

## **Sensing & Thinking with Art**

Exploring Imaginative Dialogues in Artistic Practice

KRISTIN ALBERTINE STOKKA TROXEL

### **SUPERVISORS**

Kristian Nødtvedt Knudsen  
Andrè Tribbensee

### **University of Agder, 2023**

Faculty of Fine Arts  
Department of Visual Arts and Drama

Master



## **Abstract**

Artistic research, through sensory experiences, gives opportunities for new knowledge about the creative process. In this paper, I explore within a performative research paradigm, dialogues and relationships that happen between artist-researcher and materials. In my research, I show that serendipity and flow can be gateways to imaginative dialogues with non-living materials in an artistic practice. Throughout the project, I have been listening and interacting with the phenomenon of imaginative dialogues in several artistic ways. A selection of these encounters are presented and analyzed through relevant theory to illustrate how assemblages of human and non-human actants may interrupt and transform the artistic practice while creating new knowledge and language within the practice.

## **Sammendrag**

Kunstnerisk forskning med fokus på sanselige opplevelser gir mulighet til å utvikle ny kunnskap om kunstneriske prosesser. I denne teksten utforsker jeg dialoger og relasjoner som skapes mellom kunstner-forskeren og materialene i slike prosesser. I min forskning viser jeg at konseptene serendipitet og flow kan være innganger til imaginative dialoger med ikke-levende materialer i en kunstnerisk praksis. Gjennom dette prosjektet har jeg lyttet til og interagert med fenomenet imaginative dialoger på flere måter. Et utvalg av funnene blir presentert og analysert gjennom relevant teori for å illustrere hvordan grupperinger av menneskelige og ikke-menneskelige aktanter kan utfordre og transformere den kunstneriske praksis og samtidig skape ny kunnskap og nye språk.

## **Key concepts**

Artistic research, serendipity, flow, imaginative dialogues, non-human agency, transformation,

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## Sensing & Thinking with Art - An Introduction

*“To express artistically what exists, is an endless task”* (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2008, p. 260).

As I wake up in the morning, I like to set my alarm to a three-minute interval. I have found that three minutes is the perfect amount of time to drift back into a semi-awake-dream-state where I float between conscious and intuitive thought and things that are important to me become clearer as I experience the world from a different perspective. It is something I enjoy immensely, and do for 30-60 minutes (or until my partner will not have it any longer.) It is a sort of otherworldly flow experience where I am free to focus on just being in the world without the worries and tasks at hand in a busy family life. When I paint, I experience a similar phenomenon of free intuitive thought and focus, much propelled by a dialogue of sorts with the canvas and paints. This kind of entanglement is what interests and fascinates me, and in this study, I try to explore what happens when you enter this kind of dialogue within an artistic practice.

Last January, when I was offered twenty canvases from a café that a friend was renovating, served as a catalyst into this research. The canvases were old railway photos printed on polyester canvas and foam boards. They were big, 150 x 120 cm, which allowed a lot of freedom in the process due to the sheer amount of square meters to cover with paint. But, what to paint? During this time, a fellow student and I were exploring the idea of *erasure* (Gorman, 2021) as introduced in a book of poems, and slowly this fascination with erasing, things disappearing, as well as what emerges when something is erased, flooded into my work with the canvases as I covered old train track photos with paint. While the work unfolded, something else was happening; as I found myself in front of the materials, narratives and a dialogue seemed to

appear between us. Not words or images, but a sort of intuitive longing and direction slowly became apparent to me. Listening and following, little by little, my practice slowly ripened into a sort of dance; listening in and becoming aware of what wanted to happen. Trying to notice shifts and movements in the dialogue, I added paint to the canvases. It was a wonderfilled experience; I could disappear for hours in this dance of listening, discovering and doing, and felt such satisfaction and joy in it. Therefore, when choosing a theme for my master project shortly after, I knew that I had to explore this otherworldly flow experience of imaginative dialogues with the materials closer, trying to grasp this state of mind and put words to what I was experiencing in my body.

My background is diverse; I am educated as an arts and crafts teacher in Norway, but have also worked with homeless and oppressed minorities in the USA for over a decade while simultaneously touring and recording with a band. Creating art, developing community and advocating for social change have always been equally valuable to me. Currently, while finishing my master's degree in art, I am, and have been involved with local art projects propelled by a desire to create social change or community in various ways.

I started this section with a quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty; "To express artistically what exists, is an endless task" (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2008, p. 260). I interpret this quote as calling attention to the difficulties of trying to communicate, showing the limitations of language, where important finds often can be lost in translation's hopeless task. One reason is perhaps that sensory experiences have to be sensed by the body of each human being. Our experiences may be similar and universal to a certain degree, but at the same time subjective to each individual body. This elusiveness of the artistic process and art making rarely produce clear answers, nevertheless, in this study I explore how artistic practice through flow theory



(Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005), serendipity (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018), and the concept of imaginative dialogues (PIMDI, 2022) might shed some light on the process. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is a state of being that happens when the brain focuses on one task and every day cares and worries disappear. The result is that we find ourselves de-centered from ourselves while experiencing an intense bodily awareness and focus (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p.85). Similarly, serendipity, outlined as *the art of finding that which we did not know we were looking for*, offers an approach to explore the artistic process with an awareness and ability to take advantage of the random happenings and mishaps in a creative process and to elevate these flaws (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 32-34). During this research period, I was part of a project where I was introduced to the concept of imaginative dialogues (PIMDI, 2022). Imaginative dialogues, during this research period, happens when I enter the creative process in a flow state, open and prepared for the unknown, and the aim of this project is to explore how imaginative dialogues can interrupt and contribute to the artistic process through serendipity and flow. This quest may be summed up in the following question

## **Thesis**

**How can the concept of imaginative dialogue be an approach to explore artistic practice?**

This artistic research process has been a serendipitous intertwining of practical embodied work, imaginative dialogues and engaging with theory. The written text reflects such a weave where academic reflections, artistic work and written outcomes of sensory experiences entangle with each other throughout the pages. Doing research with serendipity has been quite unpredictable and so to make the process more apprehensible for the reader I have divided the paper in two main parts. The first half introducing applied theory and method, while the second half shifts

towards the process; presenting, reflecting as well as analyzing finds. In the analysis chapter, I will present three cases, each with a question approaching the main thesis.

## Theoretical Foundations

Positioning myself within a performative research paradigm, and leaning on the ideas of Brad Haseman, as well as Tone Pernille Østern, Sofia Jusslin, Kristian Nødtvedt Knudsen, Pauliina Maapalo, and Ingrid Bjørkøy, enables me to explore and research the concept of imaginative dialogues (PIMDI, 2022) artistically and academically (Haseman, 2006; Østern, 2017; Østern et. al., 2021). This closeness between artist researcher and the research material, resonates with theories of serendipity (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005), and allows me as an artist researcher to immerse myself in my own practice, giving me the opportunity to engage with imaginative dialogues from different perspectives throughout the project. I will also employ some of Jane Bennett's definitions and terminology regarding the agency of matter (Bennet, 2010), as well as parts of Helene Illeris' research on transformative meetings with art (Illeris, 2016). In this section, I will describe more thoroughly the theoretical field I position myself within.

### Imaginative Dialogue

During my two years in the master program, I have been fortunate to be a student participant in the research group of PIMDI, A Pedagogy of Imaginative Dialogues. An Erasmus+ strategic partnership, which aims to develop a pedagogy of imaginative dialogues within art education (PIMDI, 2022). My involvement with PIMDI has affected my research in many ways, and is where I was first introduced to the term *imaginative dialogue*. The PIMDI research group use the term in a different manner than I propose. Originating from a need to develop a pedagogical method enabling student dialogue to transform from discussions to a deeper level of communication through exploring and creating collaboratively through sensory, artistic, and aesthetic practices and in that way access imaginative dialogues collectively (Anundsen et. al., 2022, pp. 2-3). The PIMDI project argues that imagination is part of the phenomenon of

dialogue, defining dialogue as a mutually explorative process where a building of knowledge happens, in contrast to the monologue where knowledge is merely received. Dialogical knowledge is in this way seen as a more democratic way of obtaining knowledge, inhabiting properties to challenge existing knowledge (Anundsen, et. al., 2022, p. 3). In my research, I have broadened the term to include dialogues between human and non-human actants (Bennett, 2010, p. 2) engaged in similar sensory, aesthetic, and artistic practices. My aim is to explore the qualities such an approach might offer in a creative process. Anundsen et. al. open up for further inquiry of imaginative dialogues; moments where the ‘self’ and ‘other’ are not distinguishable, and ask how such moments arise, as well as what it takes to enter or facilitate such experiences (Anundsen et. al., 2022, p. 19). While my focus is on groups consisting of human and non-human actants as opposed to the all-human students of the PIMDI project, I nevertheless, argue that there are similarities between the two approaches, and that the concept of imaginative dialogues may also be used describing assemblages of human and non-human actants (Bennett, 2010, p. 23-24). An interest in finding what propels such dialogues is also present in my research and as far as methods of entering and facilitating imaginative dialogues; my research suggests serendipity and flow as possible candidates.

## **Serendipity**

The term serendipity was first introduced by English author Horace Walpole in 1754 in a letter describing its meaning to a friend; referring to an Old Persian fairy tale he knew as a child (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, pp. 32-34). As a creative pattern and method in an artistic practice it includes staying open, being prepared to be unprepared for whatever the process brings and have the wherewithal to improvise solutions. This positive attitude towards non-planned occurrences has in it the potential to further learning and discoveries. Chemi and Christoffersen, find that through the paradox of prepared unpreparedness new knowledge, new

discoveries and new art may emerge intuitively, adding that serendipity as method can be quite provoking in that the doing precedes the meaning. They explain and describe the somewhat obscure concept of serendipity as well as outlining ways of using it as a method in an artistic practice. Chemi and Christoffersen see serendipity as a way to gather knowledge through the use of the senses; observing mundane happenings or objects encountered in everyday life, while remaining open and curious to, but not knowing if, randomly gathered material will lead to anything. When paired with an attitude of openness and discernment they show that what seems like rubbish today might come in useful later in dealing with unknown future challenges. Serendipity then is not just a gathering of random things; it is also very much about how one meets the unplanned in the process, being present and alert as an artist to use the loss of control creatively within one's practice. In that way a mistake or an accident, may turn out to be the start of something wonderful.

The ability to be vulnerable and open in the artistic process, allowing agency to other actants as well as an attitude of curiosity and trust (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018) is how I have tried to approach the materials through imaginative dialogues throughout this artistic research. Explained as *the art of finding that which one is not looking for*, combining the random with discernment, Chemi and Christoffersen find that serendipity occurs in the paradox of prepared unpreparedness where there needs to be a break with rules, norms, habits and traditions, leading the process in new and unexpected directions (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 32-34). It is not about luck, but more a certain competence to react at the right time and place (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, pp. 43-46). They share three guidelines for engaging with the phenomenon, stemming from interviews with experienced artists. A need for random discoveries to be met with knowledge and a certain level of skill, a willingness to test ones knowledge in an uncertain process where failure is possible, as well as an ability to engage the

senses mindfully in immediate mundane surroundings (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 39). These guidelines demand a willingness to take risks in the creative process as well as an ability to be attentive to ones surroundings during the process. Serendipity as a theoretical foundation offers new perspectives and opportunities to analyze concrete events engaging with non-human actants during the research period. Assemblages between human and non-human actants when paired with an attitude of openness and willingness to let go of control, allows for new knowledge and new art to be created through this paradox of prepared unpreparedness. Challenging the institutionalization of art, where the avant-garde art movements Dadaism and Surrealism of the early 1900's may serve as examples, serendipity becomes a tool to oppose set standards, habits and hierarchies, creating opportunities for unexpected discoveries involving all the senses, intellect and skills of the artist (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 38-39).

## **Flow**

The term *flow* comes from the field of behavioral psychology. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term describing a state of mind where one is so engrossed in one's work that 'time flies by' and everyday life is temporarily suspended (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p.85). His research finds that feelings of satisfaction, meaning, serenity and clarity are usual when in flow. In this way, he argues, flow may be understood as a different reality, a creative experience where the self is transformed and made more complex. In this development of the self, lies the key to understand the phenomenon of flow as well as human desire for the condition. Csikszentmihalyi proposes that it is probable that art's very existence relies mainly on the phenomenon, as art has been a source of flow in all of human history, for both artist and beholder (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p. 87-91). Flow theory is a vast field within psychology and has many implications. In this study I have chosen to focus on Csikszentmihalyi's definition of the term as well as parts of his research on how flow is experienced in the body through the senses. Flow theory opens

up for the creation of new temporary realities and a transformation of the subject (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p. 87-91) this has given me new perspectives and possibilities in approaching and entering my creative practice. The subject is de-centered while in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p.85), which resonates with the phenomenon of imaginative dialogues where there is a dialogue and a collaboration of sorts between equals, human and non-human. The state of flow offers a doorway to the dialogue with non-human actants, and has proven to be a way to access the imaginative dialogues in my research.

## **Artistic Research**

The field of artistic research and the performative research paradigm is a fairly new paradigm in academia. Rearing its head in the early 2000's with Haseman's manifesto for a new performative approach to academic research within the arts (Haseman, 2006). He suggests a research where the enthusiasm of a practice takes precedence over a more traditional problem-led research as in quantitative and qualitative research. Haseman sees practice-led research as original contributions to knowledge, forged from the restrictions of qualitative research's need for written outcomes, which he finds, has the potential to muddle the communication of an artistic practice. He sees the need for practice-led research to be experiential in communicating finds, creating new artistic forms of performing and exhibiting finds arguing that practice-led research does not describe a practice but simply does or is it. He gives as an example from the tradition of naming ships; 'I name this ship...' and at that exact moment, the vessel has a name. He then goes on to show artistic research findings as similar utterances; at the moment they are uttered, they perform the action, concluding; that this kind of research is not qualitative – but it is itself (Haseman, 2006, pp. 4-6).

Research and artistic practice happen simultaneously and are undividable within artistic research, as well as being an embodied inquiry, where the engagement of the senses and emotions are central. Østern et. al. have further developed the performative research paradigm, finding that the researcher's involvement with the research material inhabits a transformational effect, and within the material-discursive entanglements new knowledge is created (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 10). Østern, as both artist and scholar, finds that artistic research has a valid place in both academia and the arts. In her experience, it has the potential to elevate both fields (Østern, 2017, pp. 8-9). Her view is that art and aesthetic practices' research methodologies are organic and continually becoming, as well as having to be continually adapted to the processes at hand.

The artist researcher is ever changing and becoming throughout the whole process, resulting in embodied experiences and knowledge that constitutes the empirical data acquired. (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 2)

Research together with art has opened up for many different approaches, artistic directions, and methodologies throughout its history, art-based- and practice-led research, ARTography, performative research and many more. In my research, I find the term artistic research useful. It is a much-used term since the 1990's, while at the same time comes across as a straightforward description of my work as both artist and researcher (Østern, 2017, p. 9). I find this embodied approach very useful in my work, in trying to both engage and understand ongoing processes and dialogues, sensory experiences as well as the artistic practice and research process.



[...] performative research represents a move which holds that practice is the principal research activity – rather than *only* the practice of performance – and sees the material outcomes of practice as all-important representations of research findings in their own right. (Haseman, 2006, p. 7)

## **Embodied Knowledge**

In Helene Illeris' research (Illeris, 2016) on learning bodies and teenagers' meeting with contemporary art, she divides the body's experience with art into three dimensions; the phenomenological, the semantic and the transformational dimension. In her case studies, Illeris analyzes a case where the students engage with the artwork bodily while also given access to collaborate with it. She argues this embodied and sensory meeting gives the students agency, and she finds it possible that this is where a transformation can happen. "When the body acts in new ways through performance, the experience changes and one might perceive different aspects both of the artwork and of oneself relating to it" (Illeris, 2016, pp.155-156). Such transformational embodied knowledge, gained through emotional and sensory experiences is at the core of artistic research and to do research with art therefore rests on *aesthesis*, referring to aesthetic processes in which and through which the world makes itself known and knowable, experience-able and shareable (Østern, 2017, p. 11). Embodied experiences have a vast impact on human life, knowledge and quality of life, Østern suggests that art happens somewhere in this embodied aesthesis. The affect art creates in us; the meetings that happen in artistic and aesthetic processes between the artist and materials can create a transformation in the artist as well as the participant viewer. In this study, I have had to limit my research to focus on the artists' transformative experience, but draw on research on students experiences because they were also engaged in creating together with the art and in that sense can be seen as artists engaged in an art practice.

Østern finds that artistic research's focus on the subjective pursuit of knowledge, where the researcher's sensory body and feelings are empirical material, may create knowledge unavailable through other research methods (Østern, 2017, p. 12-13). Central to artistic research is its transformative qualities, Østern et. al. finds, similar to Illeris, that artistic research create knowledge and change through embodied sensuous experiences.

The researcher is fully entangled with the research, not only as a research cognition capable of critically reflecting on their own influence on the research, but also as an affected researcher-body who needs their own sensuous body to engage, analyze and understand. (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 2)

At a PIMDI gathering in Iceland in the fall of 2022, I attended a presentation by Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir. Her seminar was on thinking and sensing from within in meeting with a landscape, encouraging her audience to notice what happens in the body and to train ourselves to sense how nature and our surroundings affect us (Personal communication, Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir, 2022, September 19, Iceland). Reflecting on my own practice, I see that I lack words or a language to explain what takes place in the body when engaged in imaginative dialogues – a language where intuition and the senses are central, a language of art or through art seems to be wanting.

*Art is / language / a language / that can be used / to describe existence / like no other  
language / multidimensional language*

*Art is embodiment of instinct /*

*In the dialogue (art) you can use your whole body.* (Personal communication, Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir, 2022, September 19, Iceland)

Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir finds that the knowledge created in the embodied intertwining of human and non-human actants highlights the need for deeper understanding of the role aesthetics and relationships has in knowledge creation. She proposes that it is in this intertwining of subject and object that beauty is created.

Beauty is neither in the form of the object, nor only in the eye of the beholder/subject, but rather in the intertwining of subject and object. Beauty is a relational concept; it describes a certain type of relation that human beings are given to be able to have with the world – the type of relation that brings us beyond the subject-object dichotomy. (Jóhannesdóttir, 2022a, p. 5)

Pointing out that such aesthetic, sensuous and embodied knowledge as well as thinking, traditionally has largely, been omitted from academia, valued as unreliable approaches to knowledge creation (Jóhannesdóttir, 2022b, p. 5).

## **The Agency of Matter**

In Jane Bennet's, book *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett, 2010), she elevates the agency of matter, challenging the divide between living and non-living matter as well as human and non-human life. Her quest is to open up a new world of sensory experiences and new landscapes for relating with non-living matter. In my research, I draw selectively from Bennet's theory. While intrigued by her focus on, and excitement with the vitality of matter, and how this outlook can aid us towards a more sustainable future (Bennett, 2010, p. 21) I have had to limit myself to

primarily using her definitions of non-human agency in my research. Diving into her theory on vibrant matter would have been more than sufficient for a master paper by itself.

When Bennett defines non-human agency, she includes how coffee affects our bodies when we drink it, or how music or an art piece can move and touch our emotions without being living beings in themselves. She divides non-human forces into three main areas; forces operating in nature, in the human body and in human artifacts. These non-living materials are in Bennett's theory, known as *actants* (Bennett, 2010). Animism and thing-power are two different approaches Bennett outlines in her work. When non-human actants have a soul, as in animistic religions, trees and mountains are seen as living beings with soul and agency. In comparison, Bennett understands thing-power as a network between several non-living objects that together have agency and create events we cannot control, like when rain falls, and this in its turn creates a landslide. She calls such temporary networks *assemblages* (Bennett, 2010, p. 23-24). In my practice, I use the term assemblages describing groupings of human and non-human actants at work in the creative process; dialoging, influencing and ultimately adding paint to canvases. In these assemblages, there is a polyphony of voices where the different actants are valued as equals with shared opportunity to influence the process (Dysthe et al., 2012, p. 60). In her book, Bennett questions her own role (as a human) in developing a theory that gives agency to matter

I will try to make a meal out of the stuff left out of the feast of political theory done in the anthropocentric style. In so doing, I court the charge of performative self-contradiction: is it not a human subject who, after all, is articulating this theory of vibrant matter? (Bennett, 2010)

A comparable fascination with agential matter in assemblages of human and non-human actants is also found in Østern et. al.'s text, where they discuss the agential forces of materials and the possibility of non-human actants resisting the agenda of the human and vice versa. In their experience, this often occurs in very affected ways.

The researcher goes through pain, joy, despair, moments of flow, relief, grief and pride as the research material plays tricks with her. The research material, the process and the researcher perform on one another, constantly in-becoming. (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 13)

During the research period, I have often questioned my own agency and role in the imaginative dialogue-assemblages as to what or who has agency? This is why I bring the concepts of flow and serendipity into the research, to be able to implement them as theoretical lenses as the use of these theories allow for several different methodological approaches as well as offering different perspectives. “[...] humans are be(come)ing in relation to other-than-humans in the world, of which both humans and other-than-humans are actively part of producing” (Østern, et. al., 2021, p. 13).

## **Methodology**

Throughout the research period, I have made many choices that have influenced my findings in various ways. The choices of theory and methods to approach the research material, as well as the ones I choose not to apply, have all formed the research process. The ability to work in a material-discursive entangled manner I owe to the performative research paradigm (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 10) valuing the creation of new knowledge and meaning-making this research paradigm enables. The choice to do research within the performative research paradigm was also made to ensure that embodied and sensory experiences would be valued (Østern, 2017, p.

13). Serendipity theory (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018) have broadened my research by opening up for the unexpected, letting go of control on a path towards (hopefully) new discoveries. It has allowed the implementation of non-human actants in my artistic practice, and as method also opened up for the random, and the unknown to influence and have agency in the process, daring me to take risks and remain curious. Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005) has helped me to understand and value the imaginative dialogues as an act of play and transformation, giving purpose, meaning and serenity to my quest. The encounters with flow has inspired and motivated me as well as given a foundation to a broader understanding of how art may create affect in us. In my engagement and development of flow as a method to approach and engage in the imaginative dialogues, I have come to value this state of mind's qualities, adding joy and happiness into the process, a process which has also brought many challenges and transgressions onto me as an artist researcher. Ethical considerations and choices of what research material to include or omit in this project have been made. As ethical dilemmas emerged during the artistic research, mainly because of the entanglement of artist and materials, choices regarding transgressions on my own comfort zones, what to allow or not were taken. It has been a continual challenge for me not taking back the control over the creative process. In addition, decisions regarding what is too private to include from the auto ethnographic texts in the artist diary, have also been considered during the process (Østern, 2017, p. 17).

## Method

Throughout the research period, I have had to make many decisions as to how I was going to perform my study as well as how to document it. In the process of diving into theory and engaging in imaginative dialogues simultaneously, methods have been created and applied. I find it clarifying to divide the methods I have developed into three categories, *engaging with materials*, *the affected researcher body* and *documentation*. The ontological field I work within, under the performative research paradigm, has been instrumental in developing and choosing methods as the “[...] researcher is entangled with what is being researched as a researcher body, and the research results are non-representative of a reality pre-existing before the researchers involvement” (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 10).

### Engaging with Materials

Most of the materials I have used in this project were found or given to me. The twenty canvases were being thrown away and the paint was leftover from theater productions or returned buckets to the paint store. I also experimented with making my own canvases; using old curtains from my studio. It turned out that the curtains did not stretch well on the frames, so I abandoned that. I also tried painting on the curtains without frames and planned to sew them together to make enormous paintings. During the process, I realized that I prefer to use things that just come to me serendipitously. To be in the now and find a way to use whatever presents itself to me is part of my creative process. I find I quite prefer this to planning. I find it opens up the creative possibilities beyond something I could have devised, giving agency to the unplanned and unknown in the creative process. In this way, serendipity can be applied as a method of engaging with non-human agency in an art practice; to explore and dialogue without a fixed goal; staying open to what may present itself in the process as a possible canvas, paint, idea, or form. To apply serendipity as a method involves giving away one’s own agency, it is

unpredictable and the artist needs to be willing to trust the process, step out in faith in hopes that the path will eventually lead somewhere as seen in the Old Persian fairy tale of the Princes of Serendip and also in Norwegian fairytales (Asbjørnsen & Moe, 1841/2019). In these stories, non-human actants are valued differently than the subject-object dichotomy in society at large and given agency. In the fairytales, the protagonist keeps alert to opportunities that might present themselves; he is inventive, creative, and mindful of the now and has a quick wit, useful in preparing for the unknown. Chemi and Christoffersen, find that serendipity is not mainly about mindfully gathering objects or knowledge, but also entails how one engages with these actants in the events that follow (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 37).

Using serendipity as a method to explore my artistic practice has enabled new ways of responding to the materials' agency. When paint runs (fig. 4) I can see it as a flaw and try to clean it up or I can enter into a dialogue with it and listen for its agency. In this way, serendipity as a method opens up for human and non-human assemblages in an artistic practice. Curiosity is also part of serendipity method, not knowing what will happen or unfold and to keep an attitude of curiosity towards the undiscovered has been a valuable tool during the process. Another way I have approached serendipity as a method in engaging the materials is to be open to whatever presents itself, and try them out, unusual materials like the curtains and the old photos that I ended up painting on. Another way is to keep my eyes on the brush in the painting process and refuse to take in the whole canvas, as to give the materials more agency. Letting go of control in the imaginative dialogues with the materials, trusting this 'blind' process, shows how the use of serendipity involves risks; however, as method it has enabled me to explore the creative process in new and adventurous ways engaging with the agency of the materials. (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 49).



## **The Affected Researcher Body**

Contrary to qualitative and quantitative research, the lack of distance between the researcher, the materials, and the phenomenon is not viewed as problematic, but rather as a quality valuing the researcher's sensing as well as thinking in artistic research. "[...] the affected researcher body is a necessity and resource for understanding. The researcher body becomes a friend, instead of an obstacle [...]" (Østern, et. al., 2021, p. 10).

Finding the right methods of applying the senses have been important as they would direct and stimulate my research. Using flow and serendipity as methods have made it possible to pursue my artistic practice and broadened the horizon for what research can be within an artistic research paradigm. "A performative paradigm can produce ethical ways of creating new, innovative and surprising perspectives within the entangled flux of life, art and research" (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 14). How can we then employ our senses in an artistic process? Csikszentmihalyi's extensive work within the field of psychology finds it probable that art's very existence relies on flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 91). My research explore how flow may be engaged as a method to connect to the imaginative dialogue and the agency of materials through the senses. Csikszentmihalyi finds that the sensory body cannot by itself produce flow, no matter what activity it is involved in. However, only through the involvement of both mind and body is the state of flow possible (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 111). I have found in my artistic research that flow is a method that serves as a gateway to access the imaginative dialogues. The altered experience of time, the complete focus on what I am doing, as well as the feelings of joy and satisfaction have all been part of my sensory experiences with flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 85). I have used flow as a method to engage the imaginative dialogue and have developed a few rules of engagement during the creative processes.

### ***Rules of Engagement***

Listen to what the materials want, or if you cannot hear anything, paint a circle in the lower right corner and listen some more.

Follow your gut feeling.

Focus your eyes on the brush; do not take in the whole canvas.

Engage your body with the brush as in a dance. Listen to the sounds and rhythms.

Do not be afraid of making mistakes.

Wait for harmony/beauty to appear.

Sit down when the dance is over and the dialogues quiet down.

Do not engage in making the painting better.

Most of these guidelines have been used to engage in the state of flow. They evolved over time and was written down in retrospect while reflecting over the process. They are methods of engaging non-human actants to enable the assemblages of human and non-human actants in the creative process of the imaginative dialogues.

### **Documenting the Process**

As the dialogues with the materials unfolded, I needed a way of documenting what was going on. As well as the paintings themselves, I found that keeping an artist diary was useful in documenting the creative process. In the artist diary, I have used the method of auto ethnography (Baarts, 2020, p. 203-216). Auto ethnography is an acknowledged scientific theoretical approach within qualitative research, offering a methodological and practical approach to research. Knowledge is extracted from personal experiences in auto ethnography, where subjective insight contributes to general knowledge (Baarts, 2020, p. 214). There are several methods available through auto ethnography, poetry, performance, essays or novels as

well as more classical, academic texts. All usually written from a first person perspective (Baarts, 2020, p. 211). I have mostly used poetry and streams-of-consciousness texts throughout this project. I find it easier to convey my sensory experiences through poetry as I have increasingly felt that there is no known language to document or describe embodied experiences. As the poetic texts often have a visual dimension in my practice, I have, to assure the reader a better understanding of what the poetry is trying to convey, added cursive as well as ‘ / ‘ in the text to signify small pauses in the poetic reflections.

## **Process & Materials**

Throughout this master project, I have felt surrounded by the agency of materials with the opportunity to listen and respond to this agency. They have been whispering to me every time I have attentively listened by giving me nods to what color, what form, connected with other forms or color while narratives have occurred sharing why it was important, and even revealing the story behind the choices of forms or colors, placement and brightness. Acting on these intuitive notions have been my decision, and in choosing to do so I have created together with the non-human actants new and temporary realities where paintings and poetry have been created. Many times this interaction have been reminiscent of times creating whole imaginary worlds with friends as a child. Sometimes these dialogues are concerning community, inclusion and connection; ‘make a road to us,’ whisper two circles in white in an upper corner and another will add, ‘I want to be part, connect me too’. I respond by making a road or connecting them with each other and feel a satisfaction by it. Sometimes there will be an urge to repeat a form or color as a pattern, unifying the whole in a sort of rhythmic movement that seems urgent and utterly important. Other times, enveloped in flow, I suddenly remember things from my childhood, when a teacher complimented my drawing or my classmates ganged up on me for coloring something wrong in a painting we made together. I am amazed how these things surface when my senses are engaged in processes reminiscent of the past. I see that there is a connection with memories and embodied experiences that become activated by engaging imaginative dialogues in my artistic practice. However, it is usually just urges to do different things that are not connected to memories as far as I can see.

Further, I will present and analyze the different findings of this research, however, to help the reader it might be clarifying with an overview of the process with the imaginative dialogues as well as the materials and spaces I have engaged with during this artistic research.

## **Spaces & Materials**

I have mainly worked in two different studio spaces during this research period, and in each, I have kept the paint in small containers on the floor beside my easels, about fifty different hues arranged in colors; one box for the blues, one for the yellows and so on. I have mainly used high-pigmented acrylic paint as well as acrylic wall paint and towards the end, adding oil crayons as well. Most of the materials have been given to me, but a few of the canvases I have built myself with a little help. Some of the canvases I have prepared with gesso, while on some I have painted directly onto raw canvas. However, most of my canvases have been old railway photos on foam boards. The vast amount of canvases and square meters to paint on has, as mentioned earlier, had a liberating effect on me as a student researcher. I have not had to be careful and safe, and have been able to ‘kill my darlings’ easily because of so many surfaces to paint on. I am convinced that if I only had one canvas or two, or a small amount of paint, as a student budget usually would have allowed, it would have constricted the exploration due to the cost involved and a need to create something interesting in the first try or two. In a process of exploring imaginative dialogues, listening to the materials and acting upon it, this has definitely added to the sense of freedom to make mistakes, applying theories and methods of serendipity and flow. On the other hand, such freedom will also reduce the risks involved, which is a main ingredient in the concept of serendipity.

## **Process of Imaginative Dialogues**

I experience the imaginative dialogues with materials as sensed urges or intuitive knowledge in my body. The information of where a form should go and why, or what color to switch to next and why have proven difficult to translate into written text. Regardless, in the following I will attempt to present how I have worked with the imaginative dialogues in my artistic practice during this research.

Working within human and non-human assemblages in the processes with the paintings, I have typically entered my studio, changed as in a sort of ritual, slowly into painting clothes. Removed my shoes as to feel the floor, and calmed myself while entering into a focus or mindfulness towards the room and the surrounding materials. Then I would intently prepare the materials, walk to the sink, clean out the brushes if needed and fill up the water jars. All the time preparing myself quietly to enter into the imaginative dialogues. Back at the studio, I would continue to open up and wait for the materials to ‘speak’ to me. Usually, I would sit in front of a canvas, or look through a stack of them, to see if something wanted attention, feeling my way intuitively. After a while, I might set one on the easel and wait for the process to begin. These dialogues have never consisted of visual images of shapes or colors, instead I have had to approach the paint jars and look through them until one stands out. Similarly, with forms, focusing my eyes and my senses on the brush, I would begin a movement in my body, and in agreement and connection with the other actants, it would take place. After a little while, I would usually find myself lost in flow and the imaginative dialogues would be flowing in, around and through me. In this way, I have worked with the paintings in an assemblage with the materials, where all actants have equal power (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 10). This facilitates a polyphony of voices (Dysthe et al., 2012, p. 60) that have been accessible to me through the state of flow where the subject is de-centered and temporary realities are created (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 87-91).

Eventually, after a few hours, the dialogues will cease and I sit down again and take in what transpired in the session as in the poetic reflection under.

*As I paint currents of thoughts flow, narratives, bits and pieces, color choices, intuition, I stand close and paint, creating harmony, feelings of anger and contentment, tired of some of the colors, others feel good, trying to stay in flow - not think, just doing, touching the gut feeling, letting in, letting go, drifting with, good places, bad places, good process. I am present, but not in a particular/decided place or room, just being together with colors, forms, narratives becoming things I could not imagine, no planning, just doing, following gut feelings, free in a way, but following the smell, the experience of the canvas. (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 12)*

On many occasions, as in the poetic reflection over, I would reach for my artist diary and try to write down what had just transpired with words, often in the form of poetry or stream of consciousness texts. This method of working is very much about letting go of control over one's own practice. In a way, it can be seen as a transgression towards myself as well as my agenda as an artist. Putting my own ideas and wants to the side, choosing to do what I sense in the imaginative dialogues, even when I do not agree with what is suggested by the other actants. It involves risks but also allow new discoveries to be made. I find that letting go in this way, trusting the dialogues with the materials in a serendipitous way, has transformed how I experience the creative process and made me more sensitive to other actants as well as making me more alert to myself and my own agency during the creative process.

*Imaginative dialogue is (where) a dance meeting between strangers (can) take place and (may) open (our) hearts to new possibilities and perspectives creating wrinkles of meaningfulness (Poetic reflection by author)*

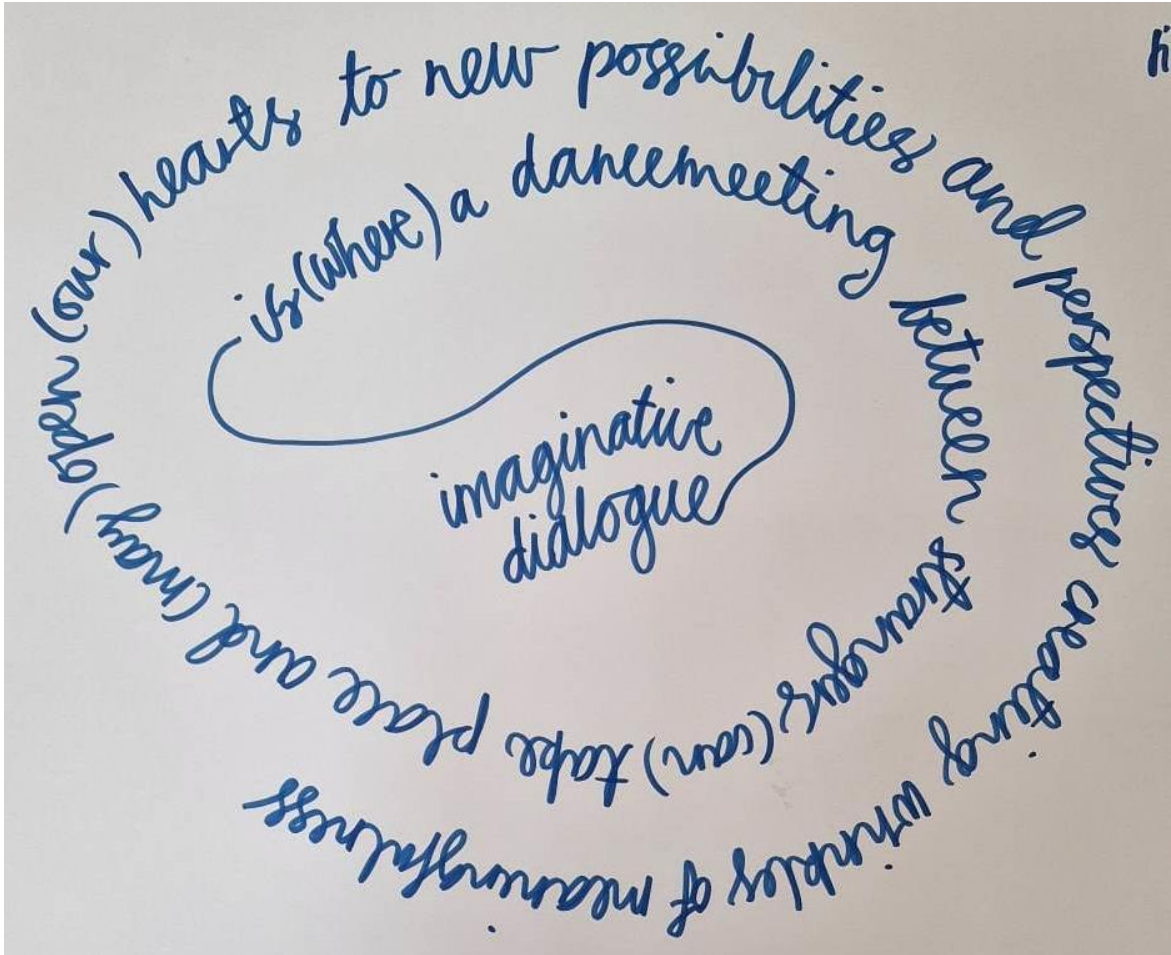


Figure 1: *Imaginative Dialogue*, 2022, by author.



## Analyzing the Artistic Process through Flow & Serendipity

In this chapter, I analyze three different cases from the creative process with the paintings. I will first focus on flow theory and what can happen when flow is introduced to the creative process. Then I will look at serendipity and what this concept offers and demands of the artist, before ending with an analysis of my interaction with imaginative dialogues as language.

### Case I: What happens when flow is applied to the creative process?

*there are many places / to enter / flow / / one flow is in listening / to the materials when painting / / one flow is / to re-read poetry / and I am back / / one flow is to / write creatively reflective / having open windows / to many different / flows at the same time / / writing with theory / doing art with theory / being in flow / in many different / rooms / at the same time / / flow is 14 sideviews simultaneously (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 68)*

I have during the research period developed routines helping me to enter flow, as mentioned in the previous chapter. They usually consist of preparing myself by settling and calming down as I enter my studio space. Entering the space is experienced as a departure from my every-day life, the doorway functions as a sort of transit port, and once inside I am more alert to the non-human actants as if was I in another reality. I get ready, as in a ritual, changing clothes, taking off my shoes in a slow and meditative manner as I approach the room mindfully. Opening up and listening to my gut feeling while getting ready, continuously in a state of listening and focus. It is as if I turn off my will, or turn on a radar of sorts to catch what the other actants want. In the poem over from my artist diary, I call this experience of state of mind *14 sideviews simultaneously* (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 68). This ‘tuning in/tuning out’ usually

takes some time, and if no dialogue appears, I start in the lower right corner of the canvas with a circle, and listen some more. Eventually, another shape or movement will want to appear and I will add it with my hand, moving my body, shifting the weight from side to side, as if in a dance losing myself to a rhythm. This ‘dance’ and total focus is how I experience the state of flow in my body. The process of this painting *You Make Me Happy in my Sadness Orange Oil Crayon on Peach Half Circles* (2023) (fig. 3) was a bit different from the others. I had given it away to a fellow student in the spring and when fall came, she had no longer use for it and returned it to me. I had to scrape off small pieces of metal and wood that she had glued onto the canvas for her project before I could start painting on it. In a way, it forced me to get to know this one and take care of it in a different manner than the other canvases. In the illustration on the next page (fig. 2), I have through a performative approach to the research material tried to illustrate how I experience flow and the interactive assemblages with non-human actants, trying to visualize the actants dialogues in the artistic process.

The curious thing about this painting process was that the materials opposed the usual painting of circles. I remember vividly a great resistance to my intentions that day. It ended up in a sort of compromise, adding half circles with peach colored paint. Why, I am not sure, but it was very important that the circles were half, and incomplete. Then there was a sense that the painting process was over, and not until a while later, was I led to strengthen the half circles with an orange oil crayon. This sense of something being done or needing to rest I experience in my emotions as a harmony of sorts; I just know that if I keep going with the painting I am transgressing on a boundary, taking more control over the process than as an equal within the assemblage. The sense I had to draw outlines with the oil crayon was one that I at first resisted, afraid that it would ruin the painting. However, transgressing on my own agency and letting the

non-human actants have agency in this case, resulted in emotions of joy and harmony. This



Figure 2: Illustration of the work with Flow.

resonates with the findings of Østern et. al. where they find that both researcher and materials may resist each other's agency (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 13). While sitting and taking in the whole canvas after the session was over, trying to document the process, several poems were created. The one under displaying the transformation of emotions in the affected researcher body during the state of flow.

*you make me happy / in my sadness / orange oil crayon / on peach half circles / takes time and effort to / enter / takes my breath away / uncertainties / doubt / fear / linger inside happiness / satisfaction is spiced / spiked / by orange / enhanced / by you / as I sit / and take / you in. (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 31)*

In re-reading this poem, I find traces of flow in the transformation of mood that occurred that day. I had spent time and effort to enter flow and when in, it took my breath away just being there. Maybe I was sad as I entered the studio, I do not recall, but the state of flow allowing the engagement with the materials and the de-centering of self seems to have affected my mood as Csikszentmihalyi points out as a trait of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p. 87-91). I also find the lines where fear and doubt linger inside happiness, as interesting traces of flow in the creative process. That such ‘opposite’ emotions can exist together, because of an orange oil crayon may be seen as a result of the state of flow expanding boundaries and enabling me to have *14 sideviews simultaneously* (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 68). The affected researcher body (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 10) is present in this poem, as well as in the poem under, highlighting the possibilities entangled assemblages with non-human actants give to create new temporary realities where meaning-making and new knowledge can be created.

*In my body is a surge of happy satisfaction when I engage in what is happening – happy for the orange oil crayon who took the painting to a new level, happy I got to be involved and assist in the process. Enjoying the result. It’s enough now, I can go home and wait for tomorrow.* (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 35)

This embodied experience of flow is situated in my gut and chest. I experience it as feelings of harmony or dis-harmony as I approach the materials with a suggestion. I have felt my way like this throughout the project, gently tiptoeing and listening in to what to do or not. Sometimes these urges have been a strong yes or no as in this case, (fig. 2) but sometimes a whisper is barely there. At times, I approach the canvas with a desire, and sometimes it is the materials that have a wish. I experience a kind of ebb and flow of agency within the assemblages of human and non-human actants. This communication may be understood as a multidimensional

language, a language of and through an artistic practice where flow may be seen as what ignites and fuels the fire.

During my artistic practice with flow and the imaginative dialogues there has been a constant longing or move towards a harmony and beauty. A beauty, not necessarily a culturally acknowledged beauty, but a clarity or agreement of when something is in harmony or not. This resonates with several of the traits Csikszentmihalyi identifies as flow, feelings of happiness, serenity, meaning, and focus (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989/2005, p. 87-91). It also reminds me of Jóhannesdóttir's text where beauty is added to this list. She finds that the creation of beauty



*Figure 3: You Make Me Happy in my Sadness Orange Oil Crayon on Peach Half Circles, 2023, by author.*

happens in the intertwining of subject and object and is a relational concept (Jóhannesdóttir,

2022a, p. 5). In my research, I find that the state of flow is a doorway to enter the creative process and assemblages with non-human actants. In such intertwinement, I experience beauty, harmony and feelings of happiness and satisfaction. In the process of engaging with flow, I have many times been reminded of how I used to play as a child, completely losing myself in play with friends in a forest creek for hours. This abandoning of oneself in order to enter into and create a new temporary reality with others reminds me of Csikszentmihalyi's research showing that with the help of our imagination we can be temporarily transformed into someone else than who we are during the state of flow. Flow expands and does not recognize our limitations, and gives us an experience of having discovered new ways of being, or as in my case, discovering a new way of being and dialoguing with matter in a painting practice. It is within this transformation of the self in flow that we sense harmony and pleasure and as Jóhannesdóttir suggests, beauty happens (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, pp.87-90; Jóhannesdóttir, 2022a, p. 5).



## Case II: What does serendipity require of the artist in a creative process?

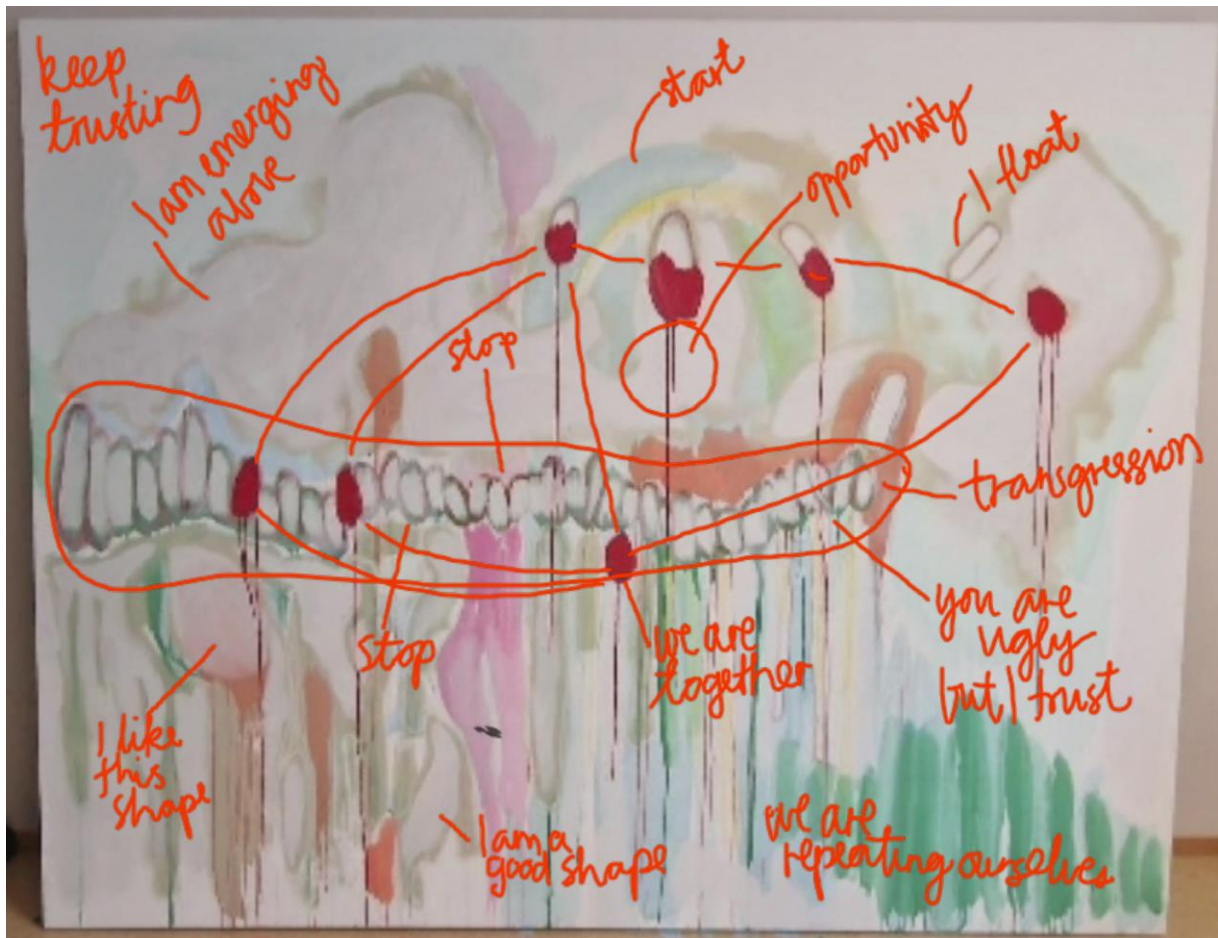


Figure 4: Illustration of the work with Serendipity.

In this picture (fig. 4) I have, in a similar manner as in Case I, tried to communicate visually how serendipity is experienced in the imaginative dialogues in a creative process. The painting, *Big Baby, There Are No Words to Translate With*, 2023 (fig. 6) is the largest canvas I have painted on, and stands about 200 x 300 cm. The size intimidated me at first, and stood empty for weeks covering a whole wall in my studio, before I dared approach it. The creative process started out with me painting a circle almost in the middle of the canvas and little by little, I engaged in a dialogue with the materials while blues and greens were added as well as more circles while I listened my way around the canvas trying to be mindful to what was wanting my attention. Then something surprising happened; little green ovals started growing repetitiously across the middle in a horizontal line. I remember thinking that they were ugly and that I did

not want them there, wondering how this was going to turn out, afraid it would ruin the painting. Nevertheless, I kept repeating them against my own wishes, giving non-human actants agency. Later, when I added small red ovals around on the canvas, the paint turned out to be very thin and started to run down towards the floor, which brought a kind panic to me, I was losing



*Figure 5: Detail from Big Baby, There Are No Words to Translate With, 2023, by author.*

control. When paint runs or drips, as the close up shows (fig. 5) forces a decision. I have to decide fast if I want to merely observe and let the red paint be, interact with it or try to clean it



up. Many times when this has happened I have responded with wanting to clean it up to erase the traces of what I at first find to be flaws and mishaps, but often I sense a reluctance from the other actants, which also happened in this case. Therefore, the paint was allowed to dry, as it was until later. When I approached it again and ended up adding colorful oil crayon lines to highlight the flaws, the running pain had in the meantime transformed into beautiful and valuable additions to the painting. I have experienced this many times in engaging with ‘flaws’ where I have ended up gaining new knowledge about surfaces and materials as well as seen the ‘flaws’ transform into something of beauty and value.

During my work with the railroad photos, printed on canvas-clad foam boards, I discovered that this material absorbs paint in ‘mysterious ways’, like nothing I have ever painted on. I would cover the whole canvas with yellow paint and the next day, the canvas had absorbed it all and the photo I had erased was visible again. Time spent experimenting and making mistakes taught me a lot about these materials through the process, but also about myself and the importance of having an attitude of curiosity, seeing mistakes as opportunities for possible new discoveries in the creative process (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 40). This transgressing on my own agency, allowing random occurrences to have agency in the process, can transform mistakes and accidents into something beautiful and meaningful, new possibilities and also lead to the discoveries of new expressions. This serendipitous approach to the creative process has required much flexibility, risk taking, openness to adventures, time and patience from me. Nevertheless, working with serendipity in this manner gives me a new way to approach the creative process in my artistic practice. It helps me to gain many different perspectives at the same time, as I curiously observe and gather information through my senses in a mindful manner. I find that the colors, forms and my own agenda is less important in my painting process now. It is the dialogues that occur inside of such constant and curious observations that is of most interest to

me now after engaging in this artistic research. Nevertheless, the paintings have during this project, become visualizations and representations of this new language, which in my body I experience as a calm and wide-eyed almost meditative state of mind.

*I think to me texture is important / texture and form / layering, hidden things / multiple layers / similar to the narratives / not dear / not easy to communicate / or understand / it's like I've discovered / my language to myself / but it's without words / and it takes a journey inwards / to hear and understand it / it is a felt language / a sensed one / and there are no words / to translate with / just a dance / between many / agents (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 58)*

With this poem, I have tried to set words to this felt language, this new language I experience in dialogues with non-human actants. During the process, I have also become aware of other ways that the communication happens. In this painting process (fig. 6), I started the dialogical painting process with making a big circle towards the middle. I do this to start the process. It is a kind of language within the assemblages, communicating that I am ready to start painting. I invite to a dialogue with this action, not knowing what will happen next. This method has developed over time and towards the end of this research, when the work with this painting started, it has become easier to trust that a process with serendipity will bring something meaningful and lead to valuable outcomes, as experience has nurtured my confidence over time. In the beginning, I was more unsure and hesitant; I wanted to have more control over the process and the outcomes. I wanted to make art that was meaningful and I would be proud of. During the project, this changed, and I have become ever more interested in the dialogues and so my focus has shifted towards finding meaning and value in the process, seeing the paintings as visual representations of what I am experiencing in the imaginative dialogues. This process

with serendipity has been very demanding at times. In this project I have explored what happens when I let go of control while at the same time stay involved with my senses in the creative process, trying to be alert to what is happening as I transgress on my own agency, doing what I sense other actants want instead of what I would prefer.

*[...] I start somewhere / that is allowed for me / with a color that is allowed / don't be afraid to kill you darlings / don't be afraid / move dance with me / slowly, hesitantly / slowly I make self-contained circles elongated / I look only at the crayon / I see you I follow you like a seal skin / I shift my weight from side to side / my feet are warm, standing in socks on the floor / contact, moved / justice, everyone will get theirs' / patterns, repeating, repeating – becomes a rhythm / then sound and movement enter the hand / more important than the form / repetitive movements / and a bubble is created / flow (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 87)*

In my work with this poem and auto ethnography, I have tried to embrace the chaos, the unknown, when writing out the affects the creative process with serendipity has made in me. I usually write immediately after a painting session, while still in flow, to connect with my affected body and just put down whatever comes to mind as I focus on the process just transpired. Using serendipity in the reflections has opened up new rooms and landscapes to me in this process. The paradox of *prepared unpreparedness* (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, pp. 32-34) has been a liberating concept that have been central in my project. Prepared unpreparedness has been an attitude of sorts to meet with the non-human actants in the imaginative dialogues, also when reflecting and writing. It is an attitude of curiosity, of playfulness and willingness to be flexible and in many ways similar to the innocent play, I experienced as a child. Writing stream-of-consciousness texts have been done in this

serendipitous manner, and seldom have I had to edit these texts. I have had to be very focused in multiple directions at the same time when applying this attitude, which has been challenging but also very fun. This method can maybe be understood as applying *the art of finding something one is not looking for* (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 4).



Figure 6: *Big Baby, There Are No Words To Translate With*, 2023, by author.

The process with this painting (fig. 6) is not done yet. I have started somewhere, I have danced with it and listened to the materials agency, nevertheless it is still in process, and I have no idea what it will become or if it will be finished anytime soon. That is one of the risks, but also the possibility for new discoveries, that is present when applying serendipity to the creative process. Another method I have used to activate serendipity is to keep my eyes on the brush in the

painting process and refuse to take in the whole canvas, as to give room for the random discoveries as well as allowing the materials more agency. I developed this method in the process, and it is expressed through one of the rules of engagement *Focus your eyes on the brush; do not take in the whole canvas*. It corresponds to serendipity theory by the forms being added randomly or ‘blindly’ (Chemi & Christoffersen, 2018, p. 49) and not planned, trusting the result in the end will make sense, in a way preparing to be unprepared, as well as having the skills to use what happens in the blind process. Another other rule of engagement that applies to serendipity is *Do not be afraid of making mistakes*. This rule is all about letting go of control and see what happens when other actants are given agency. Both of these guidelines involve risks and the unknown, and in that way they have enabled me to explore serendipity as a method in my artistic practice.

### Case III: In what ways can imaginative dialogues be a language in artistic practice?



Figure 7: Illustration of the work with Imaginative Dialogues.

*The roads of lights are vibrant, they speak of warm dialogue, near and intimate. They speak of community, of kindness, love and inclusion. They shine through the muddled colors and forms on the canvas, emerging and breaking through layers and layers of shadows of erased circles, remnants collected in the process of dialogue, the process of communication, of distance and togetherness. They are a part of a whole and at the same time, they stand out, shining through the chaos, the uncertainties, the risks, the random gathering, the loss of control. They are a map of their becoming's and at the same time, they are their own. They are what they are. Symbols of feelings and intuitions, intrusions in an artistic creation process of dialogue, experiences of flow, and serendipitous in*

*their becoming. Ready to meet the unknown, the unknowing listener as they are created into the world, more than symbols of something passed, they are the dialogues [...] (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 69)*

I have throughout this project contemplated how to approach the analysis of my findings while at the same time continue to allow non-human actants agency. The illustration on the previous page (fig. 7) is an attempt to approach the imaginative dialogues and illustrate how I experience the intertwining assemblages with non-human actants, visualizing how the actants speak and interact with me in the artistic process. In the poetic reflection above, I have tried to put into words how imaginative dialogues happen in the meeting between materials and artist researcher in painting and writing. During the work with the painting, *Imaginative Dialogues – a (self) portrait, 2022-23* (fig. 8) there were many stages. I started working with it in the spring, and occasionally it would claim my attention and wish for new layers. I started out as usual with circles, they were in a strong dark pink color, as I scattered them across the raw canvas. Then nothing. I felt that if I added more it would be a transgression on the other actants, so I refrained. And then I waited again. Until one day as I approached it in my studio, I sensed that more circles were needed. I started adding blue circles around the pink ones, listening and leaning into the dialogues, moving my body rhythmically. Then nothing. This ebb and flow dance continued for months, adding more paint, filling in the canvas with color and shapes. In October 2022, it came along to an exhibit, even though I knew it was not finished yet. After the exhibit, it rested until after the New Year before I was allowed to work with it again. Over several sessions and weeks, it transformed visually as it spoke to me about community and relationships; the imaginative dialogues as strong and vibrant as the colors on the canvas. These narratives were intuitive, a sort of embodied knowledge that I gained, not in words, pictures or memories, but in a different more sensed language, a sort of meditation where new knowledge

was transferred to me. This creation of new knowledge through the assemblages with non-human actants points to the interwoven connection and relationship between the artist and the materials (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 13) similar to the roads of lights uniting the circles on the canvas, crisscrossing the different layers in a complex imaginative dialogue.

*lightful / forms / forming / rules / demands; / connect us! / connect us! / hide the yellow  
/ brighten with / white / flow / connections / where is / the bridge / demanding / to / be  
heard (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 28)*

I find this poetic description of the agential forces of the materials very useful trying to understand both the ongoing dialogues and other sensory experiences of the process. In imaginative dialogues and the entanglement with the materials, it is difficult knowing who is leading or what is speaking or deciding in the process, I find it difficult to decipher whom or what has agency in the imaginative dialogue driven artistic process. Is it simply me, my subconscious, or my memories I access through flow or serendipity? Or can non-human materials have a voice in the process? The affected researcher-body might be a good starting point to try to understand this process, which reminds me of Østern et. al.'s description of artistic research where the intertwining of researcher and materials gives the possibility to engage the sensuous body with the materials, and in that way enable imaginative dialogues within assemblages of human and non-human actants (Østern et. al., 2021, p. 2).

I have often struggled with trying to present or describe sensory experiences with words and have created poems in the artist diary as a possible language to be able to bridge the gap. This struggle to find different and new languages to communicate knowledge gained through practice-led embodied research reminds me of Haseman's manifesto where he encourages that



new knowledge gained should be communicated through the language of a practice (Haseman, 2006, p. 4). This new way of expressing research findings is something I am exploring as well within imaginative dialogue assemblages, creating poetry and stream of consciousness texts while in flow and in dialogue with non-human actants. These texts as well as the paintings are not descriptions of a practice but are the practice (Haseman, 2006, p. 6). The painting (fig. 8) as well as the poems can in that way be seen as multidimensional utterances; their symbols and forms, layers of color, patterns and rhythms are both the knowledge gained as well as representations of research findings, communicating both process and findings as well as just being (Haseman, 2006, p. 7).

*becoming / things I could not / imagine / no planning / only doing / following / gut feeling / free / in a way / but following / the smell / around / the experience / on the canvas.* (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 12)

*when I paint / I erase / as I erase / I unearth / situations / relations / connections / memories / flood to the / surface / intuition emerges / creating / harmony / peace / flow / joy.* (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 14)

The reflections over may give insight to the process with imaginative dialogues. When transgressing on my own agency I have opened up for other actants to lead and decide through the dialogue what the paintings would become. These are a sort of multidimensional languages, needed to communicate embodied experiences I find no words to say. In both Haseman and Østern I find similar wants where they also point out the need for new languages; languages beyond the verbal or written word that the relationship between the researcher and the research material creates and opens up for. Other modes of language, through lived and sensed research,

are central aspects of my artistic research, having aesthetic and artistic qualities while generating embodied experiences and leading to new knowledge. I find that this kind of research has touched me as an artist-researcher in transformative ways (Østern, 2017, p. 11). Illeris' research points in the same direction, that the closeness between art and the students' bodies, when there is an intertwining or assemblages of sorts of human and non-human actants, can be a vessel for a transformation in the student (Illeris, 2016). In my experience, it is very much a relational experience to paint, listening to the materials, and what wills and what artistic research offers, has really opened up the playing field for me to focus on, and engage with the research phenomenon of imaginative dialogues. I have tried to sense and listen my way in my artistic practice, alert to the agency of the materials and letting my actions be what I sense wants to become, formulated in a new language, a sensory language, intuitive as the process without knowing if anyone else will be able to understand it.

*to deepen ones / body to express / something / not said / / no words can / room these  
/ experiences / felt / / no thought touch / ever the outskirts / of the rooms / discovered  
/ / still I try, dare to come / back to this space filled / with wonder & silence / open my  
eyes (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 39)*



Figure 8: *Imaginative Dialogues – a (self) portrait*, 2022-23, by author.

I find the painting *Imaginative Dialogues – a (self) portrait*, (fig. 8) is representative of the process and experiences I have had in this project exploring artistic practice with imaginative dialogues in many ways. The running paint and the yellow roads of light connect the different actants on the canvas, kindred to how the imaginative dialogues have united human and non-human actants throughout the project. It shows visually the complex communication within this language of aesthesis with its many layers and connections between the different actants, circles and shapes, making itself knowable and experience-able.

## **I begin with an idea, and then it becomes something else.**

On the cover of my artist diary there is an illustration with a quote said to be of Pablo Picasso, *I begin with an idea, and then it becomes something else*. I am confident many artists as well as researchers can agree with this experience; a planned creative or academic endeavor that takes on a life of its own – willing something other than what the artist or researcher set out to do. What is this will and agency, then? Agency is something both human and non-human actants have according to Bennett (Bennett, 2010). In my research, I explore agency in assemblages within imaginative dialogues in an artistic practice. I find that serendipity and flow function as doorways to engage in a discourse with non-human actants and give new perspectives to the possibilities and challenges engaging in imaginative dialogues may present. I find in my artistic research that engaging in imaginative dialogues open up for new discoveries, new ways of approaching the creative process with the possibility of gaining new knowledge as well as creating new art that may revitalize an artistic practice. This also has its challenges, as giving up control of the creative process may be experienced as a transgression upon the self, allowing non-human actants the agency to change the course of the process as well as the art created. Applying serendipity to the creative process is unpredictable and the risk of failure is always present, as it welcomes the unplanned and the unexpected. In my research, I show that this challenging of norms, habits and traditions may also transform the creative process and enable creation of a new language, new knowledge and new artistic expressions through such transgressions.

It has proven to be an adventurous exploration to engage with non-human actants. As I chose to entangle myself with the materials in my studio space during this research, I chose to enter assemblages and give away control and agency to non-human actants. They were always there, but I had not noticed them, let alone dialogued with them before. Through the concepts of flow

and serendipity, I found theory and created methods to enter into imaginative dialogues and assemblages with the materials where new and temporary realities were created. New rooms for the imaginative dialogues to unfold and art become. It has been an embodied, sensuous and emotional quest, exploring artistic practice through imaginative dialogues. I have changed in this process as I have explored new languages, new ways of thinking and approaching the creative process as well as developed *14 sideviews simultaneously*. Flow theory calls this transformational experience flow. Serendipity calls it serendipity. Both theories offer perspectives and methods on how to facilitate this *aesthesis* processes. Both demand a letting go of control and an abandonment of self to enter.

Exploring imaginative dialogues in my artistic practice has brought me much happiness, confidence as an artist, and challenged me as a person to let go of control and trust the creative process and my own intuition when opening up for non-human actants in the artistic practice. The poetic reflection under brings attention to this entanglement with the agency of matter,

*-when things calm down you are there, you wait for me to engage with you, listen to you, walk with you – vibrancy of thought, matter, movement, inspiration, muse, spirit. None fit you, you transcend it all, maybe life, breath, consciousness itself, maybe what connects us, creates fellowship, community, whatever it is that builds longing in us for deeper, higher, closer, further, abandoning self and our agendas – freedom might be one of your names. Maybe you are like the wind, when I try to see you, name you, categorize you, you are not in my hands any longer, you are gone with no trace, spirit but not spirit, breath but not, in everything but nowhere- who am I to try to name you, try to harness you, touch you, meet with you. What is this power, this strength, this lifesource I am touching? (Poetic reflection from Artist Diary, p. 65)*

The poetic reflection over, emphasize the journey I have had with the non-human actants as well as the questions that remain unanswered. Looking back to when I had an experience of meeting something other-than-me more than a year ago as I started to paint over old railway photos. I remember being surprised, challenged and excited. I wanted to gain more knowledge about the phenomenon of imaginative dialogues but have ended up gaining more knowledge about life and what is at work in an artistic practice, getting to play like a child again, free from the constraints of the logic permeating adulthood, a sort of return to innocence through methods of flow and serendipity. In the process, I have gained new knowledge about art and its ability to act as a multidimensional language where the world can make itself known to us. I have experienced in my body and show in my research on the imaginative dialogues in artistic practice, that we can know and sense the world in new ways through the process of aesthesis, this transformative process where meetings with art can create temporary new realities where new knowledge is created and a transformation of the self happens.

*Art is / language / a language / that can be used / to describe existence / like no other  
[...] (Personal communication, Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir, 2022, September 19, Iceland)*

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