grow up healthy in order to be released again. In parallel, however, these centres finance this care by having visitors who look at the injured seal pups as a form of entertainment. The seal body and behaviour is being commoditised for medical care. In addition, even though these centres do help the seals with regard to their physical health and provide educational content to the visitor, eye am questioning human involvement in their ecology on a broader scale. Considering that seal numbers have drastically

declined, predominantly due to human intervention in their habitat through human-made structures such as fishing nets, eye, as a human, decided to remain at a distance instead.

The possibility to perform at Arthouse during Uitmacht in Arnhem provided an opportunity to test this physical distance between the seal and eye as well as the first iterations of the shaman in combination with the seal, while remaining site-specific. A wooden picture frame, mirroring the style of the wooden vintage furniture present in the space, was placed onto a cabinet. This frame contained a seal head with the same head positioned in a smaller size centrally just above the eyes, representing a third eye – linking here to the wider spiritual context of the guru. The majority of the performance, titled *Mystic*, consisted of (the first version of) the guru staring at the seal across the venue. This staring fabricated an invisible divide of the space that the audience complied with by barely crossing it, and if, then carefully. Simultaneously, it created a strong bond between the alter ego and the seal. This performance showed that even without being in direct physical contact, a connection to the more-than-human can be established, reiterating my findings regarding motor imagery and its effect on the human body.

Natural seal habitats along the Dutch coastline were respectfully explored instead. Visiting these habitats aided in a better understanding of the larger ecology, situatedness

and nature of the animal. One of these areas was the Wadden Sea in the North of the Netherlands.

With regard to site-sensitivity, places to be visited and spaces to be worked within were understood as more-than-human entities with their own agency. This included both natural areas, such as Lauwersoog, as well as rooms within buildings, such as Studio 4 at ArtEZ in Arnhem.

Spending time at the Wadden Sea, more specifically Lauwersoog, in February 2024 is an example of site-sensitively working in an area that also houses seals. Here, it was possible to traverse the human-made dam that demarcates the boundary between the North Sea and the green-brown-pastel-coloured Lauwersmeer. While visiting, the North Sea waters had an intense reddish hue, reminding me of Silver Mine Lake near Cape Town, South Africa. This lake's distinct red colour is attributed to the presence of the surrounding indigenous Fynbos flora, Rooibos being one of these plants. This parallel triggered a subsequent brewing of the Lauwersmeer water into Rooibos tea, which eye then let steep throughout the time spent in that area, about one week. On the day of departure, eye returned the infused tea to its water source by pouring it onto the exposed wet sands of the Lauwersmeer during low tide. The intra-acting of the tea with the wet sand yielded an uncanny resemblance to arterial blood, causing a contemplative introspection about

the landscape's historical trajectory. More specifically, the profound impact of human intervention, notably exemplified by the construction of the dam, which precipitated widespread ecological disruption and loss of life, resonated deeply.

This experience had a taxing ripple effect, influencing my emotional state for over a week after having returned home. Eye was feeling worn out, tired, angry, sad and disorientated. In some way, eye felt that eye had become too porous, having almost imbibed one another, becoming one – boundaries seemed to have melted away.

### 2.3.3.3 *Speculative fabulation*

Borrowing from Haraway (2016, 213) and drawing from the Nordic folk tale *The Seal's Skin*, in which seals take human form once they remove their seal skin (The Viking Rune), *speculative fabulation* provided further possibilities for this research to interweave human and seal relations falling outside rational means of knowledge production. The construction of the shaman drew inspiration from the shapeshifting qualities highlighted in this tale and in this method. In addition, the framing of the seal image containing a third eye and being placed above the audience in the performance *Seven Fenders and One Rope* suggests that the seal is the master of both the audience and the guru – this constellation was inspired by Yoga classes where a photograph of the yogi master and inventor of that specific style of Yoga is present in the room.

### 2.3.4 The alter ego

#### 2.3.4.1 Training

In order to develop a guru character, clown training was selected to widen my performative vocabulary. This training has a strong focus on improvisation, which, especially when addressing the audience, provides valuable tools for real-time communication and interaction. Furthermore, considering the prominence of humour and absurdism within this enquiry, clowning affords a performative entry point into this genre.

A weekend workshop hosted by Elf Lyon in Amsterdam was attended, which yielded insights into clown and buffoon practices. Some of these insights were directly translated into the development of the shaman character, such as “do things good”, as stated by Lyon, by which she demonstrated that the clown does not pretend to be someone or something, they believe they are it, and thus execute an activity with full conviction. For example, one of the tasks given was to embody a top model, and this was only funny if the participants believed that they were top models, rather than pretending to be one, by, for example, over-gesturing with the aim to be funny. When becoming the guru during performances, especially throughout *Seven Fenders and One Rope*, eye did so with full conviction, knowing that this figure is part of me, manifesting as one of my alter egos. During this workshop, consent was addressed as an important aspect when interacting with the audience. The audience has to be taken care of, meaning that

a clown does not drag an audience member on stage or let them leave by themselves. Deviating slightly from clowning in this regard, in the performance *Seven Fenders and One Rope* eye invited audience members to the centre of the stage in a manner that provided very little agency for individuals to decline, according to feedback received. Furthermore, feedback received stipulated that the audience felt like they had no agency. Eye wonder if the latter is actually a potentially desired aspect of the work, as it would mirror how more-than-humans are generally viewed and treated – without agency, even though they might possess it. Another finding was that of embodied hierarchies, as eye experienced muscle aches in my legs from curtsying while inviting the audience members to the centre of the space.

#### 2.3.4.2 Expert advice

Expert advice was sought on character development by contacting an acting trainer who could advise on character-building methods and techniques. Alex Murphy from the Mulholland Acting Academy in Amsterdam provided, via email, a detailed guideline of how to create and develop such a character.

After repeatedly returning to the material Murphy had sent, eye opted for a more natural progression and development of this alter ego character. This was primarily due to the instructions being based on theatre-based methods, for

example, the inventing of a history or backstory for the character on which their actions are based. This did not seem fitting for this research enquiry, as the supposed backstory of this figure would be built on an everchanging process-led practice. Some characteristics, however, were carried over from previous performance showings, such as the character trait of dominance stemming from a dominatrix persona providing inspiration to the work *The whipping of the tempestuous salty water against my body, 2023* (please see appendix for documentation, C-1). Predominantly, though, and due to the fluid and non-fixed nature of the research foundation, it was impossible to build a fully static history for the guru, which, beneficially, emphasised the liminal aspects and qualities of this being. A more flexible approach to character development was provided by clowning, as indicated earlier.

## CHAPTER 3: NEW DROPS IN THE OCEAN AND POSSIBLE RIPPLES

### 3.1 SOMATICS

Relating to hypothesis (a), the Structural Integration sessions, which resulted in a change in my posture and the dissolving of a feeling of separation between the therapist's hand and my body, underline the possibility of change in the physical body through working with this connective tissue. In addition, Feldenkrais' approach towards motor imagery opens up somatic possibilities for connecting with the more-than-human on a corporeal level rather than simply with an 'open mind'. By visualising human and more-than-human inter and intra-actions, such as practised during the WEST summer school, while activating the connective tissue through Structural Integration, the physicality of the human body changes. The weakness in this aspect of the study is testing the effectiveness the somatic changes bring about, namely, does it indeed generate a closer human and more-than-human connection? However, by having spent time in the studio with the fenders, as expanded upon in 2.3.2.3, eye do feel a closer connection to this more-than-human, having developed a body memory of their body. Eye don't remember earlier studio sessions being this sensationful, sensitive and receptive, thus eye corroborate the effectiveness of the undergone somatic practices.

Nevertheless, eye consider these findings fruitful beginnings, which aid the development of the sealing practice. The aim remains to find effective movements and postures that prepare and change the body and conglomerate in a physical movement practice. However, the findings suggest a necessary alteration to the initial timeline of this research, as a much wider timeframe will be required for this development. One aspect that will be possible with this extension is the study of seal anatomy and the fascia within it, hopefully leading to more insight relevant to the sealing practice. Another step in this line of enquiry is to expand the guided meditative component present in *Seven Fenders and One Rope* into a stand-alone long-form guided meditation of about 30-60 minutes. Through this, eye hope to not lose the seal, as has been indicated through feedback received, but instead test a possible full submerging.

### 3.2 SPECULATIVE ABSURDISM

The combination of fictitious character-building, materials taken out of their context and the mixing of hierarchies brought about an absurdist performance (*Seven Fenders and One Rope*), which was simultaneously serious and humourous, according to feedback received. Eye question, however, to what extent this approach was post-absurdist in

the sense of pointing out existing relations, for example, as done by Beth Henley in her play *Crimes of the Heart*. Rather, eye argue for a form of *speculative absurdism* (my own term partially borrowed from Haraway's speculative fabulation) brought about by employing fabricated human and more-than-human relations, for example, the seal as a master to the guru and the audience, present in the room in the form of an elevated framed photograph. These fictional relations and hierarchies still, however, bring about current relations by triggering incongruency in the audience by displaying how human and more-than-human relations are presently not. By reflecting on current relations, brought about by displaying what they are not (through *speculative absurdism* in the performance work *Seven Fenders and One Rope*), problematics in present interrelations can slowly be unpacked and changed, as outlined in hypotheses (b) and (c).

Various experiments will be undertaken as the next steps to expand speculative absurdism within this practice further. Embracing hydrofeminist notions and situated knowledge practices, one of these steps is bringing the shaman into the water, more specifically the North Sea, moving it beyond the dance studio to form an immediate connection of the neoprene costume body to the water, connecting to the seal through and being in the same waters.



### 3.3 BECOMING MEMBRANE

The experience at Lauwersoog between the site and eye opened up new questions concerning transcorporeality, as my porous (human) body allowed in the site, the landscape, the more-than-human. As stipulated earlier, this resulted in an expression of the loss of life in that area through a human visual and corporeal vocabulary, namely that of the Rooibos tea resembling arterial blood when intra-acting with the wet Lauwersmeer sand. It felt as if the vitality of the material, as proposed by Jane Bennett (2010), in this case, the more-than-human landscape, was expressing itself through my body. However, due to the taxing aftermath of this experience, eye am no longer sure if merging with the more-than-human on that level, becoming so porous, almost becoming one, is something that eye want to precipitate. Instead of complete interweaving, eye sea needs to return to horizontal rhizomatic hierarchies and the membrane, the wetsuit, that shields somewhat while retaining porosity without creating bifurcation. The focus returns to imbricating and interwaving, to the liminal between remaining human while becoming seal. The seal as membrane. A becoming membrane.

### 3.4 ETHICS AND CARE

My refusal to revisit a seal rescue centre uncovers previously unthought notions of animal ethics, animal care and conservation practices. Thus, future research will expand into more-than-human consent and possibly consent also with respect to (human) audience engagements during performances. Also, considering the entanglement of human and seal, predominantly to the detriment of the latter, makes me want to carefully unpack Ogada's critical perspectives on conservation, which advocate for integrating, rather than separating, humans and wildlife. The conundrum of opposing live interaction with the seal, and therefore approaching conservation efforts that propagate the intermingling of human and animal with great nuance while developing a body-based interweaving with the more-than-human, can possibly be resolved by returning to site, to location, to situated knowledges<sup>4</sup> (Haraway, 1988) in this case, in water. Maybe the human body has to be prepared for such conservation efforts to be effective, for example, through fascia and motor imagery, meaning that human and (wild) animal integration would then no longer be at the disadvantage of the more-than-human.

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<sup>4</sup> Situated knowledges refers to a more nuanced understanding of objectivity, where the specific contexts in which knowledge is produced are also considered.



To elaborate on care, the feedback received from the guided meditation done at WEST Den Haag was that the imagining and then releasing of the object from the belly into the space triggered a protective mechanism, a bond to this envisioned object that seemed almost maternal. Therefore, it does seem possible to shift relationships to the more-than-human through imaginary practices (this links here to motor imagery) without the need for direct contact. This is reiterated through the work *Mystic*, where a bond between the guru and seal is established with distance in between.

## CONCLUSION

By taking a closer look at the hypotheses underlying this study, it becomes clear that the possibility of interweaving the human and more-than-human through somatic means focusing on fascia is feasible to some extent, as indicated earlier. However, substantial further research is needed. Moreover, to what extent creatures and materials of in-betweenness (seals, wetsuits and shamans) can aid in bridging the binary between the human and more-than-human has been carefully addressed by working within a performance framework. Unpacking individual (material) agencies, as proposed by Bennet, and assessing their capacity for bringing together the human and more-than-human seems futile. However, understanding these creatures and materials as collective co-makers in a wider performance practice, especially one laced with speculative absurdism, allows the unpacking of humancentric notions regarding the more-than-human to occur.

This artistic research contributes to an expanded notion of performance-making that starts with the process already, as the lookers, as introduced in this paper, contribute and co-make with me by selecting themselves instead of me choosing them for my/our work. In addition, by merging speculative fabulation and motor imagery, new ways of engaging the

somatic are developed that house the potential for human and more-than-human connection. Lastly, by tackling environmental issues through humour and absurdism, a fresh and lighter exchange about and with these grievous circumstances can be established, making the change to less detrimental human behaviours more approachable.

By insisting on a fluid and rhizomatic approach to this research and a wide array of methods, a limitation of this study is the difficulty in measuring proposed outcomes and how effective individual methods were. However, this methodology provided enough space for the elements of this research to carve out their own way, just like a river. Like waves that wash ashore, this approach also invited elements to come out of the practice or retract again, proposing the ocean body as a possible metaphor for this methodology. In light of the underlying current of this study, that of subverting hierarchies and dualisms and embracing co-making and interweaving with the more-than-human, regardless of its limitations, this fluid methodology provided exactly that: enough space for more-than-human agency to unfold (through, for example, the lookers), which is usually curbed by predetermined human-made frameworks and structures.

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## APPENDICES

### A-1

**Title:** *Untitled (Guided Meditation with an imaginary object)*

**Duration:** ca. 15 min

**Where:** WEST Den Haag, NL

**When:** July 2023

**Description:** During the WEST Summer School, I led a guided meditation where participants were invited to stand in a circle and close their eyes. I guided them through grounding exercises to connect with their bodies. They were then asked to imagine particles floating through the space, coming together in front of their bellies, and participants were asked to notice how this object affected their weight and body sensation. After a while, they were instructed to release the object back into the space, re-ground through their feet, become aware of their bodies, and finally open their eyes.

### A-2

**Title:** *Mystic*

**Link to video:** <https://vimeo.com/940044423>

**Duration:** 1 hour

**Where:** Arthouse in Arnhem (the space containing old furniture such as a wooden cabinet), NL

**When:** January 2024

**Description:** A person fully covered in a wetsuit, including their head and feet and revealing only their eyes and nose, stood in a garage-like room containing wooden furniture. For the majority of this performance, they were staring at a wooden picture frame placed at the opposite end of the space containing an image of a seal's face, which had a third eye positioned between its eyes. This third eye was the same seal face. The frame was designed to match the room's existing decor, consisting of, for example, a wooden cabinet. At some stage during this performance, the person in the wetsuit opened the cabinet and placed a smaller frame housing the same seal face into it.



### A-3

**Title:** *Untitled (The mixing of Rooibos tea and Lauwersmeer sands)*

**Duration:** steeping action: 1 week, pouring action: 2 min.

**Where:** Lauwersoog, NL

**When:** February 2024

**Description:** While I was in Lauwersoog, Netherlands, I poured rooibos tea that had been steeping for about a week onto the wet sand of the Lauwersmeer during low tide. The tea looked like arterial blood against the sand. This action stemmed from an observation I made while walking on the dam separating the Lauwersmeer from the North Sea. The North Sea appeared very red, resembling the colour of Silver Mine Lake in Cape Town, RSA, which gets



its colour from the fynbos flora around it, Rooisbos being part of this plant family. Wanting to “give back” this colour to the pastel green and brown Louwersmeer, which had previously been part of the North Sea, I decided to pour the tea into it.

**A-4**

**Title:** *Seven Fenders and One Rope*

**Link to video:** <https://vimeo.com/946367904>

**Duration:** ca. 45 min

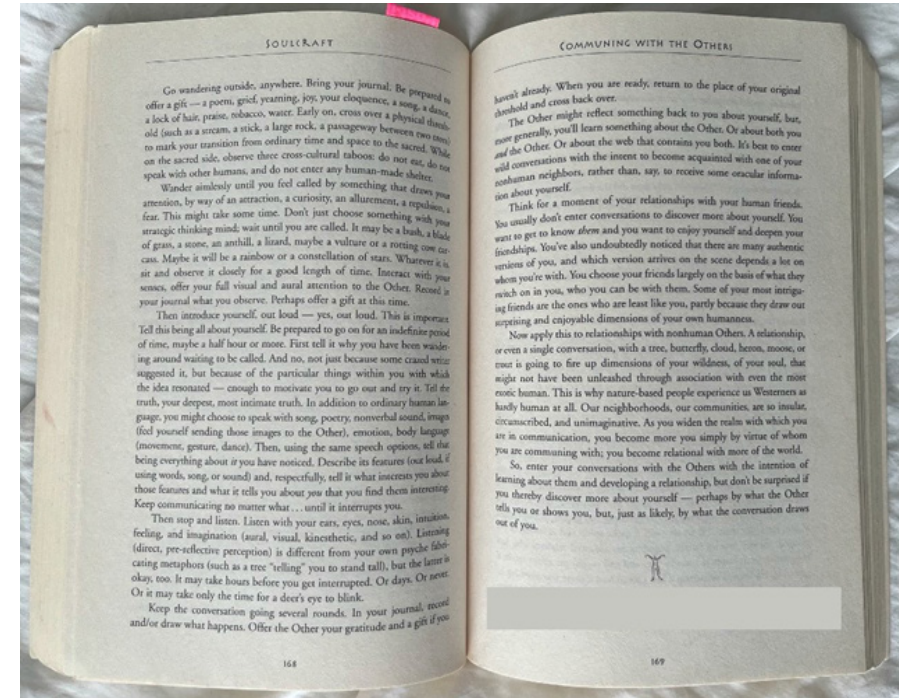
**Where:** (Dance & theatre) Studio 4, ArtEZ, Arnhem, NL

**When:** May 2024

**Description:** The audience was invited to sit against the walls on the floor in Studio 4. The tech lights were on, and in the centre was hanging a black rope, and underneath lay a fender. The performance began with turning off the lights and the artist leading a guided meditation, where the audience was asked to close their eyes and imagine a seal approaching and merging with their body. During this meditation, the lighting slowly changed from complete darkness to a blue wash. When the audience opened their eyes, they saw the space lit in subdued blue. The artist then changed into a neoprene dress, mask and shoes, walked to the centre of the room, hung the fender on the rope, and pushed it to spin. Once the fender stopped spinning, the artist, speaking through a microphone but muffled by the wetsuit hood, talked about seals, being beig-looked-at, and other aspects of their practice. The artist then individually invited each audience member to lie down under the fender. After everyone was positioned, the artist spun the fender again. While the audience lay under the fender, the artist changed back into their casual clothes and concluded the performance with another guided meditation, asking the audience to close their eyes again and let go of the seal. Once the audience opened their eyes, the lighting had returned to tech lights.

**B-1**

*Soulcraft* by Bill Plotkin, page 168 to 169.



C-1



D-1

Feedback from Katarzyna Zarzycka (published with permission from the author)  
My response to Karolina's performance

As we sat on the floor in a dark room, I felt an aura of mystery in the air. The fender hang in the middle of the space, a strange, unfitting object taken out of its context, suspended in the air while its proper place should be, after all, in the water. An object (subject?) to be looked at, positioned in the center, thus became the center of my attention, for some reason bringing to mind an association to a Native American totem pole.

Karolina's slow and gentle voice invited us to close our eyes and let our imagination follow. We were to become seals - mammals whose habitat is not the land but the ocean. There was absurdity in this quest, and if it wasn't for the quiet room I would have laughed. "Why the seal", I thought to myself? And right after that, I thought, "why not the seal?". The absolute serious conversation that appeared in my head was not fully realized as the process of becoming the seal was unfolding in front of my ears, and most importantly - it was unfolding in absolute seriousness. Seriousness so serious, yet conscious of its absurdity, that it was not only unbearably funny, but genuinely inviting to immerse yourself fully in the play. Knowing now a bit more about the "sealing" practice, I see this initial part of the performance as the invitation to embrace both the seriousness and absurd of the attempt to feel for/with the non-human from the position of a human. The task perhaps daunted, as it will never be possible to fully take in the perspective of another species. Nevertheless, Karolina seems to be well aware of the fact that one cannot simply speak for the non-human just because she has the language that the non-human does not. Choosing to opt for the humor she shows it is not about communication or comprehension, but rather about ourselves as humans trying, and failing, to look beyond ourselves. And if we make ourselves ridiculous in the process, we have already achieved something important.

The interplay between the absurd and seriousness, combined with genuine immersion in the act, was what defined the performance for me. Karolina's character, similarly, was both comedic, making fun of the new-age spiritual practices, and respectful towards this way of interacting with the non-human world. One could sense a healthy distance combined with admiration and deep curiosity, which made me overcome my initial doubts about inhabiting culturally specific character, which claimed to combine the shaman and guru in one. When we learned that "the seal is in the room", positioned strategically higher than anyone else sitting in the space, like a sacred ikon, it became clear that the shamanic practices are not being mocked, but rather evoked to question whom we consider sacred and worth listening to. The little image, which reminded me of a small altar, mediated the presence of another being. Positioned higher than anyone else, the non-human (the seal? The photos? The altar?) quite literally became the "higher power" in the room which made the situation absolutely hilarious, but not satirizing. The seal became the protagonist of the show, to whom Karolina always referred to with respect and affinity. The choice of this particular animal to be the main character (an animal without any symbolism, regarded as "cute" by pop-culture standards, featured in many memes) bridged for me the seriousness and comedy, the sea and the land, the high and the low. It created the sense of not just the non-human, but the more-than-human, as Karolina defines it in her practice.

The image of the seal, together with the fender hanging in the middle of the room, looked at the audience from above. It was not until Karolina explained to me the concept of the "lookers" that I understood what their role was, but even during the performance I could feel the difference which positioning us, the audience, on the floor made to my perception or both objects. The picture I did not notice at first, and only when the performer pointed it out to me did I notice its presence. It made me feel that I missed something important in the space, something that was there, yet what I focused on was the big and shiny object in the middle. I had a thought cross my mind about what we do and do not notice as humans. Similarly, sitting close and lower than the fender, I had the experience of something unnatural yet not threatening in front of me, something weird, something, which if seen in the art gallery I would have looked at for 3 seconds and went further, but here I was faced with it for the whole performance. It was there, preventing me from taking my eyes off of it. As much as it made me connect it to the underwater imagery, it was this non-human object, placed on the stage, did not feel like a prop or a set piece. Hanging in the middle, it was constantly there and I could not move past it or ignore its presence. Somehow it was more important than the human actor.

When we started to get chosen to lay underneath this fender, my experience of the reversal of hierarchy was only amplified. Initially, all I could focus on was the deadpan comedy of the repeated sentence. Once again, it tapped into our collective desire to feel special, to find meaning in sings and stars and omens, to look to gurus to show us the way, but in the end we end up laying on the floor, nothing more than the seals which sunbathe in the sun with their bellies facing the sky. During the performance that was my main take-away from this moment. Later, however, it got to me that the scene, just as the whole performance, was not just meant to make fun of this desire. Laying on the floor we collectively experienced the movements of the fender. If the guided meditation in the beginning was a very individual experience, laying on the floor and listening to Karolina's voice now included the embodied aspect of feeling the presence of other bodies. Sure, they were not the seals, but what was important to me was that they were all there participating in the semi-sacred, semi-comedic experience of a performance, which just like any ritual requires belief. We believed to be safe, we were willing to participate, we were willing to suspend our rationality (Freud says we find something funny because it is too quick for the ego to rationalize and the id takes pleasure in the moment of irrationality) and we fully immersed in the moment, which can be proved by everyone agreeing to lay on the floor in the end. In that moment, I felt encouraged to fully allow myself to enjoy the theatricality, the absurdity, unrealness of the mysticism, to inhabit it in and not to judge it. Post-factum, I see this moment as the ultimate stop in the journey we were led on to let go of assumptions and to give in to the desire for there to be something more. Be it a more-than-human seal-creature, or guru who sees something in you and chooses you, I was allowed to submit and simply stare at the fender which was floating above me. And of course, I was free to laugh as loud as my body could handle it.

**CHOR**

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