

Does Research Soothe You? **Audiovisual Experimentation, Traumatic Memory, and the Question of the Senses**

REGINA MOSCH, Queen Margaret University, United Kingdom; email: RMosch@qmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article examines how audiovisual artistic research can generate sensorial, inter-relational forms of impact when dealing with trauma and vulnerable bodies. Drawing on the film series *what it felt like to dream fire I–III* and the co-creative exhibition *over/exposed*, it proposes touch and breath – as theorised by Butler, Irigaray, Quinlivan and Marks – as conceptual and methodological lenses for understanding how bodies engage with research processes. Through phenomenological analysis, the article shows how artistic research practices can unsettle traditional separations between researcher and researched, instead foregrounding intertwined bodily relations that emerge during creation, collaboration and exhibition. While not therapeutic in intent, these practices can produce moments of soothing, connection and shared vulnerability, particularly in contexts of trauma and queerness. The article argues that such sensorial, affective encounters expand prevailing notions of impact and reciprocity in artistic research, highlighting how research processes themselves may provide a ground for collectivity and shared affects between participants, researchers and viewers alike.

KEYWORDS: artistic research; trauma and memory; sensory methodology; phenomenology; experimental film

INTRODUCTION

The ambition to produce research that is impactful, accountable and socially consequential has been around for some time (Bishop 2012; Hannula et al. 2014; Ginsburg 2018; Cizek & Uricchio 2020, Staunton-Price 2024). Especially audiovisual artistic research has often placed itself in opposition to more disembodied ‘scientific’ research methods with their focus on systematicity, rigour, measurability, and replicability (Macleod & Holdridge 2004; Sullivan 2005; Candy & Edmonds 2010). In the past decade, artistic research

communities have cultivated an awareness that traditional research practices have tended to serve academia and the researcher more than its research subjects. In such discussions, the particular affective, embodied and tacit connections that artistic research is able to establish are seen as valuable means to achieve a less extractive and more reciprocal relationship between researcher and research participants (Busch 2009; Bulley & Şahin 2021).

In this paper, I would like to take this discussion a step further. I want to push forward our understanding of impact and

reciprocity, so that they become graspable in more sensorial terms. What does research *feel* like for the bodies involved? If we conduct research on 'ethically difficult' subjects, such as trauma or identity, what should our aspirations be as researchers? If our objectives are to produce new knowledge for and with communities, where does this knowledge sit? As I contend for a bodily and sensory dimension in my research, I wonder: *Can research practice be soothing?* What is the benefit of considering this possibility? And what does a soothing research practice look like?

My points of departure are the experimental film works *what it felt like to dream fire I-III* (2021–23) and *over/exposed* (2023). These artistic research endeavours cohered around the subjective, embodied and sensory encounters between film art, researcher and co-creators within the context of trauma. My methodology combines an experimental form of documentary and co-creation, and seeks alternative modes to explore traumatic subjectivities beyond visible reality. My field of expertise is film studies, in theory and practice. These film works, therefore, while engaging with trauma, had no therapeutic ambition. What interests me is rather the inter-relationality between artist-researcher, research participants, camera and artworks, and what it can do for understanding trauma, much in the vein of Jill Bennett (2005) and her affective explorations of trauma-related art. What happens, not only between finished artworks and a spectator (as Bennett investigates), but between the various actors involved in the making?

I want to answer the following question from a phenomenological perspective: what does it mean to be soothed? As such, I look at how research practice may deal with two things: touch and breath. If something is soothing, it means that something is, or is becoming, calm, relaxing, comforting. When we are soothed, our breath is even or has slowed from a panicked, fast pace. We might be soothed through touch – our own or that of others. When touch feels soothing, I imagine it to be soft, warm, steady,

caring – more a caress than a stroke. There is a certain vulnerability inherent to a soothed or soothing state, as I open myself to both my inner world and, perhaps, to another person or object that sees, at least in part, my vulnerable interior.

It is Judith Butler's understanding of touch and breath in their phenomenological excursion in *What World Is This?* (2022) that I want to give my attention to. They lean on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of intertwinement, which considers bodies as always being interconnected and experience as inter-embodied. I further wish to bring Butler into proximity with queer film phenomenology: Davina Quinlivan's engagement with Luce Irigaray in her discussion on queerness and breath is particularly worthwhile for this discussion (2012, 2015), as is Katharina Lindner's notions of bodies 'behind,' 'in front of' and 'around' film (2012). Finally, through a discussion of the connections between touch, breath and film image within the two projects, it is my aim to provide a ground for discussion on how the body takes shape in research: how research acts on a body and how a body acts, forms and reforms research.

On the one hand, this argument is a philosophical one. I argue that artistic research makes possible a relationality, an inter-embodied connection between researcher and research subjects. This, on the other hand, may practically extend existing inquiries into the impact of artistic research beyond neoliberal ideas of research outcomes and measurable benefit (see for example Bishop 2012; Hannula et al. 2014; Cotter 2024). Bishop's claim for the necessity – through disruptive, socially-engaged art – to 'rethink the connections between the individual and collective' along lines of 'painful pleasure' (Bishop 2012: 39) is particularly valuable, not only for its phenomenological undertone, but also as it opens space for the sensorial in artistic research, and for the argument that art is driven by the urge to express sensations as well as spark new ones in those who interact with it. My argument, then, is that audiovisual artistic research not only has the potential to be

impactful and relevant to research communities in terms of the knowledge it produces, but that the process itself can have soothing affects for those involved.

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF TOUCH AND BREATH

Butler (2022) understands touch and breath phenomenologically, as part of lives intertwined with and interdependent on their surroundings. This idea had a particular bearing in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, from which Butler's book emerged. That core tenet – that our lives are not in fact separate, but in relation with one another – from the start challenges much of moral philosophy's assumptions about individuality. The latter also holds, I argue, for much of how research is traditionally conducted in neoliberal contexts: with a supposedly clear separation of researcher and researched, maintained through 'objective' distance. I deem it useful to take Butler's idea of an 'interlacing' of bodies and senses to artistic research practices, in order, firstly, to challenge the idea that researcher and research subjects are separate and separated actors; and secondly, to critique the notion of 'impact' that artistic research can have as bodily relations are negotiated. Here, impact has less to do with straightforwardly measurable benefits related to economy, society, health or policy. What I want to put forward is the notion of *bodily* impact: how bodies feel, are shaped by, and take up space in a research process.

In their discussion, Butler draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of a bodily being-in-the-world that implies a reciprocity between the senses and the world. Merleau-Ponty assumes that we are never quite separate from the world surrounding us; we are 'implicated' in the 'tangible and tactile, the sensuous field, the visible, the aural in which other bodies are implicated as well' (Butler 2022: 77). Sensorially speaking, touch and breath are always also a *being touched* and a *being breathed*. Butler describes Merleau-Ponty's theory through the idea of intertwinement:

Merleau-Ponty here rewrites intersubjectively as intertwine-ment [*entrelac*], which implies interconnection, and interrelatedness, in which a fine distinction is not always possible to draw between the elements that impinge upon each other: the touch of the other is something that I feel, and in some sense, I touch what is touching me in the act of being touched (2022: 37).

This assumption prises open binary oppositions between who is active and who is passive. If I touch something or someone, I am simultaneously *being touched*, whether this is about physical touch or being touched emotionally. Not only that, but we also become aware of what touches us, and the world opens itself to us in its tangibility (Butler 2022). This porous boundary between bodies and objects in the world also has significance for breath, as, according to Butler, it functions with a similar interconnectivity. 'To be a body at all is to be bound up with others and with objects', they state, 'with surfaces, and the elements, including the air that is breathed in and out, air that belongs to no one and everyone' (2022: 37-38). The breath fundamentally connects us to other people through the air we share. In the context of the pandemic, this posed ethical questions about *how* we live in a world where breathing the same air can become a fatal circumstance. Breath here becomes what inextricably links us together, fatally or not.

Irigaray presents us with a further meditation on touch and breath, especially through her notion of the 'caress.' Touch, in Irigaray's writing, is what underlines all other senses (Vasseleu 2002: 115) and is constituted through contact, reverberating with an interconnectivity that draws other senses and other bodies into its experience. Touch is hereby not always tactile or even physical. For Irigaray, 'touching or being touched concern(s) an intimacy that cannot be approached with the hand' (2009: 23). This means that touch refracts inward as



FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

well: by touching something or someone, we are brought 'in touch' with our own sensations and emotions. (Figure 1)

Like Butler, Irigaray understands breathing as a form of embodied perception. For Irigaray, 'air is the most fundamental inter-subjective space, as it exists between everything, including inside of our bodies and the visible objects of the material world,' Quinlivan writes in her extensive study of Irigaray's work (2015: 13). In addition, Irigaray interlaces touch with breath in the gesture of the caress. As we inhale and exhale, as breath transgresses from inside to outside, we perform a kind of caress, a moment in which our vulnerable insides come into gentle contact with the outside (Quinlivan 2012: 94). Breath, according to Irigaray, crosses three distinct areas:

'firstly, the sensory and contemplative nature of breathing; secondly, the spiritual and sensible awakening of the body; and thirdly, the body's relationship with the environment and air which comes to represent the communality of sharing breath and living within a shared space of air' (Quinlivan 2012: 10, referring to Irigaray).

In particular, the first and the third of these areas bear significance for this study, as traumatic memories are most acutely felt through the body. When memories that have not been assimilated at the time of experience return uncontrolled, muscles tense while breath quickens and/or becomes shallow, as van der Kolk asserts in many of his neuro-scientific case studies (2014, see e.g. 206-207). The first step in returning to the present is to re-establish a slowing of the breath, to calm the nervous system and, as van der Kolk describes it in perhaps unintentionally phenomenological terms, 'to inhabit the body' (2014); the second is to bear witness to one's own story (Felman & Laub 1992: 69) and put it into language that can be shared (Bennett 2005). The question, of course, is *how*

we inhabit this body, and which bodies are allowed to be inhabited comfortably. Furthermore, it is important that we ask how we inhabit our bodies, the world *with others* when we have been exposed to trauma, which rephrases the third of Irigaray's areas in phenomenological terms.

This intersubjectivity of touch and breath has obvious implications for relations subjected to power. 'To touch one another in intersubjectivity, it is necessary that two subjects agree to a relationship and that the possibility to consent exists' Irigaray tells us (2004: 20). We find a similar notion with Butler, who states that 'the porous boundaries of the body mark out paths of relationality; affected by that which we seek to affect, there is no clear way to distinguish activity and passivity as mutually exclusive' (2022: 58). For Butler, this leads to an insistence on a relational ethics, as we cannot think of ourselves as self-contained, since our lives are bound up with one another.

This is where film as an epistemic object enters the conversation. Given that a creative process always embodies a relationality, the question I pose here is how the spheres of film and photography employ touch and breath, intentionally or unintentionally; and what a/effect this might have. In her extensive exploration of the (queer, feminist) body on-screen (2012, 2018), Katharina Lindner has also drawn our attention to bodies 'behind', 'in front of' and 'around' film (2012: 152). Film bodies, as she calls them, are bodies whose particular embodied, muscular, kinaesthetic, affective constellations take shape in and through film and are encountered through the spectator's own embeddedness in socio-temporal contexts (2018). Her (queer feminist) film phenomenology allows us to consider not only *positionality* (where we stand), but also *directionality* and *orientation* (which way we face), as well as how the proximity of others, inside or outside of film, may touch and move us (Lindner, 2012). In her book on the place of breath in cinema, Quinlivan situates the breathing body 'within an audio *and* visual field of perception' (2012: 6, author's emphasis). Via

Irigaray's 'intersubjective space,' Quinlivan imagines breath as connecting the space between film, viewer, image and screening room. Breath, for her, is a productive route to thinking through the transition points between conceptions of in/outside, (in) visible, or haptic-ocular-sonic. Elsewhere, Quinlivan (2015) brings the notion of breath in closer proximity to queer interrelations in film, especially those that employ various disorientations of sound and image, such as Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien. Breath can draw our attention to absences and presences of bodies, but also take on the role of communicating place and the elements where air itself is the dwelling body (Quinlivan 2015).

Most notably perhaps, it is Laura U. Marks' explorations of hapticity, touch and cinema that have developed lines of thinking around the more literal touch points between film image and viewer. According to Marks, in what she calls a 'haptic image,' the viewer is drawn in to a filmic image through compositions that are intentionally left incomplete, non-referential or distorted through blur or grain. Those images are seen to speak to the viewer's sense memory through a gaze that 'caresses,' or brushes over the image rather than owning or controlling it (Marks 2000). Such images give the bodies of both the viewer and the image room to expand and breathe, and most importantly, they establish a relationship based on reciprocity. Within Marks' haptic epistemology, film touches *and* is being touched by the viewer in a relationship that does not seek to master, but rather to yield (Marks 2000: 191) to the other.

Quinlivan and Lindner's considerations are mostly related to the experience of the finished audiovisual works, commonly encountered in traditional cinematic form. It is my intention to take this exploration of bodily relations to the *creative process* as well as to more experimental encounters in the exhibitions, in order to offer a frame for understanding audiovisual artistic research as *sensorially* impactful.

RESEARCHER/RESEARCHED BODIES IN WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO DREAM FIRE I-III

what it felt like to dream fire is a self-exploration of trauma. In a series of three experimental short films that were screened in a variety of cinematic and gallery spaces in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Reykjavik (Iceland) across 2022-24, I retraced the traumatic memory of a severe medical incident my parent suffered when I was in my mid-20s that, but for my presence, could have killed my parent. The aftermath of this incident jostled me with what trauma scholars have called a delayed occurrence of a traumatic experience through intrusive, uncontrollable phenomena (Caruth 1990; Bennett 2005; van der Kolk 2014). Sleeplessness, frightening dreams and troubled projections of the future haunted me for weeks; small triggers about my parent's health still impact me today. Far from being an event of the past, trauma leaves an '*imprint ... on mind, brain, and body*,' as van der Kolk states (2014: 24, my emphasis), a kind of touch that is uninvited and overpowering. Not usually being in front of the camera, I decided to use film to access these sensorial disruptions, but also to explore the affective interrelations of experience and filmic image.

The basis of *what it felt like to dream fire I-III* is a series of long-exposure portraits, underscored by sound work from Bryant Keith Bayhan. Our creative process fluidly interlaced the creation of image and sound with the memory of my experiences. Bryant and I met for concept conversations in which I went back to what had happened, the sensory occurrences in the aftermath as well as my creative vision for the visuals. Rather than working from the filmic image, Bryant built their soundscape off my retelling of memories and their own sensory associations, *alongside* my editing of the visuals, rather than afterwards, as is traditionally done.

All three films are connected through a red colour theme along with intentional experimentation with a rupture of time and space. The first of the series, *what it*



FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4

felt like to dream fire I, is a slow progression of still photographs. They alternate between eerie, transient self-portraits shot as long exposures and mundane scenes of me doing everyday activities that are scarred with a red line slashing through the picture. The stills are animated with a subtle motion, stretching and tearing at the image. By screening this piece in a scattered cinema space (**Figure 2**), I attempted to disorientate and overwhelm the viewer, projecting multiple versions of the film on two different walls while also layering them on top of each other. While two projections touched each other and created a new film body, the film was also torn apart in different directions. The chairs in the all-black exhibition studio were not arranged in rows but strewn around the room. This resulted in a disorientated viewing experience, as viewers did not know where to look to take everything in that was projected and at the same time were forced to look at, past and across each other.

The aesthetic of the images and the structure of the cinema space make visible the intrusive presence of traumatic memories, such as dreams, hallucinations, or distorted self-image. The eerily spectral portraits are an expression of an internal state in which the sense of the individual loses its own familiar shape. The red line that pervades the mundane scenes visually articulates how this state spills over into everyday life. As the viewer is immersed in the large and disjointed projections, possibly touched by the projections, they are confronted with the overlaid presence of traumatic memories as well as the impossibility of fully grasping them.

what it felt like to dream fire II expanded the relatively still and slow aesthetic into more intriguing stop-motion sequences. The dream state and mundane everyday are now set in motion, at the same time fluid and fragmented. This aesthetic entailed an arduous process of recording each scene photograph by photograph: while I staged scenes of cooking, looking at my phone, lying in bed or creating more dream-like sequences, I had to make tiny

movements, centimetre by centimetre, while the camera operator pressed the shutter. These scenes were not exact replicas of past memories; they were a (re) search for bodily sensations and for how film could construct and deconstruct them. In this fragmented movement – both in the moments of recording and when editing the sequences together – I encapsulated the affective disruptions to time and space that an unprocessed, incisive trauma, such as experiencing my parent's near death, causes. In almost filmic terms, van der Kolk describes these memory returns as superimpositions (2014: 18) that envelop the everyday life of an individual, often unexpectedly. These can cause an individual to become 'out of touch' with reality, disrupting the flow of breath and of connection with others. (**Figure 3, 4**)

This sensation is intensified in the exhibition. In the installation in **Figure 4**, the film was played on a tiny screen inside a black box, while the sound came through the studio's speaker system. The filmic image is somewhat dislocated here, as the overpowering sound is placed 'around' the film. However, the viewer is also forced into an unusual orientation towards the film, bending their head to look down at the film, straining their eyes to make out what is on-screen, seeing it upside down, standing uncomfortably close to other viewers. This heightened focus on sensations in the body creates a relational intimacy that renders intersubjectivity graspable and spatial. Each viewer would experience the film slightly differently, but the film needed each of them to unfold its sensory impact.

In the last of the series, *what it felt like to dream fire III*, I continued a thinking through film form about how touch and breath are formed in and around film. I filmed inside a black box studio that stripped the location of any domestic familiarity except singular objects, such as the blanket or the laptop that is in *what it felt like to dream fire II*. It is as if we have now entered a more abstract dream space entirely. Constructing a film within a film, I projected excerpts of the second film on sur-

faces or played it on screens that are always somewhere in the background. I interact with my own filmic image either through looking at it, following it or being in the light of its projection. I let the filmic image, quite literally, touch me. Moreover, I again played with the temporality in the film. When I filmed myself, I moved in slow-motion which I then sped up to 400% speed in the edit, so that my movements appear in a disjointed and unnatural way. Again, I had to slow down my movement and my breath, which brought an intense physicality to the process. I felt the cold and hard surfaces of the studio floor on my body or the harsh scratching of the laptop on the floor. However, I also felt the gaze, the scrutiny of the camera *on my body*; as if the camera, the heat of the lights, and the projections directed on my body were touching me. Not used to being in front of the camera, I felt exposed and vulnerable in becoming an image body.

In its installation, I continue the idea of a body becoming enveloped with the film. In the same studio, the projector was directed into empty space, and without a viewer present, the film would merely be light dissolving in space. Only when a viewer stood in a certain spot did the film become visible. The viewer here becomes the canvas and is simultaneously *in* the film. The imagination of a traumatic experience enveloping the viewer like a skin gives Marks' hapticity a new dimension: the film touches the viewer, with the distance between viewer and image vanishing completely. Rather than experiencing the film through vision, the viewer 'merges' with the film (Marks 2021). This created an intriguing bodily intersubjectivity between the viewer onto whom the film was projected and the other viewers who were watching. By being touched by the film, a viewer exposes themselves to being watched by others in the room. At the same time, the film is watched through the shape of this viewer's body. Some attendees were highly uncomfortable, stepping away quickly or not daring to enter the projection at all. Nevertheless, even the refusal to enter into the film experience comes from a bodily

impulse: watching and understanding the intention of the film 'touched' the viewer and evoked sensations of discomfort that they wanted to avoid.

Reflecting on these three films as both subject and artist-researcher, I must admit that neither the making of the film nor the watching of it were particularly soothing. Being immersed in creating these visual expressions and looking at them in their finished stage was thrilling from an aesthetic point of view, but I cannot say that they changed how this frightening afternoon nine years ago affects me today. The reverberations of this event still come back to me unexpectedly and often make me feel unsettled and worried about my parent. However, the exhibitions – the coming-together with other people in a cinematic space – set in motion a shared relationality that is reminiscent of what Bennett describes as empathic vision (2005). Through examining the 'affective operations' (2005: 2) that are at play particularly in non-representational artworks related to trauma, Bennett establishes an understanding of artworks as 'productive of ideas' (2005: 8). What is crucial here is that a certain 'incommensurability' of these artworks may spark an immanent connection, an empathic vision, which Bennett describes as 'the product of being touched by another, and, in part, an effect of seeing oneself feeling' (2005: 123). The correlation with Butler's notion of intertwinement is obvious here. The encounter with an audiovisual artwork like *what it felt like to dream fire* does not happen at a distance; it draws the viewer close and touches them with an affective force that simultaneously functions as an opener for dialogue. All these screenings were followed by a Q&A with the audience, which often turned into post-screening conversations, and it was these occasions, where the *inter*-relationality of the research became tangible. Screening the films meant opening my personal experience to viewers who in the moment of watching breathe the same air, are touched by the effects of the work, and respond with their own thoughts, associations and

memories. It is here, in the collective encounter with my art practice, that the research instilled a sense of soothing for me as artist-researcher, because my experiences were no longer held in my body alone. And so, through my artistic practice, other people are invited into the research and become a part of it; not merely to satisfy any inner, personal curiosity, but to trace Bishop's notion of 'painful pleasure' (2012: 39) and use it to construct and critique the relation between the individual and the collective, *through the senses*.

BRINGING BODIES IN: OVER/EXPOSED

While *what it felt like to dream fire* was characterised by an inward direction that attempted to explore and soothe traumatic tensions within a transgressing artist-researcher subject, the co-creative film art exhibition *over/exposed* shifts focus onto how bodily relations refract inside, outside and around audiovisual artwork. *over/exposed* is a multi-installation exhibition that places film and photography in touch with an exhibition space, objects, and the viewers interacting with them. The ten installations which included projections, screens and prints were developed co-creatively with a group of five queer creatives from Edinburgh and Glasgow in a 9-month long process and exhibited at the Pipe Factory in Glasgow (15-18 June, 2023) and at Leith Arches (23 June, 2023).

In contrast to the films of *what it felt like to dream fire*, *over/exposed* explored a form of trauma that is much less tangible and incisive than what I experienced with my parent, specifically microaggressions. These are often described as subtle and fleeting moments of bias against marginalised identities (Sue et al. 2007; Nadal 2018) that can take the form of interpersonal instances like jokes, intrusive questions, gazes, silences; or of institutional or discursive pressures such as grammar, gendered toilets, or administrative forms asking for gender or sexuality with limited or binary options. What is crucial here is that microaggressions occur with perva-

siveness. They cut across social, political and private life, yet are often experienced unconsciously by both victim and perpetrator. As extensive research in psychology (for example O'Keefe et al. 2015; Williams et al. 2018; Nadal, 2018; Robinson-Perez et al. 2019) has found, microaggressions have similar lasting and damaging effects as singular, incisive or violent traumas, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. These pressures not only impact individuals emotionally, but also in concrete physical ways: one might avoid entering certain spaces, speak quietly or not at all to avoid being exposed as queer, wear certain clothes and not others, or hold back with a transition. Microaggressions, as such, function in an uncomfortable inter-relationship within social, professional and political spaces. In moments of microaggressions, one body is harshly touched, indeed intruded on, without consent. The exhibition, therefore, had the ambition, on the one hand, to draw attention to the impacts of microaggressions, and on the other to provide a space where queer people could feel seen and soothed in their experiences.

Because there has been a longstanding tendency to objectify, simplify and reduce queer identities in research (Browne & Nash 2018: 4-5), it was important to me to conduct this artistic research in a way that would go beyond the extraction of findings and production of knowledge of value for the university. *what it felt like to dream fire* had given me a sense for the possible intrusive effects of 'research' on a researched body, and so I wanted to make sure that this research would not exacerbate the pain the participants brought to the project, but would instead produce tangible relations with and between the participants based on a shared sense of ownership of the knowledge produced. In the following sections, I want to look at these relations by foregrounding the notions of touch and breath, as they pervade both the co-creative process and the finished artworks.

over/exposed was framed by a method of filmmaking that deconstructed a traditional documentary approach. Instead



FIGURE 5

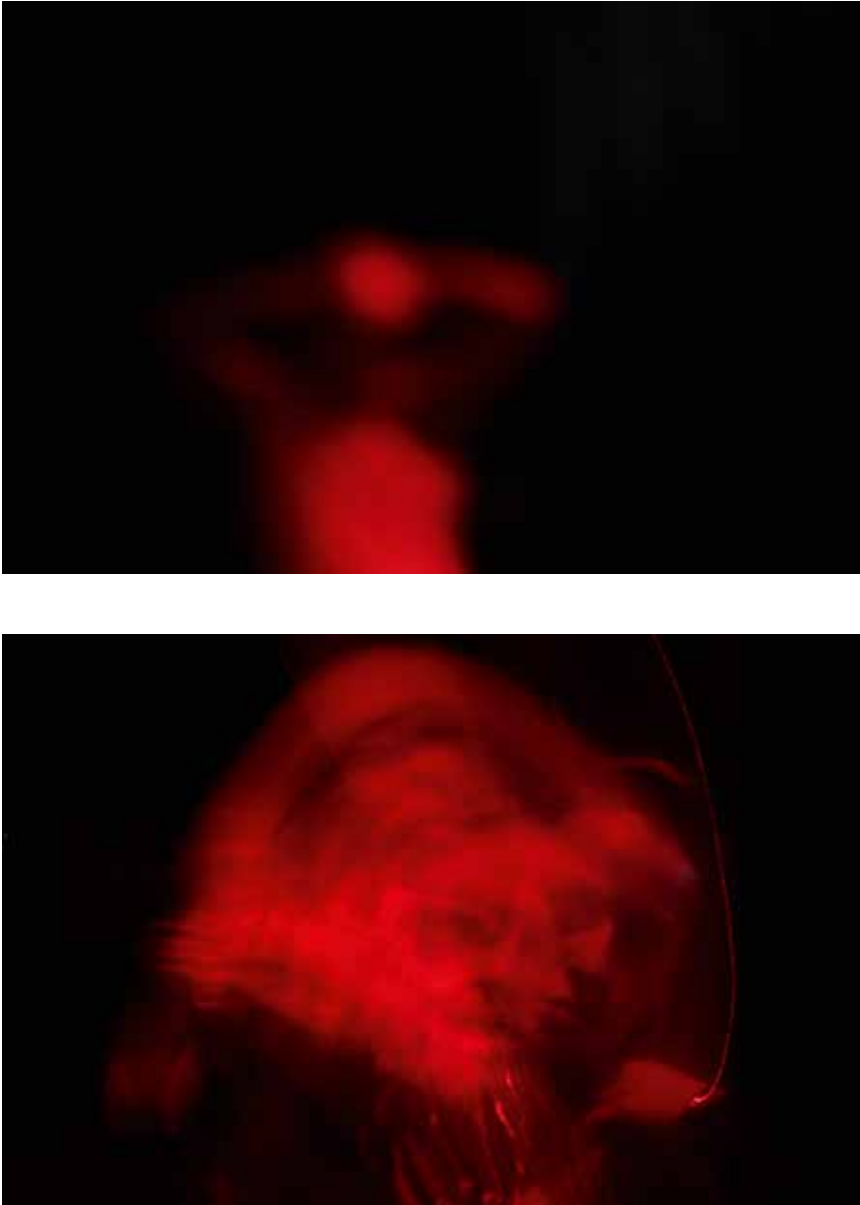


FIGURE 6

of mostly speaking about experiences or observing participants through the camera, the impetus was to find articulations for what it *felt* like on our bodies when our queerness provoked other people to make jokes, stare, look away, ignore, harass or deny us the right to define who we are. I was interested in a sensory and embodied reality, holding close Trin T. Minh-Ha's reminder that a separation between inner and outer reality is not only limiting but potentially violent to living knowledge (1990: 83). **(Figure 5)**

Breaking up traditional methods of documentary meant that I could reconfigure relationality as *inter*-relationality. Rather than maintaining a distinct separation between 'director' and 'documentary subjects' – for example, embodied in the classical interview shot where director and subjects remain on either side of the camera or by maintaining control over the aesthetic outcome in the edit – I merged the bodies of researcher, participant, camera and film. Methodologically, conversation, movement exercises and filming almost seamlessly touched each other with their different epistemic configurations flowing in and around each other.

With these principles in mind, we began the creative process on our first in-person meeting by simply being in the space. Without cameras or microphones, we got to know each other, established our safer space policy¹ and asked each other questions about our experiences with microaggressions. I had prepared interview questions; however, the conversation soon went at its own pace, led by the participants themselves.

The importance of breathing and touch came to the surface in a movement exercise, in which I asked the participants to return to a painful memory related to microaggressions and express it through a body movement or position. We would then

as a group perform this same movement or body position. This exercise put us most acutely in touch with memories and sensations of microaggressions and rendered Butler's intertwinement physical and spatial. Through one person's bodily sensation and our imitation of it, we were all in touch with each other's sensations. Our moving collectively between the muscular tensions and bodily deflation, the contortions and discomforts of such intrusive encounters made some of us cry or caused physical pain in the chest or stomach. Yet, we allowed these sensations to become visible, holding and releasing them collectively.

Bringing these emotions and sensations to the surface was the starting point for the work on our film. Eradicating a single-director vision, we used multiple cameras accessible to everyone in the room. I initially gave the participants a prompt to direct attention to shapes, contours and silhouettes of other bodies and make us think about the kind of sensations those images evoke. I showed the co-creators ways to distort the image, for example through long exposure, disorientating lighting, or using clingfilm in front of the lens. Creativity and pleasure in using our bodies in exciting and unusual ways soon took hold. At this point, I was no longer controlling the process, but instead creating *alongside* the participants. My researcher body was interlaced with the bodies of the participants and the film bodies emerging from our camera screens.

Notably, the camera was a body intertwined with our collective search for subjective expressions. Rather than being a neutral, disembodied instrument for observation or 'capturing' reality (Butler 1993: 94), the camera acted as a touch point between the subjectivities coming together in this process, with idiosyncrasies of its own accord: an ISO setting that was far too high, blowing out or intensifying colours; long exposures that stretched out or fragmented bodies; autofocus that would not work in the diffuse light of the studio. The result were hundreds of raw film clips and photos in which the borders and points of connection

1 A safer space policy is a written document in which all participants share what is important to them, what makes them feel safe and which boundaries they do not wish to cross.

between bodies and objects were less clearly defined (**Figure 6**). Just as my role had merged with that of the participants, the subjects in the artwork had become at times indistinguishable from their surroundings. Breaking up any pre-defined ways of 'narrating' our bodies, reversing, countering and performing different articulations, and doing this as a collective body, established a playful commonality between us. Indeed, the proximity to other queer bodies achieved, both phenomenologically and affectively, a sense of soothing. The participants explained that it was unusual for them to share a space with only queer people, but that it felt *good* not to have to explain or defend themselves, to be with people who share the same or similar subjectivities. In their account of intertwining, Butler briefly draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology (2006), which suggests that any given space is directed and orientated by established lines that we have learned to follow. Often, it is the presence of a queer body that simultaneously disorients those given lines and is disoriented by them. In the co-creative process of *over/exposed*, we retraced such phenomenological lines that shaped our bodies prior to coming together (e.g., how does language represent our gender identities? How have we distorted our gender expression to fit into a straight space? How does it feel when we are disorientated?). Yet, this process also helped us to construct *new lines* through which we could orientate ourselves towards each other. To return to Butler, touch in our process, whether evoked by confronting our emotions or the camera directed at our bodies, was not intrusive. We let ourselves be touched gently by research questions and our own answers, breathing together without feeling constricted. We could just be – we could 'sink' as Ahmed calls it (2006: 154). I suggest that this foundation of our research process, in which the illusory separation of researcher and participants was collapsed, in fact produced highly robust research outcomes. It allowed participants to be seen as whole bodies experiencing the world, rather than

as merely providing answers about their experience.

The relationality and embodied subjectivity that connected us in the creative process also carried over to the exhibitions. All artworks in *over/exposed* had a distinct focus on 'the perceptive and expressive body' (Lindner 2012: 163) and on building a relationality with the viewer through touch and breath. I want to highlight some of the ten artworks that speak distinctly to the idea of intertwining and hold potential for a soothing of vulnerable bodies. I am careful to assume that my interpretations are all-encompassing here, as this is what they remain: *my* subjective interpretations. But, as I am embedded in the web of subjectivities surrounding my research field (Lindner 2018), I dwell in this tension and consider it productive, without ever positing the interpretation as definitive.

The piece *Circle of Chairs*² manifests the idea of breath as a connective instance between artists and viewer, whereas *Lips* uses breath to involve the viewer in a sensorial critique of microaggressions. In *Circle of Chairs*, we recreated the set-up of our first meeting as a group. Viewers are invited to sit down and listen to an edited conversation of the artists. In the recording, the audience can hear us speak about difficult experiences of microaggressions in family, social or professional settings, but they also hear us laugh, shift uncomfortably in our seats, reassure each other, well up with tears and most importantly breathe. The decision to include this 'raw data' in our art exhibition came from a desire to involve the audience in the affective operations of our process. As the co-creators put it, they wanted to share with the audience the comfort they felt while speaking about difficult memories. And so, as the viewer sits down in the circle, listening, they take the place of our invisible bodies. The breath of the audience merges with the breath of the co-creators on the recording. As the co-creators' stories 'touch' them, they might

2 The titles of the artworks are purely for orientation in this text. In the exhibition, the artworks had no titles and ambiguously blended in with each other.



FIGURE 7

brush against the person next to them, intertwining emotional and physical touch. In contrast to the gentle encounter of *Circle of Chairs*, that staged in *Lips* is more confrontational. Reminiscent of a karaoke stage, the viewer is invited to sing along to a song one of the co-creators wrote in response to our process. Spotlights are directed on the viewer, intentionally provoking a heightened sense of suddenly being at the centre of attention. Most viewers did not dare to sing out loud; many mouthed the song or held their breath to just listen. Some never walked up to the microphone. This kind of tension inside the viewer, which shifts focus onto their corporeality (holding their breath, breathing shallowly, feeling tense), facilitated a sensorial grasp of microaggressions, crucially relying on the viewer to embody our research outcomes.

In some artworks, we employed textures and surfaces to appeal to the viewer's sense of touch. *slashing gaze*, for instance, offers the viewer a physical encounter with the act of microaggressions. The participants revealed that microaggressions can feel like a 'death by a thousand cuts,' which is also taken up in scientific microaggression research (Moore & Nash 2020; Nadal et al. 2011). *slashing gaze* (Figure 7) brings this to the fore: as a video clip of a fist opening and closing plays on a screen behind a Lycra cloth, the viewer has to crouch down and push, pull or stretch the cloth apart in order to see what is playing behind it. Being physically drawn into the artwork, the viewer's hand merges with the one behind the cloth, and at the same time, the viewer physically enacts a microaggressive intrusion by forcing themselves into the artworks. Thus, by being with(in) the artwork, the viewer makes graspable what microaggressions feel like *through* their own body. This physical gesture, observed by other viewers, attunes the viewer, as Bennett contends, to affects flowing 'through bodies and spaces' (2005: 13, her emphasis). These affects bring our research findings into an inter-relational space, transgressing boundaries traditionally intended to be rigidly held in place.

Research here is built and developed continuously with each new encounter; surfaces and contours are perpetually becoming.

In *write me down*, viewers are also invited to slow down. The installation features a writing table on which post card-sized self-portraits of one of the co-creators are spread out. An instructional, poetic note asks the viewer to draw, doodle, or write on the postcards, or take one away with them. In perhaps the most literal, haptic encounter, the viewer and the image body come close to each other through touch. Yet again, it is a reciprocal touch: the viewer touches the image by holding it in their hand, but the image also touches the viewer, allowing the body to be moved from the inside (Marks 2000: 83). The notes and doodles that people left on the postcards reveal this affective bond. The ambiguous shapes of the portrait invited people to open up to their own experiences: some described their experiences of coming out, ended relationships because of homophobia, or shared their personal experiences of microaggressions due to their voice or style. The portraits here seem to invite a gaze beyond the surface of the image (see examples in Figure 8). Some viewers seem to see themselves as not entirely separate from the face in the image; the image and viewer bodies are almost intertwined ('I see myself in the nothingness'). Another viewer draws attention to the notion of breath, in a playful poetic reflection on the impact of microaggressions when they force us to stop breathing ('Holding my breath...Holding my tongue... Might explode later').

The distinction between who affects whom in these artworks cannot always be drawn clearly. On the one hand, the viewer changes the shape of the artwork by extending it with doodles, drawings or writings; on the other, those writings often speak of a profound affective impact that the viewers experienced. This impact went beyond cultivating awareness and empathy within the viewer for our bodies in the image. Often, it was as if the image body soothed the viewer, affirming that they

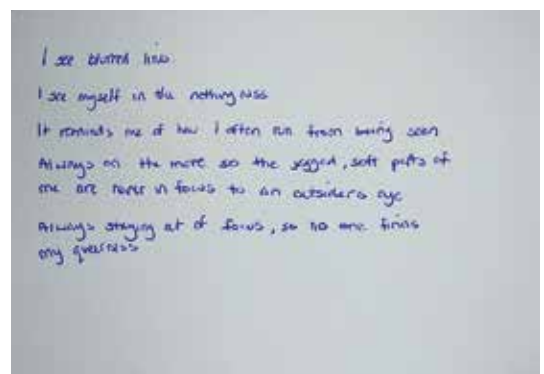
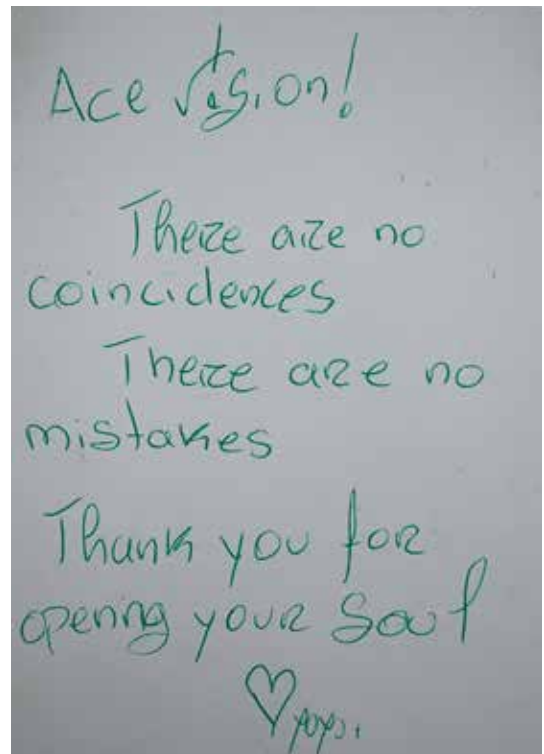
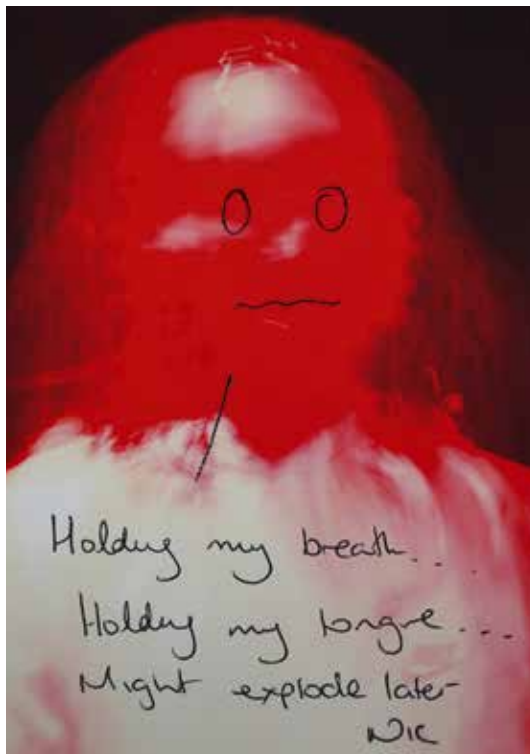


FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9

are not alone with their experiences and making itself 'vulnerable' to taking in those experiences.

In summary, *over/exposed* has to an extent 'disturbed the order of things' (Lindner 2012: 156) by dislodging a straightforward orientation towards the artworks. Drawing the viewer into the artworks allowed us to share our research findings about microaggressions *through the body*. Moreover, through the exhibition we could build relations with those who encountered our research. While the exhibitions were on, we talked about the artworks with those attending – whether friends and strangers – held other creative gatherings like spoken word afternoons or workshops (Figure 9), and collected written responses via a guest book. In an affect-based way, this correlates with van der Kolk's emphasis on human connection and bodily perception for traumatic experiences to ease (2014), as well as Ahmed's idea of a 'dwelling place' (2006), in which we can 'just be' without the world encroaching on us. The experimental, open-ended *modus operandi* of this research thus mobilises a shared touch, shared breath, and perhaps moments that both soften and slow into a soothing caress. This means that knowledge is *shared*, not through authority, but through collectively experienced affects; yet it is also continuously reactivated in conjunction with each viewer. What I wish to communicate is that this artistic research practice constitutes a space that is inhabitable – a space in which the touch and breath of each partaker is never fully separate from the outcomes that the research yields.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

How, then, do we rethink bodily relations in a research process? The artistic practice of *what it felt like to dream fire* and *over/exposed* has offered a methodology that allows the artist-researcher, research participants and viewers of the artworks to breathe. The breath, and the instances of touch it invokes, reveal that approaching trauma through research requires us not to separate cognitive findings from bodily

ones, or separate what we *find out* from how this makes us *feel*. Can we breathe calmly while engaged in research? Does research make us hold our breath? Take our breath away? How do our bodies feel when vulnerable experiences come to the surface? Artistic research, arguably more so than other routes of producing knowledge, allows us to do precisely that: to interlace bodies with research – to 'put our bodies into it,' as Chapman suggests (2023: 72) – however oblique and diverging the lines we form in the process might be. And so, understanding research through touch and breath offers a chance to grasp those researcher-researched relations as intertwined, as sharing the same space and air in which we reside. In this paper, I have not only paid attention to how these dynamics played out, but proposed breathing, touching and being touched as an inherent part of the methodology.

As Bishop states, these relations should not be an end in themselves, 'but serve to explore and disentangle a more complex knot of social concerns about political engagement, affect, inequality, narcissism, class, and behavioural protocols' (2012: 39). One of these concerns is also a criticality towards the reciprocal impact we often claim for artistic research. What we talk about here is often not measurable through numbers or scientific metrics, as it happens inside and between people. Based on interviews before and after our process, and many conversations since, the co-creators made friends and found vital support amongst a queer kinship that they did not have before. Microaggressions, while still occurring frequently, became less stressful to deal with, because our process had helped contextualise them. For one person, the process helped them become more confident in expressing their queer identity in everyday life. For another, it meant being comfortable with using the term 'queer' for themselves. One co-creator found the courage to affirm their identity and begin their medical transition. Creatively, they could develop their artistic skills and exhibit work for the first

time. All of them continue to work creatively together, both professionally and recreationally.

The pleasure that comes from being involved in an artistic research project matters – whether it is my pleasure in using the artworks to do philosophy and then sharing this with an academic community through this paper, or whether it is the pleasure we all took in hearing or reading testimonies that speak of a deep resonance with the exhibition or in observing visitors as they interact with the artworks and ‘get it’. To me, allowing this pleasure to be part of a research process is a key step towards countering extraction in research practices.

My concluding argument is that when we give research participants and the artist-researcher room to breathe and be *affected*, research may serve not only academic knowledge production. It serves those that our research touches to feel connected to a larger community in light of ongoing societal unsettlement and encroachment against queer people and other groups in society. Indeed, if we cast our net more widely and take into account ethical obligation in times of severe social disparities, as Butler does, such a perspective on research can form the base of an ethics: to take research seriously as a form of building and upholding shared affects, unafraid of forming relations with whom ever it comes into contact with and keeping them alive in its continuous encounters.

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