

The
Asymptotes



A Field Guide

Ena Naito

Exploration of a Hydro-logic Process
Towards a Multimodal Creative Nonfiction

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This paper interweaves experimental writings, artworks, images and reflective notes (in italicised passages). Unless otherwise stated, all images and works are of the author's own.

**Exploration of a Hydro-logic Process
Towards a Multimodal Creative Nonfiction**

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ABSTRACT

To think hydro-logically is to acknowledge that we are all bodies of water. We carry nutrients and toxins; leak and absorb; seek confluence. Each of us, we carry stories of other bodies of water. Our permeable bodies are inextricably caught up in the currents of other bodies, and therefore are never fully able to control the elements that course through us.

Taking a cue from feminist new materialism, this thesis seeks to fill the gap between discourse and practice by exploring how the figuration of the hydro-logic can shift from a conceptual way of thinking into a way of creative *doing*. The shift is specifically examined through the practice of experimental book-writing, enacted as a highly

reflective and reflexive form of research. Interweaving theory, practice and poesis, this thesis investigates an emerging site of how a book *performs* research, while simultaneously contributing to the wider scholarship situated around practice-based research. This involves locating possible methodologies and creative modes of documentation and reflection, as well as identifying, analysing and evaluating key qualities and implications of the hydro-logic process.

This quest unfolds in several fluidified phases, becoming more purposeful as it builds towards a creation of a multimodal creative nonfiction book titled, *The Asymptotes*. Each phase of the journey is informed by the hydro-logic – from

literature research and gathering of materials, to the making of the artefact and its interpersonal evaluation. Reciprocally, the understanding of the hydro-logic is continually developed in response to the empirical, theoretical and reflective findings. Throughout such hydro-logical process, experimental writing becomes both a method of research inquiry and a research artefact, whose final form as a multimodal book embodies the traces, intensities, and qualities of the process.

This study proposes a design approach that resists the linearity of traditional research methods and academic obsession with categorisation. To practice hydro-logically is to embody the multi-layered and living nature of a creative practice,

with critical attention to the eroding, transporting, depositing, and cross-fertilisation of various forms of knowledge. The key findings from this research are used to offer an emerging approach for the hydro-logic process, as well as to engender productive methods for mapping-in-movement to navigate through induced uncertainties. In so doing, this work demonstrates how a fluidly leaking, absorbing, and seething form of research can be performed whilst keeping sight of the academic and creative research focus.

Keywords

book, experimental writing, hydro-logic, transdisciplinary, bodies of water, experimental design

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PREFACE

I have always sought for a sense of belonging. Having an academic background in Fine Arts and now a student of Design, I had constantly been under the social, institutional, and professional pressures to create ‘rigorous’ works of art or design that belong within the disciplinary framework. Yet strongly drawn towards the borderline phenomena between design practice, academic theory, and poesis, I never felt like I truly *belonged* in any of the established contexts.

The Experimental Design course that I took in 2021 had me question my own creative identity. With an extremely open brief and an encouraged exploratory approach, I was forced to reckon with my inner tensions – on one hand, the desperate need to belong and be accepted as a ‘Designer’; and on the other, a longing to break free. I can still recall the intensity of those six weeks – fear, panic, sleepless nights and overwhelming uncertainties – as if the doubts that I had suppressed were suddenly overflowing. I remember that most of those weeks were spent on making and unmaking, thinking and silencing, risking and escaping, rather than on producing a work. Most of the time was devoured by questioning: What is my creative practice, really?

In this period of utter confusion, I resorted to writing. Rewriting my own brief; writing

reflections on bodily experiments; poetic texts which synthesised academic texts together; pages filled to the brim with existential questions; journaling; transcribing conversations; testing out different voices. Those words came first; the words made an audio piece; the audio piece created a short film; and then the film transformed into an interactive work.¹ Those snippets of writings became *materials* to compose a work of design. The words *designed* the work.

Although I had always been drawn to the musicality of language, until then, I had never thought that creative writing could be a design practice. This exploratory space of Experimental Design revealed an unimagined fragment of who I am. A tiny piece, and still featherlight, yet it was a truly valuable juncture that continued to shape my creative identity.

Since then, I have been gingerly probing this piece of ‘me’ through different courses and briefs – for instance, using experimental writing to create a woven textiles collection, functional product design, or speculative storytelling. During this time, I have also had the opportunity to partake in teaching multiple BA and MA Design courses. In facilitating workshops, seminars and discussions, I have been using writing as a creative method to encourage the students to propel their understanding of (often abstract) topics. From collaborative writing exercises of embodied responses to the oceanic tidal patterns, to writing ‘recipes’ in order to understand what ‘togetherness’ means in design, writing has encouraged the students to find their own approaches to the theme, while being able to synthesise academic discourses into their project developments.

Two years after I had meandered through the Experimental Design course as a student and having taught six courses during those years, I was now on the teaching side of Experimental Design. This has posed new challenges that I had not considered as a student: namely, how does one *teach* Experimental Design? *Can* there be a framework for Experimental Design? Or would framing make its exploratory quality inherently futile?

In trying to find resources for the students and designing workshops, I found

¹ the work was exhibited at Dutch Design Week 2021, see Appendix A

that there is a lack of comprehensive approach (or a consensus) to what exactly Experimental Design is. Moreover, as the course is designed for each student to deeply examine and challenge their own individual practices and possibilities, there was difficulty in pre-planning the course. Notably, how can we as educators prevent directing the students towards a certain ‘expectation’ or a fixed outcome, yet still *guide* the students within this academic course? While an exhaustive framework of Experimental Design does not exist – or perhaps, *cannot* exist – there can be an investigation of what its anatomy *could* look like, from which educational structures and productive exercises could emerge.

I am using the opportunity of my master’s thesis to utilise my own design process as an experimental trial to examine how writing can push one’s exploratory practice. Although this thesis is not focused on designing a pedagogical method, the outcome of this exploration is something that I would like to take into consideration for my subsequent teaching, study and research opportunities.

Both as a student of Contemporary Design and by guiding other designers through teaching, I have seen and experienced numerous approaches to design. Yet defining my own identity as a designer is a difficult task, and my approach is still perpetually evolving. The way I understand design is not as a set of criteria, but instead as a transitional *space* - a brimming space between seemingly separated bodies of knowledge. Whether it is the synthesis between chemistry and performance, human anatomy and motion graphics, molecular physics and storytelling, or industrial design and creative writing, design gives me the permission to ‘trespass’ different fields of knowledge, while making them tangible to a wider public. Through these ‘trespassings’, I absorb from a breadth of sources - from science papers, lab reports, art history, environmental articles, lectures on human anatomy, and works of literature, to client interviews and political speeches. And by synthesising these pieces together to engender new ways of accessing the world, I approach design like an alchemist.

The Contemporary Design Programme – which this thesis is affiliated with – is a space for students to “discover and advance their individual creative processes” and to “display a strong artistic vision and take responsibility, argument and stand behind

their work as a designer”.² Therefore, this research is not an exercise of ‘proving’ what I already know, but instead is approached as an opportunity to delve deeper into what design *can* be through a quest that I had always feared to step my foot into. My previous experiences have taught me how emotionally demanding it could be to fumble my way through uncertainties. Yet never before I have felt this supported by the people around me, and I feel confident that this would be the time to test the waters – to seek for my own place of belonging.

This moment has never felt so right.

2 Aalto University, n.d

PROLOGUE

A Field Guide

With a field guide, you can experience the landscape with increased knowledge of what you are immersed in. It provides you with information on species or landscape features in the wild, such as where a certain plant can be found, its key identifiers, how it has evolved, how it behaves, and how it is related to others. Similarly, this paper acts as a field guide of the journey to *The Asymptotes* – a multimodal creative nonfiction book. It maps the experimental approach, including theoretical research, gathering of materials, exploration of creative methods and evaluation, while critically considering the implications of this research. This paper also analyses recorded documentations, observations, findings, and reflections of the practitioner’s journey.

A field guide does not give you precise instructions on how to navigate the terrain, and likewise, the purpose of this paper is neither to provide a comprehensive analysis of ‘how to read’ *The Asymptotes* as a finished object, nor is it to justify every stylistic choice of the making. Rather, it serves as a contextualising document of the process, which embeds this creative endeavour into the wider practice-based academic discourse.

A field guide will also radically shift the explorer’s experience of the landscape. Although it does not give you instructions, a field guide categorises and rationalises, suggests what

to look for. Once you pull out a field guide, you suddenly know more about what you are observing, and become more aware of the elements in the landscape that you were unaware of before.

But perhaps you want to listen to the songs of the birds without knowing what colours their feathers are. Perhaps you want to let your body *experience* the climb up that hill without knowing its geological history. Maybe you are seeking for that rawness of the immersive experience, uncontaminated by this excess knowledge.

A landscape can also be experienced without a field guide.

This paper will inevitably shape your experience of reading *The Asymptotes* as opposed to without it. It would help makes sense of the book differently, through a ‘behind-the-scenes’ look into the examination of the process and the context by which it was made.

But perhaps, you want to experience the book without having been told what to look for.

When and how to read this Field Guide is up to you.

INTRODUCTION

Mapping the Terrain

Foundations of Research

The shift from the Cartesian illusion of the solid, rational and autonomous body, towards the ‘leaky’ body has been proposed by a number of feminist theorists, such as Karen Barad, Adrienne Rich and Stacy Alaimo. Built upon these preceding thinkers, feminist scholar Astrida Neimanis calls to “reimagin[e] oneself as a ‘body of water’”, not only because we are “living [our] “embodiment[s] as watery”, but also because our existence as bodies of water is a “biological fact”.¹ Using the logics of our watery embodiments – or ‘*hydro-logics*’ – Neimanis attests to the intertwining, living and responsive nature of our beings. Along with the growing attention on new materialism in recent years, ‘Bodies of Water’ as a figuration has been increasingly examined by scholars as a way to generate aqueous ‘imaginaries’ – or hydro-logic discourses – on the relational fluidity across ecological, political, social, cultural, economic, and colonial divisions.²

Taking a cue from hydro-logical scholars, this thesis seeks to fill the gap between discourse and practice, by exploring how the logics of water can shift from a conceptual

1 Neimanis, 2013: 24

2 Neimanis, 2017

way of thinking into a way of creative *doing*. The shift is specifically examined through the practice of experimental book-writing, enacted as a highly reflective and reflexive form of research.

In this investigation, book-writing is both a method of research inquiry and a creative artefact. Therefore, it is concerned with how book-as-*process* can generate a way of practicing design, evidenced by the analysis of the process and the resulting book itself. In academia, books are primarily examined as resulting artefacts of writing practices, and book-as-*process* is rarely debated or studied in its own right. In a highly established discipline of literary studies, the focus of research often lies in analysing the stylistic choices of language. Turning towards artists’ books, we find that they are often concerned with the ongoing ontological debates on book-as-concept which aim to destabilise the traditional form and function of the book. This thesis offers another approach by burrowing into how a book *performs* research, while simultaneously contributing to the wider scholarship situated around practice-based research that interweaves theory, practice and poesis.

The sources I draw from are wide-ranging – including, but not limited to, design research, literature, environmental humanities, phenomenology, ethnography, visual arts, and pedagogy. In order to operate within an emerging field where frameworks and theories are not yet firmly established, the groundwork based on multidisciplinary sources seeks to contextualise ‘book-as-process’ within existing academic practices. Yet to prevent the dilution of research that often arises when handling wide-spread areas of knowledge, I will identify and operate within *particular* relevant intersections across domains. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the expanded field of design through a generative cross-fertilisation of transdisciplinary research.

The inquiry has relevance in the face of contemporary research, with the increasing need for communication and collaboration across traditionally separated disciplines, as well as for tackling the still-prevailing segregation between the institutionalised academia and the wider public. This endeavour towards an artefact, which embodies the hydro-logic research process in a familiar ‘book’ manner, renders the knowledge accessible to scholars outside of design, and further to those beyond academia. In addition, this research

permits an experimental space for the practitioner – an expanse in which I am able to inquire into research which involves the risk of getting lost, of self-doubt, of discomforting uncertainty, of struggles and of frictions.

Framing of Study

The creative endeavour is constantly under revision, and is progressively amended through re-contextualisation, analysis, and reflection. Thus, it is my intention that the process and the outcome change as a result of (sometimes unexpected) encounters with various bodies of knowledge.

This study is guided by research questions, which will be developed and evolves throughout the design process. Firstly:

By exploring experimental design through writing as a material and a process, how can the figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ shift from a way of thinking into a way of hydro-logical *doing*?

In addition to the initial question above, a more specified approach will be established:

How does the hydro-logics inform and shape the book-as-*process*? How can multimodal nonfiction book-writing perform research as an emerging site of knowledge production?

In this context, book-as-*process* indicates that the focus of this study is *not* on evaluating how effective the aesthetic and linguistic elements of the artefact are in conveying a fixed ‘message’ or an ‘intention’ to the readers. Similarly, it is less concerned with the tactile making or the production process of the book-as-object (i.e. paper-making, printing, binding). Instead, the experimental creative journey is the main subject of reflection, as I focus on how book-writing shapes the design process. Nevertheless, rather than a fundamental disinterest in the final artefact, the outcome is examined as a *knowing* artefact which embodies the hydro-logic process.

It is also worth emphasising that in existing research or otherwise, what exactly the hydro-logic process would mean in design practice has not been previously established. Therefore, this thesis becomes more purposeful as it builds into a pilot case study, through which it proposes a shift in hydro-logics from figuration to practice. This involves locating possible methodologies, creative modes of documentation and reflection, as well as identifying, analysing and evaluating key characteristics and implications of the process. Given the scope of this thesis, I do not intend to establish a ubiquitous framework of the hydro-logic, nor is it implied that this study is exhaustive or fully validated. On the contrary, I recognise (and take advantage of) the fact that it is at an exploratory stage, which encourages critical experimentation, probing, detours, sculpting, and questioning, and opens up possibilities to be developed further by future researchers and practitioners.

This research locates itself within the space of experimental design. While the term, ‘experimental’ has widely been used in the context of creative studies, what exactly ‘experimental’ denotes seems to resist a unified understanding. For instance, Chives and Graves-Smith define ‘experimental art’ as an “*imprecise term* [...] concerned with exploring new ideas or technology” (added emphasis).³ Similarly, Julia Valle-Noronha notes in her doctoral dissertation that ‘experimental fashion’ is a “term that lacks a clear academic definition”.⁴ In one of the few books fully dedicated to experimental design, Armin Lindauer and Brenda Müller specify that “it uses a test setup similar to a scientific experiment, and test series as an instrument and a method”.⁵ Simultaneously, some practitioners approach the notion of ‘experimental’ as ‘try-outs’ to expand beyond the rigidity of knowledge fields. Valle-Noronha explains that experimental works “do not necessarily lead to a finalised outcome” and that it is “tightly bound to the idea of experience, ‘as opposed to authority of conjecture’”.⁶ She further proposes iterative experiments that seek to explore clothes as active agents, by interweaving theoretical research and empirical practice. I align my understanding of experimental design with

3 Chives and Graves-Smith, 2015: 222

4 Valle-Noronha, 2019: 19

5 Lindauer and Müller, 2015: 16

6 Valle-Noronha, 2015: 19

such exploratory approach, in which the active process of “giving voice to different entities that act in the phenomenon”⁷ becomes the subject of scrutiny.

Perhaps the crux of experimental design *is* the very fact that it seems not to have reached a consensus in the creative fields. In other words, if experimental design *does* become institutionalised, rigidly defined or formulaic, can it still be considered as being experimental? With this paradox in mind, this thesis will not attempt to concretely define what ‘experimental design’ is, but rather, *use* this exploratory space that actively permits leaky margins of uncertainties and unknowability, without being tied to a fixed ideology or a premeditated solution. Thus, although there will be a ‘finalised outcome’ for this thesis (as the artefact), its contents are not rigidly predetermined from the outset of this research.

Structure of Thesis

This thesis is organised into eight chapters.

Chapter One provides an overview of the formation of research questions and builds an initial understanding of the hydro-logic process, by positioning it within existing theories and initial empirical experimentations. It begins by outlining the key feminist new materialist conceptual ideologies of the ‘hydro-logics’, especially grounded upon Astrida Neimanis’ figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’. It then briefly explores how this figuration could shift from an intellectual ‘reimagining’ into a dynamic mode of practicing by specifically identifying several key essences of the hydro-logics according to literature. These key findings are recontextualised within the design discourse through existing conceptual frameworks of practice-based and phenomenological research. I then critically examine a/r/tography as an example of phenomenological practice-based research that is similarly grounded upon a theoretical figuration. Accordingly, the theoretical discourse from new materialism, hydrology, and design research are synthesised to build a loose initial framework for the hydro-logic process, which forms the basis for the subsequent research direction. In the latter part of

⁷ *ibid.*: 19

this chapter, I introduce writing as a design material *and* as a way of witnessing explorations unfold, both through literature and practical writing experiments. Through these investigations, the scope of research is narrowed from examining the designerly materiality and process of writing, to that of *book-writing*. The chapter concludes by bringing forth the issue of the solitary nature of writing done in this chapter and urges a need for the practitioner to extend beyond a tightly closed system.

Chapter Two responds to the issue raised in the previous chapter by attempting to induce a heightened external influence. Specifically, this chapter discusses the research trip during two intensive weeks in May 2022 in England. Here, the go-along method, which is traditionally used as an ethnographic research tool, is implemented within the design research practice. I discuss the values and constraints of the go-along method detailed in contemporary ethnographic literature, followed by descriptive analyses of the method in practice in Oxford and Scarborough. I argue how the inherently ‘living’ nature of the go-along method is fitting to the hydro-logic process, by reflecting on my own experience as an ‘immersed’ and highly responsive researcher. As the go-along method was combined with other methods of research and documentation during the research trip, these modes are also briefly discussed. This chapter concludes by building upon aspects of the hydro-logic process established in Chapter One through a more practical perspective. Through these findings, the scope is further delimited to a particular focus on *multimodal* book-writing.

Chapter Three supports the previous delimitation of the thesis scope through the theoretical contextualisation of multimodal books. Firstly, I address the current state of books within design, and identify the lack of book-as-process examined in its own right within design discourses. The subsequent section identifies relevant literature in framing the direction of this thesis, including debates on ‘bookness’ in artists’ books and image-text theories in children’s picture books. Accordingly, a review of publications from literature, visual arts, and pedagogy converge in an attempt to fill the gap in the underdevelopment of discussions on how book performs research within design. I then link the theories and research to the hydro-logic process by demonstrating how the process of multimodal book-writing stresses the need for living, responsive and non-linear modes of practicing.

Chapter Four concentrates on the empirical practice of book-writing towards the artefact. It details how the research from the previous three chapters are synthesised and reinterpreted through the process of experimental writing. This chapter follows the journey of testing ideas, questions, struggles, confusions, and frictions in practicing the hydro-logic process. Extracts from the documented personal reflections are interwoven throughout, providing a raw account of the practitioner's mind, which are used to identify key findings of the hydro-logical book-writing process. Subsequently, I explicate several unique methods that have originated in practice – such as 'Blurb-ing' and 'Book cover-ing' – and analyse them in the light of the hydro-logic. I argue that these methods act both to advance *and* to document the process, which objectively highlight the winding evolution towards the artefact. Finally, I summarise how a highly living and embodied hydro-logic mode of practicing has empirically unfolded in this chapter.

Chapter Five continues to follow the book-as-process towards the artefact by specifically focusing on the external input by its readers. The chapter briefly outlines the primary revision of the manuscript by an editor, before shifting its focus to the process of reader evaluation. I contextualise the challenges in producing a productive evaluation method for this book, as well as indicate what I wish to gain from this evaluation stage. I then propose a 'Book Review' approach as a constructive evaluation method for this thesis, which is followed by a specification of how the method was implemented in this research and the data obtained. These data are analysed in sequence, followed by a discussion of the key thematic findings. The corresponding findings are used to further edit the book, as well as to discuss what the manuscript *knows* about the hydro-logic process that could not be unveiled through the writing process itself. Subsequently, the limitations and considerations of the 'Book Review' method are identified and examined. This chapter ends by positioning the 'Book Review' within the hydro-logic process.

Chapter Six is a short segment which illustrates the production process of the resulting book, *The Asymptotes*.

Chapter Seven is dedicated to building an approach of the hydro-logic process by returning to the research questions. Using the accumulated research and findings of practicing book-as-process, I identify five main renderings of the hydro-logics, which are presented as a proposal rather than an established design framework. Here, the significance of mapping the practitioner's creative movement is also discussed. I then address the larger thematic considerations, challenges and implications that arise when specifically considering *The Asymptotes* as a design artefact. It discusses how *The Asymptotes* is both reflective and reflexive of the design process, inextricably becoming an embodiment of the hydro-logic practice. I conclude this chapter by addressing the considerations and limitations of this endeavour which require further investigation, together with opportunities and ideas for future research.

Chapter Eight, the concluding chapter, summarises the hydro-logic practice in the context of book-as-process, and highlights the contribution of this research to the design discourse and communities beyond.

Chapter One

SOURCE

Examining the Hydro-logics

Bodies of Water

In 1504, Leonardo da Vinci draws a map of river Arno, illustrating how water flows from mountains into rivulets, joining into rivers and ending up in the sea. Two years later, he draws the human arm, portraying how the branches of veins and arteries come together to flow towards the heart. When put side by side, the two drawings look extraordinarily similar.¹

It is said that da Vinci often used one system to fathom the workings of the other, as he had done by examining the river to understand anatomical systems.² This research began with a sheer curiosity: “*what if* hydrology could be used to understand and develop my exploratory design process? What kind of spaces would it afford?”

Throughout history, human beings have endeavoured to make sense of water – a mysterious substance that seemed to construct much of weather phenomena, yet also an

1 Author interview with Simblet, 2022

2 *ibid.*

integral source of life and civilisation. In China, evidence of the cyclic concept of water dates back to as early as 900 BCE.³ In the West, numerous attempts have been made to uncover the geological operation of water, although the cyclic theories did not develop until the seventeenth century.⁴ The foundation of ‘the’ hydrological cycle as we know now is said to have been established by Robert E. Horton: “A simple basic fact involved in the hydrologic cycle”, Horton had asserted, is “rainfall = evaporation + runoff”.⁵ Through such mathematical simplification, he sought to establish a disciplinary claim to water by rendering hydrology a “pure science”.⁶ This “basic fact” had spread across waters and was operating globally by the late twentieth century.⁷

Grounded upon this canon of hydrology, we (the contemporary Western society) represent and understand the hydrological cycle as the circulation of the fundamental unit H₂O – an abstract, isomorphic entity that is universal, coherent, calculable, deterritorialised and rendered timeless as a “resource” to be “managed”.^{8,9} Indeed, water has now become “legible”,¹⁰ circulating predominantly in diagrammatic forms in popular discourse, appearing in school textbooks, posters, and widely on the Internet.¹¹ With streamlined images and familiar landscape features, these simplified blueprints can be easily read, assimilated and appropriated by the public beyond the hydrological sciences.

However, such taxonomic representation of water as a constant cycle that “proceeds endlessly in the presence or absence of human activity”,¹² misrepresents the reality of watery flows, which fluctuate across multiple geotemporal scales, qualities and modalities. While the planetary hydrological cycle *is* a closed system as Earth will neither gain

3 Nace, 2009: 15

4 Goudie, 2000: 256 quoted in Linton, 2008: 631

5 Horton, 1931: 190, quoted in Linton, 2008: 635

6 Linton, 2008: 634 - 635

7 *ibid.*: 635

8 Linton, 2010: 14

9 Linton, 2014: 111

10 Linton, 2008: 636

11 Linton, 2014: 112

12 Maidment, 1993 quoted in Linton, 2014: 112

nor lose the water it possesses,¹³ and water *does* return and repeat, it is always *different* every time it reappears, redistributing itself across various locations in diverse forms.¹⁴ Therefore, although the hydrological cycle encompasses all waters, the choreography of each revolution is vastly unique.

Feminist new materialist scholar Astrida Neimanis develops such hydrological notion into a more embodied, intimate one. “When I drink a glass of water, where does it go?”¹⁵ she asks in the introduction to her book, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017). This seemingly simple question of such a banal action suddenly plunges us into a complex entanglement of relationalities: the glass of water we drink in the morning gets absorbed by our bloodstreams, circulates, becomes excreted as sweat, moisture in our breaths, urine, breast milk. Perhaps this breast milk is fed to a nursing infant which then circulates within his or her body. Eventually, the water drains out from the internal bodily system, into drainage pipes, river bodies, ocean bodies, which enter algae bodies, which get ingested by fish bodies. Some of the ocean bodies evaporate into the air, condensing and raining down on other bodies and nourishing the crops that our bodies consume. Thinking through water initiates a relentless expansion of the body, which makes the dominant Western metaphysical understanding of the body as individualised, discrete and sovereign, inherently futile.

Moreover, as water constitutes roughly seventy per cent of human bodies, Neimanis stresses that watery embodiment is neither thought experiment nor speculative fiction.¹⁶ The biological fact that our “cells [are] inflated by water” and “metabolic functions mediated in aqueous solution”¹⁷ – renders this notion a physical *materialisation* rather than a mere metaphor. While Neimanis assembles concepts of preceding feminist scholars such as Karen Barad’s ‘Intra-action’ and Stacy Alaimo’s ‘transcorporality’, the figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ – built upon anatomical logics combined with the banality of this aqueous material existence – makes this figuration a uniquely accessible, grounded, and *embodied* one.

13 Neimanis, 2013: 31

14 Neimanis, 2012: 8

15 Neimanis, 2017: 24

16 *ibid.*: 30

17 Suzuki, 2003: 179 quoted in Neimanis, 2012: 96

hydro|logics

“To drink a glass of water is to ingest the bodies that haunt that water.”¹⁸

~ Astrida Neimanis

Recognising ourselves as bodies of water, then, shifts our understanding of the body to an open-ended assemblage that is perpetually contaminated and contaminating. Such way of thinking invites us to recognise the body as being permeable, with the borders constantly being breached and renegotiated, seeking confluence, spilling and absorbing. We leak – exhaling, sweating, urinating, menstruating, ejaculating, weeping, perspiring, lactating, shedding, excreting. And we absorb – drinking, inhaling, ingesting. Our bodies are inextricably caught up in the currents of other bodies, and therefore are never fully able to control the elements that course through us.¹⁹ What once became part of our bodies, and what our bodies changed the meaning of, still expands beyond the ‘containers’ of our skins, as much as a river flows into an ocean. We cannot exist without leaking or absorbing.

Yet a body is not simply fluid – we resist total dissolution *as bodies*. Neimanis asserts that despite the watery embodiments, we do not all flow into a singular unintelligible puddle, but instead are highly shaped by the speeds, pathways, and materialities of specific watery flows.²⁰ The journey of water is never frictionless, and its meaning transforms across various membranes. These “sites of resistance and opposition” render bodies “viscous”²¹ – retaining their inherent abilities to leak and absorb without losing integrity as individuals. Accordingly, bodies are never neutral cartographies, making us recall how the subjective ‘I’ is situated in relation to other currents.²²

Such hydro-logic, therefore, makes space for changeability, uncertainty, flow and flux

18 Neimanis, 2012: 96

19 Neimanis, 2017

20 Neimanis, 2013: 31

21 Tuana 2008: 194 quoted in Neimanis, 2017: 38

22 Neimanis, 2013: 24, 36

that is shaped by both internal and external forces. Illustratively, Neimanis' argument feeds off of the fluvial processes of erosion, transportation and deposition, resembling how river currents shape the landscape through which they flow. Writer Kathleen Dean Moore quotes her conversation with a hydrologist in her essay, *The Rules of the River* (2014), which beautifully illuminates such logic of water:

The dynamics of a river are manifestations of energy, he said. A fast, high-energy river will carry particles—the faster the river, the bigger the particle. But when it loses energy and slows, the river drops what it carries. So anything that slows a river can make a new landscape. It could be a stick lodged against a stone or the ribcage of a calf moose drowned at high water. Where the water piles against the obstacle, it drops its load, and an island begins to form. The island—in fact, any deposition—reshapes the current. As water curls around the obstacle, the current's own force turns it upstream. Around one small change, the energy reorganizes itself entirely.

And here's the point: no one pattern continues indefinitely; it always gives way to another. When there are so many obstacles and islands that a channel can no longer carry all its water and sediment, it crosses a stability threshold and the current carves a different direction.²³

These dynamic 'rules' of the river offer an explicit understanding that echoes Neimanis' argument. Each body of water is shaped by the existing paths, altering its velocities and directions according to the geological landscape. Yet the moving body of water also *shapes* the landscape in turn, picking up sediments, transporting, and depositing them elsewhere, making the waters murky with its rush. Throughout its journey, the current merges with other rivulets at confluences, becoming deeper and stronger downstream. Could such hydro-logic inform a way of practicing design?

Recently following Neimanis, there has been a growing number of studies that theorise such watery embodiment to develop 'imaginaries' – a new way of thinking. In the

23 Moore, 2014

Environmental Humanities discourses, 'Bodies of Water'²⁴ has framed discussions on politics and ethics in the light of posthumanism (i.e. Celermajer et.al, 2020), water justice and conservation (i.e. Waitt and Nowroozipour, 2018, Yates et.al, 2017), gender (i.e. Kormos, 2019; Chadwick, 2022; Pauwelussen, 2021), socio-economic inequality (i.e. Horton and Kraftl, 2017) and pedagogy (i.e. Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2014). Expanding beyond into the arts, the notion of 'hydrocommons' has also been appropriated to reflect upon working critically with contemporary waters, as a means to reimagine ways of living with the climate crisis (i.e. Sigurjónsdóttir, 2018; Lemos, 2020; Gómez, 2020)

However, while intensively researching into such ontological discourses, I increasingly began to recognise a repeated approach to 'Bodies of Water' in papers across disciplines; namely, its approach as a theoretical justification rather than employing its richness as an *embodied* one. I started to question how this notion might engender a new approach to design practice and construct a framework for situated knowledge production. What if this way of thinking could also become a way of *doing*? In other words, rather than using hydro-logical thinking as a concept for 'reimaginings', how could it influence and shape a creative *process*?

In order for the hydro-logical figuration to become a mode of *doing*, the approach must be dynamic, heightening its movements and currents instead of becoming a static entity. Moreover, as it is futile to examine the countless multidirectional relations that all bodies of water engender, this thesis follows *one stream* of hydro-logics through a *particular* journey of practice-based research. In so doing, I argue that the logic of water – through its fluid movement – offers a productive way of approaching an experimental design practice with heightened exploratory nature.

Fluid Methodologies

The hydro-logic process is based on several existing methodologies under reflective and reflexive praxes. Firstly, the focus on the creative process broadly positions this study under practice-based research, in which the experiential act of doing or making and

24 Uppercase 'Bodies of Water' to denote a theoretical figuration. Lowercase 'bodies of water' will be used in this paper to indicate our biological and embodied watery existence.

its outcome (practice) lead to new knowledge (research).²⁵ Practice research has been developed in various academic domains, traditionally in medicine, healthcare and natural sciences to the increasing acceptance within pedagogy, creative arts and humanities.²⁶ Reviewing a sample of literature across various domains, a prominent shared quality of practice research is its *situatedness*, relying on the direct experiential context in which the knowledge is produced.²⁷ It thus demands a specific form of “context-based, process-oriented description and explanation”,²⁸ which is positioned in relation to other bodies of existing knowledge. Contextualising within design, practice research refers to the ways in which the practitioner navigates through her creative endeavour to generate knowledge that can be disseminated, scrutinised and appropriated. It empowers the dialogue between creative and critical methodologies, which operate as “interdependent and complementary processes”.²⁹

Specifically, moreover, this study locates itself within *practice-based* research. Although ‘practice-based research’ has commonly been used interchangeably with ‘practice-led research’,³⁰ distinctions are outlined by scholars such as Linda Candy. In short, while practice-led research is primarily concerned with the nature of the practice, *practice-based* research uses the production of a “creative artefact [as a] basis of the contribution to knowledge”, thus taking the practice further by realising it.³¹ Hence, this research becomes both about the process of seeking knowledge *and* the generated knowledge itself.

Additionally, due to its process-oriented nature, instead of planning what the outcome is ‘supposed to be’, practice-based research allows space for subjective exploration. As new questions emerge from the process of practice, they lead, form, reform, and transform the course of the research journey. Accordingly, it values the unknowable nature of creative research, demanding that the practitioner attends to unformed thoughts, ideas and images, allowing the relationship between experience, embodiment, and knowledge to

engender the “very possibility of getting lost, of losing oneself, of falling into and outside of and away from the known territories, of coming undone and untethered in relation to another territory”.³² The close documentation, reflections, and analyses of how the creative practitioner navigates through these questions and uncertainties towards an outcome become the basis of practice-based knowledge production.

Secondly, recalling Neimanis’ ‘Bodies of Water’, the hydro-logics demands an actively embodied, situated and living way of practicing, which locates the approach of this research within the phenomenological discourse. While phenomenology has historically been established through a philosophical canon of the study of consciousness, I am less concerned with the prevailing debates on transcendental or existential phenomenology. Instead, I offer a contemporary adaptation, namely drawing from Susan Kozel’s notion of ‘return to lived experience’ in the context of creative research, thoroughly discussed in her book, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (2007). My specific interest in Kozel’s approach comes from her framing of phenomenology-as-process – or *doing* phenomenology – beyond a mere theorisation. Drawing together cultural discourses in live performance and digital technologies, she illustrates how phenomenology-as-process enables the practitioner to both create content *and* reflect upon it. In practice, phenomenology performs self-conscious reflection *in movement* by “listening to senses and insights that arrive obliquely, unbidden in midst of movement [and] experiences”.³³ Extending Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘hyper-reflection’ into the field of artistic performance, Kozel suggests that the practitioner engages in a process of thought that interrogates her movement *while* moving, thereby taking into account its own functioning.³⁴ Such process demands that the practitioner continues to be immersed in movement, while being conscious of how this *very act of reflecting* is influencing the live movement itself.³⁵ Phenomenology-as-process, therefore, is simultaneously reflective and reflexive, constructed out of numerous tiny feedback loops that take into account

25 Candy, 2006

26 Kaszynska et al., 2022

27 *ibid.*: 18

28 Andersson, et al., 2003: 50, quoted in *ibid.*

29 Candy and Edmonds, 2018: 64

30 Brook, 2012: 2

31 Candy and Edmonds, 2018: 64

32 Jones and Harris, 2016: 3

33 Kozel, 2013: 7:11

34 Kozel, 2007: 31

35 *ibid.*

the changes they themselves introduce into the action. It demands the act of performing in responsive systems with a constant meta-embodiment of the practitioner's own situatedness. Indeed, phenomenology stresses the quintessential subjectivity of research as "a way of awareness that cannot transcend specific conditions"³⁶, yet like Neimanis' 'Bodies of Water', acknowledges the "reality that all bodies exist with, and through other bodies".³⁷

While practice-based research and phenomenology offer useful foundations for how one might *practice* hydro-logically, they are both broadly situated. In examining a more specific research approach, I turn to a/r/tography as an existing practice-based, phenomenological methodology which has stemmed from a similar vein. Notably, the a/r/tographic mode of practicing is built upon a figuration (the rhizome) – thereby rendering the following examination valuable for this research, which similarly aims to shift a figuration into practice.

Mainly operating within the field of pedagogical research and grounded in the work of Rita Irwin amongst others, a/r/tography is a methodology created as a tool to explore what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as a "rhizomatic structure".³⁸ A rhizome, according to Deleuze and Guattari, does not possess a principal root (thus is non-hierarchical), and its unpredictability and inextricability eradicate the definite starting or end point.³⁹ Moreover, it grows in "decentred multiplicity"⁴⁰, ever-expanding and penetrating into various kinds of grounds.⁴¹ In transforming this figuration into practice, a/r/tographic discourse claims that theory is no longer abstracted but becomes an embodied living inquiry,⁴² which is encompassed within the "map of networked, relational and transversal thought processes"⁴³ of the rhizome. Due to this extremely organic and

multi-directional process, immersing oneself in a rhizomatic structure "strips the power to control the journey of inquiry from the practitioner", and consequently, "what [the practitioner] can do is to map the growth of the system".⁴⁴ Such mapping requires that the practitioner retrospectively takes a distance from what has unfolded to assess their personal journeys.⁴⁵

In addition, a/r/tography is a branch of practice-based research that specifically highlights the practitioner's "living inquiry" of creating, knowing, and doing. Indeed, the term, 'a/r/tography' alludes to the three core identities involved in the inquiry process – the creating Artist; the knowing Researcher; and the doing Teacher.⁴⁶ Operating at this liminal in-between, the a/r/tographic practitioner becomes a "host of various multiplicities" which tethers life and its inherent hybrid subjectivity to one's artistic knowing.⁴⁷

Owing to its rhizomatic structure and the 'living inquiry', a/r/tographic literature argues that 'openness' is an integral condition, wherein the expansive inquiry of praxes and the merging of identities become possible.⁴⁸ Indeed, similar to the figuration of the 'leaky' 'Bodies of Water', the research becomes rendered organic, where "organism" (the practitioner) itself is an *open* assemblage with free-forming interconnections.⁴⁹ Accordingly, in conceptualising a/r/tography as a "personal journey with ruptures, interventions, and intersections",⁵⁰ such openness highlights the emergent, generative, responsive, and reflexive nature of artistic inquiry.

Surprisingly, there are very few scholars who have criticised a/r/tography in depth to this date, albeit being adopted for almost a decade by various practitioners and researchers. The criticisms I briefly outline here are mainly drawn from scholars Jan Jagodzinski and Jason Wallin (2013), supplemented by my own critical assessment of various a/r/tographic literature and case studies.

36 Blumenfeld-Jones, 2016: 324

37 Kozel, 2013: 08:16

38 Malilang, 2018: 71

39 Honan, 2007: 533 and Colman 2010: 233 cited in Malilang, 2018: 78

40 Bonta and Protevi, 2004:136

41 Malilang, 2018: 79

42 Irwin, 2006 cited in Pavlou, 2022

43 Colman, 2010: 233

44 Irwin, 2013 cited in Malilang, 2018: 81

45 Blumenfeld-Jones, 2016: 329

46 LeBlanc et al., 2015: 355

47 Malilang, 2018: 80

48 Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013: 91

49 *ibid.*, 2013: 91-92

50 Springgay et al., 2005 cited in Blumenfeld-Jones, 2016: 323

Firstly, the focus on the Artist/Researcher/Teacher identities could be seen as counter-intuitive to the groundwork of this methodology that stresses ‘living hybridity’. Notably, it fails to neither recognise the *already* hybrid identities of the artists, researchers and teachers, *nor* the profound difference that is inherent within each individual identity. Moreover, despite being a mode of ‘living inquiry’ which attempts to destabilise the institutionalised demarcations, as it stands, how one legitimises these identities is still largely confirmed by institutional traditions. A practitioner may ‘think’ as a teacher, yet its conferral derives from the *institutional* understanding of what a teacher *knows* and *does*. For instance, art teachers have to ‘prove’ that they are ‘teachers’ through their academic qualifications, and many must ‘verify’ that they are ‘artists’ through their portfolios.⁵¹ Thus, the reference to the identities of the Artist/Researcher/Teacher inherently ties a/r/tography to the discrete ‘characters’ ‘imagined’ by the institutions. Without a comprehensive discussion on the already hybrid identities of artists, researchers, and teachers or their significance beyond professions, it renders the escape from the traditional academic obsession with divisions, ultimately futile.

Secondly, the a/r/tographic methodology is grounded upon the ‘absolute openness’ of the process, emphasised by their reference to the rhizome which expands infinitely “in all directions”.⁵² As productive and favourable as this openness could be for one’s ‘self-exploration’, it poses a fundamental question of, “how open *can* one be?”. As Jagodzinski and Wallin argue, a/r/tography seems to be open “insofar as the will of the artist and semiotic productivity can be maintained”, noting that “desire” would inevitably affect one’s practice.⁵³ I would add to their argument that the notion of ‘openness’ must be approached with caution, as it is unclear what Irwin’s definition of ‘openness’ includes – does it also involve the practitioner’s ‘openness’ to their own artistic ego (or desire)? When the vast majority of a/r/tographic practice engages with self-study and self-rendering, it becomes a challenge to move beyond a mere self-determining activity and into one that could be disseminated as generative knowledge. For instance, how does one acknowledge or justify something as hyper-subjective (and some might say ‘egoistic’) as

desire in academia? Such structural and epistemological ‘openness’ could pose challenges in communicating or drawing conclusions from a/r/tographic research, especially as “rhizomatic relations do not seek conclusions”.⁵⁴

In presenting these criticisms, my intention is neither to attempt to ‘fix’ these limitations nor to conjure a ‘better version’ of this methodology altogether. Rather, taking a critical stance has allowed me to become aware of the possibilities and vulnerabilities of an approach that seeks for a highly organic, subjective and ‘living’ mode of doing research. It has furthermore exemplified a productive shift from figuration (the rhizome) to practice (rhizomatic structure) and offers an existing framework from which to approach a hydro-logic way of practicing design.

The Anatomy of the Hydro-logic

Based upon the theoretical research on the figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ and further drawing from existing methodologies, a preliminary groundwork of the hydro-logic process has been loosely outlined.

Firstly, a hydro-logical practice is a **directional** process. Not only is water constantly in motion, but it also characteristically flows towards multiple bearings, directed temporally and by geopolitical forces.⁵⁵ As a form of practice-based research, this thesis will specifically focus on *one* strand of such flows. Therefore, unlike the a/r/tographic rhizome which insists on ‘absolute openness’ and an ‘ever-expanding structure’ without a ‘principle root’, following one ‘main current’ of the hydro-logics enables the practitioner to closely examine the *movement towards* the artefact, rather than that of ‘aimless drifting’. Furthermore, in an artistically driven mode of research, it is vital that the practitioner is proactive in maintaining her creative ‘flow’ – defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a “highly focused mental state conducive to productivity”.⁵⁶ By being guided by the creative and academic focus, the hydro-logic process encourages purposeful

51 Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013: 83

52 Deleuze and Guattari, 1980:7 cited in Malilang, 2018: 79

53 Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013: 92

54 Sullivan, 2005 quoted in Jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013; 71

55 Farnum et al., 2018

56 Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, cited in Joiner, 2022

movements and prevents prolonged ‘puddling’ of practice. Such directional hydro-logic is especially productive in producing a thesis, in which both time and resources are limited.

Secondly, the stress on the directional nature of the hydro-logic does not by any means imply that the pathway towards the artefact should be linear or direct, nor does it suggest that the direction remains constant. On the contrary, a body of water **meanders**, gets interrupted, merges, floods and drains. As Csikszentmihalyi continues to claim, a creative process is “recursive, not linear”, and thus “mental *meandering*” (added emphasis) is a crucial element of creative processes that enables the co-mingling of ideas.⁵⁷ Hence, the hydro-logic approach demands that the practitioner incorporates a “degree of tolerance for uncertainty”⁵⁸ into her endeavour, allowing for organic flux, experimental approaches, and various voices and forms of knowledge to feed into her study.

Third, a body of water is a ‘living’ process that is embedded into a larger system and is never completely isolated. Other waters constantly feed into the main flow, altering its direction, speed, volume, and composition.⁵⁹ To think as a body of water means to argue against the solitary illusion of the self, and to continually reflect upon how her body and flows are intimately intertwined with others. Such hydro-logics demand *embodiment* (and not merely ‘recognition’) of the external influences that feed into the creative practice. This encourages space for knowledge and methods from other academic fields to infiltrate into the design process, and the examination of relevant confluences that result from these interactions. As a mode of living research, the practitioner must consistently be attentive and **responsive** to factors beyond ‘intentional research’ – such as daily experiences and mundane conversations – that trickle into her practice.

Simultaneously, the practitioner must also acknowledge that her movements, in turn, are shaping the environment through which it flows. A body of water is not only contaminated by the external systems, but also *contaminates them*. This expands the practitioner’s responsibilities beyond her own creative endeavours, and urges that she

57 Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, quoted in Joiner, 2022

58 Joiner, 2022

59 Neimanis, 2013: 31

considers the implication of her research (both the process and the artefact) on others, as well as insisting on its contextualisation within the existing academic landscape. Further, it demands critical reflection on the particularity of her situatedness and the examination of the frictions that arise from her ‘politics of location’.⁶⁰

At this initial stage, the understanding of the hydro-logic as a mode of *doing* design is still extremely slippery: What might it mean in practice? And what methods would allow for this mode of practicing? Throughout this thesis journey, I will expand on, experiment, and challenge these questions. I will encounter new theories and research from a number of academic fields, which will be fed into the empirical experiments in an endeavour to seek for, understand, practice, and empower the hydro-logic process.

As outlined in the tentative groundwork, the primary step in practicing hydro-logically is to define its direction. As Neimanis argues, water always requires some sort of boundedness, whether it is a dam, a weather front, a river, or a human body to “provide some kind of intelligibility”.⁶¹ Therefore, identifying ‘the main current’ is a crucial part of what makes the fluidity of water comprehensible. In establishing a more focused scope in which to practice the hydro-logics, the first research question was identified:

By exploring experimental design through writing as a material and a process, how can the figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ shift from a way of thinking into a hydro-logic way of *doing*?

60 For ‘politics on location’, see Adrienne Rich’s ‘Notes towards a Politics of Location’ in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory* (Lewis and Miller (eds.), 2003)

61 Neimanis, 2014; 19

Writing as a Hydro-logical Process

“Language doesn’t just make things – it assembles, cobbles together, entire worlds and all the relations within. And that, I think, makes words a rather extraordinary material for design.”⁶²

~ Anne Galloway

In practice-based research, writing has been widely used as a cognitive practice to document, reflect upon and communicate one’s research. For instance, journal entries, field notes and logbooks may be used to gain self-awareness during the design process or to be analysed retrospectively, while design research is predominantly disseminated in a form of discursive academic papers. Moreover, there are countless authors who have written *about* design, from history, theory, and culture to how-to guides, targeted at those within and outside of the academic design community.⁶³ Writing has also been used actively by design fiction writers such as Tony Fry, as a tool for scenario building of possible speculative futures. Less recognised are studies that have employed existing writing as *inspiration* for design in pedagogical contexts, such as using poetry to inspire product design (i.e. Marti, 2015) or spatial design (i.e. Hawkins, 2021; Hasirci, 2012). However, specifically during my own studies, I have felt that rarely is the act and the materiality of writing themselves examined as the central design process and the artefact. By approaching design through experimental writing in this research, I explore how the materiality of language and the process of writing contribute to, inform, and shape this hydro-logic process. I have approached this as an opportunity to rethink how writing operates in my work, as well as to actively engage with its potential for knowledge production within future design practices.

In this thesis, I use writing as fluid, relational, and situated material and process, beyond a means of documentation, visual agent, or metaphorical inspiration. In so doing, I greatly align my practice with Tamar Shafir’s words: “I often wonder whether it is possible to be a designer who uses words as a material, rather than a writer who just happens to speak

about design, both on the page and out loud”.⁶⁴ In this paper, the term, ‘writing’ is both a noun (i.e. ‘*writings* on the wall’) and a verb (i.e. ‘I am *writing*’), and hence affords the examination both as material *and* process.

In order to approach writing as material and process, it is useful to draw on the practice of experimental writing, largely debated in literary studies although less so in design. Akin to the precarious understandings of ‘experimental’ practices in many creative fields, “[e]xperimental writing”, literary scholar Warren Motte (2015) claims, “is difficult to define with any kind of precision” as it is “very mutable, changing both swiftly and radically over both time and cultural space”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he goes on to specify that “they usually focus on form rather than on content”.⁶⁶ The general consensus of experimental writing in literature seems to be that it “pushes the possibilities of language”⁶⁷ (also discussed by Andriani, 2022; Reed, 2014; and Berry, 2016 among many others). Moreover, whether a work is deemed ‘experimental’ seems to be determined by its completed outcome, which includes the originality in the uses of language, dissemination formats and typographic elements. In *The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms* (2018), Adrian Kim (ed.) compiles an anthology of contemporary essays that borrow their structures from a variety of unconventional forms. For instance, ‘Maths 1619’ by Gwendolyn Wallace uses a maths test structure to discuss racial stereotypes, whereas ‘#miscarriage.exe’ by Ingrid Gendrzewski is a piece of experimental poetry resembling an HTML code.

However, rather than aiming to radicalise language as an outcome, I use the term, ‘experimental’ to denote my writing’s exploratory nature within practice-based research. Accordingly, I align my approach with essayist Michel de Montaigne, who applied the term *essais* – as in ‘attempts’ or ‘try-outs’ – to his experiments in prose.⁶⁸ Here, the term, ‘experimental’ indicates a mode of investigation through figuring and refiguring; trial and error. Experimental writing in practice-based research, therefore, explicitly encourages uncertainty, unknowability, risks and failures, within the constraints and tendencies of

64 Shafir, 2018

65 Motte, 2018: 1

66 *ibid.*: 1

67 MacKenzie, 2020

68 Gibbons et al., 2012: 2

62 Galloway, 2012: 84

63 Watkins, 2019 : 5

language. Specifically in this research, it provides a space to explore how writing behaves; 1) when it is approached as design *material and process*, and; 2) when it develops in dialogue with the hydro-logic process.

Text, Textures, Textiles

Having taken the Woven Fabrics Studio course in 2021, I found an intimate affiliation between writing and weaving which I will briefly outline here. In this research, I treat (textual and visual) writings as a weaver would treat yarns. A weaver gives agency to the material by letting the thickness, rigidity, smoothness, and tautness of the warp and weft yarns to influence the pattern. In a similar vein, a writer lets the weaving process of language shape the content through, for instance, sonic associations, imagery correlations, or meaning affiliations, by using the fluidity of thoughts and words.

Additionally, there are rules for weaving. The weaving process is extremely intellectual, I found, as it requires the understanding and mechanics of how each component works. Through theory, trial and error, I learned that slippery yarns are difficult to weave with; how tightening the warp creates a wrinkled effect on the fabric; how to ensure that the fabric does not fall apart when it is taken off the loom. Yet once understood and acknowledged, these rules can be pushed to the limits or even broken, and it is often from this liminal space where the most original and fascinating weaves emerge. Similarly, writing-as-experiment provides a space to challenge the rules, limits and preconceptions of language, while still ensuring that the writing does not lose integrity in the process.

Writing as a Body of Water: Initial Experiments

Writerly experiments permit the practitioner to explore different writing styles, voices, and processes – to probe, test, and mould their materiality. By combining the earlier theoretical research with the creative practice of experimental writing, the aim was to outline an initial approach to how the hydro-logics could be translated into an embodied process. Yet where and how do I start? In order to shift the hydro-logics into a way of *doing*, it was necessary that I explore what the experimental writing process affords in *practice*. For 90 consecutive days, I wrote one experimental piece a day with the prompt: “what does it mean to write *as a body of water*?”. This was a question that had arisen

recurrently during the research on feminist new materialism, and which had been noted down time and again in my research notebooks. As many scholars wrote *about* ‘Bodies of Water’, I had wondered what writing *as a body of water* might mean within creative explorations. This prompt further afforded versatile approaches and expansion into other fields of knowledge while providing an anchor for these writerly experiments. Each piece began with an immersion in watery conditions – whether embodied physically, imaginatively, or through research – and those experiences shaped the form, content, and quality of my writings. As these were foundational experiments conducted in the process of establishing the main part of the thesis, I will not explicate, justify, or analyse these in detail. Instead, in this section, I will briefly summarise the key findings which have formed the foundational approach to the hydro-logic process.

Retrospectively, these experimental writings could be categorised into three general modes:

Firstly, in ‘investigative writing’, experimental writing was used to synthesise the ongoing digestion of theoretical and literature research. Beyond simply reiterating or summarising the sources, this process of writing demanded that I dive deep into, absorb and embody the research in order to materialise it in a new form. [See Figure 1.1 “*Flushing – What A Beautiful Wor(l)d*” and Figure 1.2 “*item #06 Breast Milk*”] In addition, reflecting upon the research of relevant artistic case studies falls into this category.

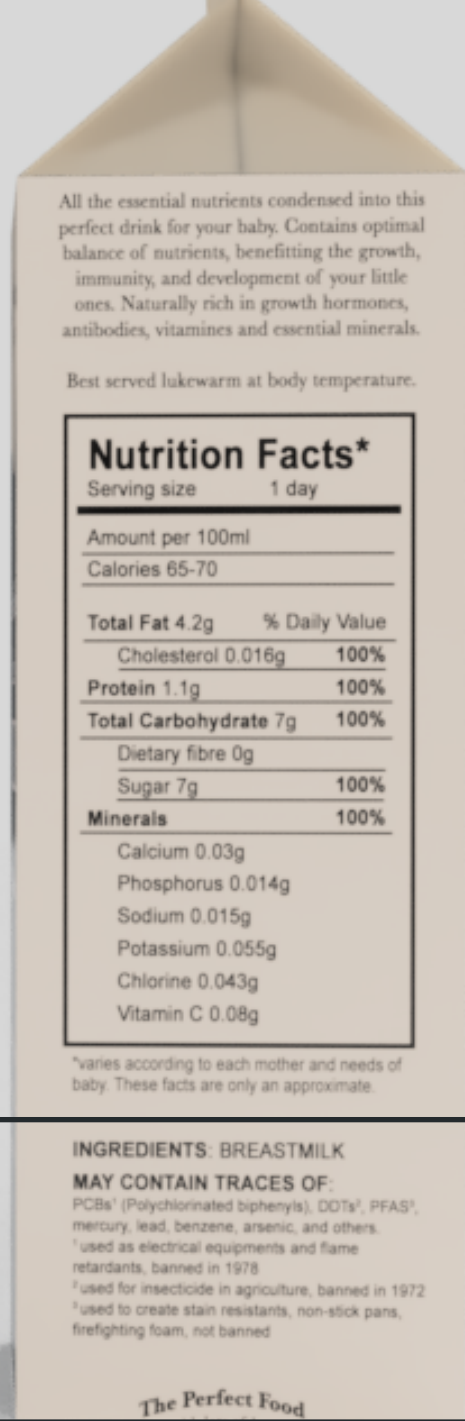
The second was categorised as ‘performative writing’, in which I used writing to reflect upon corporeal experiments, during and/or after the action. These writings did not describe the experiments themselves, but rather documented my raw sensory, reflective, and cognitive experiences. Often including diagrams, sketches, fragmented speech, photographs and playful use of white space, they ended with multiple questions, becoming catalysts for subsequent performative experiments. [See Figure 1.3 “*Conversation with the Wind*” and Figure 1.4 “*If Rain Were the Colour of Blood*”]

Third, ‘affective writing’ became a method to voice out my struggles as a designer. They came in monologue essay-style writings, poetry, short (and sometimes unintelligible) scribbles, and transcripts of voice recordings. The writings enabled me to uncover the tensions between expectation and curiosity, how I constantly seek to ‘belong’ within the Design institution, and frustrations with my current approach. This process of affective writing was also used to figure out where my values lie, and those values were used to search for my own creative approach.

chemical cocktail that is pumped deep underground into shale rocks to extract oil. Think about the Vinyl Chloride seeping into the soil and groundwater. Think about your food grown with this water. Absolutely delicious. **Appreciate** the fact that the waste you produce piles high on the other side of the world as they leach out toxic substances into the soils. **Find relief** in knowing that you can take breathing air for granted. **Find comfort** in knowing that it is not you who has to breathe in poisonous gases that arise from burning landfills. Reflect on how all this pollution unlocks history as glaciers melt, releasing highly toxic industrial compounds into the ocean. The very ocean that sustains all of our Product Lines. The very ocean that produces rain, irrigates crops, feeds our Inventions. That very ocean which eventually fills up your glass, right up to the rim. **What a beautiful scene. Enjoy** creating the bubbles with the washing-up-liquid. This is always the fun part. Breathe in the lovely, fresh, artificial smell of cleanliness, and watch the chemicals swirl down the drain. **Feel the satisfaction** of expelling the filth into the abyss. **Find satisfaction** in knowing that it has disappeared from your own field of vision by reflecting on the cloudy eutrophic lakes with depleted oxygen. Think about its effects on the ecosystem. Think about the animals that drink this water. A fortified drink, enriched with leached chemicals. Soon, that glass of water will exit your system. After all, you no longer need it. It is only filth. You don't want the waste to still be circulating within you, do you? The best way is to banish it. Out of sight, out of mind. Flushing – **what a beautiful word.** It's no longer any of your concern. It spirals down into the abyss. **You are purified.** You have absolutely nothing to do with it anymore. **Find relief** in knowing that the waste is no longer inside or beside you. **Congratulate** yourself for successfully banishing all these substances. **Find pleasure** in dismissing any thoughts such as eutrophication, landfills, damaged ecosystems, suffering bodies, or extinct species.

No, you definitely don't have anything to do with it.

Figure 1.1
Excerpt from *"Flushing" - What A Beautiful Wor(l)d*
Experimental writing



INGREDIENTS: BREASTMILK
MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF:
 PCBs¹ (Polychlorinated biphenyls), DDTs², PFAS³, mercury, lead, benzene, arsenic, and others.
¹ used as electrical equipments and flame retardants, banned in 1978
² used for insecticide in agriculture, banned in 1972
³ used to create stain resitants, non-stick pans, firefighting foam, not banned

The Perfect Food
 with lots of love

Figure 1.2
 Excerpt from *item #06 Breast Milk*
 Experimental writing into critical product design

Maybe I could write a little fictional story about this... ~~you~~
~~can't~~ milky rain. One day, from the clouds - splat - milky
white liquid, opaque, like breastmilk. ~~Does~~ water not
have taste? Weird ~~sometimes~~ do ~~but we say it's~~ ~~to wash away~~
~~But who determines the 'neutral'?~~ If we drink, for example, coke every
single day instead of water, would coke become the 'neutral' taste? Like white
noise. Anyway, going back ~~white~~, pearl-like droplets, hanging from the leaves,
as it slowly drops, as it slowly crawls... down your body... I don't know, I guess
I'm interested in the relationship between rain and bodily fluids as well. Blood, or
urine, or breastmilk, or saliva ~~how do they connect~~?
Because basically, we're part of a river, aren't we? So water, in a hydrological
cycle - the conventional hydrological cycle ~~water~~, falls as rain, and then flows
through the rivers, to the estuaries, and into the ocean. Whereas it also travels
within us ~~it goes down the rivers of blood vessels, and exists as~~
urine. What's the difference there? Is the difference in the scale? Or the way that
it seems to be contained by this ~~skin~~ as one single organism?
How to make this performativity simple and readable, and easy to grasp for the
public? With the intellectual background in Environmental Humanities which is
partly a phenomenological thinking ~~or ecological thought~~ ~~make it~~
condensed without losing its richness.
It's less rainy now ~~I can feel~~ ~~responding to it~~
~~I guess we don't care about climate so much because we're shielded from it, and~~
we don't implicate ourselves, our bodies, within it. It doesn't really *feel* like it's
changing. So how could, at the level of weather and rain, could people start to
integrate into the weather world ~~and, actually feel implicated in these~~
consequences? And it doesn't have to be a dark narrative, of 'oh yes, climate
change is approaching and we have to do some ~~so many works~~
that do that already, and I don't think that's ~~my intention~~. My intention is to
have more of a... collective moment, performativity, with rain, but in the context
of design. And context of *everyday* design, it's not a design that exists in the
museum as a one-off, but how can it be more integrated into people's everyday
lives



Figure 1.3
Excerpt from *Conversation with the Wind*
Experimental writing, still from film



Figure 1.4
If Rain Were the Colour of Blood
(Rainwater from 48°11'47.8"N 8°39'46.9"E)
 Stills from performance film, 04:35 loop, and excerpt from writing

Imagine waking up one morning in the comfort of your bed. You snooze your alarm clock that you always set five minutes earlier, so that you could feel the luxury of being folded within the mille-feuille of warm blankets. It's raining today. Your fresh morning senses latch onto the sounds of gentle pattering rain on your bedroom window. You savour the rest of those blissful moments and reluctantly emerge out of your feathery skin. Then you pull open the curtains.

Outside, red rain falls, tapping rhythmically on the windowpanes. From the inside, it looks like raining blood.

You would probably be confused and scared. You've never heard of this happening before. But deep within, you feel a spark of excitement like waking up to the glitter of the first snowfall. Outside, the red rain tints the world in all shades of crimson lustre, and you douse in a touch of wonder you left behind with your childhood dreams.

Once you learn that it is simply water – nothing more than tinted rain – you might even go outside to touch it, it's too tempting to resist. I would wander amongst it, relishing the red liquid rubies that decorate the tips of those slender branches and peering into those rose-tinted mirrors below me. And if I look up, I would be swallowed by the expanse of thick red haze that seems to softly blanket the earth from above. I would paint my body with the rain, rediscovering how each crimson drop seeps between the bends and pores of my flesh, how it dyes my snow-coloured shirt in the shade of blood, with the blood that has yet to channel through my body. I might even let a ripe drop linger on the tip of my tongue, and gaze through the prism into the distant motion pictures. If rain was the colour of blood for a day, would we converse with it like never before? Would we touch it, and let ourselves be touched?

The aim of these initial experiments was to ‘try out’ various voices and styles and to allow the materiality of writing to shape the course of the process within a space that encourages uncertainty, risks and failures. Indeed, in discussing creative flow through her own writerly experiments, Rosemary Joiner (2022) observes that “creativity and flow must be allowed to run free [...] to allow for true artistic freedom and inspiration”.⁶⁹ Yet as she also notes, it is necessary that “at times the flow be tempered and guided like water in a stream to allow for outcomes to be achieved”, thereby “require[ing] balance, focus and vision”⁷⁰ on behalf of the practitioner.

During the 90 days of producing writings experimentally around the single prompt, I was able to gain knowledge on how different styles of writing engender distinct effects – how more fragmented modes of writings are better suited for exploring more abstract ideas; how factual information struggle to be expressed poetically; how my writings tend towards lyrical voices in general. There were many articulations I struggled with, but also those which overflowed without ceasing.

Each of these short series of experimental writings had the potential to be developed further as the main mode of investigation. However, towards the end of 90 days, instead of producing entirely ‘new’ pieces of writings each time, they tended towards assemblages of previous snippets of writings. As one assemblage merged with another assemblage, which merged with another, and then with another, the initially distinct pieces of writings organically began to synthesise together. I became increasingly drawn to this organic *process* of research, refeeding, reflecting, fusing and transforming existing knowledge, that echoed the fluid, accumulative and responsive nature of the hydro-logics. Therefore, after the initial 90 days of writerly experiments, instead of choosing ‘one’ mode of writing to explore further, I focused on examining the *confluences* that the theoretical, reflective and creative research afforded.

This experimental writing process was also used to specify the outcome, as ‘writing’ could broadly result in anything from a piece of paper with a few phrases, a printed poem, or a photo essay to a performative reading or an exhibition. As I continued the experiments, particular writings organically clustered together and evolved towards

distinct ‘chapters’, yet still with a fluid continuous narrative thread across the pieces. In delimiting the scope of this research using the findings of these initial experiments, I decided to approach my exploration through a framework of an experimental book. Notably, the framework of a ‘book’ still affords space for meandering and uncertainties, while providing yet another layer of ‘boundedness’ and directionality to this study. Furthermore, it enables the continued exploration of the materiality *and* process of writing at a much more demanding level.

Accordingly, the secondary research questions were introduced:

How does the hydro-logic inform and shape the book-as-*process*? How can book-writing perform research as an emerging site of knowledge production?

In Search for the Hydro-logics

Grounded upon theoretical literature and the initial experimental practice, this chapter has outlined the primary endeavour in shifting ‘Bodies of Water’ from a way of thinking into a hydro-logical way of *doing*. Taking the cue from hydro-logical discourses, I have discussed the existing relevant methodologies including practice-based research and phenomenology, while the ‘rhizomatic’ a/r/tography has been examined as a practice which had stemmed from a similar figuration. The second half of this chapter introduced the materiality and process of writing within design practices, and was empirically expanded into experimental writing attempts. Through this initial research, questions have evolved, and the scope has been delimited accordingly. In the following chapters, the understanding of the hydro-logic will be developed in response to the empirical, theoretical and reflective findings of book-writing.

In an emerging field, designing a methodological approach holds unique challenges. *How* this hydro-logic process is productive or even *whether* it yields meaningful knowledge is yet unknown, which makes this endeavour both difficult to navigate and not without risk. This initial stage has operated on such shaky ground, taking the ‘*what if?*’ inquiry through the demanding process of contextualisation, question formation, scope reframing, and early testing.

69 Joiner, 2022

70 *ibid.*

The primary issue in the way of exploring the hydro-logic process so far, however, has been the solitary nature of writing. This is counter-intuitive to the logic of water, which is inherently a *living* process, demanding that one actively responds to external landscapes and seeks confluence with other bodies of water. Although the initial experiments examined influences across bodies of knowledge, and were indeed phenomenologically 'living' through performative bodily explorations, it ceased to actively extend beyond a tightly-closed system – or more critically, the 'self-rendering' of the practitioner. The practice was still confined within the familiarity of *my* story, *my* watery existence.

Furthermore, the hydro-logics still seemed to remain as a cognitive exercise rather than a mode of 'doing', as although my responsiveness to external influences was considered, they were not actively *incorporated into the design process* itself. What methods and directions would allow for a more targeted examination of the research questions? In order to develop the hydro-logic through practice, it was necessary that I put myself in a position where external factors would greatly unsettle the course of my creative process.

At that time, as part of the research for my writerly experiments, I had been in conversation with multiple people about their perspectives on the hydro-logic, including experts in human anatomy, botany, philosophy, conservation, hydrology and physics. Furthermore, stemming from the socio-political implications of 'Bodies of Water', I had long been researching into people with unique dependence on watery flows – in particular, fishermen in Scarborough, UK, who have been experiencing a steep decline in the fishing industry due to environmental pollution. These conversations and research became the catalyst to travel to England to deepen my knowledge empirically. In addition, it also provided an opportunity to experiment with methods that would embody the hydro-logics in practice.

So, in May 2022 I travelled across bodies of water, to seek for watery stories.

And this, I believe, became the 'true' beginning of this thesis journey.

Chapter Two TRIBUTARIES

Dialogue Across Watery Bodies

This chapter discusses the empirical research performed during two intensive weeks in May 2022 in England. At the outset of this research trip, there were three main objectives:

- 1) to examine ‘living’ research methods as empirical approaches to the hydro-logics;
- 2) to practice experimental writing that is reflective of and is highly shaped by the external contexts; and
- 3) to gather materials which would be used to shape the book-as-artefact.

In approaching the first objective, I will borrow the ‘go-along’ method from ethnography and assess its suitability for this research context. I will briefly outline the values and constraints of the go-along method detailed in contemporary ethnographic literature, followed by a description of its implementation in Oxford and Scarborough, UK. I argue that the inherently ‘living’ nature of the go-along method is fitting to the hydro-logic process, however, as per the second objective, address the need for other reflective methods to complement the go-along. The third objective is achieved as a result of employing the combination of methods, materialised as audio and video recordings, photographs, journals, sketches and field notes.

The Go-Along Method

Following the ‘mobilities turn’ in the twentieth century, mobile methods have gained significant attention in the ethnographic discourse, widely employed by social scientists and geographers.¹ Stemming from the increasing interest in human movements together with the study of ‘living experiences’ of phenomenology, the go-along emerged as one variant of such qualitative research method. As a hybrid between interviewing and participant observation,² the go-along is a method in which the researcher “accompan[ies] individual informants on their ‘natural’ outings, and – through asking questions, listening and observing – actively explore their subjects’ stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment[s]”.³ Scholars in social sciences note that the go-along allows the productive capturing of the “stream of perceptions, emotions and interpretations of the participants”,⁴ while being exposed to a multi-sensory stimulation of the particular location.⁵ For instance, in their study on people’s engagement with the natural environment, Hitchings and Jones (2004) concluded that the act of walking in the gardens eased the participants’ verbalisations of thoughts, and reduced their inclinations to present the researchers with the ‘correct’ answers.

Furthermore, in the go-along, the participant is empowered to lead the research as a ‘guide’ of their own lives, while the researchers actively embrace the arising situations with careful attention to the participant’s experiences and thoughts.⁶ Unlike the sedentary interviews which often magnify the dialectical relationship between the researcher and participant, the more informal encounters of the go-along enable the collapse of traditional power relations.⁷ Such shift in dynamics not only allows the researcher to access the participant’s experiential interpretations *in situ*,⁸ but also affords intimacy where shared perspectives can arise between them.⁹

1 Evans and Jones, 2011; Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020

2 Evans and Jones, 2011: 850

3 Kusenbach, 2003: 463

4 *ibid.*: 464

5 Adams & Guy, 2007 cited in Evans and Jones, 2011: 850

6 Bergeron et al., 2014: 110

7 Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020: 443

8 Kusenbach, 2003: 463

9 *ibid.*: 462

Moreover, as the researcher is immersed in the environment throughout the process of research, it allows her to gather data from the embodied self. By corporeally experiencing the movement between places, the multi-sensory stimulations offer a privileged insight into the participant's "hidden or unnoticed habitual relations"¹⁰ of place-bound experiences, which are often lost in verbal articulations. Correspondingly, such 'living research' demands the researcher's heightened sensitivity as they interact with happenings, as well as continuous reflection upon the subjective, situated, unitary and temporal nature of experience.¹¹

Considerations of the Go-Along Method

Despite being a highly immersive method that aims to capture the participant's 'natural' behaviour, the presence of another person (the researcher) inevitably influences one's actions, demeanour and attitude, especially if the participants are conscious of engaging in research.¹² This could be heightened by the presence of recording devices such as audio tools, cameras, or even notebooks. The curiosity of the researcher may also deter the participants from their everyday routines, often in goodwill and enthusiasm for the research, for instance, by giving a tour or taking the researcher to a place they might not have otherwise visited.

Additionally, this method primarily unfolds through the researcher's experience – the encounters and situations are greatly dependent on the researcher's own interactions, background and social skills. It is therefore not enough for the research method to be 'good', but also requires successful social navigation by the researcher. Maintaining the balance between adhering to the set research objectives and sustaining the 'naturalness' of interactions therefore becomes a challenge. The question of what part of the experience is considered 'research' also becomes problematic when dealing with such subjective experiences. Naturally, how and when the researcher decides to document would heavily influence the data, not to mention the researcher's interpretations. Such subjectivity

10 Kusenbach, 2003 cited in Evans and Jones, 2011: 850

11 Krantz, 2016: 411

12 Kusenbach, 2003: 463

makes this method less suited to researchers aiming to collect a coherent set of data for comparison.¹³ Simultaneously, attempting to extract coherency from the data could significantly diminish the richness, density and immediacy uniquely valuable to the go-along.

Finally, the researcher must consider the physical, cultural, and social implications in each research context. This is especially critical in the go-along, as the researcher steps into the delicate and private dimensions of the participants' lived experiences. It is crucial that the researcher obtains consent, verifies their willingness to participate, and is transparent on which parts of their lives the researcher has access to. Throughout the study, the researcher must be highly sensitive, adaptable, flexible and responsive to each circumstance, letting themselves engage with the fluid nature of this method.

Gathering Stories with the Go-Along Method

Rather than embarking on the research trip *in order to* 'test out' the go-along from the outset, this method was chosen *due to* the particular conditions that this trip afforded. Namely, when I initially contacted some participants to ask whether I could have face-to-face conversations with them, two of the participants (one in Oxfordshire and the other in North Yorkshire) kindly asked me if I would like to stay at their places while conducting my research. As I gratefully accepted their offers and as they enthusiastically welcomed me into their lives, an unanticipated yet ideal opportunity arose to practice the go-along.

During the course of the research trip, the third objective for this research trip, 3) *to gather materials and data which would form the artefact*, was the main objective communicated to all the participants. Specifically, the explanation of the research was simplified, as many of the participants were from outside of academia. I described my project as being at the initial stage of a 'book', for which I am gathering stories about people's relationship to water that are personal or from their expertise, stressing that I was looking to *converse* with them as they went about their lives. This explanation was intentionally broadly situated to empower the participants to shape the conversations in their own ways, enabling me to interact with their streams of thoughts, actions and

13 Kusenbach, 2003: 463

stories more organically through the go-along method. I would then adapt my approach if necessary, according to the flow, duration, location and context of conversation, as well as the background and personality of each participant.

The go-alongs were documented with an audio recorder and a GoPro video camera, and were carefully chosen according to respective circumstances.¹⁴ For instance, only the audio recorder was used indoors in most scenarios, as the device could be placed on a table and be ‘forgotten’ by the participants. This was both to prevent the feeling of intrusiveness into the more private dimensions of their home lives, as well as considering the less dynamic nature of interior movements. Moreover, while the GoPro was used during walks outside, I refrained from explicitly aiming at or following the participants’ movements with the lens, in order to minimise the self-consciousness which could arise from being ‘recorded on camera’. By using a chest mount, the GoPro documented *my* experiences from the researcher’s perspective, while still being able to naturally capture the participants’ interactions. Through these raw modes of documentation, materials beyond spoken words – such as paces of walking, breaths, silences, pauses and utterances – later became valuable substances to work with [discussed further in Chapter Four].

The logbook was used in tandem with the above documentation tools. Any details of experiences that could not be captured in the moment were retrospectively recorded; for example, sensory cues relating to smells, touch, taste and subtle actions or expressions uncaptured on audio/camera. Additionally, being a ‘living’ form of research, some conversations arose at unexpected moments when I did not have any recording devices at hand. In these circumstances, unless the interaction appeared to progress into a sustained duration of oral storytelling, interrupting the flow of the ‘natural’ conversation to retrieve a recording device seemed counterproductive. Appropriately, the logbook was used to record the conversation from memory soon after the event.

The following section will use my personal accounts to summarise the timeline of the trip in short, as well as to describe how the go-along method was practiced in context.

14 **On consent:** before documenting in any form, consent was obtained from every participant. The participants were also informed that this research is a creative project, and that I would be using the data I collect *as artistic materials*. After the first consent, all forms of documentation (camera, audio recorder, notebook) were made clearly visible during interactions and were also verbally emphasised if necessary.





Location 1: Oxford, Oxfordshire (4 – 7 May 2022)

My research trip began in Oxfordshire, where I was invited to stay with Sarah Simblet (Professor of Human Anatomy and Botany at Oxford University) and Frank Henderson (Haymaker and farm owner). They lived in a housing complex in the village of Wootton, where they have spent the last decade slowly transforming their old stone cottage themselves. They took me seamlessly into their daily routines and as they were both wonderful storytellers by nature, the conversations were unceasing. This made the go-along method especially fitting to this context.

The conversations occurred in diverse locations at various moments of the day – while preparing breakfast coffees; while doing the dishes; during a car ride into town; while going to the local farmers’ market; while running errands; during neighbour gatherings; during the evening walks in the meadows; and post-dinner talks by the fireplace with a cup of tea in our hands.

In general, the conversations could be categorised into mundane dialogues (“What shall we have for dinner today?”; “Would you like to come along to the farm tomorrow?”; “We haven’t had rain for a while”; “In the few days you’ve been here, the wisterias have come out!”) as well as sustained storytelling (“There’s a bit of science to haymaking - if

you get twenty-seven inches of rain per year, you can grow enough crops, but dry enough that you can actually make them into hay...”; “I was buying my weather forecasts from the MET office before we had internet...”; “This horse skeleton is probably from 1976, and had been dissected really badly...”; “Do you think you can replicate the blue of the sky poetically?...”). The topics of conversation were multifarious, extending both from their personal histories as well as their breadths of expertise – the flooding of the farm last year; the drought of 1987 compared to the drought of this year; the function of hair hygrometers; the sex lives of snails; the preservation of dissected human bodies; how desert plants adapt to rain-deprived landscapes; how they identify one species of bird from another from the way they fly – and the richness of their knowledge was packed into every story, as seemingly unrelated conversations flowed organically into each other.

In this part of the research trip, it was extremely clear that specific locations in which the conversations took place greatly shaped the content. For instance, every time we walked along the river, one of them would comment on the dryness of the river this year. Yet it would transform into a different conversation every single time – the recent dry weather; how a wheat field becomes blue when lacking in water; the geography of the River Glyme. Moreover, the conversations prompted by particular locations were often enriched by the sensory cues, as evidenced in my journal entries:



We go down on our knees to observe the orchids. “Look at the detail on them”, Frank says, smelling one with his eyes closed, “they’re probably one of the smallest orchids. But you know it’s the first week of May when they come out”. Sarah shows me the nectar guides she’s been telling me about this morning. “They’re dotted landing marks for the butterflies and bees, just like we have for airplanes”, I remember her telling me. We move around on our knees from orchid to orchid, like bees from flower to flower.

Then they lie down on the grass and roll over, so that their whole body is opening up to the sky. I echo their movements and lie down too, the soft stubble of grass brushing on my cheeks. And we lie there in silence, intoxicated by the freshness of spring. I close my eyes.

* * *

This morning, they tell me a memory about collecting the colour of the sky. Frank begins in the middle of his memory, “I said to Sarah, ‘look, they’re absolutely blue!’”.

I turn my confused face towards Sarah and we smile at Frank’s eagerness. Sarah rewinds the story and begins with an explanation: “On a bright sunny day like this, the blue light of the sky will reflect on the holly leaves, so you get little flashes of bright blue in the darkness of the woodlands”.

Then Frank continues excitedly, “...so the woodlands were like the mirror image of the sky!”. I ask them why holly leaves are so especially shiny, and Sarah, being a botanist, tells me that it’s a protective mechanism to stop the moisture from escaping in dry conditions. “Evergreens can cope with frosts and high winds and in freezing climates, but also in bright, dry sunlight”, she says.

Suddenly, Frank gets up and steps out into the garden. I follow him out into the dazzling morning light, just as he plucks a leaf from the holly tree. He holds it up against the sky, twisting his wrist and adjusting the angles. “It has a shiny mirror finish on it. There. Look! It’s picking up the blue of the sky!” Sarah comes out and we all peer into the single holly leaf held up against the liquid sunlight. “So imagine this filling the whole woodlands”, she says, “it was like the forest had gathered all the blues of the sky”.

Watching the tiny specks of blues dancing in Frank’s hand, I feel a little bit closer to their memory.



One major unanticipated outcome of the go-along method was the organic extension of my research beyond the scope of the primary participants. As they seamlessly took me into their daily lives which involved the community – including neighbours, friends, colleagues, and extended family members – they, too, became incorporated into my research through the go-along. The primary participants introduced me to the local community and explained my ‘project’ to them in their own words. Through these connections, more people began to enthusiastically offer me their knowledge of water, which soon grew into collective conversations. Beyond this, moreover, after hearing about my ‘project’, several members of the community spontaneously called up their acquaintances, and handed me their phones so that I could talk with them. These chains of interactions became extremely valuable as I unleashed the research into the hands of my (ever-increasing) participants.

Already within the first few days here, I noticed how my project started to morph through the voices of other people. Paying attention to how everyone framed my project in their own words was especially intriguing, as it carried from mouth to mouth like Chinese whispers:

“She’s working on a book for her university project and is collecting stories about water – do you have any?”, became;

“She’s collecting stories about water, and we’ve just been talking about how water molecules are actually coloured blue!”, became;

“She’s collecting stories about the colour blue”, which eventually became;

“do you have any blue stories?”

It was incredible how by the end of the day, they were no longer referring to the conversation as ‘for her project’. Everyone was sharing their ‘blue stories’ as one led to another – blue butterfly wings and their mechanisms, why it is their favourite colour, emotional blues and grief, a childhood memory of the blue-inked tongue, blue ice, the ocean – the stories were like streams that flowed into one another, constantly feeding and forever in flux.

It was fascinating to observe that my ‘research’ had become adopted as a collective topic of discussion. These new encounters added another layer of insight and richness to the gathered materials through the go-along. By the end of my time at Oxford, in addition to the two original participants, I had been in conversation with people with expertise in an array of specialised knowledge, including a documentary film director, a physicist, a geneticist, a biologist, and a farmer among many more. It had indeed become an organic form of ‘living research’ as it was embraced and engaged with in countless ways.

Location 2: Scarborough, North Yorkshire (9 – 19 May 2022)

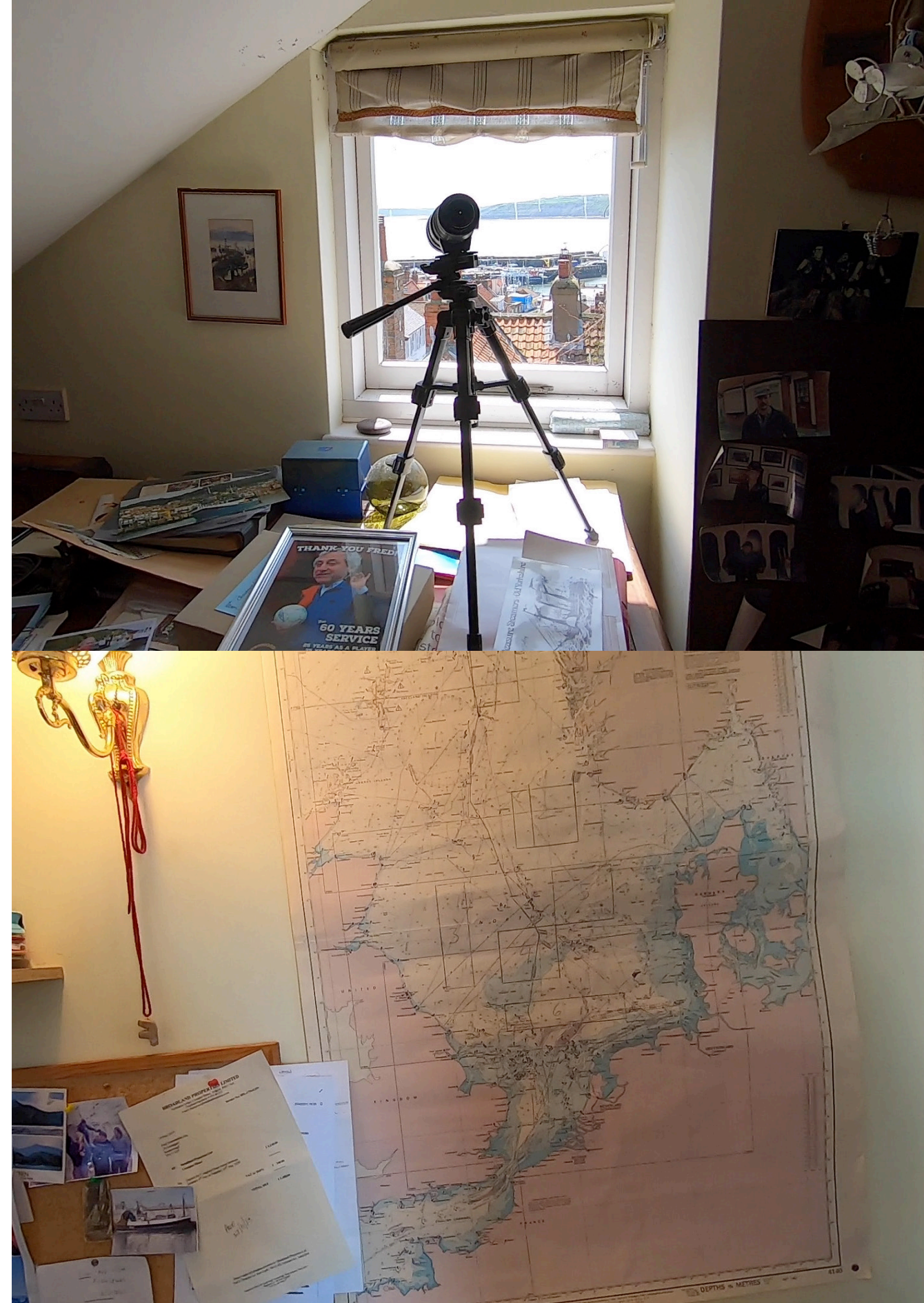
I travelled up to North Yorkshire by train, where Andrew Fletcher (printmaker) had kindly offered to host me. Scarborough is a coastal town with a rich generational history of fishery, yet over the past decade, there had been a steep decline in the industry due to environmental pollution, political regulations and the mechanisation of modern fishing boats. Now in the town, there are “virtually no traditional fishermen left”,¹⁵ and when I inquired why it is, one fisherman told me that “the ocean is not suitable for fishing anymore”.¹⁶ According to literature, similar patterns of decline can be observed in other Northern coastal areas, yet as a town historically built from its dependence on the ocean, the impact was especially clear in Scarborough. Unused boats were tethered to the harbour, and fishmongers that sold locally-caught seafood were difficult to find.

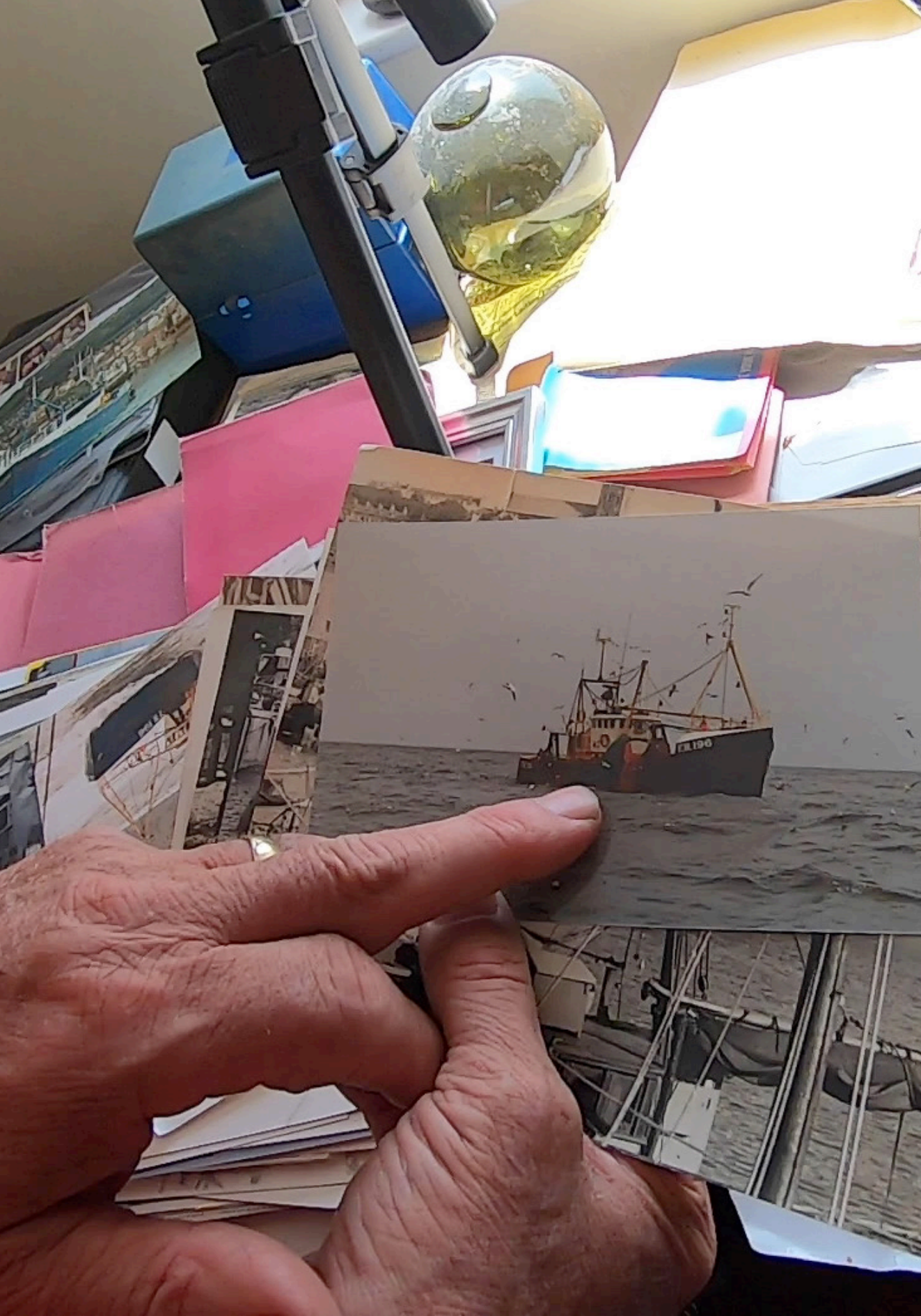
I was more independent in this latter part of the research trip, as the planned objective was to converse with the local retired fishermen – whose livelihoods had depended on the water and who have spent their lives navigating on the sea – and to understand their unique (and changing) relationships to water. Before the trip, I had attempted to contact several fishermen, yet was only able to arrange a meeting with one of them in advance. Subsequently through social networks in situ, I was able to speak in depth with three retired fishermen including a lighthouse keeper.

The go-along method required modification from the previous use, as I was not residing at the fishermen’s homes as I had at the primary participants’ in Oxford. Therefore, the research was less focused on engaging with their daily routines or mundane dialogues, but instead was directed at concentrated conversations. The interactions were shorter (ranging from two to three hours per participant), were scheduled in advance, and the circumstances differed for each participant. In most cases, the walking-interview method was employed, in which I would walk along the town’s harbour (or their chosen locations) with the participants and engage them in conversations. As time was restricted, I would introduce myself and my project (as I had in Oxford), and then ease them into conversation by asking about their relationship to water. I had initially been afraid

¹⁵ Author conversation with Fred Normandale, May 2022

¹⁶ *ibid.*





that the prompt would unsettle the participants due to its vastness, yet such worry was futile, as every fisherman swiftly responded to my question – “I grew up on the sea!”; “This [pointing to the ocean] was my playground.”; “I could not remember *not* being on the sea!”. For the fishermen, having water below their feet was a state of normalcy since childhood, as seamanship was passed down through generations. From this first question, the conversations tumbled, provoking further personal stories, local history, and professional knowledge, as well as revealing their unique relationships with water as people who have spent most of their lives on the fishing boats. For instance, I noticed that they talked about navigating on the sea like most people would about land, mentioning the locations of specific currents and underwater ‘landmarks’ as if they were describing familiar maps. In avoiding the reduction to a dialectic ‘question-and-answer’ format, I was especially aware of being highly responsive, asking for clarifications without deterring their thoughts, and engaging with relevant questions that stemmed directly from the flow of their narratives.

The topics of conversation were wide-ranging: Stories about sailing in extreme weather; how the navigation system has changed over the years; seamanship education; gutting herrings; the many lives lost on the sea; saving lives; sweaters knitted by the fishermen’s wives; superstitions; the role of the lighthouse keeper. It was also interesting to note that although these conversations were conducted separately with three fishermen, there were themes that naturally overlapped, such as the discussion on the decline of the local fishing industry, where each participant provided different reasons (politics and fishing quotas, increasing mechanisation of the fishing industry, and ocean pollution).

Moreover, similar to the walks in Oxford, specific locations and environments provoked unique conversations, particularly memories related to place. The sensory experience of walking along the harbour together with specific buildings and landmarks conjured raw modes of storytelling that emerged from ‘streams of thoughts’ rather than ‘logical narratives’. The immersion in the environment rendered their storytelling more fragmented, as they let the experience of feeling and being in the place itself to fill in the ineffable gaps in their stories. As recorded in my journal:

As we walk, he looks up at the bluest sky. I follow his gaze. A small cloud floats faraway on the horizon, but every other corner of the sky is a luminous echo of the ocean. “This”,

he points to the sky before looking at me, “is the best weather for fishing”. Then he tells me about the best catch he had as a fisherman. “It was a day just like this one”, he starts...

Furthermore, certain objects prompted and guided the conversations:

We arrive at a bench at the seafront, and Oaksie suddenly tells me, “stay here”. Perplexed, I open my mouth to ask where he’s going, but he is already walking away. He’s turned 90 last week, and yet his strides are strong and brisk as I watch his blue-sweatered broad back disappear inside a house. As instructed, I sit down on the bench and watch the tides roll back and forth.

After a minute, I find Oaksie standing next to me with two thick photo albums in his arms. I scoot over and he sits next to me, taking one album and opening the cover. It’s a black-and-white photo of a street lined with old houses. He rests his index finger on the photo, and then points to the harbour street we’ve just been walking on. “See that concrete pavement? It used to be where the fishing boats landed, and we would unload the catch there. Tons and tons of herrings”. The salty breeze picks up his raspy voice and blends the syllables with the tides.

As he carefully goes through the album, I start to notice how, when he looks at the landscape now, he is seeing the old town from decades ago. Through his eyes, the buildings are just like in the monochrome photographs on his lap. At first I was listening to him talk, trying to imagine what he must be experiencing. But very quickly, his stories and the photographs engulf me, and I realise that I, too, am vividly experiencing this place through his memories. It’s magical.

* * *

“So this is what I was talking about”, Fred opens his closet, and takes out a pile of neatly-folded navy sweaters, “these are my ganseys”.¹⁷ “You see the pattern? It’s different for every port. So if the fisherman drowns, his body can be identified and returned to the right place”.

¹⁷ Ganseys = hand-knitted traditional sweaters that fishermen used to wear during their days on fishing boats.





He takes another deep blue sweater in his hands and carefully unfolds it. “My wife knits them for me and they’re magnificent”. He tells me that it takes more than three months of meticulous knitting to make one sweater. “For our very first one, we planned these patterns on the back of an empty cornflake box over breakfast”. As he unfolds each gansey, a different story unfolds. These sweaters must be like books for him, each one containing a different part of his life. “Strangely, I’ve also parted with a few...”, he continues...

As illustrated in the above extracts, the participants were keen to share their stories in their own ways. Two of the participants brought out their photo albums to explain their stories, giving me visual accounts of their thought processes. One participant spontaneously invited me to his house, where he showed me his attic office with navigation charts, maps, books, fishing attire and photographs.

Similar to the engagement of the local community in Oxford, the research in Scarborough was also enriched through spontaneous encounters. Word got around that I was gathering stories of water, and I was introduced to a number of people through the word of mouth during my stay. Through these ‘social currents’, I was able to also hear stories from diverse perspectives, including a conversation with a fisherman’s wife who provided me with a woman’s perspective on fishing; a local policeman with unique responsibilities on water safety; and many volunteers at the Scarborough Maritime Heritage Centre. Subjecting myself to unplanned encounters became one of the most enriching aspects of the go-along, which was induced by following the fluidity of these social interactions that shape the ‘living experiences’ of the participants.

Other Modes of Research & Documentation

In parallel with the conversations throughout the trip, I was constantly supplementing my knowledge through secondary research. Much of the independent time was dedicated to deepening my knowledge of the participants’ topics of conversation, as they would often provide me with books, local newspapers, and references relating to the subjects. Not only could I clarify, contextualise, and gain knowledge for my own benefit, but it also enabled me to engage more actively with the participants’ expertise. Notably, by proactively researching into topics arising from the dialogues, I was able to feed my knowledge back

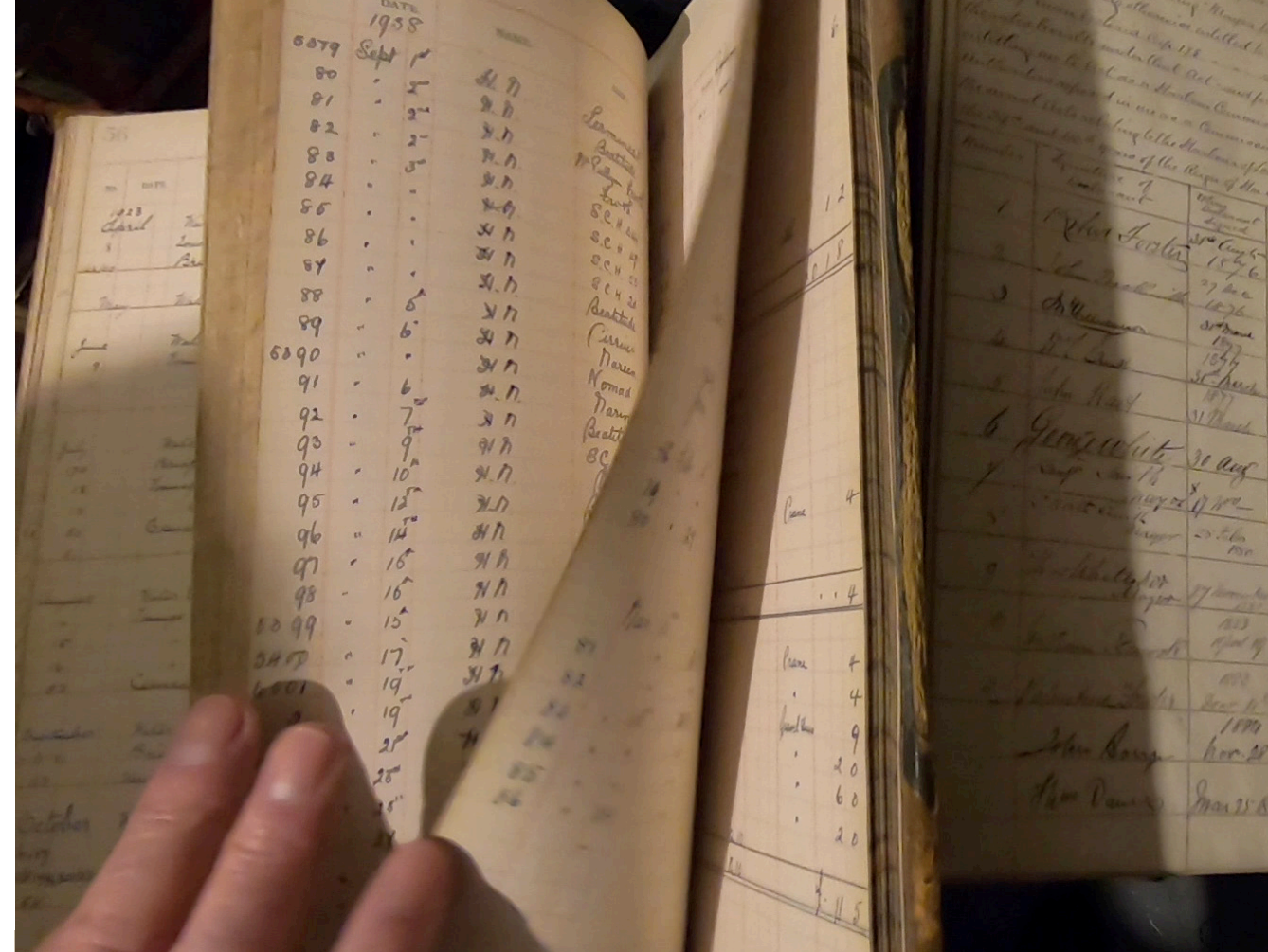


into the subsequent conversations, which allowed for deeper, more nuanced sites of interaction.

Along with literature, the archival research at the Maritime Heritage Centre had been especially useful in contextualising the conversations with the fishermen. Thousands of artefacts, photographs, documents, objects, books and reference files could be accessed, where I had spent hours piecing together the stories I had just heard. It was also essential to familiarise myself with maritime jargon (i.e. “skipper” = captain of a fishing vessel) and the town’s historical events (i.e. “The Lifeboat Disaster” = sea tragedy in 1954 due to heavy storm) in order to hold engaging and responsive conversations with the participants. At the Maritime Heritage Centre, the team also guided me through the temperature-controlled basement archive, where they offered me access to valuable items such as pre-War harbour books, letters, and garments.

During the two weeks of the research trip, I had kept both a logbook and a journal. The logbook, briefly mentioned earlier, consisted of the more ‘objective’ accounts of the course of the day, including observation notes, weather, meals, places, quotes, descriptive sensory cues, recommended references, books, maps, and major conversation topics. This information was deemed more factual and largely devoid of emotional or interpretive input. In the logbook, small details that would seem insignificant at the time were also noted down, as they would later become valuable in revisiting and contextualising the array of documented materials.

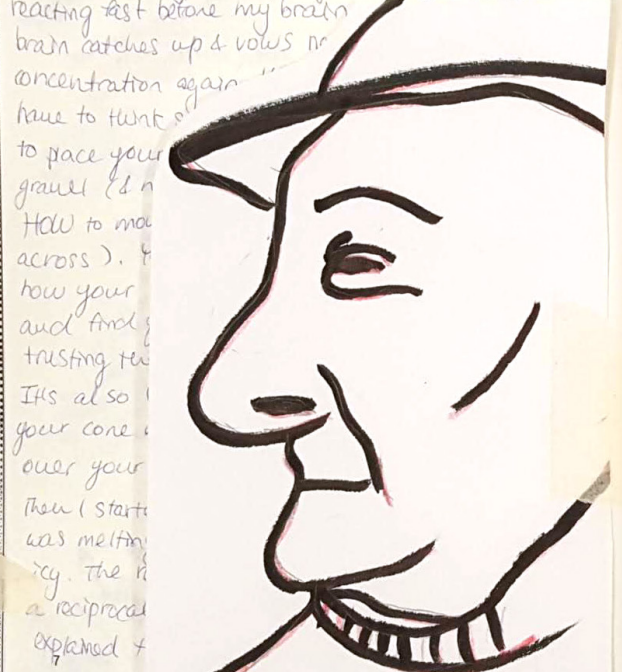
On the other hand, the journal was used to record the subjective, personal account of the day, including my own reflections on the experiences and immersion into the participants’ lives and stories. Building upon the immersive ‘living research’ of the go-alongs, journalling enabled the materialisation of my heightened sensory, emotional and intellectual engagements with place-bound experiences, which were often absent from the more ‘factual’ forms of documentation. Moreover, the journal also generated a space to explore experimental writing in situ. Many entries were fluid streams of consciousness with both textual and visual writings; such as poetic recounts of sensory experiences, fragments of thoughts sketched out, reflections on memory, drawings that captured the ambience of places, emotional connections, confusions and questions, snippets of fleeting moments, and lyrical explorations of conceptual ideas. Many reflective writings were also focused on the interpersonal. For instance, reflecting on the slow pace of one of my participants revealed his altered embodiment of time and space, thereby highlighting the otherness of lived experiences and the particularity of my situatedness.



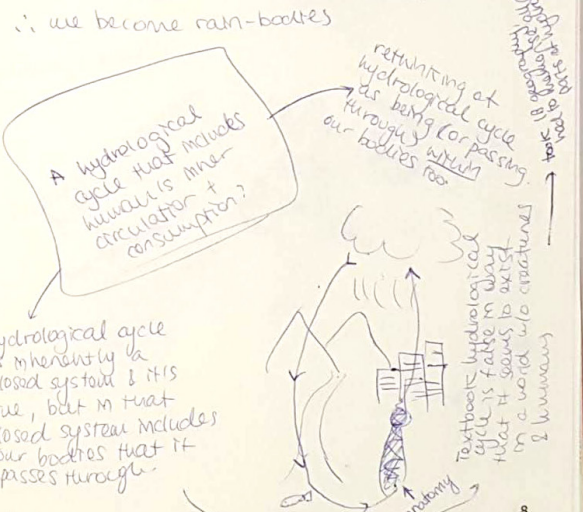
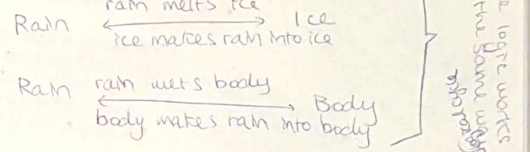
WAKE UP 4:56 AM - WORK ON TA FEEDBACK, bed = wooden bunkers
 WEATHER: clear, humid but with clouds. Pale.
 no wind.
 BREAKFAST: free to take - coconut yogurt & bread
 curtain opens "make" morning water brought
 yourself at home in this morning by Fruit
 WEATHER - overcast, drizzling wind
 (bird song (which birds check later))
 Pick up Miqua from bus station. walk 30 min
 Narrow passageway, blooming honeysuckle.
 CONVERSATION - smells of honeysuckle
 Fast walking pace, anatomy of the nose
 turkeys, point out nectar guides → RESEARCH! (TER!)
 diff. species → like airplanes landing
 LUNCH - salad, bread, paté
 HORSE SKELETON moved outside, assemble,
 deassemble. skeletons on kitchen counter
 → 1948-1960 → medical student
 BATH in brass bathtub. Patina, sound echoes.
 door to make-slip bath, so set up sign on staircase
 DINNER - smoked salmon, scrambled eggs
 with Sonja (documentary film director)
 CONVERSATION about freezing arctic trip,
 truth & fiction in documentaries
 EVENING WALK around meadows, sunset, flying
 geese, play pool sticks, "the river is low"
 CONVERSATION - tea, housebuilding



I was walking just now outside. It had snowed last week, but the temp. had warmed in the last couple of days and the streets & roads were becoming especially icy. It's like a skating rink! It's interesting how much we have to use our brains & bodies when we're out in this weather. The moment my mind starts to think of something else but "do not slip!", and the moment my eyes leave the ground before me, I find myself slipping, and by body reacting first before my brain brain catches up & vows no concentration again.



→ so when rain falls on a ramp it becomes ice, but ice also renders the ramp into ice. So basically, rain becomes ice & ice becomes rain. It's all equilibrium. Gradually, the equilibrium might shift and it might become more rain, or more ice, depending on the temp transfer. This can be applied to our bodily relationship with rain, too. Rain hits us and gets absorbed by our skin (moisture + coldness) but we also become partly rain, we make the rampdrop human, or at least, part of our bodies.



A note to readers of *The Asymptotes*

Many readers of this paper may ask: "how much of these stories are actually in *The Asymptotes*?", especially as the book resists to be a straightforward *recount* of the trip. Some readers may recognise how this research trip has been transformed from the conversations into the final book, although I have avoided making direct connections to prevent providing a singular 'explanation' of the book's narrative. Moreover, this paper only mentions a meagre portion of the boundless range of conversations I have had over the two weeks.

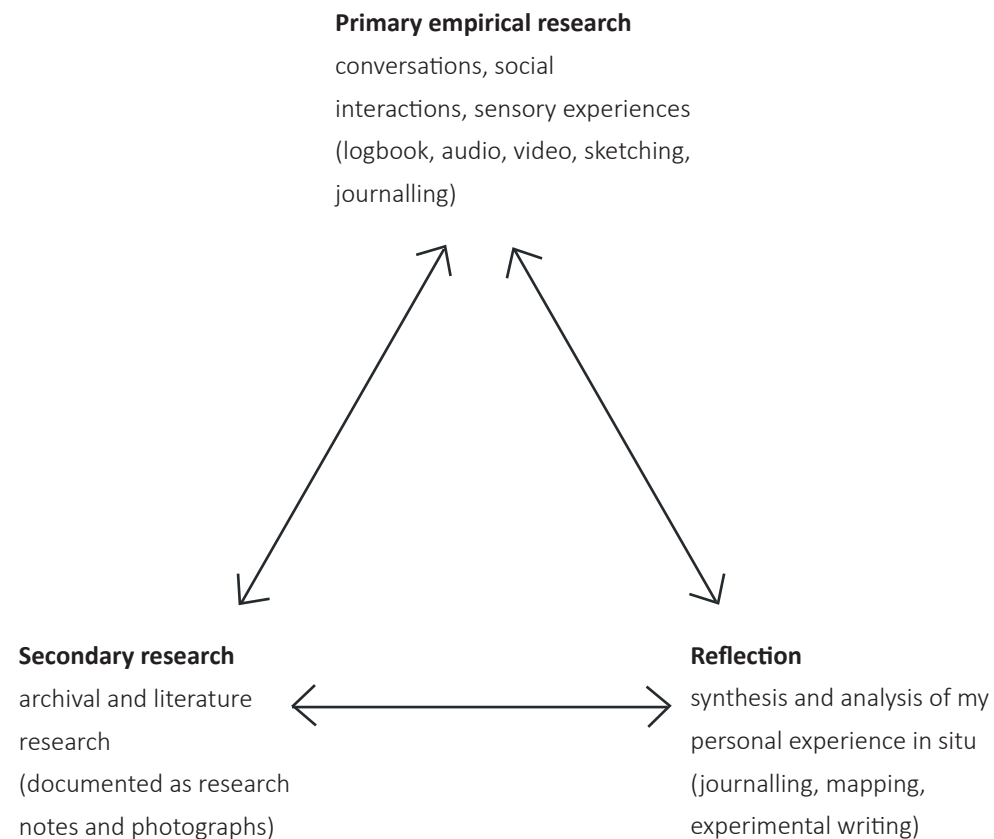
It is worth noting, however, that all of the book's content is based on the conversations, encounters, reflections, and research performed during (with some before and after) the trip, which have sometimes been used as raw materials, yet most have been synthesised, shape-shifted, and rearticulated through experimental writing. Furthermore, some ideas that were uttered or briefly mentioned in conversations have been expanded into larger stories through additional research. Therefore, no story in the book is of a singular 'factual transcript', but instead is an alchemy of polyphonic voices that blend together on the same idea from multiple geotemporal perspectives.

More on how the process of experimental writing has transformed the stories are examined in Chapter Four, and my choice as a designer to protect the autonomy of *The Asymptotes* as a book in its own right is discussed in Chapter Seven.

Figures 3.1, 3.2
 Left top: logbook of a day's account
 Left bottom: journal with experimental writing in situ

Notes from the Go-Along

Various degrees of ‘immersiveness’ were employed in the mobile methods of research – from being fully immersed in the participants’ everyday routines in Oxford; walking conversations with the fishermen lasting several hours; to the regular re-visits to the Maritime Heritage Centre archive enabling shorter spurts of dialogues with diverse individuals. This primary empirical research was supplemented by independent reflections as well as archival and literature research *in situ*, which allowed the constant feedback loop of knowledge, broadly illustrated as follows:



Moreover, despite the research being conducted at two main locations consecutively, the research blended across these two geotemporal contexts. For example, new threads of conversations emerged from recounting my experience in Oxford to the participants in Scarborough, as the latter participants would extract a fragment from my recount, and elaborate on the topic through their own knowledge. Through this once-removed, yet organic interaction across strangers due to my own movement, I had become a witness and a facilitator of such incidental ‘dialogues’:

5 May, Oxford: “It’s a skylark”, Sarah says as we walk under the blue sky, now filled with a ceaseless note of birdsong. “Sky-lark?” I repeat the bird’s name – it must be the seventh species I’ve learned about today. I stop walking and dart my eyes around to catch a glimpse of the bird, to no avail. “You can’t see him now”, she says, “because they’re so high up, about three hundred to four hundred feet”. Then she tells me how during the breeding season, the male skylark would hover and sing at the top of his lungs, before closing his wings and plummeting down. “She’d join him if she’s interested. If he has no luck, he has to go all the way up and sing again”.

6 May, Oxford: I’ve been drawn to skylarks since we stood under that cloudless sky yesterday. I actually can’t pinpoint exactly why. Perhaps it’s the fact that I could hear the bird’s piercing voice so clearly, soaring across the sky, and yet not being able to see him with my eyes. Or perhaps it’s about falling, or about losing control – because we associate birds with flight... but the fact that he falls – there’s something alluring about that. I wanted to know more about the skylark’s fall, and I spent my early morning today researching about them. I did find a lot about their taxonomy, habitat, ecology, or about their symbolism in poetry. But I couldn’t find much detail on the falling, although many sources mention the ‘plummet’. Perhaps it’s still a mystery.

12 May, Scarborough: After breakfast with a cup of coffee in hand, I tell Fletch about the skylark conversation I had with Sarah some days ago, and how I’ve been researching into them for almost a week now. I ask him if he knows about skylarks and he responds by describing the birdsong in his own words, “the sound seems to mirror the landscape – it’s beautiful but haunting at the same time.” Then he starts telling me a story. “I have a very vivid memory of a skylark hovering...”

Furthermore, provided that the mobile methods, reflective practices, and secondary research were all fundamental in constructing such 'living' continuity of research, the entire experience can be understood as a *single unceasing go-along*. In other words, due to the highly immersive nature of the method, I argue that it cannot be analysed separately from the other modes of research that are inherently woven into the fabric of the researcher's living experience.

Such 'expanded' go-along within practice-based research illuminates how the external factors (social, environmental, habitual, historical) shape the course of one's research, and uncovers the unknowability, uncertainty, and fluctuation of both the participants' and researcher's living experiences. In empirically practicing the go-along, I have identified key practical findings to supplement the original theoretical research, which I will discuss below.

Firstly, the go-along becomes less 'contrived' when there is more than one participant present. In a study outlining an ethnographic fieldwork of urban neighbourhoods, sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) observes that "conducting go-alongs with more than one person at a time" as being productive, as it can "reduce some of the obvious discomfort that a number of informants feel about being followed in, and queried about, their mundane local practices by an ethnographer".¹⁸ She also notes that although there can never be a completely 'natural' social situation in the company of a researcher, the "less contrived ones stand a much better chance of uncovering aspects of individual lived experience that frequently remain hidden".¹⁹ After similarly observing this pattern during my research trip, I consciously attempted to engage more than one participant whenever suitable. This enabled me to also witness the interactions that happen amongst the participants when I am not directly implicated in the conversations. In some circumstances, however, it was more fitting to have one-on-one conversations due to the intimacy and concentration of the interactions, especially when the participants were keen to tell longer stories. Moreover, with the increasing number of participants, it became

18 Kusenbach, 2003: 464

19 *ibid.*

difficult to document the interactions due to constant interjections and interruptions, overlapping or drowned-out voices, and splits into concurrent smaller dialogues, which are inherent to everyday modes of social encounters.

Secondly, the responsive nature of the go-along extends beyond passively responding to their narratives. A conversation is built collectively by both the participant(s) and the researcher – it is an exchange of give-and-take. Yet research could often become extractive due to the lack of reciprocity on behalf of the researcher, which is sometimes balanced through (monetary) compensation.²⁰ The value of this research, however, was in the knowledge, living experiences, and interactions. Therefore, I was constantly aware of actively engaging in conversations (instead of passively listening) by mutually contributing with my own knowledge, stories and thoughts in return. In so doing, the go-along interactions became a reciprocal *sharing*, and a way of building knowledge *together* with the participants. During the trip I was still a researcher, yet more importantly, I had become a participant in my own research, a guest, a listener, a talker, and a person to simply spend some time with.

Perhaps the sheer enthusiasm and heart-warming willingness of the participants arose from such interactions. Although one must be aware of how and to what extent the participants' behaviours may change in the company of the researcher, this influence is not necessarily a given negative. In fact, I found that my curiosity empowered the participants to contribute their knowledge which they might not usually have the opportunity to share, and many got involved in my research as if it were their own – by personally inviting in more participants, actively offering their stories, and returning eagerly with new knowledge relating to our past conversations. As one participant told me: "We're really curious – it's not often that a stranger comes and asks you for a story about water. And we're also excited – it's not often that you *get* to share your stories of water".²¹

20 Monetary compensation was not the case in any part of the research in this thesis.

21 Author conversation with Andrew Fletcher, May 2022

Third, during this research trip, the multimodal means of research and documentation attempted to capture and understand the experiences and oral histories in their rawest forms. Together, the extremely subjective (i.e. reflecting on my own emotional experiences and memories) and the more objective (i.e. recounting events as ‘facts’, photographs, transcripts of audio recordings) forms of documentation unveiled various dimensions of the experience, which can be assembled to re-construct a more phenomenologically ‘holistic’ account of the research. Nevertheless, through practicing the go-along, I realised how much of the collected material is highly dependent on when and how the researcher decides to document (or not to document) the interactions. Even the ‘objective data’ is already highly biased the moment the researcher makes the decision. Although the same can generally be said for other qualitative research methods, the go-along requires increased attention to the implications of these choices, as it gathers data from immersive *living* experiences. Although such bias comes with its strengths in practice-based research, it is crucial that the practitioner continuously assesses the rightness of the chosen documentation, while critically considering how it may shape both the creative process and the outcome.

Furthermore, as an organic method without clear beginnings and endings which lacks the demarcation of ‘sessions’, it is difficult to decide precisely *when* to document. Should the researcher document conversations only when it ‘feels’ relevant? Or should all mundane dialogues be recorded? What about silences – if there is a sustained period when the participants are individually completing chores without talking, should that be documented? And if so, how? These questions were repeatedly considered throughout the research, together with considerations of sensitivity, suitability and practicality of documentation methods.

The Hydro-logics of the Go-along

This chapter discussed the go-along as a highly lived, situated and responsive research method employed during the research trip (objective 1). This method enabled the gathering of materials (objective 3) which were documented in visual, textual and auditory modes. The collected materials consist of oral histories, dialogues, sensory experiences, archival research, literature, and reflections, in which reflective and experimental writing was used as a means to understand and synthesise the practitioner’s experiences in situ

(objective 2). It is worth emphasising that the richness of this research trip was beyond what can (or should) be described in this paper, through ceaseless conversations, unexpected encounters, and fleeting moments with more people than I can mention here. The chapter extracts a meagre portion of these encounters in order to textually analyse the process of practicing research hydro-logically.

This empirical research expands the foundational understanding of the hydro-logic into a practical domain. The hydro-logic, which is inherently a *living* process, demands that one actively responds to external landscapes and seeks confluence with other bodies of water. In shifting the figuration of the hydro-logic into a mode of *doing*, this research trip provided a highly fluid form of practicing. As the term ‘go-along’ already suggests, this method demands that the practitioner ‘goes along’ with the flow of events and circumstances by accompanying individuals through a portion of their lives. While in the social sciences, this ethnographic method is used to study specific behaviours of subjects, in this practice-based research context, the purpose was to gather materials that organically emerged *as a result of* this hydro-logic mode of doing research. This will then be used as bottom-up *agential materials* towards the design artefact in the following chapters. Therefore, emphases were placed on voices, conversations, dialogues and oral storytelling as well as the practitioner’s unique experiential knowledge in situ, centred around narratives of people’s relationships to bodies of water – be it a scientific relationship to its physics, a landscape to grow up on, a direct source of livelihood and history, their own anatomical watery human existences, or their confluence with others.

This research method enabled me to put myself in a position where external factors greatly shaped the course of my creative process, thereby inviting uncertainty and unknowability resulting from unfamiliar routines, places and lives. This required the delicate balance between relinquishing control in order to be guided by the flows of other people’s currents, and actively encouraging these flows to occur. In so doing, the practitioner is *shaped* by the flow of research, *shapes* the flow of research, and *reflects on* the flow of research, demanding that she is immersed in the unceasing flow of living experiences, yet simultaneously is able to witness the unfolding of her research from the broader contexts in which experiences occur. Hence during the go-along, it was critical to provide a dual focus by combining ‘objective’ recordings of events with subjectively mediated interpretations, allowing a heightened “aware[ness] of how different elements of our biographies, existing experiences, and elements of our identities become significant

during research”.²²

The practice of go-along, then, returns us to Neimanis’ hydro-logic in which individual ‘Bodies of Water’ are understood as being highly shaped by the speeds, pathways, and materialities of specific watery flows – with borders constantly being breached and renegotiated, seeking confluence, spilling and absorbing.²³ Such hydro-logical quality makes space for “uncertainty, changeability, flow and flux”,²⁴ inherent within this go-along method.

With the rich collection of materials from this journey, I started to search for a form that would capture the hydro-logical quality of these intertwining stories, encounters, voices, and senses. How could this gathered research be incorporated, presented, or reinterpreted as a book? How do I keep the hydro-logics of the research alive through experimental writing, and do justice to its rich multilayeredness?

During the research trip, I also had the opportunity to visit the Victoria & Albert Museum in London where they had a small exhibition display titled *Landscape and Language in Artists’ Books* (displayed Feb-May 2022). Located at a staircase landing, the exhibition included experimental books from the National Library’s collections by pioneer Land Artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton from the 1960s. Although I had been familiar with most artists included in the exhibition, seeing their works in forms of the less-known artists’ books had been a major eye-opener. This exhibition provoked me to rethink what the suitable form of a ‘book’ could look like. Specifically, considering that my central documentation methods encompassed textual and visual components, why forcefully flatten all the materials into words? For instance, the journal was an amalgamation of writings, sketches, and visual mappings of thoughts – as drawings morphed into text, and text into writing. Wouldn’t disregarding these multimodal sites of merging and friction be counterproductive to seeking a form that captures the fluid and quintessentially hydro-logical nature of the gathered materials? This demanded the reconsidering of the conventional textual understanding of ‘writing a book’ into one that

is more ‘phenomenologically living’. Accordingly, the secondary research question was further specified:

How does the hydro-logics inform and shape the book-as-*process*? How can **multimodal** nonfiction book-writing perform research as an emerging site of knowledge production?

The above research question together with the empirical findings direct this research towards operating within the affordances of multimodal experimental writings. In particular, what does it mean to use the dialogues between textual *and* visual writings as design materials? And how might exploring the contemporaneity of the printed book channel the hydro-logic process? The following chapter will recontextualise the research direction within the theoretical framework of multimodal book-writing.

22 Pink, 2013: 37

23 *ibid.*: 31

24 Henwood, 2021: 77

Chapter Three CONFLUENCES

Where Visual and Textual Practices Meet

When framing ‘writing’ in the context of design, what exactly constitutes ‘writing’ could become debatable. One may argue that ‘writing’ is simply a sequence of letters or symbols (including Chinese pictograms and contemporary emojis). Yet more broadly, if a composer ‘writes’ music and a choreographer ‘writes’ movement, could a perfumer ‘write’ smells? While acknowledging the expansive sensory nature of the term, ‘writing’ in this paper will delimit its scope to denote textual and visual writings – that is, both the experimental practice and the result of crafting a *sequence* of words and images. The stress on *sequence* indicates that not all words and images are considered as writing; for example, a single painting or an object which do not rely on sequentiality for meaning-making would not be considered as ‘writing’ for the purpose of this research. In other words, ‘writing’ in this context requires that individual words, sentences, lines, shapes, and images produce meaning through their directional and temporal relationalities.

In the light of visual and textual writings, working towards a book takes on another significance. Namely, a fundamental axis of a book is its *paginal sequentiality*, beyond simply being a carrier of its contents.¹ Our interactions with the book-as-object, then, are coded with the expectation of continuity, progression, and temporal narrative, as

we experience the pages in directional succession. Accordingly, it demands that the practitioner productively thinks in *relations* rather than in discrete components. Indeed, in practicing phenomenological ‘living research’, one must examine the “borderline existence of two or more worlds” as a confluence that is “*a mixed stream of fluids...* something multi-layered, not known, always to be created anew” (original emphasis).² Hence, using multimodal book-writing is especially productive in examining the hydro-logic process, which seeks to examine the *confluence* of various materialities – be it the inevitable permeability of watery bodies (Chapter One), the conversations emerging at the junction of multiple voices (Chapter Two), or the generative dialogue between visual and textual modalities (current chapter).

What does the intrinsic form of the ‘book’ afford? Moreover, how would the *process* of multimodal writing grant a space to experimentally synthesise the gathered materials? And how would multimodal book-writing contribute to the understanding of the hydro-logics as a mode of *doing*? This chapter will contextualise such discussions within the wider theoretical discourse of multimodal books.

Book-writing as Design Process?

The making of books is a multidisciplinary field, firmly grounded within historical, educational, literary, linguistic, psychological and socio-cultural domains. The notion of investigating book-as-*process* has been applied by scholars in participatory studies, for instance, as community programmes (i.e. Barratt-Pugh and Haig, 2020), as forms of art therapy (i.e. Cobb and Negash, 2010), or within pedagogical contexts to develop language and cognitive abilities (i.e. Brown and Towell, 2015; Wei and Ma, 2020). In all of the above studies, instead of being concerned with the quality of the outcome, the *processes* of creating the books and their transformative potentials are the topics of scrutiny. However, exploring how the process of book-writing – which is enacted in the fluid process of researching, writing, designing, editing, printing, disseminating, reading, and criticising – influences a *design practice* is still in its dawn. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to fill such gap

¹ Macken, 2018

² Salva and Nuutinen, 2003: 532 quoted in Krantz, 2016: 407

by examining how book-writing *performs* practice-based research.

Perhaps the studies that partially resonate with my endeavour exist in the making of artists' books, such as the doctoral dissertation by Elizabeth Ann Kealy-Morris, *The Artist's Book: Making as Embodied Knowledge of Practice and the Self* (2016), in which she explores her identity through autoethnographic accounts. Much of her investigation is dedicated to performing research on her personal history as a visual form of autobiographical expression. Through photographic collages and hand bookbinding, the artist evidenced the "embodied understanding of one's identity and creativity by encasing the self within the [photographic] book".³ Another more 'procedural' approach is Ching-Yu Chang's *Little Mouse: a journey – The Making of a Picture-book Artwork* (2017). In this study, the artist recounts her step-by-step process towards the creation of a fictional children's picture book, from determining the settings, characters, colour schemes, tone, conflicts, and plot to storyboarding and illustrating.

While studies such as these provide useful approaches, the focus of this thesis is neither on the act of artistic self-rendering (although self-expression is inherent to various degrees in any mode of creative practice), nor on the procedural account of its narrative making. Rather, the process of multimodal book-writing in this research concerns the shift of the hydro-logics from figuration to design practice, thereby directing the attention to the material and methodological implications of working towards a book. Namely, what does writing as agential *material* and *process* afford a hydro-logical design practice?

Multimodality & 'Bookness'

In literary studies, multimodal literature refers to a body of text that "feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives".⁴ Works of multimodal literature are sometimes described as 'hybrid creatures', owing to their syntheses of media and art forms that seek to destabilise the boundaries between different cognitive modes (visual, written, aural, gestural, etc.).⁵ Despite creating such

'hybrids', these various semiotic systems "do not all flow into one amorphous puddle"⁶ as Neimanis' would argue, as they each embody particular features and affordances. Multimodal studies are situated at such confluences, examining the *relationalities and responsiveness* between these modes by putting them in direct dialogue with each other.

Multimodality is by no means a recent phenomenon. The history of multimodal books dates back to early religious texts, such as the Medieval illuminated manuscripts which were decorated with intricate calligraphies and coloured patterns.⁷ In the fifteenth century, images and texts were carved into the same block to create 'block books' resembling contemporary graphic novels.⁸ With the technological advancement of the printing press, the Victorian era became the golden age of illustrated books, with John Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* becoming an iconic representation of the rising popularity of children's picture books.⁹ The 1970s saw an upsurge in artists' books, which aimed to destabilise the traditional form and function of the book, unleashed from the confines of commercial publishing.¹⁰ Multimodality gained exponential academic momentum in the mid-1990s, as the term became featured by scholars in diverse domains.¹¹ Recently, in resisting the dematerialisation of the book within the digital era, various artists, authors, and designers have continued to explore the possibilities of the printed page and test the limits of its very form and medium. Cognitive narratologist Alison Gibbons (2012) observes that contemporary multimodality exists on a spectrum "from minimal to extensive in the level of incorporation", and illustrates her claim with an array of examples including "varied typography, unusual textual layouts and page design [...], the inclusion of images (illustrative, diagrammatic, photographic), [...] play with the size, shape, and design of the codex, using cut-outs/die cuts or pop-ups, [...] metafictional writing, footnotes and self-interrogative critical voices, [or] ontological masquerade in itself".¹²

6 Neimanis, 2012: 5

7 Gibbons, 2012: 423

8 Russel, 2016

9 Gibbons, 2012: 424

10 Macken, 2018: 1

11 Jewitt et al., 2016

12 Gibbons, 2012: 420

3 Kealy-Morris, 2016: 3

4 Gibbons, 2012: 420

5 Sadokierski, 2010: 24 cited in Gibbons, 2012: 427

In the most ordinary sense, books are still conventionally understood as commercially reproducible ‘containers’ which deliver information to an audience. Yet alongside the proliferation of multimodal and digital books which push the boundaries of genre, it presents us with the ontological questions of what a book *should* and *could* be. What makes an object a book? Does it have to be bound? How many pages does it need? Does it require two covers and a spine? These questions emphasise the difficulty in generating an inclusive terminology that encompasses various types of books within the expanding spectrum of recent radical experimentations, as the formal conceptions of ‘the book’ seem to be highly elusive.¹³

However, while the genre is malleable and widely reinterpreted in radical forms, not all artefacts are necessarily ‘books’ – indeed, “a text can be inscribed on anything”, yet “it does not [automatically] make it a book”.¹⁴ Although such criticisms of the ever-expanding concept of the ‘book’ have accumulated in academia, many scholars seem to be reluctant to move beyond exposing the issue. Within such contemporary landscape of hesitations, designer and scholar Marian Macken’s frank approach to providing a set of explicit criteria for ‘bookness’ is especially fresh. In her book, *Binding Space: The Book as Spatial Practice* (2018), she identifies three key qualities of ‘bookness’: 1) elements of paginal sequentiality; 2) objecthood and structure of the book, and; 3) the act of reading. Accordingly, “if artists are unengaged with the enunciation of a book’s bookness and if a reader [...] does not gain some enhanced experience of bookness whilst negotiating its pages, chances are that the object made and experienced is merely a book made by an artist, not an artist’s book”.¹⁵

Many creatives and scholars would continue to challenge Macken’s criteria of ‘bookness’, yet contributing to such controversy on what is (or is not) considered a ‘book’ is beyond the scope of this paper. Accordingly, the purpose of this thesis is *not* to artistically radicalise the concept of the book by ‘denying’ its conventional ‘function’¹⁶

as many artists’ books may attempt. On the contrary, I actively use Macken’s criteria of ‘bookness’ as a structural framework towards the design artefact. Notably, this research operates within the book’s formal characteristics and constraints, as opposed to using the book as a loosely bound ideological *concept*. This allows the established architecture of ‘bookness’ to generate a frame in which to explore the hydro-logic fluidity, tension and contamination between visual and textual writings. Consequently, although the space of the book is used to artistically experiment with materials and ideas, theory-wise, my approach leans *less* towards the artist’s books as ‘art objects’. Instead, this thesis benefits from discourses on the semiotics of picture books, which examine the generative synthesis and frictions of modalities.

The Third Current

In literary forms that contain both visual and textual elements, the collaboration of these modes births out a ‘third current’. Various metaphors to illustrate such current is drawn from music, including “duet”, “counterpoint”, “contrapunctual”¹⁷ or “polyphony”.¹⁸ From physics, Miller suggests “interference” of wave theory, alluding to how separate wave patterns congregate to form a new pattern.¹⁹ Moebius describes this relationship as “plate tectonics” of images and words,²⁰ drawing from geological imagery of two plates moving together. What all of these metaphors stress is the meaning-making potential that derives from the synergetic interactions between these modalities, beyond merely being a total sum of the individual elements.²¹ It thus becomes necessary for the practitioner to recognise the limits and affordances of each mode, and the generative ways in which they partake in such transactions.

The scholarships on picture books have long studied the simultaneity of modal relationships intrinsic to its method of storytelling. For instance, the taxonomies of image-

17 Cech, 1983: 118, Pullman, 1989: 167, Ward and Fox, 1984: 21 cited in Sipe, 1998: 97

18 Robertson and Hetherington, 2018: 377

19 Miller, 1992: 95 cited in Sipe, 1998: 97

20 Moebius, 1986: 143 cited in Sipe, 1998: 98

21 Strnad and Hewitt, 2021

13 Macken, 2018: 2

14 Smith, 1996 quoted in Paton, 2011: 22

15 Paton, 2011: 23

16 Calvert, 2017:11

text intersections by Len Unsworth (et al.) are widely cited in literature. He proposes: *concurrency*, where “one mode elaborates on the meaning of the other by further specifying or describing it”;²² *augmentation*, where either the text or image may extend or add new meanings to the other;²³ and *divergence*, where the “action in the text and image are ‘at variance’ to each other”.²⁴ I would add to this framework that one must also consult the ‘image-ability’ of text (such as typeface, textboxes, white spaces, composition). Here, it is useful to draw from contemporary literary critic Johanna Drucker’s *Diagrammatic Writing* (2013), in which she demonstrates the page as being a dynamic spatial “scene of vectors and forces” of the literary work.²⁵ In her book, the graphic presentations self-reflexively exhibit the textual content, including arrangement, organisation, size, hierarchy, and other features that contribute to the production of meaning. While expanding into graphical analysis or visual epistemology is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to consider the agency of these spatial elements with any mode of book design.

Living Multimodality

Any living experience is fundamentally multimodal. We comprehend the world through the synthesis of information that is delivered from our sensory perceptions (taste, smell, vision, hearing, touch, proprioception). Multimodal books thus highlight the phenomenologically embodied experience – the *living experience* – and is “closer to our experiential processing of reality”.²⁶ This does not imply that more conventional forms of literature are not interpreted multimodally. Claiming so would dismiss the imaginative capacities of the literary experience, as well as the interaction between the reader’s body in relation to the artefact and the locative context.²⁷ Rather, multimodal books “are self-conscious of their material form, playing upon the integrative nature of cognition and

22 Daly and Unsworth, 2011: 62

23 Unsworth, 2006: 1176

24 Unsworth, 2006: 1176 cited in Callow, 2020: 124

25 Drucker, 2013: 4

26 Gibbons, 2010: 100

27 *ibid.*: 100

embodied nature of reading”.²⁸ They explicitly ask the reader to attend visually to the surface of the page, and to cognise meaning from the creative synthesis of text, image, and tactility, to “decipher not only verbal language but also other codes and languages”.²⁹ Moreover, given that multimodal texts “leav[e] a lot unsaid”, each reader must navigate through the “gaps” in their own way.³⁰ Thus despite the diversity in reading experiences of more traditional book forms, with multimodal literature, its inexhaustibility is significantly manifold. Accordingly, multimodal books, which reinforce the “many possible pathways through the textworld”,³¹ highlight the multilayered and subjectively-situated nature of phenomenological awareness.

A multimodal narrative, then, becomes a two-fold story of consciousness; firstly due to its living and sensory qualities experienced by the reader, and secondly as it demands that the practitioner consciously *crafts* these qualities into the artefact. To do so, the practitioner must become aware of how the particularities and affordances of modalities “combine to create a *book experience*” (original emphasis),³² and to be able to “stag[e] the reader’s experience through pacing and range of movement”.³³ Indeed, Gibbons suggests that multimodal books shift the focus “from reader to user”, “from narrator to narrator-presenter”, “from reading to transmodal construction of narrative meaning”, and from “writing to *designing*” (added emphasis).³⁴ In this vein, book-writing precisely becomes a process of *designing living experiences*.

Such experiences of multimodal books resist linearity. Whereas verbal text demands directional, sequential reading (even when the content is structured atemporally – since one consumes the words from left to right in the English language), images present a simultaneity of elements, acting as interruptions of the flow by seducing us to “sto[p] and look”.³⁵ Multimodality operates within such continual tension between “our impulse

28 *ibid.*: 100

29 Hallet 2009: 150 quoted in Plate, 2018

30 Salisbury and Styles, 2012 cited in Watkins, 2019: 7

31 Lemke 1993 quoted in Sipe, 1998: 101

32 Stout, 2007: 181

33 Burdick, 1996

34 Gibbons, 2012: 421

35 Sipe, 1998: 101

to gaze at the pictures” and to “not interrupt the temporal narrative flow”.³⁶ Therefore, despite being bound to its paginal and textual sequentiality inherent to ‘bookness’, a multimodal book “loosens the tyranny of one-way flow”³⁷ by employing the distinct features of the cognitive modes of our living experiences. Accordingly, it demands rereading – for the possibilities of the text, images, or the image-text relationships are inexhaustive, inviting multi-interpretive uncertainty and speculation.

The Hydro-logics of Multimodal Books

The previous chapter ended with a search for a ‘form that captures’ the hydro-logic nature of the research trip. In multimodally documenting the watery stories and experiences within the living, fluid, and responsive nature of the research, I have found value in the dialogue between textual and visual writings. This encouraged me to rethink what a ‘book’ could be, beyond the original textually-envisaged form. However, given that this tendency towards multimodality had been an organic progression of the empirical research, it required further theoretical contextualisation. This is not to doubt or undermine the result of such ‘organic progression’ of the practice, nor to imply that experiential knowledge cannot be justified without existing theories. On the contrary, this chapter actively *encouraged* such inclination by *supplementing* the flow with existing discourses. Ultimately, in order to be guided by the research questions, it was necessary that I deepen my knowledge and assess the suitability of the established direction through additional research.

By grounding my approach on Macken’s notion of ‘bookness’, it generates a structural scope through which the journey towards the design artefact can be examined. Furthermore, I identified the semiotic and material theories of multimodality, which clarified the affordances, devices and the collaborative nature of image-text relationships.

The modalities (textual and visual writings) and Macken’s framework (‘bookness’) were discussed separately in this chapter due to the scarcity of comprehensive resources

that pinpoint their relational significance. However, in this research, the artefact is understood as being birthed out of the generative friction between (and among) experimental writings, the book’s framework, and the gathered materials from the research trip. Accordingly, while the framework of the book will shape the flow of the writings, the materiality of writings and the knowledge gathered during the research trip will be encouraged ‘erode’ parts of ‘bookness’ in turn. It is these material resistances and responsive dialogues that will continue to form the hydro-logical current.

By its very nature, multimodal books resist perpetual linearity and instead encourage fluctuating speeds and awarenesses. Our cognitive disparity in the interpretation of visual and textual modes affords different meaning-making potentials. Thus, a multimodal book becomes a space in which our cognitive modes are constantly in tension, as the directional current persistently rubs against the non-directional that presents a simultaneity of various components. The go-along method had strongly mirrored this mode of navigation. While the practitioner manoeuvres *directionally* through the given context (temporally; by following the participant’s established routines, or towards a larger research objective), she must also be able to immerse herself in the living experience of the *now* (by reflecting on the present moment, or the simultaneity of sensory experiences). In so doing, the practitioner becomes a ‘reader’ of a sort, who ‘goes along’ with the directional flow, yet whose reflective and reflexive modes of research persistently compel her to pause and re-evaluate the perpetual ‘now’s.

Accordingly, the research on multimodal books as *living experience* attests to the unforeseen confluence between the highly empirical practice of the go-along (founded upon sociological methods), and the theoretical framing of multimodality (founded upon literary semiotics). Such convergence formed a stronger, and more confident directional flow of the research process that follows.

* * *

36 Sipe, 1998: 101

37 *ibid.*: 101

Most often in the production of multimodal books, the verbal narrative is envisaged first, followed by visuals to ‘depict’ it. Notably, although the textual and visual components are created ‘together’ (as the writer must be “prepared to reshape their prose in response to the illustrator’s contributions”³⁸ and vice versa), the main thread of the narrative is laid out by the creator in advance. However, what happens when the ‘author’ does not start with a predetermined narrative, but instead with a *pool of materials*? Specifically in light of this thesis, how can the narrative *emerge from* the gathered conversations and documented experiences? And what findings develop when both the visual and textual are produced by one person? Contemporary multimodal book research “seldom discusses the creative process and the reflective thoughts within that process”.³⁹ In response to such gap in the discourse, the following chapter will explore multimodal book-writing as *process* through my own creative practice towards an artefact.

38 Watkins, 2019: 9

39 Chang, 2017: 15

Chapter Four MEANDERS

Braiding Gathered Stories

Building upon the theoretical research of multimodal books (Chapter Three), and using the gathered materials from the go-along (Chapter Two), this chapter seeks to explore multimodal book-writing, not as a result-driven, but as a *process*-driven inquiry. Specifically, it is built upon my practice-based approach to creating the multimodal book – later titled, *The Asymptotes*. I respond to the materiality of the collected oral histories, conversations and experiences, and engage with them as agents in the organic construction of the narrative. Here, it must be noted that the term, ‘narrative’, does not equate to ‘plot’ (i.e. the classic five-act structure with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution). Rather, a narrative is understood as a series of connected events, wherein the relations between these storied events could be direct and unambiguous or obscure and fragmented. In performing visual and textual writings in conjunction, I let these narrative connections emerge, rather than adhering to a ‘pre-made’ narrative arc.

It is also important to emphasise here that the intention of this thesis was never to produce a book that recounts or depicts the chronological events that happened during the research trip. Nor is the book used as a device to faithfully retell the stories ‘on behalf of’ the participants – I believe that these are not my stories to recount, at least not in this research context. Rather, the gathered stories are used as artistic materials which could be

eroded, shaped, transported, and deposited, while resisting the reduction of the research to a “simple” “one true story”.¹ Accordingly, instead of being bound to preconceptions on how a story *should* be told or what you can/cannot do with oral histories, experimental writing was used to gain a richer, more creative understanding of the gathered materials.

The whole book-writing process spanned over six months of intensive writing – every day for 6 to 9 hours – and has required the approach from multidisciplinary perspectives including, but not limited to, literature (i.e. diction, style, poesis) and fine art (i.e. tradition of contemporary paintings, conceptual and theoretical artistic reflections). Nevertheless, I will refrain from explicating the ‘step-by-step’ recount of its making, or its literary and artistic justifications; firstly, since expanding the critical discussions into the realm of literature of fine arts would require another paper; and secondly, to preserve the autonomy of *The Asymptotes* as a *book* with its *own voice* beyond that of the creator. This research will instead focus on the key findings and methods relevant to book-writing as a *hydro-logical design process*.

Throughout the process of book-writing, I have been rigorously documenting my reflective thoughts, both through written and audio journal entries, some of which were later transcribed. What am I subjectively feeling as I navigate through the process, and what am I objectively doing in order to journey towards the artefact? In so doing, the reflective process mapped my personal journey of excitement and struggles, while simultaneously tethering the endeavour back to the creative and academic focus. Presented in italicised passages, these reflective notes are interwoven across this chapter to guide the discussion through the meandering journey of learnings, discoveries, and uncertainties. Additional images of the process can also be found in Appendix B.

Navigating Pools of Conversations

The return from the research trip marked the beginning of refiguring the abundance of raw materials I had gathered. This included transcribing hours of conversations, rewatching footages, revisiting the journal, logbooks, and research notes, as well as

¹ Gough, 2010: 45

rereading books, articles, and recommended literature. However, going through the materials had not only been for the sole purpose of organising the experience once removed. In fact, attending to these documented materials retrospectively opened yet another layer of engaging with the experience. For instance, in rewatching the video footages repeatedly, I was able to attune myself to the varied paces of walking and breaths of the participants, which I had been less conscious of in situ; while in transcribing stories of two fishermen consecutively, overlapping themes emerged. The audio recorder had captured overheard dialogues that I had not been listening to; murmurs, pauses and silences. The video had recorded details of places that were beyond my recollections, reported the colour of the sky, and captured the subtle gestures of the participants. The journal was overflowing with sketches and jottings – full of questions and incomplete thoughts – and had documented fleeting sensory experiences that had already slipped away from my memory. Simply put, revisiting these materials revealed the ‘byproducts’ of the research – those I had not consciously aimed to document, but had indeed formed significant portions of the experiential knowledge.

Moreover, in this process of navigating through the recorded materials, the distinctions between the chosen modes of documentation became clear. During the research trip in situ, methods were consciously chosen according to circumstances such as the nature of interaction, location, and availability of equipment [see Chapter Two]. In light of working with textual-visual multimodality, it was crucial to understand what kind of knowledge had been recorded and *produced* with each mode, as well as how the other sensory elements (i.e. olfactory, auditory, tactile) were encompassed. Accordingly, the analysis of the documented materials was approached as an opportunity to supplement the theoretical research from Chapter Three in the particular context of this study.

The documentation could be categorised into three general modes:

Textual: was the most common form, and includes written notes and transcripts from audio recordings. Most factual data (i.e. dates, places, people’s names), intersubjective data (i.e. raw oral histories, verbal exchanges and conversations) and subjective reflection (i.e. what I had experienced, what influenced me, what topics intrigued me and why) were written down in textual forms.

Visual: this form of documentation included in situ sketches, photographs, and video recordings. Photographs and video were used to record details of people, movements, objects and environments with an ‘objective gaze’ of the lens. Sketching, on the other hand, rendered the experience into embodied movements on the page and highlighted the subjective and temporal nature of the research. For instance, quicker, rougher strokes conveyed fast movements or attempts to capture fleeting moments, whereas incomplete sketches illuminated the uncertainty of memory.

Spatial: operated at the intersection of the above two modes and refers to the use of the page, or the image-ability of the text. This involved the use of hand-written typographic elements and white spaces in the journal, most often employed for depicting auditory experiences. For instance, whispers were illustrated with small writings that floated in the middle of the page, while overlapping conversations were expressed through the layering of words and sketches. Afterthoughts and intersections were frequently written along the edges.

Furthermore, within the process of refiguring the gathered documentation materials, I began to realise how my mind organised the abundance of information by mentally ‘tagging’ the fragments of conversations, experiences, reflections and readings. After this realisation, I began to note down any spontaneous mental ‘taggings’ that occurred on a sheet of paper. As I repeatedly navigated through the pools of materials, each additional round offered new awarenesses and connections as the ‘taggings’ grew into networks of ideas. As I wrote in my journal:

“When I just re-listened to the recording of the conversation I had with Sarah (human anatomist & botanist) about freezing a human body to preserve it for dissection, ‘PING!’ – my brain immediately connected this to Fletch’s (printmaker and artist) comment about how photographs freeze time, then ‘PING!’ – it reminded me of Oaksie (fisherman) bringing out his photo albums for me, and how he managed to make those frozen scenes alive with his stories... then a few days later, I was looking through my logbook and ‘PING!’ I saw a quote by Brigid (geneticist) who gave me a scientific overview of freezing water at a molecular level. Sometimes, these connections will not be as obvious – sometimes, it comes with a faint ‘ping’, and sometimes, I know there is a connection but not sure exactly how.”

With a growing ‘tagging’ of knowledge, I was constantly searching for a suitable narrative form. In working towards a book, there must be a certain coherency to the entire narrative, even if they are fragments or disparate stories. Indeed, what distinguishes a piece of poetry from a poetry *book*, or a single story from a *book* of short stories, is how, when bound as a book, these pieces of writing must somehow be tied together by a narrative thread. Here, the meaning emerges not only from the individual pieces of writing, but also from the collection *as a whole*; including the thematic, stylistic, or sentimental relations across them. Accordingly, the framework of ‘bookness’ demands that the whole be greater than the sum of its parts, whereby their combined synergetic relationship adds another layer of quality unachieved if presented individually. Therefore, the components must be carefully curated to engender yet another possibility for meaning-making *as a book* in its entirety.

In desperation to somehow tie the gathered stories together into a coherent ‘book’ form, I had initially attempted to organise the materials into various sequences – chronologically, geographically, thematically, emotionally, and stylistically. However, such effort to cram the experiences and conversations into a predetermined sequence had flattened the living richness of these encounters into a static, linear structure. It had merely become a rigid ‘collage’ of quotes and reflections, without any generative meaning-making *across* these stories.

“First I was just feeling lost in the midst of all this richness. And then came the tremendous inclination to control the process. I want to shove these stories into a narrative container – any shape would do – so that I can gain control over them and actually start ‘writing’ the book. But then again, shoving them into linear narrative containers is counterproductive to the hydro-logic, isn’t it? Bodies of water spill, leak, and absorb beyond their ‘containers’. I have to let these stories erode, transport, deposit, and carve their course with these frictions.”

“How do all these rich pieces come together in a way that flows organically, that creates space for silences, the unsaid, the unspoken, the unseen? How do I let go of control, my subconscious desire to put them in ‘clean’ order, and let the dynamic muddiness of the experiences and writings speak?”

Braiding Narrative Fragments

“I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it”

~ Laurel Richardson

Feeling completely lost in a dilemma of claiming/relinquishing control, I decided to return to feminist new materialism’s approach to ‘Bodies of Water’ in order to anchor myself back to the ‘main current’ of this research. I began to revisit my original research notes yet now through a renewed lens of book-writing, where one quote that I had jotted down months before, stood out. Literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) writes that feminist writing:

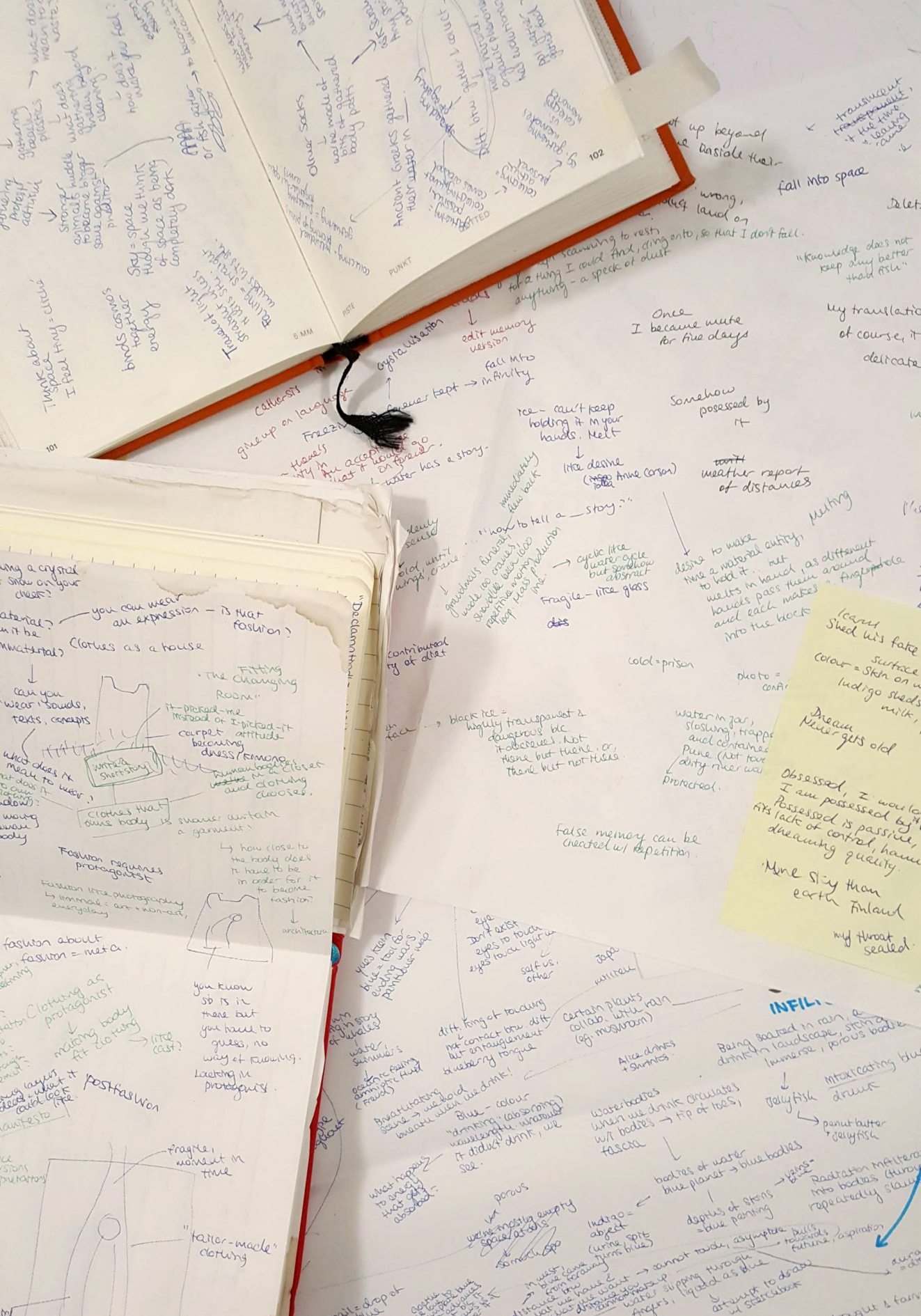
becomes ‘organic writing’ [...] resisting separation. It becomes a ‘connoting material’, a ‘kneading dough’, a ‘linguistic flesh’. And it draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water - a water from the source, a deep, subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages.³

Further research and reading into feminist literature, such as books by Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson, and Anne Carson, enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of how such ‘fluidity’ could be linguistically and structurally encompassed. I was especially provoked by how these writers used a formally watery quality in which words ‘run over each other’, ‘trickle’, or ‘drip down the pages’. This inherently hydro-logic approach by feminist writers highlighted how ideas are always in the midst of fluid transitioning. As noted in my journal:

“Transitions are often understood as means of getting from one place to another, to transform from one state into another – be it flying from Finland to England, or turning

2 Richardson, 2001; 35

3 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1989: 38 quoted in Neimanis, 2013: 33



liquid into solid. Usually, what matters is the destination: I want to arrive in England to do my research; or I want to produce the ice cubes for my fruit tea. Yet what if the transition of getting there becomes the subject of inquiry? Like the three short hours of hovering flight, or the process of freezing as the molecules gradually crystallise – those liminal spaces where something is in the midst of a phenomenon. Transitions are constantly in flux, never really arriving. And if I think about it, none of the stories I heard had a definite conclusion – most of the time, I was left hanging and wondering and wandering, and itching to do more research. Maybe this is the power of stories.”

Two days later:

“What if the book could be made of these transitions? Transitions elongated, stretched, morphed, overlapped, and braided?”

Understanding the gathered stories as transitions shifted how I began to interact with these materials, from previously approaching the stories as ‘disparate conversations with different people’, into voices that fluidly traverse through bodies and conversations, across time and space. The experimental writings that followed aimed to expand feminism’s ‘formally watery writings’ into the realm of multimodality, especially focusing on fluid, “organic writing” that “resists separation”.⁴ How could I braid the *currents of stories* that bodies of water carry? How could these stories leak into and become absorbed by another to engender new meanings through their watery flux?

The subsequent experimental writings attempted to explore various creative ways of transitioning between pieces of knowledge and modalities. They were built on the fleetingness, interruptions and morphings of the gathered voices, with purposeful disruption of temporal sequentiality.

A few examples of the initial experiments are briefly outlined below:

- Rewriting an experience in onomatopoeia. Especially focused on trying to materialise the sounds of bodies of water I had encountered during the trip (i.e.

4 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1989: 38 quoted in Neimanis, 2013: 33

Figure 4.1
‘Tagging’ of stories becoming a network

rough ocean, trickling river, rain, freshly collected spring water in a tin tank, a body drinking water)

In Number Three, there was a silver tin tank for drinking water. Unlike tap water, it tasted sweet like milk, silky on my tongue. I would tip the nose to pour it into a glass, and drink it down like it had flavour.

Clink clank clink. Tonk.

Thump.

Drip, drip, driiiiiipppp, slosh, slosh, slosh, driiiiiip

drip drip drip

drip drip.

drip.

drip.

dr

ip

Sip Gulp. Gulp, gulp, gulp slurp Pant.

Sigh.

[Excerpt from experimental writing with onomatopoeia]

- Constructing a dialogue by piecing together fragments of conversations from disparate locations and temporalities, so that the past comes in direct conversation with the present. For example, an anatomist's voice would come in dialogue with a quoted phrase from a fisherman's recount of the 1960s fishing industry. Various geo-temporalities blend together, creating a sense of atemporal simultaneity.

- Experimenting with visual and textual means to produce pauses and silences; exploratory use of white space in producing narrative rhythm. How can one 'draw' silences, and how can these 'negative spaces' connect two moments together?
- Translating scientific and theoretical research to resemble oral storytelling. For instance, I had been researching into the physics of light, and was experimenting with ways to render the scientific research into a story, using simplification, imagery, and oral language. How might one of the participants explain it?

"Here is why the sky is blue.

To begin with, flip the plane over and imagine the sea. Imagine watching the waves rolling in and colliding into a protruding rock. First a large wave swells up, and when it reaches the rock it drapes over the obstacle, gliding over and around, rejoining itself on the other side. Then a shorter wave arrives and collides into the rock. Instead of striding over, it is rebounded by the obstacle, sending ripples in all directions.

Now overlay this moving image to the waves of light above. As the sun exhales its breath of blended light, the waves must fall through the numerous obstacles of dust, water vapour and air molecules to reach the earth. The long, large red wave can touch the earth, gliding over the obstacles with ease. But the shorter blue wave bounces off of the particles during its journey down, being scattered in all directions.

So blue is the light that scatters, filling the sky with its lostness"

[Excerpt from attempts to render scientific research into storytelling]

- Taking fragmented sketches and incomplete thoughts from the journal entries and expanding them lyrically, poetically, and through prose essays. For instance, writing about an evening in the meadows with the participants in Oxford with a purely olfactory focus instead of the verbal dialogue.

- Writing with images, drawing with words. For instance, I would take a piece of a raw audio recording and attempt to ‘draw’ the dialogue [figure 4.2]. Similarly, I would choose a frame from a video footage and seek to textually describe it in extreme detail, so that the words conjure a vivid image in one’s mind. This exercise became especially useful in understanding the gains and losses when it came to translating modalities. For example, I found that factual information such as dates and numbers were difficult to embody as images, whereas the stillness of a moment lost its richness when had to be described in words.

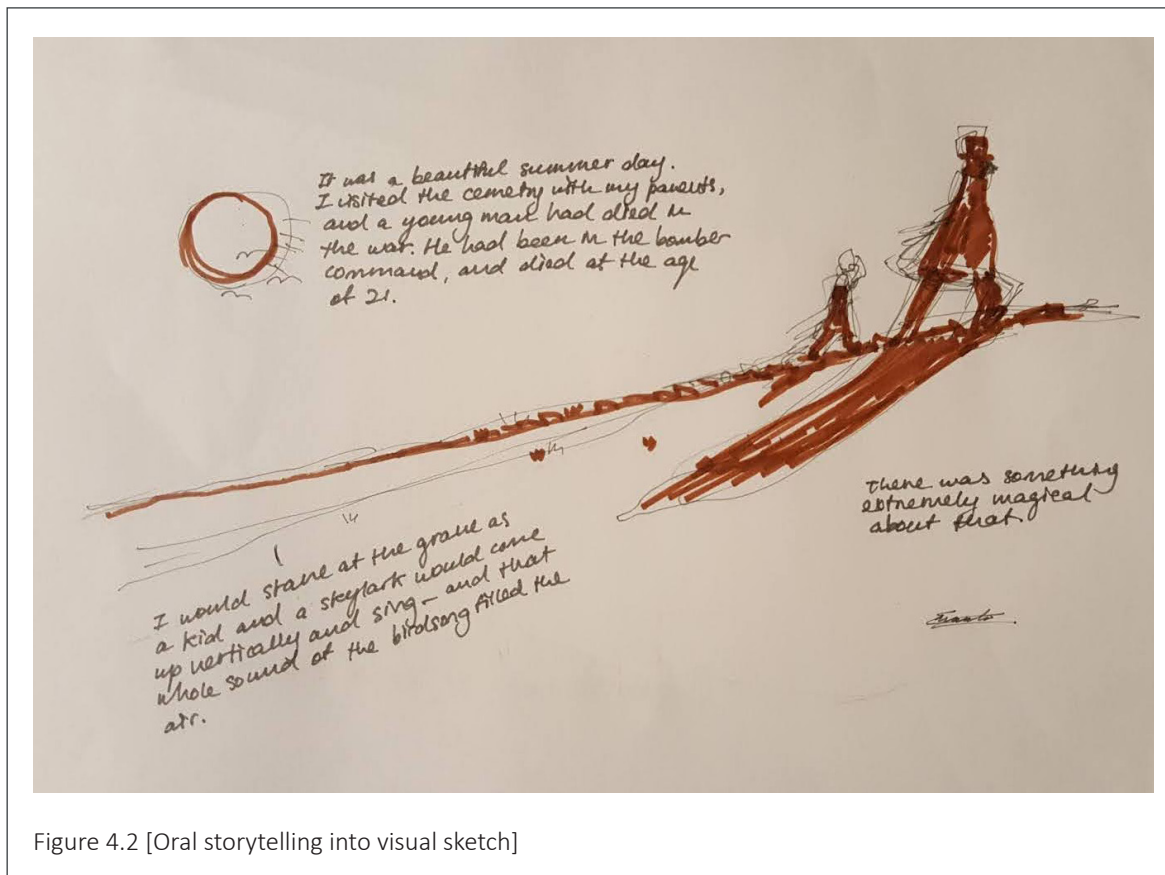


Figure 4.2 [Oral storytelling into visual sketch]

A Water Cycle of Stories

The experimental approach to the transitions between these stories engendered new ways to explore the generative dialogue between visual and textual modes of thinking, understanding, making, and embodying. Furthermore, this investigation operated at the *intersections* between knowledge (i.e. human anatomy and art; physics and haymaking; philosophy and mathematics). Such junctions themselves became the subject of scrutiny – evolving into explorations of how each voice might tell the same story differently while constantly seeking confluence with one another. Moreover, throughout this process, emerging thematic concepts were added to the original network of ‘taggings’, as I continued to work alongside the mind map that visualised these linkages. With the cycle of navigating through the documentations and exploring them through countless snippets of experimental writings that organically clustered together, the networked map of ‘taggings’ grew larger and more complex.

Yet within such complexity, a structure began to emerge. In particular, the formally hydrological quality of the writings had transformed into a hydro-logical narrative *presence*. It revealed a continuous narrative of how bodies of water (as geological water bodies *and* as human bodies) experience freezing, melting, drying up, falling, seeping, fogging and are sometimes repelled. Indeed, through the experimental process of grappling with the materials, they had taken shape as a water cycle of stories, as seemingly distant narratives connected through the ‘corporeal fluidity’ of visual and textual writings. The same ideas returned and repeated (i.e. the notion of freezing), but were always different every time they reappeared, redistributing themselves in new meanings and forms. These bodies of water I had encountered were constantly *shifting* between the precarious ‘modes of being’, always on the verge of becoming another story; another body of water.

This provisional structure based on the embodied hydrological cycle would be adjusted as I work on the book. Nevertheless, it had formed the crucial groundwork in directing the subsequent process towards the multimodal book as an artefact.

* * *

It is impossible to insist on a definite moment when I 'started to write the book'. One could claim that it had commenced in conjunction with the process of journaling during the go-along, or perhaps it had even begun with my first attempts at experimental writing in Chapter One. Yet I would also argue that establishing the structural framework for the book induced a decisive shift in my mindset, which influenced the methods of making. That is, instead of attempting to generate expansive multiplicities of writings (as I had done in the previous experiments to grapple with the materials), the approach shifted into a more purposeful, directional one as I consciously worked *towards* the artefact in the framework of 'bookness'. Working alongside a roughly drafted map of the book's provisional structure, every piece of writing produced was now assessed in relation to the integrity of the book as a whole. How would it contribute to constructing a narrative? Which transitions and collaborations are the most meaningful? The writings could no longer be considered as discrete pieces, but instead had to continuously be contextualised within the book's narrative and coherency.

Process-wise, all the visual and textual writings were performed while keeping sight of the 'next' idea that the current story might migrate into. For instance, in writing a section based on a fisherman's experience on a frozen boat, I would have my mind on the conversation with a scientist about the physics behind freezing water. In so doing, the process of writing was perpetually in a state of transition, and purposefully so. Moreover, this directional approach prevented the static 'pooling' of writing into a single self-contained narrative or the 'aimless drifting' into diluted superficiality.

However, navigating directionally does not imply that the path is linear, nor does it suggest that the direction is fixed. The intention was not to 'make the writing arrive' at a certain idea, but to explore the act of *reaching towards* it. Accordingly, in navigating through a piece of writing towards a certain direction, there were countless futile attempts – reaching a dead end, circling around the same ideas without an option to escape, or to simply realise that a transition was too forced. Many potential directions were experimented, each time producing a different outcome.

The process of crafting these transitions involved the constant fluid movement between visual and textual writings as the artwork and design were done in conjunction with the text production. As more writings accumulated, the process began to evolve into a cyclic system of wall mappings [figure 4.4 & 4.5].

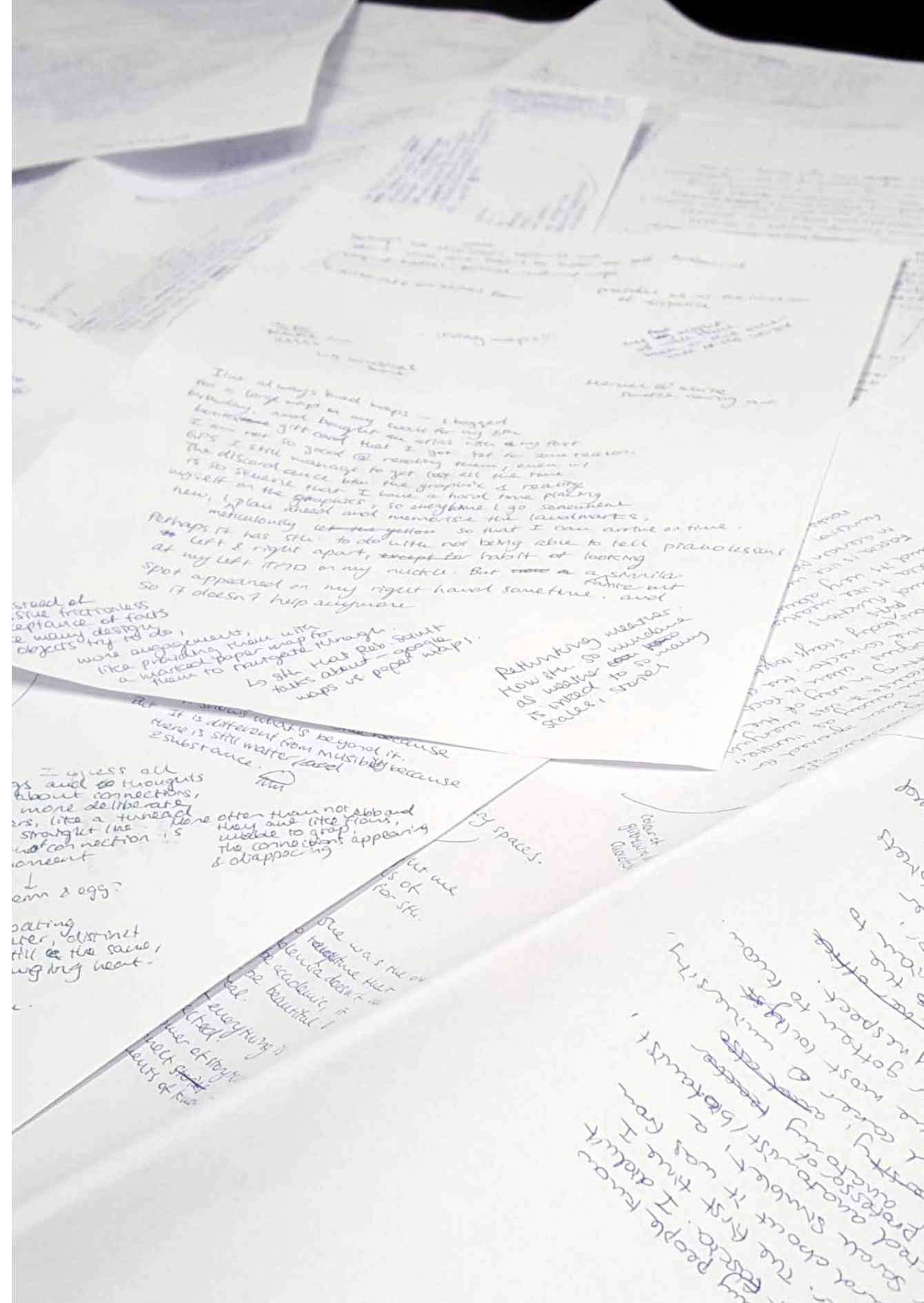
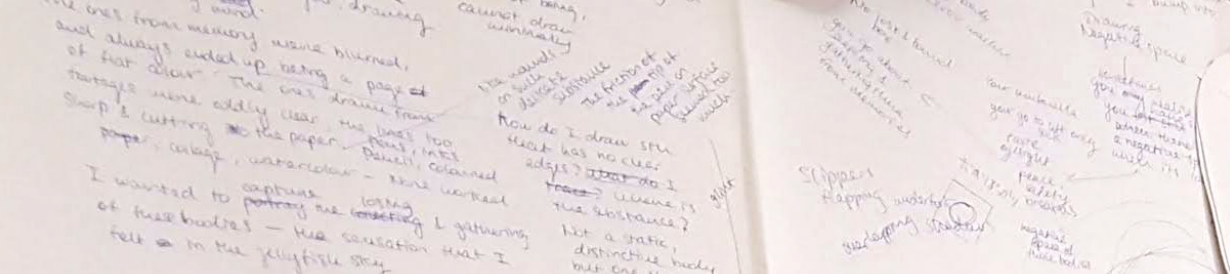


Figure 4.3
Writing by hand is never a clean process. Usually, the floor was covered with snippets of experiments.



1. Printing photocopied (and later typed) accumulation of manuscripts and documented materials (including sketches and reflective writings).

2. The printed manuscripts, artworks, and raw sketches were cut into sections (as small as a single sentence, quote or even a word) and taped to a wall. They were moved split, pasted, reshuffled, set aside, copied, exchanged until there was a narrative flow. A typed portion of a manuscript would be cut and matched up with a drawing; drawings would be cut into pieces combined with existing texts. The interplay between images, text, and spatial elements of the page were also refigured.

3. Production of experimental writings emerging from the previous two stages: re-drawing or re-writing of existing pieces; translation of visual into textual and vice versa; addition of new writings with supplemented research. These were photocopied and fed back into the system.

Figure 4.4
Diagram of practitioner's process of book-writing

Figure 4.5 (photograph) Wall-mappings

The wall became a living mind map, dynamically morphing as it responded to new experiments, ideas, and knowledge. Through repetition of this process, the book became more coherent (in textual and visual style, as well as narrative flow).

Living Writing

In his book, *The Thinking Hand* (2009), Juhani Pallasmaa claims that when one draws, “it is impossible to know which appeared first, the line on the paper or the thought, or a consciousness of an intention. In a way, the image seems to draw itself through the human hand”.⁵ He further connects this to textual writing by observing that “the process of writing itself [...] gives birth to unexpected ideas”.⁶ Similarly, I had reflected on the embodied experience of writing in my journal:

“Writing by hand is never a clean process. As I write, I constantly cross sections out, put thick borders around some, and draw arrows between seemingly distant elements or thought-sketches. I cut pieces out from the paper I wrote on a month ago, and paste them into my notebook alongside today’s fresh words. Paper gives me the space to go wrong; or perhaps it encourages the spilling of unfinished ideas and uncertain thoughts. Typing has an illusion of concreteness – whatever one writes, it will either be kept or deleted, without an uncertain in-between. My writing on paper is full of this in-betweenness, a collection of untied thoughts and hanging threads. The initial writings are extremely fragmented and roughly written, and are often connected with asterisks and leaping symbols that attempt to make sense of its coherency. This method of writing allows me to capture my thoughts as it flows, which could be revisited later with a clearer mind. On a blank sheet of paper, I am not restricted by neat horizontal rows or the typed letters that line up like soldiers. The words can start to unravel, morph into molten ideas and images. Writing becomes an act of drawing – to slip between visual and textual modes seamlessly as water”.

Paper allows spaces for images and visual thoughts to coexist with textual writings and research, while accompanying the rawness of the practitioner’s mental journey.

“Typing pours out at the pace of thought – a skill many of us have perfected over years of frantically typing up email replies, essays, and text messages – and often does not afford space for reflection during the process. Unlike typing, a lag emerges when writing by hand,

5 Pallasmaa, 2009: 92

6 *ibid.*

and these extra milliseconds encourage formations of connections and questions, and elongate hesitations and uncertainty. I found that the labour of handwriting affords time for affective openings and negotiations of possibilities.”

Moreover, writing by hand allows the practitioner to witness the “traces, stains and dirt” of their work, including “the layering of erased lines, errors and failures, the repeated re-tracings on the drawings, and the collage of corrections, additions and elimination on the page”.⁷ These “traces”, Pallasmaa asserts, enables the practitioner to grasp the multiplicity and malleability of the process, as “[i]nstead of dictating a thought, the thinking process turns into an act of waiting, listening, collaboration and dialogue”.⁸

“Last week, my papers were junk yards. Writing with a pen scratched in all of the ‘rubbish’ that I had written. It showed all of my failures – awful drawings, meaningless words – and all of my falls into numerous rabbit holes that never got anywhere. There were so many crossed-out sections that those writings seemed to only stain the paper with useless ink. How I wished I could just delete everything with a push of a keyboard and return to the fresh white page!

This week, the same papers are treasure maps. I realised how they actually fit perfectly into the current state of the book, and those writings now make sense. So I spent today digging under those crossed-out drawings and words, trying to piece some of those together, and marvelling at how meaningful those connections are now.”

* * *

Having gone through rounds of cutting, moving, and adding, the book’s roughly written narrative was gradually mapped out on the wall. Yet as the wall map was increasingly becoming complex – with highlighted quotes, crossed-out sentences, and those which were ‘un-crossed-out’ when I later realised its significance – it eventually became necessary that I digitalise the textual writings.

7 Pallasmaa, 2009: 110

8 *ibid.*: 111

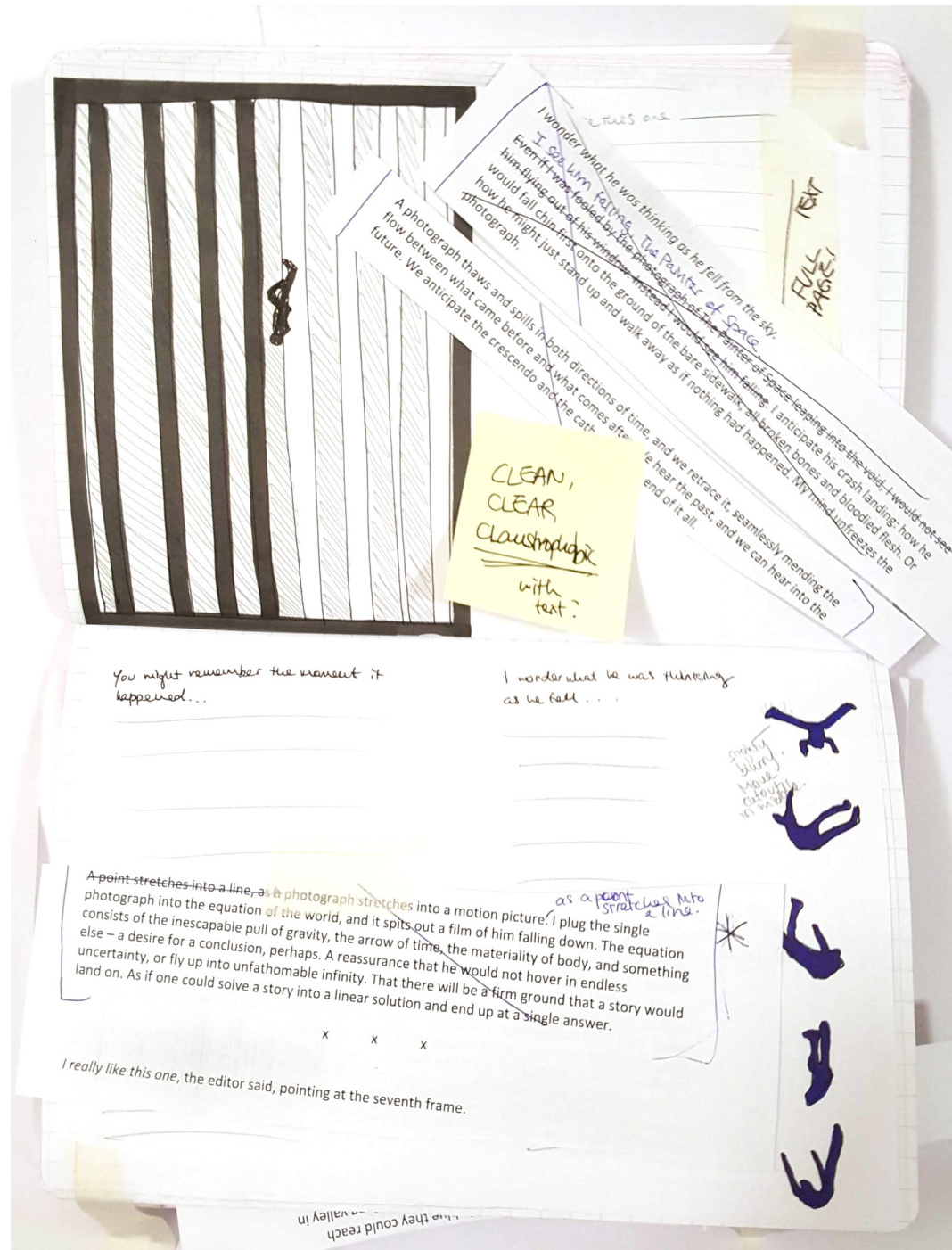


Figure 4.6
 'Dummy book' pages, which eventually became p.110-113 in the final artefact.

Effectively, the process of typing enabled me to witness what I had produced up until this point, to identify which transitions worked or which ideas did not flow, and to experience the narrative with a renewed freshness. Re-journeying through the writings was also an opportunity to make small changes as I went along. This became the skeletal structure to the first loose 'draft' which formed the structural and stylistic groundwork for *The Asymptotes*.

The digital document became a useful tool as it enabled me to easily make minor changes, as well as to move large blocks of prose around to test the structural flow. The limitation, however, was the fact that the image and text had to be worked separately as two strands. Specifically, while the textual elements could be easily typed and changed, the hand-drawn sketches could not morph in the same way on screen. To mitigate this separation while retaining the efficiency of the digital form, I worked alongside a physical 'dummy book' – a sequence of visual writings, with each page tied to a specific paragraph – which could be moved around, replaced, cut, and edited in a similar manner to the textual manuscript [see figure 4.6].

In so doing, albeit being in different forms, the visual and textual writings could still develop together, as the artwork shifted according to the textual changes, and the text was edited in response to the artwork. Furthermore, this method of progressively working towards 'bookness' demanded that I start to consider the spatial elements on the page more practically. For instance, how much of the textual and visual writings can fit into a page and how? If the artwork clearly does not allow enough space for the prose, should the artwork make more space, or should the text be spread over two pages? Could a detail in the text be cut and be visually presented in the artworks instead? Such process of responsive negotiation also played a crucial role in the process of book-writing.

Dialogue Across Modalities

As theoretically framed in Chapter Three, the value of multimodality derives from the synergetic transactions and responsiveness between the modalities. Simultaneously, it asks the practitioner to recognise the particular features, affordances and limits of each mode, whereby each holds a different semiotic and aesthetic potential. Accordingly, although the digital document (focused on prose) and the 'dummy book' (focused on artwork)

were developed in conjunction, being able to partially isolate one from the other also provided advantages. Notably, I had the option to strengthen the unique affordances of each by working further into the details. By understanding what each mode produces in the absence of the other, I was also able to examine the structural gaps in the narrative. For instance, by reading the text without the ‘distraction’ of the artwork, I realised that some experimental prose sections were too fragmented for comprehension. These were ‘fixed’ by adding more detail to the accompanying artwork, so that the artwork could support the textual fissures. On the other hand, the artwork could become more abstract when the text became the matrix. Furthermore, I continued to explore how the artworks can complement the speed and flow of the words (and vice versa), so that they do not become mere repetitions of the same content, but instead engender yet another layer of collaborative meaning-making.

Such dialogue was one that demanded doubting, questioning, criticising, and fact-checking: are these the right set of images and styles to convey the particular story? Can I cut this sentence without making the whole structure collapse? If the story is based on a historical event, how ‘accurate’ should this representation be? Through cycles of reflecting, researching and writing, new text and artwork were added, yet even more were removed as I gained more experience on how these modalities effectively ‘lean onto each other’ to produce meaning.

Beyond their mutual narrative potential, moreover, the page became a space for *practical* negotiation between text, image, and the ‘image-ability’ of text, as the page is finite, and the modalities must operate within the limited economy of the page.⁹

Given the tightly interwoven nature of the book’s narrative structure, a small change in the manuscript would induce a rippling chain of reactions. For instance, if the text was modified, it might be necessary to adjust the textbox size, the layout, and/or the composition of the accompanying artwork. Similarly, if the artwork was changed, the placement of the text must be modified in order to ensure legibility.

The page, however, was not a passive ‘stage’ where the negotiations between text and image occurred. In fact, many of the writings emerged *from* the space, which I had initially explored in the earlier experimental writings. For instance, the text, “So we too,

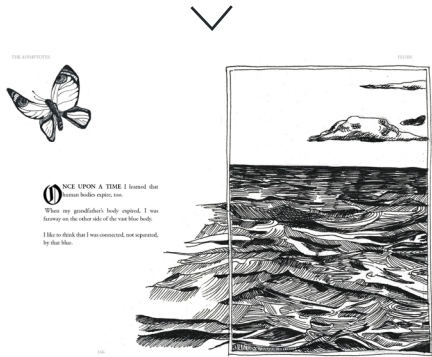
9 Drucker, 2013: 4

Figure 4.7 (right column, continues to next page)
Changes in artwork and spatial arrangements in the digital manuscript (before and several weeks after). Even after the visual and textual writings were combined digitally, they continued to develop together. There were a number of variations in between the earlier images/text and the ones used for the final artefact. (Pages in *The Asymptotes*: top 66-67; bottom 122-123)

are mostly empty space” [see pages 52-53 in *The Asymptotes*] was written in order to *accompany* the emptiness of the page. The white page is highlighted precisely *due to* these words that float alone in the sea of emptiness. Another example of a narrative that arose from such image-ability is reflected in the ‘Fog’ chapter, where the artwork and type are purposely of similar colours, as the text becomes buried in the artwork, obscured and difficult to read [see pages 188-189 in *The Asymptotes*]. The text emerged and the artwork was created *in order to produce* this cognitive struggle, which reflects a particular conversation during the research trip.

Through the continued dialogue between image, text, and space, the writings were gradually woven together towards achieving integrity essential to ‘bookness’ – that is, its paginal sequentiality. A book must be designed in spreads (when opened, both left and right pages are simultaneously looked at), and in a directional succession of pages. To experiment further with the spatial and sequential qualities of the page, the artworks were scanned and digitally combined with the text, becoming the digital manuscript [See figure 4.7]. The digital manuscript provided a physical frame with gutters, margins and type,





which are crucial elements in the production of meaning beyond the book's narrative content. Having gone through numerous rounds of re-writings, cutting, adding, and reshufflings, the manuscript had a more established structure than the combination of the text and the 'dummy book'. Consequently, distinct chapters emerged as a narrative matrix, used to introduce pauses in thoughts or to transition into new voices. Accordingly, while still being approached as a fluid process of becoming, the digital manuscript added another dimension to the process, providing a space for the existing and new writings to come into direct dialogue with the formal framework of 'bookness'.



Figure 4.7 (cont.)
Digital manuscript approached as a fluid process of becoming.
(Pages in *The Asymptotes*: top 166-167; bottom 186-187)

Methods for Hydro-logical Book-Writing

The following section will discuss methods that emerged from the hydro-logical book-writing process – that is, a mode of performing book-writing that is 'living' in flux, highly responsive, and directional.

One particular set of methods that developed was what I called 'Blurb-ing' and 'Book-covering'. Both the blurb (a short description of the book usually printed on the back cover) and the book cover (an encasing which binds the book together) are significant paratextual elements of a book, which embody the "information that surround[s] or accompany[s] the text from which the reader gather[s] additional meaning".¹⁰ In commercial publishing, both the blurb and the cover contribute to promotional functions by visually and textually enticing the pre-publication decision-makers and potential readers.¹¹ They are commonly produced by the publisher *after* the manuscript is complete, as one of the latest stages of the publishing process.¹² However, in this thesis, I attempted to use the blurb and the cover as *methods* integrated into the design practice. Specifically, I have repeatedly produced these paratextual elements as a means to propel the process of writing, as well as to reflect upon the progress.

Blurb-ing and Book-covering began with the early experimental writings discussed in this chapter, and every week since, I would write a blurb and create a cover for the emerging 'book' *at that current state*. Since the blurb and the cover must both textually and visually encompass the content of the book (including its tone, mood, genre), the creation of these elements forced me to stand back and reflect on the hydro-logical process. Notably, in order to write a blurb and make the cover suitable for the writings' respective states, it was necessary that I understand what exactly this fluid process had produced: what is the book *about* in this current state? What am I trying to achieve through these narratives? What is the overall mood and tone of the book? What impressions might it give, and why?

10 Strnad and Hewitt, 2021: 336

11 Cubbon, 2022

12 Sadokierski, 2022

These methods of blurb and book-covering afford two key advantages. Firstly, it forces the creative practitioner to zoom out and examine their practice more objectively in order to create a visual or textual 'summary' of the work. The practitioner is asked to refine, redefine, and/or reinterpret their artistic outcome, as well as to assess the integrity of the narrative at each stage in the process. Especially in this fluid form of practice-based research, where the practitioner largely relinquishes control over her process to the agencies of other people's knowledge, being open to uncertainties and unknowability is necessarily valuable. Consequently, getting lost, confusion, failing, doubting, and struggling become a productive part of the process. Nevertheless, there is also a high risk of ending up 'aimlessly drifting' without a focal direction, or becoming *too* immersed in its making and thus neglecting the wider context in which the research operates. Blurb and Book-covering as methods minimise such risk by forcing the practitioner to routinely clarify what they have already achieved, while simultaneously being reminded about the directional nature of this process. This is especially significant in the context of an academic thesis, whereby the practitioner is expected to draw 'conclusions' within a limited timeframe.

Secondly, Blurb and Book-covering document the evolution of the design process. By putting the blurbs and covers in chronological successions, they generate a 'timeline', which allows the practitioner to retrospectively analyse the progression of research that might be difficult to recognise *during* the process of creating. Moreover, when combined with other documentation methods such as journalling and reflective writing, the transformations in the practitioner's stylistic, intuitive, emotional, and practical approaches come to light.

In this research, the methods of Blurb and Book-covering not only aided the 'living' process of multimodal book-writing to be constantly 'in flow', but also mapped how such process has continued to shape the artefact. It is evident from figure 4.8 (see graphical timeline starting next page) that the process was dynamic, with flows and flux embedded within the evolution. While the blurb transformed from being descriptive to more lyrical, the cover morphed from being 'clean' to more expressive. When corresponded with the reflective journal, it revealed how the flux in the 'living' process of book-writing has directly influenced the weekly outcome. For instance, from Week 15 to 16, one can clearly identify a change in stylistic approach as there was a leap in the cover design from the

paper cut-out into a painterly style. This shift aligns with a journal excerpt of the same week, in which I had noted the struggle with the rigid static-ness of my prose as well as the artwork style that I was experimenting with at that time. The paper cut-outs, made with blocks of form and delineated sharp edges, did not necessarily convey the embodied fluidity that was involved in the go-along research or the writing process. At this juncture, the textual style had also been heavily influenced by the sudden change in visual direction from the tight cut-outs into fluid paintings that highlighted the movement of the hand.

"By unleashing myself from the paper cut-outs into the paintings, I felt as if I was finally given permission to write more expressively – more like a body of water which leaks and absorbs."

In some weeks, only a few words changed from the previous blurb/cover, whereas others saw dramatic transformations in tone and style. Furthermore, while no two blurbs/covers were exactly identical, there were times when they repeated a version similar to one made many weeks prior. When aligned with the reflective journal entries, it is evident that these repetitions were results of my doubts in writing, confusion, and the fear of derailing. Indeed, the earlier blurbs and covers were often used to re-anchor myself back to the creative 'current', especially when going down a certain 'rabbit hole' had been unproductive.

Additionally, during the process of 'updating' these paratextual elements weekly, I had become more aware of the blurbs and book covers on the market. Through research and analysis, it became evident that they embody qualities inherent to their respective genre tropes. For instance, suspense fiction would often have photographic covers with silhouettes, motion-blurred shadows and large sans-serif titles, complemented by blurbs with explicit cliff-hangers (i.e. "who was the suspect?"), whereas covers for poetry books are often very minimalistic with generous use of white space, and the blurbs are often assemblages of reviews by other poets. In line with this research, figure 4.8 also exposes how I had struggled to identify with a single genre category in the process of writing the book (is it a poetry book? A biography? A memoir? A contemporary novel? A literary essay? A picture book?). Accordingly, I had experimented with different 'tones' of these paratextual elements, trying to make my work 'fit' into an existing genre – until eventually, I had come to accept its hybridity.

“The book had become at once a reflective essay, a string of poetry, a work of biographies, a picture book, and at times none of these.

I could say that beyond genre, I am seeking a form that captures the elasticity of stories; one that is capable of articulating the messy complexity of lived experiences, with interruptions, continuations, fragments, silences and utterances.”

Blurb-ing and Book-covering as methods effectively arose from the framework of ‘bookness’, by integrating the paratextual elements into the process of narrative-making. Given that this set of methods for practice-based research is unique to this study, a more comprehensive examination must be conducted to evaluate its validity in other academic contexts. Nevertheless, it became a valuable tool for documentation in this research, allowing the practitioner to identify the evolution of the artefact in relation to her process. In addition, the creation of the text-based blurb and the image-based cover has unveiled the closely interwoven nature of the visual and textual elements as they responded to each other’s progressions. The value of these methods in the context of hydro-logical practicing will be discussed later in Chapter Seven.

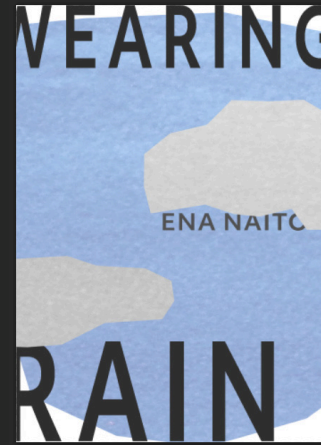
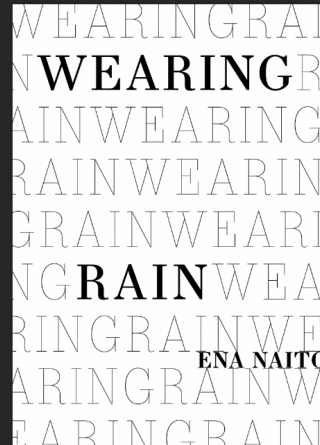
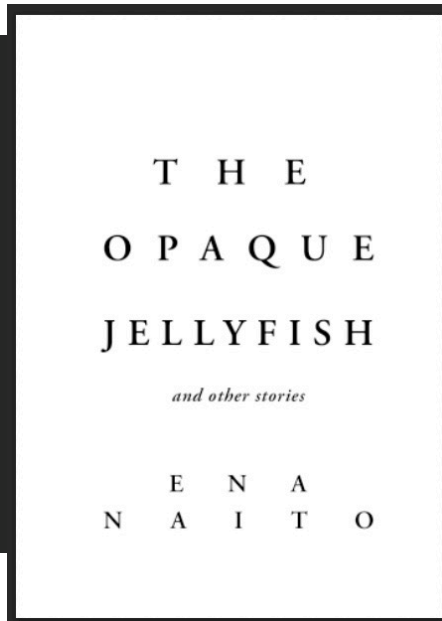


To Walk the Echo of the Sky

By acknowledging us as bodies of water – enmeshed but also never neutral, simultaneously incorporated yet invasive – *To Walk the Echo of the Sky* explores the alchemy that occurs between writing and weathering. The form converses with the content, so that beyond the meaning of the words themselves, the writings drip over the pages. The writings are not ‘about’ water, but they are watering in themselves – leaking and absorbing, spilling and condensing.

Writings are never single-layered – the surface of the river might tell a different story from the undercurrents deep within. The book explores the complexities of various bodies of water, with its leaping scales and the intricacy of flows amongst the polyphony of voices.

Figure 4.8
Evolution of blurbs (a selection)
and book covers over the course
of writerly experiments.



The Opaque Jellyfish and Other Stories

A human body is made of around 7,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 atoms, each one containing electrons and protons and quarks and possibly even smaller particles.

A body is a gathering of a sort, then, a specific arrangement of the tiniest humming building blocks that make up a bigger collection, of cells and chemicals and organs.

A body is made of repurposed parts; calcium, sodium, magnesium, recycled things, water that was once in the form of a raindrop, that is mixed and remixed into the viscous body.

A body is made of exhaled breaths and leaking sweat, of scars, of emotions, and of memories. Scattered, gathered, somehow made whole, then scattered again.

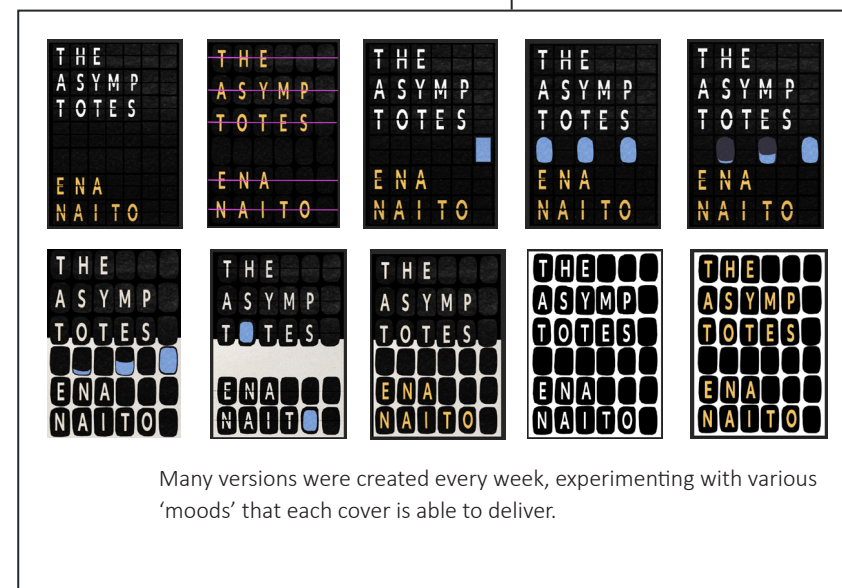
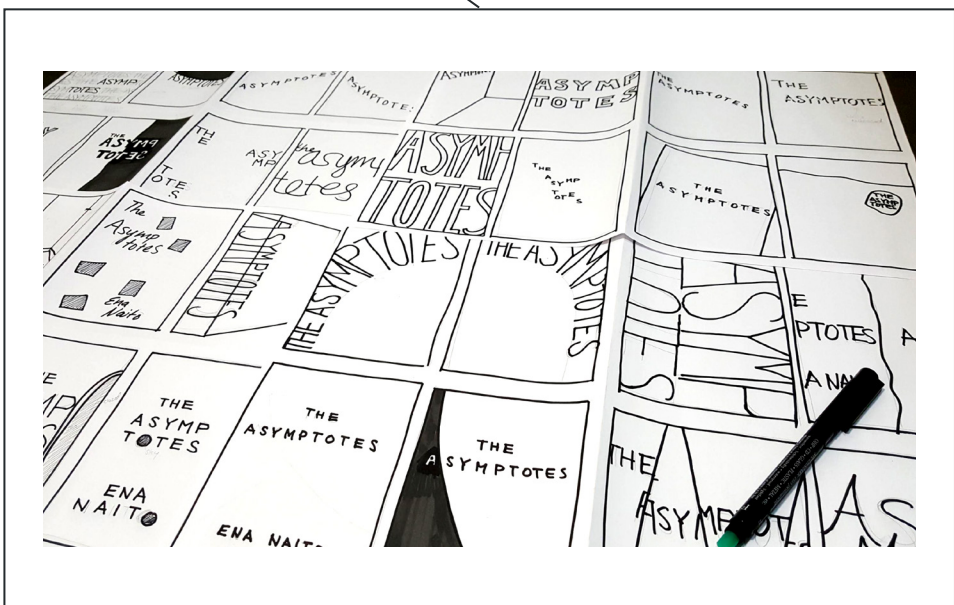
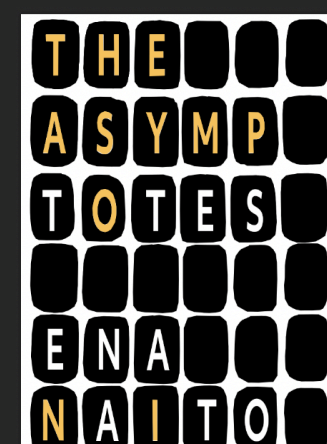
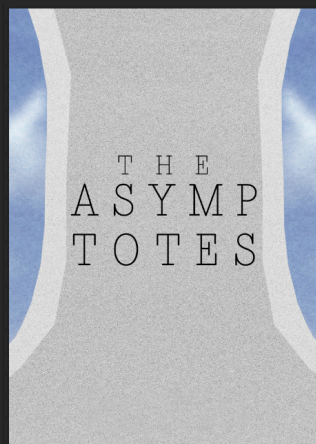
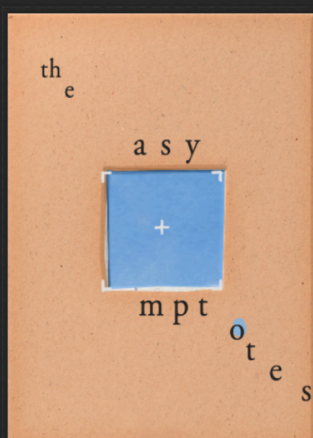
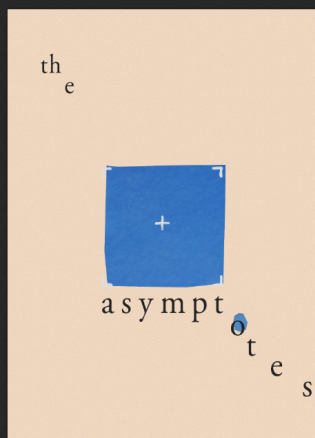
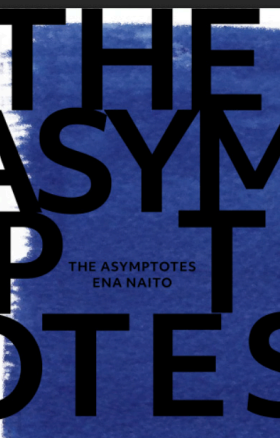
The Opaque Jellyfish and Other Stories is a constellation of transitions and translations, interweaving a travelogue of storied bodies.

Wearing Rain

Falling rain; failing dreams; flights; droughts; the obsession with the colour blue. What does it mean to be connected through watery stories, to be in the cycle that continuously reinvents itself into new truths and uncertainties? Written as a series of fluid narratives, *Wearing Rain* draws on oral history, personal narrative, science and philosophy, to challenge issues of abstract representations and bounded containments.

Based upon gathered encounters, harvested knowledge and gifted stories, this illustrated nonfiction braids seemingly distant scales of lives, rivulets and fragments together – charting a visual and textual journey across distances and time.

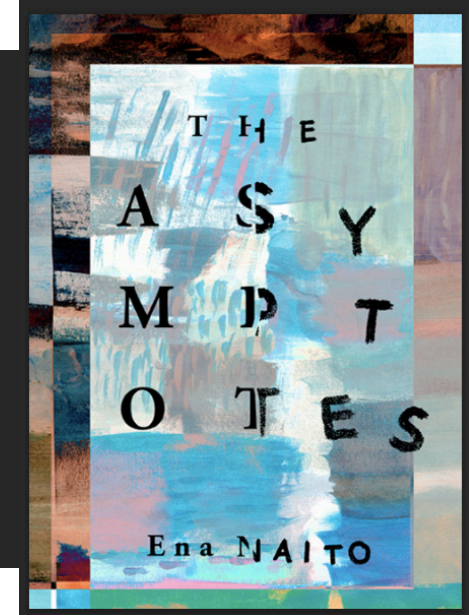
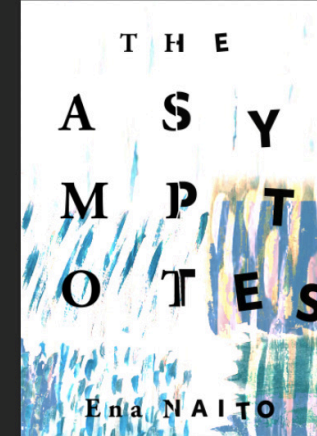
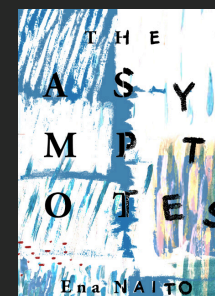
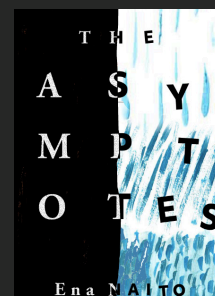
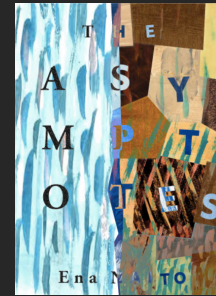
Figure 4.8 (cont.)
Evolution of blurbs and book covers over the course of writerly experiments.



Many versions were created every week, experimenting with various 'moods' that each cover is able to deliver.

Potential cover versions were drawn throughout one week in tandem with the book-writing. These were later used to finalise the 'cover of the week'.

Figure 4.8 (cont.) Evolution of blurbs and book covers over the course of writerly experiments.



The Asymptotes

Empty airplane seats, false weather forecasts, falling dreams, her obsession with the colour blue, pickled radish and toilet paper tubes. Flying high untethered to the ground, yet tightly strapped to Twenty-Seven F, the fight spirals into a narrative of displacement, lostness and the precarious meaning of home.

The Asymptotes is a bold exploration of storytelling that conjures a blend of voices, carefully reassembling fragments of conversations, overheard whispers, found stories, memories, and science to tell a new kind of story. Intimately familiar and poignantly raw, the illustrated book moves fluidly between falling and flying, as we follow a lyrical voice that explores what it means to belong in the unknowable.

In every other telling it fails and falls, disintegrates in my grasp into liquid, dripping.

In one other telling, it files.

The Asymptotes

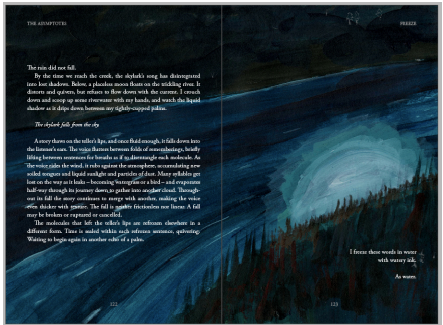
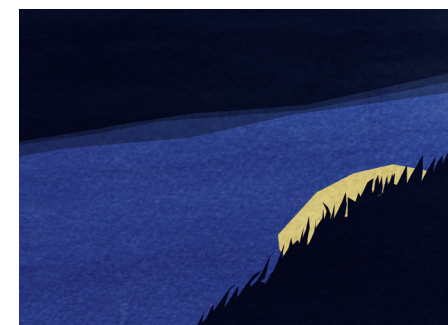
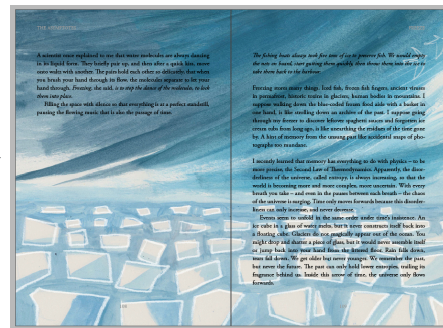
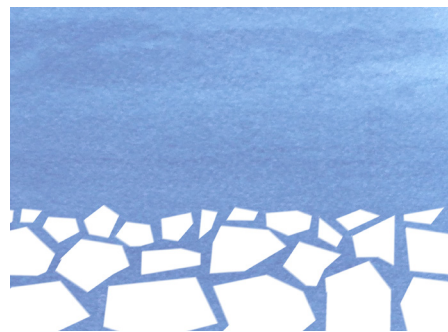
Twenty-Seven-F.

I had chosen a window seat, but the seat did not have a window.

False weather forecasts. Falling dreams. Obsession with the colour blue. Pickled radish. Toilet paper tubes.

The Asymptotes unravels the nature of myth and dreams; the circularity of truth and fiction; the ever-present chaos caused by the universe; wholeness; belonging. In this asymptotic journey, we are travelling but never landing, buckling into caverns of thought that rebounds continually to the airplane seat in the duration of one short flight.

Together with the rich full-spread illustrations, the words conjure a blend of voices, carefully reassembling fragments of conversations, overheard whispers, found stories, fragile memories and snapshots of science. Intimate, familiar and at times daringly raw, the illustrated book moves fluidly between falling and flying, as we follow a lyrical voice that explores what it means to belong in the unknowable.



This week saw a sudden shift in artwork style (together with the textual writing style)- from rigid paper cut-outs to expressive paintings.

A Note on Braiding Sites of Knowledge

Writing the book demanded a different set of knowledge and a different means of *knowing*. Many writers have attested that the largest proportion of their time is spent on reading, as “in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book”.¹³ Likewise, this process of book-writing required that I acquire knowledge in a range of areas and disciplines, and from a wide variety of media and cultural texts beyond those necessary for this academic exegesis.

In this thesis, the process of book-writing was not done ‘after’ all the research was ‘complete’, but instead, was performed *in parallel* with the continued gathering of knowledge from journal articles, specialised books, recorded lectures, conferences, and podcasts. Since the return from the research trip, I had also been in continued conversation with some of the participants in order to supplement, deepen, or clarify their stories. Furthermore, as the narrative developed, I also reached out to more people with specific disciplinary knowledge to gain deeper insight into particular ideas explored in my writing, including an aircraft engineer, a linguist, a hydrologist, a neuropsychologist and a biodiversity conservationist. In these conversations, I was able to share my understanding and pose field-specific questions, from which the participants proactively lead me into engaging discussions around their expertise.

The means of *knowing* for the book, moreover, had been radically different from the *academically-knowing* practitioner. It is an affective form of research, beyond merely reciting, reiterating, or appropriating what has already been said. In other words, in order to write a book, I must “absorb realms of facts”,¹⁴ to fully internalise the constellation of diverse materials, carefully choose those that add value to the writing, and artistically create something that engenders a new form of knowledge. This process is extremely intensive, demanding that I as a ‘designer’ be willing to buckle into caverns of knowledge, to dive into each of them in depth without knowing whether the specific research I had embarked on is going to be productive for the book. As documented in my journal:

“I won’t know whether the piece of knowledge or story is worth diving into, until I examine and digest every corner of it. Sometimes, I will research into one topic for days, and if I’m lucky, can extract a small portion from that which can be incorporated into my writing. It’s a high-risk, time-consuming process, where you never know if the rabbit hole you dive into is the ‘right one’ that clicks. But the more time I put in and the more I read and converse with people, the more encounters I have, and the more knowledge I gather. From this pool of knowledge now absorbed by me (which I continue to deepen), I can carefully choose which stories would make sense in each context, and which pieces of knowledge benefit from being discussed together.”

“Sometimes, I would sense a connection across stories without knowing exactly how they connect. I would probe and poke at the connections through writing, but most of the time the connections don’t emerge, and I’m left with this nagging feeling that there is a tiny potential opening for a transition, but not large enough to actually make it happen. I realised that it helps to dig into these materials with secondary research, or return to my research notes. By gaining more knowledge about them through other perspectives, I might be able to make these ‘openings’ wider and wider until the stories can flow seamlessly between them. Not always, but once in a while, it works. These were the most interesting to explore and the most productive if they worked, because they illuminated incredible connections which were hidden out of plain sight. Who knew that the mathematics of the sextant and the ‘Lost and Found’ box might come into such a productive dialogue?

I understand more clearly now, why Gibbons once claimed that ‘writing becomes designing’. At the most fundamental level, I need to figure out how these hidden relations can be unveiled and design the way in which they materialise. This is a difficult task, because most often, I was attempting to facilitate the dialogues between very distant pieces of knowledge, which would almost never come face to face in real life.”

The result was a braiding of various stories: a story of Yves Klein, a story of the colour blue, a story of a falling dream, a story of light waves, a story of human fascia, a story of a desert plant, a story of navigating on the foggy sea. Like bodies of water, the seemingly distant bodies of knowledge flow into one another, to converse and to open up new fields of generative meaning-making, yet still tethered to the book’s structure. Indeed, the content had shaped the form, and in turn, the form had shaped the content.

¹³ Osgood, 1917 quoted in Brien, 2006: 55

¹⁴ Mailer, 2003: 190 quoted in Brien, 2006: 55

“Oh I had so many questions. Some questions could be answered through research – like supplementing a conversation that I had with Brigid (geneticist) with scientific papers in order to understand it better. Or contextualising an event that Oaksie (fisherman) recounted about the lifeboat drowning in 1954 by digging into archival newspapers and articles that were written at that time. But many questions were those that could not be answered by secondary research. They were questions about this very act of rewriting oral histories: how to tell a story experienced by a single human being, but intrinsically made up of other people’s stories? I’ve read and read many perspectives on this, from research papers to author interviews, but I cannot come to a conclusion”.

“Why not pose those questions in the book? Why attempt to hide these struggles and pretend like this process was effortless?”

It is worth noting that neither reflective journaling nor secondary research were isolated exercises dissociated from book-writing. Rather, I actively let the reflective texts influence the writings in the book, the book to call for secondary research. For instance, questions arising in the journal reflections would be further explored through book-writing; the book’s lyrical ‘voice’ would penetrate into the reflections; and quotes encountered in secondary research would influence the narrative flow. Such dialogue between research, writing, and reflection afforded space for new information, new stories, and new questions to shape the course of the process.

A Note on Book-writing as Lifework

The process of writing itself becomes a living experience as the research spilled into ‘life’. In fact, it was fascinating to observe how my whole life became a research opportunity. As I cooked dinner, the previously clogged chain of images would start to flow like water, and I would run to my desk and scribble them down before they disappeared while still holding a spatula in my other hand. In my daily dose of reading before going to bed, I was constantly looking out for powerful words and expressions that I might use in my own writing. I would listen to relevant podcasts on the current topic of research while going on runs. Sometimes, I would be talking to peers about non-related things, which suddenly

click perfectly into my writing. Indeed, writers need to have “powers of observation heightened beyond the normal” which they utilise to “read people, events, situations and places by watching, eavesdropping, travelling and, in various ways, attempting to experience, and then understand, that which they wish to represent or evoke in their writing”.¹⁵ The ‘living research’, therefore, seems to be especially appropriate for the practice of book-writing.

“Sometimes, my writings would be an image, or a colour. Yesterday, I went to an art shop to look at their vast range of papers to find the right kind of ‘blue’ I saw – or rather experienced – in Oxford. At this particular moment, I was with Sarah and Frank, walking in the meadows, and they were telling me beautiful stories about specific plants, birds, and how you can distinguish them. We navigated through the world of smells, rubbing wild mint between our fingers and burying our faces in the overwhelming sweetness of honeysuckles.

And at one point at the top of the hill, we naturally came to a halt and stood still, looking up at the sky and listening to the skylarks. No one uttered a word for five minutes, and although it wasn’t agreed upon, it just felt like the most natural thing to let the landscape speak. There was no wind and everything seemed to be at a complete standstill. I loved how they were equally embraced by the moment as I was, although it must be an everyday experience for them. We stood there for what felt like ages but also at the same time, a moment that ended in a blink of an eye.

“Isn’t it still?” Sarah whispered. “Very still,” Frank nodded in reply. “Yes,” I said, and immediately I wished I could say something better. I think we were all intoxicated by the blueness of the sky and the notes of the skylarks.

A few weeks later, I rewinded through the footage on my GoPro with an urge to get a glimpse at that blue again, but the blue wasn’t there. It was a moment – both temporal and immaterial – that a video recording wouldn’t capture. How do I translate this into the materiality of the book? Do I describe it in words? Do I paint it? Can I? Should I?

So this is how I ended up at the art shop. I went on a quest to look for that blue, hoping that it would lead me somewhere”.

¹⁵ Gordimer, 2000: 4 quoted in Brien, 2006: 55

* * *

“It’s hard to explain, because writing is partly an intuitive practice, at least for me. I once asked a weaver why she chose a particular yarn, and she answered, “because it felt right”. I also choose certain words because it feels right in my heart.

I usually start with a direction of the content, but the words and phrases arrive like a musical composition. Writing is a lot about the rhythm, I think, and how you sway with it. This means that in order to write, you have to first become part of the ebbs and flows, and only then do the words flow out. On good days, they come gushing out like a tsunami of impromptu melodies and my mind struggles to keep up. But on other days, not a drop of a syllable trickles out. Sometimes, I would spend five-and-a-half hours trying to start a paragraph or even a drawing, ending up writing or sketching a hundred versions, yet none of which I was happy with. Often when I was unable to ‘extract’ a rhythm out, I would leave it to the side for a few days and attempt it later or approach it through another story. There is always another way of telling the same thing, I learned, and so I would experiment with various approaches before settling on one.”

* * *

“The thesaurus became my best friend with whom I would spend hours with. Often, I would devote more time to trying to discover ‘the’ perfect word to explain a sensation or a scene, rather than the actual writing itself. Occasionally, that perfect word didn’t exist – none of them felt enough to embody the experience. Language is limiting, and crafting words is difficult. This is the struggle with the material – it often doesn’t behave the way the designer wants it to – whether you are weaving with slippery threads or weaving words. A certain rhythm might demand a similar-sounding syllable to follow it, and I would look for words that would fit in while also considering the content. Sometimes, a phrase would be associated with another idea so strongly, that I’d have to rethink the flow of the paragraphs. It was a process of continuous negotiation between the material and I. As the designer, I had the agency to shape the words into content. As the material, the words had the agency to shape the rhythm; to spill and clog; to shape my process of shaping.”

The Hydro-logics of Book-writing

For most authors, the topic, plot, structures and style of the book are decided before writing. Yet in performing book-as-process, instead of starting out with a fixed intention of what the book will be ‘about’, the practitioner shares agency with the gathered materials themselves. Notably through this hydro-logic process, the stories, whispers, utterances, silences, facts, fleeting moments and fragments of knowledge were the fundamental design ingredients, each piece with its particular substance, tendency and voice. As material agents, they are capable of actively forming structure, qualities, narrative and the content of the artefact.

This chapter followed the initial process of engaging with the gathered stories, testing ideas, and illustrated a fluid means of book-writing directed towards the multimodal book as an artefact. In so doing, it has synthesised the previous theoretical research on multimodal ‘bookness’ (Chapter Three) using the materials gathered during the research trip (Chapter Two) to channel into a hydro-logical mode of *doing*. The materials from the research trip were first analysed and processed (through transcribing, re-reading, re-watching, re-listening, and categorising), in order to grapple with the expanse of embedded knowledge. This was followed by producing experimental writing *from* these materials, which uncovered precarious confluences between stories, dialogues and experiences. As an organic continuation of the research trip, I worked multimodally, while supplementing my knowledge through additional readings and conversations. With a shift from approaching the stories as ‘disparate dialogues with different people’, to voices that fluidly traverse through bodies and conversations, these unique confluences became the ‘flesh’ of the book.

Through this hydro-logic process, various productive methods for mapping-in-movement emerged. For instance, wall-mapping enabled the dynamic morphing of the narrative becoming, as it responded to new experiments, ideas, and knowledge *as* it evolved. Moreover, the Book-covering and Blurb-ing methods not only encouraged the continuous directional movement of the design process, but also became modes of documentation that unveiled patterns in its evolution. These were combined with written and audio journalling, which documented subjective reflections, struggles and questions that had arisen while empirically performing the hydro-logic process. These methods were crucial in navigating through uncertainties, notably due to the unpredictability of *how* exactly

these stories, reflections, and research would come together to generate ‘bookness’.

Through such process of writing, reshuffling, moulding, assembling, cropping, and cross-fertilising, the writings began to take on a hydro-logic form – ceasing to tell ‘a singular story’, but instead to operate within the in-between spaces as a series of ‘transitions’, constantly in the process of *becoming*; always on the verge of spilling into another story.

The following chapter discusses some of these key hydro-logic qualities by examining the resulting manuscript *as a body of knowledge*. What does the manifested book *know* about the hydro-logic practice, that could not be unveiled through the writing process itself? Moreover, how does the *experience* of reading (as an essential component of Macken’s ‘bookness’) play a role in understanding hydro-logically-produced knowledge?

Chapter Five DELTA

Reshaping the Hydro-logics

When is a Book Complete?

The question of “when is a work complete?” has long been discussed with rigour within various domains, including visual art (“when is a painting complete?”), creative writing (“when is a piece of text complete?”) and even within fields of science (“when is a scientific research complete?”). Despite the attempts to draw a clear finish line, the notion of ‘completeness’ remains ambiguous. By definition, being ‘complete’ denotes that it has all the “necessary or appropriate parts”,¹ through which we cognitively seek for a cathartic conclusion. However, if we consider a work (i.e. painting, text, research) to include its experience by the user (or reader, spectator, participant), a work can *never* be complete in its entirety, as it requires input – such as time, effort, energy, resources, knowledge, or interpretation – on behalf of the ‘experiencer’. Beyond this claim moreover, during my previous studies in Fine Arts, I have been ‘taught’ by numerous practicing artists that artworks *should* never be complete – that a ‘strong’ work of art is unfinished, leaving the viewer intellectually engaged. Although I recognise that there are many justifications to oppose this claim, I share the view with them and many other creatives who seek to keep

¹ Oxford Dictionary

the work ‘alive’ through its purposeful ‘incompleteness’.

Nevertheless, in the context of this academic research, there must exist some sort of boundary. The practitioner must decide when to move on to the next stage, when to actively finish editing, and when to share it with others. Thus, the notion of completeness – even if it is an illusion – must be present in order for it to become a *body* of knowledge that others can grasp. Such ‘body’ – whether it is a body or knowledge or of water – requires some sort of “boundedness...to give it some kind of intelligibility”.²

As the manuscript developed, the writing process transformed into an editing process where I focused on refining, condensing, and revising the book as a whole. With the cycle of editing and re-editing, I had been hoping that the book would arrive at a natural state of ‘completeness’. Yet due to the active immersion in the constantly fluctuating nature of the ‘living’ writing process, even when the book entered its ‘editing stage’, the manuscript continued to morph, leak, and absorb new knowledge. Therefore, while recognising that the book would never be fully ‘complete’, I had to determine some sort of ‘boundedness’ to the fluid process in order to acknowledge the book as a design artefact.

“I think it is useful to compare this book to a stack of Jenga. The book is going to be ‘complete’ when the stack is still standing, but no more blocks could be taken away. It doesn’t necessarily mean fewer words or visual elements, but more about carefully-chosen words, attentively placed stories and research, meticulously considered compositions, and delicately constructed rhythms – all necessary parts to hold the structure together. So for the past few weeks, my editing process has been like playing with Jenga. I would try different ways of removing the blocks – pushing, pulling, faster, slower, from the bottom, the middle, the top. I would go as far as it is barely standing, and then remove one more block so that it collapses. Then build it up again for another trial. I found that the most important part was this moment of collapse, the testament to pushing the limits of my own work. With each round, I would learn something new, like “this block definitely shouldn’t be removed” or “these ones aren’t really necessary”, and by repeating the process of collapsing and re-

² Neimanis, 2014: 19

building, I get closer and closer to that liminal structure that is strong, balanced, but devoid of all that can be removed.”

As established in my journal above, the first complete draft of the manuscript was ‘finished’ when all excess elements were detracted, and nothing else could be pruned away from the practitioner’s perspective. It was also then considered ready to be sent off and revised by editors.

“To be honest, I was really scared of asking others to read the book. I don’t know where the fear was exactly, but the words and images looked so vulnerable on the pages... so naked... and the fact that it was constructed out of gathered stories of other people, but tied together by my own fragile voice.

But I felt an overwhelming sense of release when the manuscript was first edited. Until then, I didn’t realise how much I had held it in, these heavy stories that I experimented with over and over for months.

And then every round of editing was another process of sifting the book through a sieve – the more times you sieve it, the more refined the particles become.”

For the first round, the manuscript was revised by the primary editor with a background in Literature and Journalism. The manuscript was thoroughly edited with a particular focus on grammatical correctness, diction, conciseness of phrases, and consistent style. In addition, the editor’s notes included suggestions to make the narrative stronger, comments on the coherency, the relationship between visual and textual elements, as well as typographic components. Her feedback was used to make a round of edits, after which the revised manuscript was sent to five reviewers.

Evaluating a Creative Work

In evaluating design, a plethora of diverse assessment methods exist, for instance, methods of usability testing in product design, or the life-cycle assessment in numerous design fields including graphic, industrial, and service designs.³ In evaluating multimodal picture books, contemporary scholars have, for instance, analysed the literary quality of the story in early-childhood pedagogical contexts by observing children’s interactions with the book (i.e. Wei and Ma, 2020; Papen, 2020; Murriss, 2016). Yet how does one evaluate a creative outcome, especially those that rely on the interpretation and experience of the receiver, such as creative writing and art? Especially in arts education, the challenge of how the student’s creative work could be ‘objectively’ assessed has been an ongoing topic of deliberation. For instance, scholars (i.e. Mozaffari, 2013) have attempted to create a set of criteria for assessing creativity in writing, in which the student’s work would be assessed from “no use of” to “maximal use of” the components in each outlined category such as image, characterisation, voice, and story.⁴

However, these methods prove less effective to apply to the context of this thesis, which is a complex entanglement of various genres, research, processes and modalities. As a result, developing an evaluation method had been particularly challenging. How would I ask others to evaluate it, without prescribing my own interpretation of ‘what I want the book to be about’ or supplying them with a checklist of components to ‘look out for’? Initially, a questionnaire had been made, which asked particular questions that I was interested in about how I crafted the book. These included prompts such as: “how effective do you find the relationship between the illustrations and text, and why?”, and; “how do you find the chapter titles and the cyclic structure of the narrative?”. Yet despite employing open-ended questions, this questionnaire would inevitably be leading the readers to explicitly focus their attention on what ‘I’ as the practitioner *expect* them to recognise. For instance, unless explicitly asked in the question, the readers may not identify the ‘cyclic structure’ of the chapters. This would reveal that the structure may not have played a significant role

³ Christou et al., 2021: 3

⁴ Mozaffari, 2013: 2217

in the reading experience, and accordingly, what the readers *do not* mention also become valuable data to consider.

In addressing a similar challenge in the context of evaluating interactive art, Marentakis et al. (2017) argue that many creative works are neither “conceived in order to support a single interpretation, nor do they try to communicate a certainty, or a fact”.⁵ Consequently, the knowledge generated upon the interaction with a creative work is “the outcome of an inductive rather than deductive process”.⁶ My approach to evaluation in this thesis derives from a similar vein, with an endeavour to “turn away from the metrics-driven evaluation, towards maintaining freedom of interpretation while addressing aesthetic thinking and knowledge”.⁷ How do the particularities of individual backgrounds form their reading experiences and interpretations? What do they each gain from *The Asymptotes*, and more importantly, what do they *bring* to it? Moreover, without having knowledge about the process of its making, how and to what extent would the hydro-logic quality of the process manifest in the artefact? Accordingly, my objective was to gather the readers’ fresh responses to the book without inscribing what to ‘look for’ or revealing the creative process, by developing a fluid and ‘natural’ way of responding to the book.

Yet this poses a similar question as the go-along method – namely, what is a ‘natural’ means of understanding an individual’s reading experience? When one reads a novel for leisure, they would subconsciously synthesise and interpret the information internally, and very rarely are they asked to express the details of their thoughts. While there may be a most ‘natural’ way of experiencing the artefact, an evaluation requires that the readers *consciously* engage with it in order to articulate their experiences externally. Therefore, in an attempt to elicit a consciously critical yet ‘natural’ response, I decided to frame the evaluation around a *book review*, which would encourage such critical engagement without dissociating the artefact from its ‘natural’ habitat.

5 Marentakis et al., 2017: 855

6 *ibid.*: 855

7 *ibid.*: 855

‘Book Review’ as an Evaluation Method

A book review is a critical assessment, with the purpose of providing analysis and critique for potential readers. Moreover, these reviews are highly subjective and reflect the interpretations and opinions of the reviewer rather than being a factual retelling of the content.⁸

The standard procedure for a book review is presented as follows:

- Brief summary of the book in reviewer’s own words, including thematic components.
- What the reviewer liked about the book and why.
- What the reviewer disliked/questioned about the book and why.

Using the above structure combined with a comprehensive analysis of existing book reviews, a ‘Book Review form’ was created as presented below. As the participants were not literary critics with experience in writing book reviews, I have made a more structured version that still allows freedom in how they answer the questions.

BOOK REVIEW

1. List THREE keywords that you think are the main “themes” of the book.
2. Write a brief SUMMARY of the book in your own words (a ‘blurb’).
3. Pick TWO quotations from the book that stood out to you. Why did you choose these quotes? Please give a reason for each one.
4. What aspects of the book did you enjoy and why?
5. Which elements did not work for you, and why? How would you change it?
6. Any conclusive thoughts to end your review?

8 Brangers, 2021

The participants of this book review included five people, ages 23 to 82. They were of five different nationalities, all bilingual or native speakers of English. Their academic/occupational fields ranged across clinical psychology; English literature and design; politics and economics; fine art; and linguistic translation. One of the reviewers was also a participant during the research trip, yet had very little knowledge about the writing process or its development. Others had no prior knowledge of the process or content. Hence, their reviews mainly concern the ‘completed’ book without the contextual knowledge of this thesis process. Moreover, after receiving the results, I had the chance for discussions with specific participants for clarification and/or elaboration.

The subsequent sections will be based on the data gathered from these book reviews, combined with my own reflections during analysis.

Analysis of Book Reviews [raw data can be found in Appendix C]

Themes: Overlapping themes identified by the reviewers were “time” and “perception” – otherwise they were extremely varied. Impressively, they covered most of the thematic notions I had in mind while writing the book, including “stories”, “The Colour Blue”, “beginnings & endings” and “truth & untruth”. Moreover, as the latter two themes show, I had been exploring several juxtapositions within the book. “Flying and falling” was a theme that I had been conscious of while crafting the narrative, yet unmentioned by the reviewers. On the other hand, one reviewer noted the theme of “myth-making” which I had not been aware of. This was especially well-expressed, as the notion of myth-making in itself encompasses many of the above themes, as well as others presented by the reviewers such as “perception”, “time/space”, and “science vs. philosophy”.

Summary: The five summaries consisted of widely ranging angles that uniquely responded to their respective backgrounds. Dissecting the words used in these summaries (i.e. “poetic”, “creative narrative”, “inner conversation”, “contemplation”, “semi-narrative”) has revealed that *The Asymptotes* does not belong in a single literary or artistic genre, but instead is a liminal form of storytelling. The reviewers also responded to the fluid structure of the book, using words such as “free-flowing”, “flowing”, “intertwin[ing]” and “ever-changing”. Furthermore, they also touched upon the interwoven multiplicities

of bodies of knowledge, presenting the book as one that “examines events from multiple perspectives”, “brings together a number of stories” and “buckles into caverns of thought (spanning art history, science, memory, wordplay)”. All five reviewers either alluded to the “flight”, “airplane” or “journey”, suggesting that they have recognised the book’s narrative architecture that is structured around a single flight journey.

Quotes: None of the chosen quotes overlapped among the reviewers. The reasons for selecting their respective quotes were especially situated, related to their own:

past memories: “in a very poignant childhood memory...”; “early memory of one of my schoolteachers...”; “it made me think of times when I’ve been above the clouds in an airplane...”

fields of expertise: “it comes back to the ongoing debate between competing ontologies and thus contrasting beliefs about how the world can be observed (and if there even is a single truth to be observed)”; “...in my research, I work based on the idea that human behaviour can and should be measured in an objective way. This is very different to how other disciplines view human behaviours”.

provocative self-reflection: “A lot of people, myself included, like to focus on one thing and try to dissect it to understand it, but it’s important to remember that things cannot be understood without considering its environment, connections and history”; “this line [referring to ‘I translate the myth of myself back to the world’ p.92] provoked me so much, it is exactly how I feel! ...we become aware of the massive effort that goes into building a single person and then we must reckon with how to translate it into something that we and others can understand. Our self-mythologizing is ongoing.”

emotional responses: “I was not aware of what *The Falling Man* was referring to until reading this quote...the realisation genuinely sent shivers down my spine... this resonated with my innate fears and thoughts the most”.

Observations & Interpretations: This can be discussed through the ways in which the reviewers have articulated their reading experiences, combined with their analyses of quotes and critiques of the book. The main angles from which the reviewers approached *The Asymptotes* are as follows:

Textual language: Diction, wordplay, phrasing, metaphors, breaking the fourth wall, and the use of contemporary language were all positively noted, including the use of fabricated **compound words** such as “strangebodied” and **textual imagery**, which “communicates how rich and thick the sky and sea are in the narrator’s eyes”. One reviewer noted how she “can almost feel how dry the air is in the airplane”, detailing her embodied response to the prose.

On the other hand, there were phrases, wordings and rhythms that were unproductive, mostly noted by the reviewers as **difficulties with imagery** (“breathy light” seems counterintuitive, or “vomiting sunbaked bodies onto the sand” was too abstract in its poetry and thus “did not leave the reader with a concrete image”), as well as struggles with **illogical connections** (the quote in the book, ‘sliding into the airplane seat as if hitting a home run’ was confusing as the reviewer could not comprehend the connection between “how the narrator’s body was sliding into a seat and a home run”).

Visual language: Every reviewer noted the illustrations. The “interplay between the text and the painterly illustrations” “set the tone” of the reading experiences, bringing them “closer to the themes and subjects the text referred to, and the artistry of the writer”. One reviewer also noted that they “made the text feel more personal”. There were many specific elements described, such as the **use of colour** (“the ombre on p.193 makes me feel peaceful and calm”, “the contrast between the blue and white is interesting”), **style and medium** (“I can almost feel the dry roughness of the situation p.118-119” “the flow on p.192 makes me feel like I am in the ocean or inside a strong gust of wind”, “the silhouette image...carried a proximity to death and tragedy p.113”). Two reviewers also noted the **spatial design** of the book (“the falling words design as well as the curved design of the chapter names...were visually and aesthetically pleasing”; “the falling text really worked for me, I felt like I was sliding/falling with increasing momentum”).

There were several critical notes, all of them relating to the **incongruencies between text and image**, that I had been oblivious of. Two of the reviewers specifically noted a page where the text writes ‘my thumb is left on the shutter [...] and it snaps away thirteen instead of one’, the image accompanying this text has 23 blue squares (rather than 13 as the text describes). Another noted that when the text refers to an infant’s skull which is ‘born in six fragments’, the image only has five. These incongruencies of details caused confusion for the reviewers and took them “out of the experience [and] the flow”.

Structure: The reviewers mentioned the **fluidity of the narrative**, and positively noted the effectiveness of the “flow of the book”, “stream of consciousness” and the “familiarity of recurring narrative threads”. One reviewer describes: “it seems disconnected on the surface, but it wasn’t really. It felt like it was mimicking the flow of the mind and thoughts so well, jumping from idea to idea, but never too far to feel disconnected in any way.” She continues by expressing the effect on her reading experience: “That felt really relatable and I found this aspect exciting – to see where it would naturally go next, where it would progress”. One reviewer also made the connection between **chapter divisions and its content**, noting how “for example, in ‘Overflow’, all these stories seem to tumble out from the speaker’s subconscious, like overflowing water”.

Critically, however, several sections **lacked fluidity**, as they seemed “too abrupt and out of nowhere”. These were the most problematic when the narrative transitioned from a more conceptual text (i.e. a text that reflexively questions how to tell a story gifted by other people) into one that is grounded in an event (i.e. a text that is based on direct quotes of the go-along participants).

Discussion of Book Reviews

Every decision I had made in writing the book has explicitly been attempts *practice* hydro-logically; to explore what it means to design as a responsive, living, directional body of water. As the reviewers were not informed about such process of creating the book (from the go-along and literature research, to the writing process), their engagement is purely with that of the materialised artefact. However, the external reviews revealed how the logic of water – which I had considered to be forming the design *process* – had indeed manifested as the book itself. Building upon the previous analysis of the book reviews, the following section seeks to understand the hydro-logic qualities of *The Asymptotes* from the data.

The reviewers have approached the **fluid structure** as an intrinsic element of the book, including its “flow”, “narrative threads” and “chapter divisions that helped [...] to conceptualise” the writing. They used words such as, “flowing” “liquid” and “cycle” in relation to the book’s structure, attesting to its hydro-logic quality.

Such flow was approached differently by one reviewer, when she claimed, “I did feel compelled to look up the little facts it offered”, detailing that she had “stepped out” of the flow of the book to ‘confirm’ the pieces of knowledge, and returned again into the fluid experience of the book. The reading experience, therefore, had become a **living experience** in which the readers are encouraged to weave in and out of the book’s narrative. Such fluidity between the ‘real’ world and the story world, she claims, is enhanced by the “various levels of fourth-wall-breaking” whereby the imaginary wall between the book and reality collapses.

Moreover, the embodied experience of reading was highlighted by the reviewers’ multimodal bodily responses, such as “I can almost feel the dry air”, “I felt like I was falling”, and “it sent shivers down my spine”. All five reviewers commented on the significance of **responsivity** between images and text. Notably, many discussed the texture of images in relation to the linguistic imagery (i.e. “I can feel the dry roughness of the situation [through] the colours and connection to the writing”). These analyses further reinforced how the **multimodal** creative *process* of the practitioner had effectively synthesised the image-text dialogue, ultimately engaging the readers in a multimodal *reading experience*.

In addition, the reviewers described the experience of reading this book as a “journey”

and “travel”, whereby the narrative progression builds into a more purposeful and **directional** one. The structure of the book tied together within the “duration of one short flight”, I realised, had been a materialisation of the sense of directionality that I strived to maintain during the research process, due to the fluid nature of the hydro-logic that could easily result in ‘aimless drifting’.

The value of this review also lies in the **situated knowledge** of each reviewer. Spanning across fields of knowledge, cultures, experiences and ages, each had their own approach to writing the book review. Although reviews are inherently subjective, some responded more personally (addressing their emotional experiences of reading the book, personal identities, or describing their own past), while others responded generally (discussing the effect that the topic or style might have on readers in general). Furthermore, when comparing their critiques, three reviewers mostly focused on the artistic components of the book (i.e. style of writing, word choice, image aesthetics, narrative fluidity), while the other two focused more on the logistical aspects (i.e. coherency of image-text relationship, structural flow). Interestingly, those who responded more artistically had backgrounds in the arts and humanities, whereas those who discussed more analytically were from the sciences, therefore exposing how the approaches to the book change across different fields of knowledge.

Furthermore, some reviewers were self-reflective in the way they wrote the review, by stating, for instance, “I realise that these critiques come from a very analytic scientific perspective, but it’s something that I find tricky to let go”.

By analysing the reviews, I was able to not only understand various interpretations of the readers, but also to expand *my* understanding of the book. How the readers extended the ideas encompassed in *The Asymptotes*, developed new connections, and formed questions attested to the fluid nature of the book that encourages active intellectual engagement. For example, a reviewer touched upon the significance of the title, observing how the readers are “travelling but never landing anywhere, like the eponymous asymptote”. She then expanded the meaning of the title in her own terms by reflecting; “the question I am left with is not how close we *can* come to the invisible, untouchable lines that draw the world, but how closely we *dare* to approach them” (original emphasis).

Similarly, a reviewer beautifully takes us through how the idea of ‘self-mythologising’ in the book had provoked deep reflection on her own identity:

“We go inward and think and create and ruminate and build stories (about ourselves, about the people around us, our families, our experiences, our daily lives, our patterns) and then we are left to assimilate (or not) and create something out of that tangle of feelings and experience, fact and fiction. Much of this synthesizing happens subconsciously, but occasionally we become aware of the massive effort that goes into building a single person and then we must reckon with how to translate it into something that we and others can understand, for better or worse. Our self-mythologizing is ongoing.”

Written by a reviewer

Reviews such as these have evidenced the readers’ engagements beyond the existing content of the book. It emphasises the role of the reader as a co-creator of the work, and that this artefact materialises through the convergence of the reader and narrative.

Perspective of a Go-Along Participant on Reading *The Asymptotes*

A follow-up conversation was additionally conducted with one of the reviewers who also took part as a participant in the go-along research phase. This was done in order to gain insight into the experience of being part of the experimental process as a participant, and later reading the materialised book which had interwoven their stories they themselves had offered.

In our short conversation, the participant told me that they had recognised some sections of the book while reading, for instance, “the section about the song of the skylark over the young dead airman’s grave – a very poignant memory from my childhood”. When I asked what they thought about the fact that I (as the designer) took the liberty to synthesise and re-articulate their stories and our conversations, they asserted; “I had no problem with the reinterpretation of my memories in this book, as they remained recognisable to me and the sentiment remained the same [...] the feeling was captured really accurately”. They also mentioned that the form of *The Asymptotes* was “something very new to [them], combining science with personal reminiscences and artwork in a book format”. These positive comments were especially empowering, as for this particular

participant, the book provided “an unexpected freshness” and “authenticity” which had derived from the process of practice-based research.

It is worth noting, however, that not all participants may feel the same way, and a more exhaustive evaluation must be carried out in order to understand each individual experience of being part of this research. Nevertheless, this follow-up conversation had provided another dimension which must be considered – notably, the complexity that arises from employing an experimental process that uses stories and conversations with other people as *design materials*. More on this will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Considerations of the Book Review Method

The data gathered with the Book Review method is fully qualitative. Despite the advantages of qualitative methods (especially for this research which encourages open interpretation of the creative work), it poses challenges related to subjectivity. Notably, the practitioner must account for her own subjectivity and bias when interpreting the data, as well as to be cautious of drawing speculative conclusions. Language is not a neutral medium, and therefore one must note that what the reviewer intended to communicate may not be received accurately by the practitioner. On the other hand, the openness of the Book Review method renders the questions themselves to be subject to the interpretation of the reviewer, as a single question could be approached in a multitude of ways. Consequently, the practitioner cannot control what kind of data they would receive. Hence, for researchers aiming to evaluate a specific component or perspective, and for those aiming to compare several variables holistically (i.e. how the readers’ age/background influences their engagements with the artefact), this method may not be suitable, or could require modification.

Furthermore, the framing of the evaluation as a Book Review had inherently prioritised the examination of the textual elements more than the visual. Not only is the established notion of a ‘book review’ tied to verbal language, but the questionnaire also required textual answers in the form of fillable text boxes. Thus, the visual elements had to be discussed textually. This may have (sub)consciously lead the reviewers to reflect

less on the visual components as their thoughts could either *not* be expressed in words or the visuals were deemed less significant than the textual content. Moreover, the framing of this evaluation as a ‘book review’ inevitably delimits the reviewers to approach the questionnaire with an expectation of what a book review *should* be. Consequently, as the traditional book review does not usually discuss the design of books, there were very few mentions of the paratextual components in the data.

Crucially, moreover, the multimodal aspect of the book could not be dealt comprehensively with this method. This is due to several reasons. Firstly, the reviewers were provided access to the digital manuscript instead of a printed copy (the book had not been printed at this point, as I would later edit the manuscript according to their critiques), which inevitably crafts an altered reading experience. The digital book lacks sensory and haptic qualities such as the weight, the touch, the thickness of paper, and the smell of ink that are inherent to the reading experience of a printed book. The evaluation of the physical copy could provoke comments on the texture of paper, dimensions of the book, and size of the type (which could be easily zoomed in on screen, but not on paper). With a physical book, moreover, there are possibilities to flip back and forth between distant pages, and does not enforce a linear reading experience as scrolling through a digital copy might.

Secondly, a book is further tied to the “tradition allied to historical continuity” which includes “the simple romance of paper and binding”.⁹ Indeed, even before the reader engages with the content, the objecthood of the book fundamentally dictate *how* the book will be approached. Notably, the digital format in which the book had been disseminated gravitates towards a distinct context, culture, and mindset of reading (for example, one might read a digital copy by sitting at an office desk on a laptop, whereas one might take a physical copy to bed and read before falling asleep), thereby influencing how the readers approach the book, and consequently their experiences.

The most significant limitation in the application of this method, however, was the small number of reviewers, due to the considerable time and effort required to read, reflect

upon and write about the book. As in any evaluation method, the larger the number of data sets, the more insights the practitioner is able to extract. Specifically, the increase in the number of participants would allow the practitioner to compare, contrast, and seek patterns across the reviews correlating with their respective backgrounds, which could not be validated in this study. Furthermore, discussing the book with more participants who had taken part in the go-along phase would provide an enhanced understanding of the book in its relation to its multiple ‘authors’.

As I was forced to draw conclusions from a limited number of data sets, the results are neither comprehensive, nor does it indicate how the book will be received by the wider audience. Four out of five reviewers had obtained a degree from higher education, thus albeit belonging within disparate fields, were familiar with the academic context. Given that all reviewers were notified of the evaluative purpose of the Book Review, it had most likely influenced their attitudes towards the reading experience in a way that they may not read a book for leisure. This could include reading the book more thoroughly with a conscious, reflective, and ‘analytic’ mindset inherent to academic thinking. While such analytic approach is necessary for obtaining critical and in-depth data, it must be acknowledged that the results would be once removed from the more ‘natural’ and immersive reading experiences.

Provided that this evaluation method has not been fully established in the context of practice-based research, the Book Review should be understood as an experimental pilot method rather than a fixed, comprehensive one. Hence, its validity and adaptability in other contexts require further investigation. However, acknowledging the limitations has brought its future potentials to light. For example, in response to the book’s multimodality, it could develop to include a *visual* Book Review that encourages the reviewers to respond through rough sketches. Likewise, the review could be extended into a workshop – akin to a ‘Book Club’ – in which the reviewers are encouraged to collaboratively discuss the book-as-artefact. Supplementing the original book review with other modes of participant reflections (visual, participatory, verbal), would enable a more thorough gathering of data sets for an increasingly ‘living’ evaluation.

9 Calvert, 2017: 3

The Hydro-logics of the Book Review

The Book Review method emerged as a response to the challenge of evaluating against an ‘intended’ use of the book-as-artefact. As Marentakis et al. (2017) observe, an interpretation of a creative work is “a hypothesis out of the multiple potential meanings, rather than a conclusion”, stressing that creative evaluation methods should be designed to capture “potentialities” arising from the audience’s experiences.¹⁰ The method, furthermore, is grounded in the ‘natural habitat’ in which books operate, borrowing its framework from the established context of commercial literary publishing. It provides a space that exploits the fundamental nature of book reviews – to reflect and to critique – and therefore gives explicit permission to the reviewers to infuse their answers with their own personal opinions. A face-to-face interview (‘conversation’) instead of a questionnaire-style peer evaluation was also considered, yet ultimately, the written review would enable the reviewers to voice critiques that they might not be able to verbally articulate directly to the maker. In addition, the Book Reviews could be written in their own time at their own paces, enabling space for deeper reflection, contemplation, and articulation of thoughts which may be lost in the spontaneity of a conversation.

The core of this method lies in recognising the agencies of the ‘living’ subjectivities and reading experiences of the reviewers. The Book Review has highlighted particularities of interpretation which arose from respective backgrounds and existing knowledge, while simultaneously “articulating common issues from differing perspectives”.¹¹ The structure of the questionnaire (‘disguised’ as a Book Review) was especially open-ended with the purpose of minimising the restrictions as to how each reviewer approaches the book. Given that “there is no right way to write a book review”,¹² this method invites the reviewers to form their unique way of responding, and to freely discuss what *they* have noticed and experienced, beyond the practitioner’s academic or creative ‘intentions’.

Furthermore, the reviewers had experienced the manifested book detached from its process, enabling *The Asymptotes* to speak for itself as an autonomous artefact. Through

this, my objective was to analyse how such hydro-logic process translates into an outcome when experienced without the contextual knowledge of this study, as well as to obtain new perspectives on the artefact that I, as a single individual, would not have conjured myself. Although my intention was never to ‘convey’ my experimental process through the artefact, the results of the Book Review revealed how the hydro-logic process had indeed manifested in the artefact. The readers have expressed how *The Asymptotes* embodied a fluid quality within its directional structure and engaged in a multimodally lived experience of reading. Indeed, the book itself *is* hydro-logical.

Additionally, each reader actively responded to the book through their own situated knowledge, stimulated by the diversity of stories interwoven throughout the book. By extending the ideas encompassed in the narrative through their own reflective thoughts and fields of expertise, the reviewers had woven themselves into the story – absorbing the materials, digesting and internalising them to develop knowledge of their own, and finally releasing their newly-formed thoughts through the Book Reviews. Such metabolic process of absorption, digestion, responding, and leakage quintessentially echoes my own hydro-logic process as a practitioner. For me, it had also been a journey of absorbing knowledge (from literature and go-along), digestion (through experimental writings), responding (through reflective notes, book-writing) and leakage into the artefact.

* * *

In responding to the reviewers’ comments and critiques, further edits were made to the manuscript. Exploring how to make these edits became another layer of the reflective process. For instance, some critiques were related to semiotics, rhythm, and narrative flow, which could be altered more easily with their suggestions (i.e. “to me, it would read better if it said ‘downhill’ instead of ‘downhills’”), while others required more crafting (i.e. “the visual leap is too abrupt” or “this word choice doesn’t conjure any images”). Understanding why certain sections did not work from the perspective of the readers was essential in exploring ways to alter the manuscript, leading to the addition of transitions, restructuring sections, and reevaluating designerly choices.

Additionally, given how the reviewers’ interpretations have enriched *my own* understanding of the book, I also decided to construct the final blurb by interweaving

10 Marentakis et al., 2017: 854

11 Mazé, 2018: 575

12 Brangers (Ed.), 2021

the various elements from the reviewers' 'blurbs'. Therefore, the readers' experiences and understandings of *The Asymptotes* were directly incorporated into constructing the final book. As such, beyond a method to analyse the artefact, the evaluation became an active current within the ongoing process of book-writing, which embodies the value of the readers in co-creating the book and attests to the responsivity of the hydro-logical process.

"The book began to gain another dimension. I can see now, that on top of the initial gathered stories from conversations, there is another current of the stories of the editors and reviewers".

By following the evaluations with another round of the editing process, the manuscript actively responded to and embodied the reader's experiences, opening up the research again to heightened external contamination. With a form of evaluation that is constructed upon the agency of interpersonal knowledge, the book was in a constant state of *becoming* until its very final stages – reflective of the hydro-logic that is living and morphing, seeking confluence with other bodies of water.

Chapter Six ACCUMULATED CURRENTS

Snapshots of Production

Figures 6.1, 6.2, 6.3

Top right: printed mock-up book with notes.

Below and bottom right: colour correction test sheets with various colour profiles to achieve prints closer to original artworks.

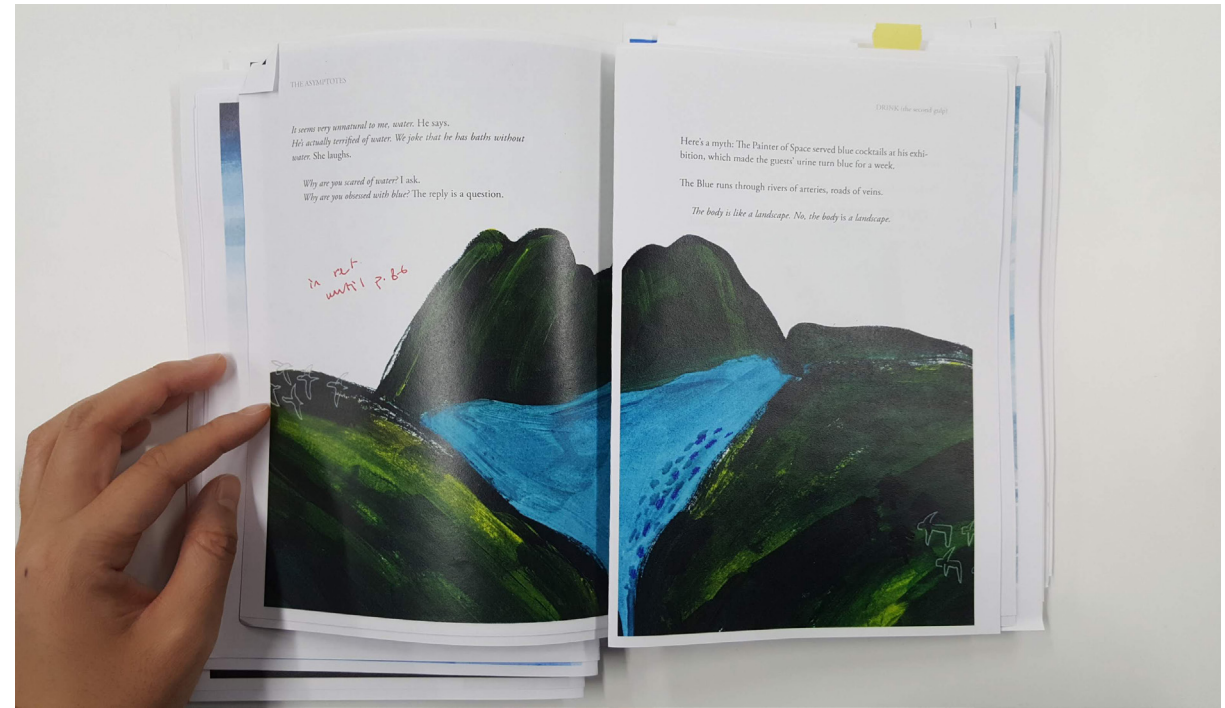




Figure 6.4, 6.5
The Asymptotes



Think about the weather patterns, flowing
around the globe. The deep flows and sur-
ficial currents, and the way the water
is flowing in different directions within
itself. And then the wind, and the moisture
in the atmosphere, and then the clouds.
Inside your body, you've got these different
forms of watery mass, moving in different di-
rections with different energy and speed. All
the time, nonstop.
Like the tides.

side. You ride on the
side in the darkness,
just the glancing moonlight,
like a peck of lead anywhere,
in the darkness and sounds of waves
in silhouette. We would be
looking for herrings, looking over the
side. And sometimes, we would be
or them glancing under the
moonlight, churning the gentle
waves into liquid silver.

As the sea would change, and
the winds would whip up in no
time. Sometimes, we would get
caught out on horrendous seas.
The sea can devour you. Boats
bar downed, and many didn't
return.

That is not blank, you know.

Figure 6.6
The Asymptotes

Chapter Seven THE MOUTH

Refiguring the Hydro-logics

To practice hydro-logically is to embody the fluid nature of creative practice, with careful attention to the eroding, transporting, and depositing of knowledge. In Chapter One, the feminist new materialist figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ was introduced, and the hydro-logic framework was tentatively framed based on existing literature. Throughout this thesis journey, the hydro-logic has informed the practitioner’s process in different contexts and means – from the go-along, multimodal book-writing, to methods of reflection and evaluation.

The understanding of the hydro-logic as a mode of *doing*, moreover, was progressively deepened in dialogue with the empirical, theoretical and reflective findings. Accordingly, combining the knowledge developed thus far, this chapter will identify the qualities of the hydro-logic process, as well as discuss some of the methodological approaches which engender these characteristics. It offers how a living, fluid mode of research can be performed whilst keeping sight of the academic and creative focus. Furthermore, the values, implications, and limitations of this hydro-logic research will be examined.

Anatomy of the Hydro-logic Process

In this section, I will identify five renderings of the hydro-logic approach based on the accumulated findings across the process. Here, ‘renderings’ are neither fixed methods, nor are they criteria against which the validity of work should be measured. Instead, they are theoretical spaces through which to examine creative means of knowing and generating knowledge.¹ They may influence the practitioner’s research, the creative making, the outcome, and/or the user’s experience of the artefact.² Consequently, these conceptual frameworks can be employed to understand specific features of one’s research and should be approached as a possible variant of experimental design practice.

hydro|logics

responsive & responsible, meandering, directional, multimodal, and accumulating

1 Springgay et al., 2005: 899 cited in Stevenson, 2013: 13

2 *ibid.*

Responsivity & Responsibility – To think as a body of water means to argue against the solitary illusion of the self, and to reflect upon how the practitioner’s flows are intimately intertwined with others. Such hydro-logics demand active responsiveness to the external influences that may feed into one’s creative practice. This also encourages space for knowledge and methods from other academic fields to infiltrate into the design process, and to examine relevant confluences that result from these interactions.

On the other hand, the practitioner must acknowledge that her movements, in turn, are shaping the environment through which it flows. This expands the practitioner’s responsibilities beyond her own creative endeavour, and urges that she considers the implication of their research (both the process and artefact) on others, as well as insisting on its contextualisation within the existing academic landscape. Simultaneously, it demands critical reflection on the particularity of one’s situatedness, as well as building the process upon the relational nature of the ‘living’ inquiry.

Meandering – Due to its high dependency on external influences, the hydro-logic is a fluid exploration that inherently *resists* linearity. The practitioner relinquishes dominance over the design process, and embarks on detours that may feel unpredictable or risky. Hence, one must embed tolerance for uncertainty and unknowability into their endeavour, allowing for organic flux, experimental approaches, and various forms of thinking to feed into their study. This inevitably produces struggles, frictions, ruptures, interruptions, unexpectedness and ‘being lost’ that may be beyond the control of the practitioner, which is also seen as part of the design process.

Directional – Being a form of academic research, the process must be guided by the creative and academic focus. Although uncertainties, unknowability and ‘getting lost’ are significant components of the process (as outlined above), the directionality becomes an anchor which prevents prolonged periods of creative inertness or ‘aimless drifting’. Accordingly, the practitioner must constantly keep the research aim(s) in sight and routinely assess the rightness of her current direction. This encourages progressive movement of the study which continually builds upon preceding knowledge.

Multimodal Research – Any living experience is fundamentally multimodal, as we comprehend the world through the synthesis of sensory cues. Multimodal research is thus a perceptual mode of inquiry where the confluence of senses is understood as integral to knowledge production. Furthermore, it highlights our phenomenological nature, encouraging the practitioner to consciously reflect upon her (and the others’) experiential processing of the world. Accordingly, every lived moment is seen as an opportunity for research, thereby allowing ‘research’ to infiltrate into ‘life’, and for ‘life’ to shape one’s ‘research’.

Accumulating Flows – The artefact is not something made separately from the process of research, but instead a ‘thickening’ of the hydro-logical process (and the above four renderings). In other words, the hydro-logical journey of the practitioner – from theoretical research to reflective practices – *constitutes* the artefact. Hence, the artefact is a tangible *cumulative result* of the design process rather than simply being ‘informed’ or ‘inspired’ by the research, and is considered to be in the state of constant becoming *from the very outset* of the research. Consequently, the *hydro-logical design process* intrinsically results in a self-reflexive *hydro-logical design artefact*.

As illustrated in figure 7.1 on the next page, each of these hydro-logic renderings has informed the practitioner’s process throughout the experimental design process. In practice, these qualities exist simultaneously, as one cannot be dissociated from another. For instance, being highly responsive to external influences induces meandering of the subsequent processes, as the practitioner relinquishes some of her creative agency to the participants; such meandering movement requires a direction – a bearing to meander *towards* – which encourages progressive movement towards the artefact, and so on. Altogether, these qualities form the hydro-logical *living research*.

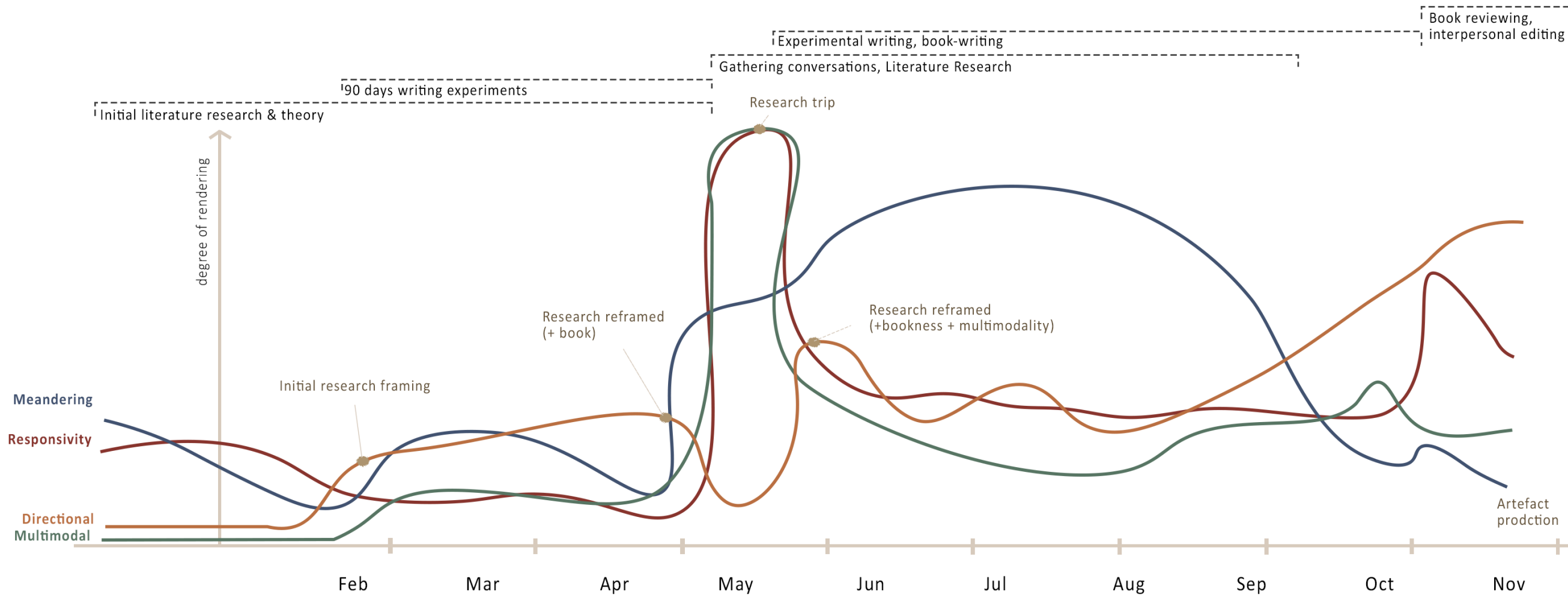


Figure 7.1
Hydro-logic Renderings Subjectively Mapped out for this Research Process
 (the four mapped renderings combine to create the **accumulative** quality of the hydro-logic)

As a body of water, the practitioner leaks and absorbs, partaking in the hydrological cycles of other bodies. Yet, practicing as a body of water is precarious. Relinquishing agency to other bodies of water invites unexpected encounters, findings and knowledge to become inevitable materials interwoven into the process. Therefore, the creative journey is highly dependent on, and differs radically according to the specificities of the research condition. Given such increased uncontrollability, this research comes with high risk, not only because the practitioner must navigate through the process without being certain that her efforts would generate ‘productive’ results, but also because the practice could easily *cease to become research*. In other words, ‘living research’ is vulnerable to becoming merely ‘living’, if the practitioner loses *all* control of the ‘research’ aspect. Accordingly, how can one ensure that this hydro-logical process is validated, communicated or appropriated *as research*? In analysing my entire research journey in light of the proposed hydro-logic renderings, I propose that the practitioner maps their process *in* movement.

Mapping Hydro-logical Movement

In framing a/r/tography, Irwin (et al.) quotes that living research “strips the power to control the journey of inquiry from the practitioner”, and therefore “the significance of the discovery appears *only in retrospect*” (added emphasis).³ As such, many practice-based research methodologies (including a/r/tography) have suggested that the practitioner retrospectively maps her creative journey, as it adds a layer of objectivity by providing temporal and emotional distance from the process. Indeed, retrospective mapping reveals patterns of practice that could not be recognised whilst moving. Taking a distance from my process, for example, unveiled how I had repeatedly appropriated the established framework of commercial book publishing as creative *methods* at various stages in this thesis (i.e. Blurb-ing, Book-covering, Book Reviews).

On the contrary however, I argue that the unique value of ‘living’ research lies precisely *in midst* of the research journey. Here, I return to Kozel’s framing of phenomenological ‘hyper-reflection’ [discussed in Chapter One], in which the practitioner interrogates her movement *during* movement, while being conscious of how

this act of ‘reflection-during-movement’ is influencing the live movement itself. It allows the findings acquired during mapping to immediately feed back into the continuing design process to induce further action. Simultaneously, I propose that mapping in movement enables the practitioner to continuously situate and assess her *current* position in relation to the wider research direction.

In times of heightened doubt or fruitless attempts, the practitioner may feel as if mapping is futile. These emotional struggles, uncertainty, and unknowability are inherent within the hydro-logics, during which there may be an intense craving for creative control and an impulse to blockade the erratic spasms of external influences from shaping her process. It is in these moments, however, that the process of mapping in movement is especially productive, as it forces the reorganisation of thoughts and re-anchoring to the broader research context. Indeed, mapping demands that the practitioner seeks connections between research and practice, self and other, as well as past, present and future of the process, thereby revealing multiple layers in which her creative practice is (or can be) intertwined with others.

Moreover, mapping in movement can be used to analyse the current directional trajectory and to predict (but not become fixated on) *possible* paths which the process *may* flow into. Similar to how an impromptu jazz musician may constantly think about the melodic progression (without precisely knowing what will be produced until the moment those notes are played), the practitioner is perpetually aware of the *possibilities* of her creative progression. The current approach, from which these possibilities branch out, can then be assessed against the direction of the research scope, and if necessary, be reframed or redirected. Mapping in movement encourages these regular assessments, thereby preventing the practice from ‘aimlessly drifting’ or becoming over-expansive and ‘diluted’.

During the creative process, I found that constructing a *system* for mapping – which is systematically repeated throughout stages of research – is invaluable to this research, as it can provide a fixed structure to the hydro-logic design process. For instance, even in times of heightened uncertainty when the making seemed to stall during the book-writing process, Blurb-ing and Book-covering methods [discussed in Chapter Four] forced me to reflect upon my trajectory every week. In using these methods, I am still *in the movement* of making, but am simultaneously asked to stand back from the immersiveness of the

³ Felman, 1997:15 quoted in Springgay et al., 2005: 908

living research process and to rationally examine the ‘now’. How is the process relevant to the research *now*? How do the experiments feed into the book *now*? What kind of knowledge does the process generate *now*? And how does this *now* fit into the broader map of research? Especially when ‘feeling lost’ or being ‘caught in a loop’, mapping had induced cognitive progress, which was often followed by distinctive turns in the creative approach.

Throughout this research, different methods of mapping have been explored, each emerging out of the context in which the practitioner operates. Instead of inflicting a single fixed mapping method throughout the entire process, the hydro-logics require that these methods morph in form and quality. As the practitioner courses through the various stages of her creative journey, the mapping system also responds to the environments and circumstances of research by questioning: what kind of mapping makes sense at this stage?

Mapping can take many shapes – be it in the form of a mind map to organise and find confluences amongst gathered pieces of knowledge (done during the go-along); the Book-covering and Blurb-ing methods (during book-writing); or reflective audio recordings (to map out my thoughts verbally *while* making). In all cases, these mappings were not external or disembodied acts, but instead, were reflections which were intimately intertwined into the making journey. Indeed, the mind maps during the go-along eventually *engendered* the book’s narrative structure; the evolving book covers and blurbs *progressed into* the paratexts of the final artefact; and the questions in the audio journaling *composed* a part of the book’s prose. These mappings, therefore, were not simply used as a ‘tool to reflect on the process’, but as living *materials* that inherently constitute the outcome.

In this living research that shifts the hydro-logic into a mode of *doing*, the practitioner must embed tolerance for uncontrollability in their methodological framework. Given such nature, I argue that mapping in movement affords a degree of control for the practitioner. Mapping, for me, had also been an act of reclaiming my own practice. When the research process increasingly became shaped and embodied by other people’s lives and stories, there had been a surging fear of losing my validation and purpose as a practitioner. The regular mapping and re-anchoring to the research framework have been crucial exercises to re-examine my role as a researcher and practitioner in the

design research framework. Accordingly, the mapping process creates a self-reflective practitioner, who is perpetually aware of her own situatedness (as a designer, a researcher, an academic, a body of water), as well as who critically examines the implications of her research in the broader world, in and outside of academia.

In the following sections, I will examine several of these key implications of the hydro-logic particular to this thesis. Specifically, I will address the larger thematic considerations, challenges, and critiques embodied by *The Asymptotes* that have repeatedly arisen throughout the research process.

On Authenticity, Representation, and Stories as Gifts

An oft-cited claim by narrative theorist Dorrit Cohn argues that in order for a work (literary, artistic, or even design) to be considered authentically nonfiction, it “*must* be based on verifiable fact” (original emphasis).⁴ For Cohn, the distinction between nonfictionality and fictionality is absolute – it is either in “one key or another” – implying that a literary work would assert evident indicators that permit the reader to decide how they choose to ‘receive’ it.⁵ The prevailing desire for “one true story” has created such “mutually exclusive” categories in which “particular kinds of facts, such as ‘scientific facts’ and ‘historical facts’, are equated with ‘reality’”.⁶ Yet this claim raises questions about what exactly ‘authenticity’ is, how it is produced, and why readers value them.⁷ What is considered ‘truth’ or ‘fiction’? Can means of representation be purely ‘authentic’?

The Asymptotes is a work of nonfiction, yet it pushes the constraints of evidence. It is based upon “veritable facts”, yet those ‘facts’ are cut, copied, reshuffled, morphed, duplicated, and extracted. In so doing, the book challenges Cohn’s claim that fiction and truth are “mutually exclusive”. It absolves the book from its genre-tied promise to tell ‘*the single*’ truth or to insist on a fixed stability of knowledge. This is grounded

4 Novak, 2017: 8

5 Cohn, 1999: 35 cited in Novak, 2017: 13

6 Gough, 2010: 45

7 Mead, 2009 quoted in Gibbons et al., 2012: 13

upon the acknowledgement that a life story is never fully knowable or representable and cannot be told by an ‘objective’ authoritative narrator.⁸ In fact, attempts at purist nonfiction ‘authenticity’ are inherently futile, as the act of creating is also that of mediated “contamination”.⁹ Moreover, it recognises the shapeshifting nature of memories and oral histories, and the impossibility of fixing them as a single ‘truth’ to be told, as memory “metamorphoses in tandem with those of the present” and “exists in a series of revised versions that are ceaselessly reconstructed”.¹⁰ The deliberate “contamination” of the narratives in *The Asymptotes* attests to the fact that there can be no unmediated way of transferring the gathered knowledge – through a book or otherwise. Such reflexivity itself is the ‘truth’ in this book.

Furthermore, using gathered stories as design materials ultimately comes with the weight of these stories, as well as the concern for ethics of representation. On one hand, I had understood that an ‘uncontaminated’ communication of the gathered stories is impossible, especially when using them creatively. On the other hand, this inevitable ‘contamination’ has to be done responsibly and sensitively. Namely, how can I deal with these conversations and storytelling ‘truthfully’, yet as artistic material for practice-based research? This was a question that had been lurking below the surface throughout this thesis. Although I believe that there is no single ‘solution’ that ‘fixes’ such difficulty, the practitioner should nevertheless address their approach according to the context of their research.

“I don’t want to tell the story on ‘behalf of’ someone else - I don’t think I could do justice to the richness of their knowledge, nor their experiences. This is not journalism, but instead, a constellation of stories that are braided together into a fluid narrative. It’s self-reflexive in that it asks questions about what it means to tell a story – my story and of others – and how seemingly disparate stories can be so intimately close to each other.”

8 Rifkind, 2020: 2

9 Novak, 2017

10 Alexander, 2010: 114

In this creative endeavour, I handled these stories as ‘gifts’. Gifts of stories offered to me by strangers; gifts of memories handed over through encounters; gifts of knowledge given by experts. These were all gifts, shared with trust and permission for creative liberty. Receiving a gift comes with the privilege to use it in one’s own ways. Yet simultaneously, it must be treated with careful attention, time, and respect. *The Asymptotes* is a creative weaving of these storied gifts, threaded with harvested research and accumulated experiences of my own.

*“The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible in its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness.”*¹¹

~ Trinh T. Minh-Ha

On Authorship

More prominent in the histories of Visual Art and Literature, yet increasingly in Design, the notion of authorship has gained critical attention. Notably, critics have challenged the traditional ‘myth’ of a single author being the sole originator of a creative work.¹² Similarly, ‘designer as author’ has inflamed decades of debates about the designer’s agency (or lack thereof).¹³ Examining authorship in this hydro-logical study becomes especially crucial as the creative process is highly dependent on the influence of other people’s lives and stories. Consequently, the questions and issues around the practitioner’s authority had also arisen time and time again at various stages of my creative process. Is there an ‘author’ in this work, and if so, what is the significance of authorship?

Authorship emerges in multiple forms throughout the thesis. The practitioner-as-author; the participants (of the go-along)-as-authors and the readers (including editors and

11 Minh-Ha, 2019: 2

12 Lupton, 2011

13 Lupton, 2011: 69

reviewers)-as-authors. As such, I align with many contemporary thinkers who argue that there is no *single* 'Author' (uppercase denoting its traditional ubiquitous ideology) for this work. The notion of the 'Author' (especially in works of participatory nature) is increasingly criticised in a negative light, notably due to its conception as a dominant, egoistic claim over the work by certain individual(s). Some may even argue that inscribing the author/artist's name on a book or an artwork is a gesture of (unlawful) power.¹⁴ In light of these arguments, I have repeatedly considered whether it is 'right' to put my name on the book cover, especially when the narrative is largely constructed from other people's knowledge and stories. And if I do (or do not) decide to include my name as the 'author', what would it mean in the context of this research? The struggle with this issue of authorship can also be noticed in the evolution of book covers [illustrated in Chapter Four, figure 4.8], with a period where covers were made without the practitioner's name. Accordingly, authorship has been a topic of criticality, both in how to use the gifted stories as the 'practitioner-author', and in how to *represent* this relationship within the artefact. The ultimate decision to include the practitioner's (my) name on the cover came from recognising another significant dimension of authorship that had been previously overlooked – that is, the author's *responsibility*.

In this research, the gathered stories and knowledge are used as artistic materials. While being treated with respect and sensitivity, it also means that the raw material would be adopted, decontextualised, appropriated, and reshaped as they undergo the experimental synthesis. Indeed, *The Asymptotes* rarely uses the unedited transcript of the audio recordings from the go-along. For me, these conversations were more than sentences that could be simply written down and printed – they encompassed the richness of the sentiments, expressions, tones and fragmentations that easily get lost in the raw transcript. The raw materials themselves, then, are reinterpreted through the practitioner's subjective lens, with another layer of experimental creative rendering. Consequently, there is a high risk that the original intention of the participants (and other sources I drew from) may become diluted or even misrepresented through this research process.

¹⁴ Authorship has been a topic of debate in both my BFA Fine Art and MA Contemporary Design studies, and thus some of the discussions in this section is based on my own knowledge gained in these academic contexts.

As such, when considering this process of producing creative nonfiction, I believe that the issue of authorship is *beyond* the popular debates of whether or not a single person should claim ownership of the work. Rather, I argue that authorship concerns owning up to the *responsibility* for the work they have produced. In *The Asymptotes*, the stories are tied together by the practitioner's situatedness – *my* role as a 'listener' in times of storytelling, *my* responsiveness to their knowledge – and thus must be made clear that the participants' 'gifts' have been largely 'contaminated' by my own experimental design process. As a body of water, "my politics of location recalls my *accountability* to the way I'm specifically situated in relation to specific waters" (added emphasis).¹⁵ As the 'author' (with a lowercase 'a'), I recognise my subjectivity as a practitioner, and become accountable for any consequences of this book. I absolve everyone who has gifted me their stories of any responsibility for my interpretations and any mistakes, mine alone.

Despite this, however, *The Asymptotes* is by no means exclusive to this singular body of mine, nor is it merely an artistic self-expression. Rather, it is an invitation to the readers to consider *their* situatedness, *their* experiences and *their* bodies of knowledge, as the book opens up a space for reflection [discussed in Chapter Five]. Indeed, interpretation itself is fundamentally infused with cultural, historical, linguistic and social prejudices, and every reading experience is dependent on contextual particularity. The reader, therefore, engages as a co-creator of the work by "supplying that portion of it that is not written but only implied", as "[e]ach reader fills in the unwritten work or the 'gaps' in his or her own way, thereby acknowledging the inexhaustibility of the text".¹⁶ Similarly, *The Asymptotes*, which, akin to lyric essays, "leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit",¹⁷ urges the readers to actively make intuitive and interpretive connections. Furthermore, the multimodality of the book encourages the reader to introduce their own voice to the polyphony of images and text [discussed in Chapter Three]. Therefore, although the book is a 'finalised outcome' of the practice-based research, it is perpetually in the state of constant *becoming* as the readers continue to navigate through – and extend from – the

¹⁵ Neimanis, 2013: 36

¹⁶ Iser quoted in Sipe, 1998: 99

¹⁷ Tall, 1997 quoted in Sempert, 2017

many possible narrative pathways.

In addition, *The Asymptotes* seeks to pluralise knowledge by drawing from multiple disciplines (human anatomy, physics, history, philosophy, linguistics, mathematics...), as well as a breadth of sources, (oral histories and conversations, scientific reports, literary works, academic papers, contemporary media...). This intertextual mosaic of different voices resists the academic obsession with categorisation, and instead, demonstrates a connected, affective and embodied relationship between overlapping forms of knowledge. Such mode of interdisciplinary making in the creative field attempts to draw together “an unusually diverse field of readers whose interests are located at various spaces”,¹⁸ operating within the realm where discourses and knowledge fluidly interweave to generate a new potentials for meaning-making.

Through the book, reality multiplies.

On Resisting Linearity

A book inherently “fixes thought, knowledge, and culture in the form of an artefact” (original emphasis).¹⁹ In putting oral history into a book format, some magic of the oral tradition would be lost – the fluidity and spontaneity of interaction, the unexpected moments, the murmurs, the sighs, the timbres of their voices, the fleeing facial expressions – of “what comes next not already being written”.²⁰ Moreover, oral storytelling insists on the relationship between the teller and the listener, and in a conversation, these roles are especially in flux. The challenge in this experimental process was in how to preserve those sense of wonder, longing, and vulnerability inherent within the “collaborative process of telling and retelling stories”,²¹ and to avoid raising one narrative version as superior to the others.

As a result, *The Asymptotes* is a constellation of diverse materials which overlays multitudes of times and spaces – blurring the line between the past and present, while

interweaving personal and public histories. It resists linear time and collapses distance between faraway places, as a way of storytelling that is fluid yet a curated stream of consciousness. These are stories of bodies of water – stories about our dependence on water; stories about the human body; stories about loss and desire; about the slipperiness of memory; about embracing uncertainty in times of change. The narrator’s falling dream overlays with a flying artist of the 1960s; this artist overlaps with *The Falling Man* and the shared history of 9/11. A single, almost inaudible whisper caught by the audio recorder in the meadows at dusk is taken 400km north where that whispered phrase provokes a memory from 70 years ago. A memory about the too-blue sky and under that, the drying river of the present; the drying body; the thirsty body; the desert plant. The Second Law of Thermodynamics and the physics of entropy; how the universe is becoming more disordered over time; how the ocean is becoming warmer over time; how the number of fish in these oceans is declining over time; how the fishing industry has disappeared over time. A scientific fact becomes a personal story; a whisper floats in white space; a voice carries on a stranger’s memory. The narrative courses through many bodies of water that leak and absorb, across past and present, fluidly meandering through ideas, voices, and memories, as seemingly distant stories come into direct dialogue with each other.

Therefore, *The Asymptotes* is not a travelogue of a single event, but a synchronicity of multitudes that are constructed out of experimental transitions between stories. It highlights the fact that individual stories do not arrive in a coherent form, but surface through ambiguous, floating, fragmented thoughts that resist transparent linear rereadings and rewritings. At the same time, it avoids piling disconnected ‘facts’ on readers as many modern nonfiction writings are criticised for doing,²² and instead demonstrates an affective, embodied relationship through the braided narratives. Drawing from lyric essays – a form of writing that emphasises streams of hydro-logic connections – and together with the artwork that embrace the strokes and movements of the body, *The Asymptotes* embodies what it means to design a book as a body of water.

18 Brook, 2012: 1 quoted in Malilang, 2018: 77

19 Calvert, 2017: 3

20 Patel, 2022

21 *ibid.*

22 Henwood, 2021

The Hydro-logical Design Artefact

In *The Asymptotes*, the hydro-logic process has manifested within the visual and textual writings, the narrative structure, and the stylistic and aesthetic approaches. Interestingly, these hydro-logical qualities, even when detached from the process, still persist in the artefact. As evidenced by the evaluator book reviews [discussed in Chapter Five], *The Asymptotes* heightens the **multimodal** experience of reading through its linguistic imagery, lyrical prose and visual images; invites **responsivity** by combining fragments of stories approached multidisciplinarily; fluidly **meanders** through ideas, voices, and memories; is constructed out of series of shifts that grow increasingly purposeful as they **accumulate**; and the paginal sequentiality of the book renders it inherently **directional**, as the readers navigate from cover to cover. It is, indeed, a *hydro-logical book in itself*.

The Asymptotes seeks to queer divisions of literary genre – it is at once a prose poem, a critical essay, a picture book, a series of paintings, a confession, a book-form documentary. Yet before being approached as a design object, art, literature, it is a documentation of a *design process*. The materials that construct the book are the conversations and stories, wide-reaching external research, results of various experimental methods, and the reflection on the living experience of doing research. Yet simultaneously, it is neither a pure recording of the research and oral histories, nor a raw documentation of the practitioner's process. Instead, the book creatively *materialises* the very confluence between research, creative making, and reflecting. In the book, the narrator continually questions what it means to tell a story, faces the deceptive meaning of truth and authenticity of representation, and struggles to embrace uncertainties; yet at the same time, also discovers the wonder within unknowability, and learns to navigate through 'lostness'. Such self-reflexive and self-conscious critical treatise of *The Asymptotes* is an echo of my thesis journey, which has been documented through reflective writings, research notes and journal entries. *The Asymptotes* thus becomes a unique form of the 'learning diary' – a creative documentation of *how* I had approached the research questions in this thesis.

Considerations, Limitations and Opportunities for Further Studies

Being still in its dawn, the hydro-logic process is an emerging proposal rather than an established methodology. In the context of this MA thesis, my intention was neither to construct a comprehensive 'definition' of the hydro-logic, nor to provide a 'fixed' framework that the other practitioners should employ in order to practice hydro-logically. Instead, this thesis is seen as a primary pilot case study – a single seed – with potential for growth. The hydro-logic process still requires further development, critical reflection and validation. In this section, I will highlight the key limitations and considerations from my findings, as well as open up opportunities for future research.

First, the hydro-logic closely examines the active responsivity of one's creative process to external influences, thereby demanding that the practitioner puts herself in circumstances where there is a high possibility of uncontrollability. Of course, one might choose to conduct the research locally and without explicit social interactions (i.e. responding to the natural landscape or weather – as I did in the very first experimental writings [See Chapter One: Writing as a Body of Water]). However, I have found that putting myself in a socially unfamiliar context (or routine), renders the need for responsivity more explicit. The immersion in other people's lives especially requires increased attentiveness, as the practitioner attempts to adapt to the speeds, pathways, and materialities of other bodies of water. In these circumstances, the uncontrollable and unexpected become heightened in a manner that may be unachievable when practicing solitarily in a local environment.

Putting oneself in such 'suitable' circumstances would require financial, and more importantly, *social* resources that might not be obtainable in all research contexts. In this research, I had been extremely lucky to be granted financial assistance from Aalto University which enabled me to travel abroad, where I was welcomed into the lives of the most incredible people who engaged in my research as if it were their own. However, it must be acknowledged that this is not the case in every research context. In practicing the hydro-logics whereby the process is highly dependent on the involvement of others, the practitioner must rely on other people's knowledge, time, and willingness. Given that the gathered knowledge becomes the foundational material for the practice, the quality, duration, content, and direction of research may also be heavily determined

by the participants. Therefore, the practitioner must embed a large degree of tolerance for uncertainty and unknowability, as well as ensure that one has enough time to accommodate any unexpected occurrences. Provided that the hydro-logical process requires both creative and practical flexibility, such practice may not be feasible in every research (or institutionally defined) context.

Secondly, as living research, the hydro-logical process insists upon the practitioner's active responsivity to these external influences, yet must still remain *as research*, conducted by an *academic* practitioner. Critically, although the practitioner is constantly being shaped by other bodies of water, the practice continues to privilege the position of the practitioner as the ubiquitous manifestor of the work. Ultimately, it is the practitioner who decides (even if subconsciously), what and how to document, experience, interpret, use, and produce the artefact. This raises the question of “*how much agency or control should the practitioner have?*”

Knowing when, how, and to what extent to relinquish or take back control of my practice had been one of the greatest challenges throughout this thesis process. “Strip[ping] the power to control the journey of inquiry from the practitioner”²³ as a/r/tography insists, has the danger of becoming an ‘aimless drift’ – infinitely expanding and vastly diluted [discussed in Chapter One]. Yet simultaneously, fully controlling the design process eradicates active responsivity, experimental approaches and the organic formation of the artefact. In this thesis, I have tried to ‘control’ the process insofar as to maintain a direction but not a ‘solution’; and to approach every encounter with a sense of wonder but to constantly tether myself to the research context. As discussed earlier, I have found that the process of mapping in movement was extremely productive in finding such equilibrium. Indeed, it acted as a ‘security’ measure which anchored the process to the main research current, thereby affording reassuring spaces for experimental approaches. Practicing hydro-logically, moreover, is to learn to operate at a threshold, in which the practitioner perpetually tests the limits of how much agency they can relinquish before they can no longer reclaim control.

However, how can a practitioner *justify* these decisions regarding agency? Moreover, how does one *measure* agency (or the lack thereof)? Is the ‘intention’ of letting someone or something else mould the design process enough? Or is it the practitioner’s ‘feeling’ of

uncertainty when they relinquish control? Or is it dependent on whether the participants ‘felt’ like they had an input in the design process? How do I know that I have given agency to the process of experimental writing or to the participants’ stories when I am subjectively the one gathering, interpreting and using it? Despite being documented throughout this thesis journey, these questions have not been fully answered in this research. In a future study, it may be productive to develop a systematic approach in order to explicitly document or map the ‘degrees of agency and/or control’ which evolves (and fluctuates) across the research journey. In combination with other forms of reflection, this approach could generate means of understanding more precisely, how each set of methods used in the research has shaped the hydro-logic process.

Third, in this thesis, the hydro-logic process has been explored in the light of multimodal book-writing, specifically focused on visual and textual modes of writerly experiments. Due to the limited amount of time, *The Asymptotes* remains as a book within this paper. However, I see this research as developing into other mediums – for instance, an audiobook with recorded sounds which adds another dimension of modality; or an immersive exhibition which allows the visitors to walk through the narrative with expanded sensory stimulation.

In addition, the hydro-logic process has the potential to be explored through other contexts: how does this living research – highly responsive, multimodal, meandering yet directional – accumulate when implemented with other materials and frameworks? Specifically, how would the hydro-logic be understood if the practitioner were to be working with a material other than ‘writings’ and towards an artefact other than a ‘book’? For instance, the hydro-logics could be employed to shape a process towards a textile collection, a creation of a digital interface, or a theatre performance. Returning to the originating domain of the Environmental Humanities, I acknowledge that there is also a strong case to be made to employ the hydro-logics for environmentally-focused design processes, such as multispecies design or biomaterial design.

Personally, my interest leans towards developing the hydro-logical approach for design pedagogy. I see much potential in using the findings from this study to design workshops and reflective exercises or to build educational curriculums, especially in relation to experimental design. Currently, there is still a lack of comprehensive methods to engender, analyse, or document experimental design processes, and further development

23 Malilang, 2018: 81

of specific hydro-logical methods could foster more nuanced engagements with exploratory and process-oriented means of practicing design. For instance, generating a set of systematic methods for mapping in movement could become a strategic guideline to engender the students' active reflections, while encouraging spaces for uncertainty and unknowability to become part of their work.

By testing the hydro-logic mode of *doing* in various contexts, I believe that the essence, affordances, limitations, and validity of this process would become more evident. Accordingly, the implications arising from each potential direction would be vastly unique, as some contexts will inevitably benefit more from this approach than others.

Fourth, in order to be validated as a contribution of scholastic knowledge to the academic community, the knowledge and research in question must be effectively disseminable and retainable for critical consideration. Hence, the practitioner-researcher is expected to justify its methodological 'rigour'. Biggs and Büchler (2007) argue that such 'rigour' can only be assessed through "the strength of the chain of reasoning, [which] has to be judged in the context of the question and the answer".²⁴ It is clear that their rationale for 'rigour' derives from the "arborescent scheme of research tradition where the flow of reasoning follows a linear trajectory".²⁵ Deviating from such tradition, recently in academia, the central subjectivity of the practitioner has become increasingly validated as being capable of producing 'rigorous' knowledge. Yet what is accepted as a form of 'appropriate' research presentation style for academia is still subject to established institutionalised protocols, and largely favours repeatable, methodical, and easily sharable knowledge.²⁶

The hydro-logical process shares the same concerns with many other practice-based and reflective research methodologies, whereby the generated knowledge is often difficult to be characterised, articulated and communicated as exegeses. Yet this is especially challenging for the hydro-logics – a mode of doing research that is organically living, is highly responsive, and deliberately resists linearity – as it produces knowledge neither in a logical succession, nor as a single strand of coherent reasoning. Rather, it is

a network of unexpected encounters, numerous falls into various rabbit holes, and the complexities and messiness of living experiences. Furthermore, alongside relying on the subjective experiential knowledge of the practitioner (which is already difficult to articulate 'rationally' in itself), the hydro-logical process also concerns the 'unknowable' subjectivities of others involved. Such form of living research that is constructed out of multiple 'unknowabilities' leaves us with the question of how the research can be validated when it "exceeds the available forms in which knowledge can be carried".²⁷

Fifth, as a counterargument to the previous point which demands an 'appropriate' research presentation style for academia (i.e. an exegesis such as this paper), a sustained criticism of artistic research is that in an attempt to communicate the research, the practitioner inevitably instructs the reader of the exegesis on precisely *how they should* understand the artefact. In other words, the practitioner-researcher "think[s] on behalf of" the reader, by "overcoding [the work] by the judgement of the researcher".²⁸

Throughout the process of writing this paper, I have been caught in a dilemma: on one hand as a *practitioner-researcher*, I have been expected to 'demonstrate academic rigour' within the institutional tradition by explicating the research; yet on the other hand, as a *creative*, I believe that the artefact – *The Asymptotes* – is entitled to have autonomy without a paper that 'reveals' all of its mechanisms. This dilemma becomes even more complex precisely because the artefact *is* also a form of documentation [as discussed earlier in this chapter]. As a manifestation of the experiments, processes, methods, questions, and reflections, I argue that *The Asymptotes* is another *version* of this paper (or the paper is another version of the book), albeit its articulation in different forms. In such a case, must a contextualising document (such as this paper) be presented together with the artefact in order to serve as a 'rational explanation' for the book's more abstract means of knowledge-dissemination? If so, to what extent should this paper articulate, describe, or explain the artefact? What does *The Asymptotes* *know* that this paper does not? And what might this paper take away from its readers?

In writing this paper, knowledge and processes were reorganised, uncertainties were

24 Biggs and Büchler, 2007: 69 quoted in Malilang, 2018: 77

25 Malilang, 2018: 77

26 Kaszynska et al., 2022

27 Brook, 2012: 8

28 Jagodzinski and Wallinn, 2013: 97

clarified, arguments were linked, and interpretations were offered. Although I refrained as much as possible from 'revealing' the mechanisms of the book while still preserving the coherency of this contextualising document, it would have inevitably tainted how you – the reader of this paper – experience *The Asymptotes*. Of course, providing this paper is not a given negative, as it offers a different layer of understanding the book. Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel the paradoxical discordance between the exegesis-artefact relationship: the exegesis – which inherently seeks to make the book-as-process more 'transparent'; and *The Asymptotes* – a work that *resists* transparency by design.

Perhaps in the coming years, preserving the subjective experience of the academic audience and critics would become essentially integrated within an 'appropriate' research presentation style for academia. Perhaps in the future, *The Asymptotes* alone could be sufficient to justify academic 'rigour' – with all of its interpretive gaps and questions that the audience navigates through, just as the practitioner did in the process.

But until then, this paper will be the field guide to *The Asymptotes*.

Chapter Eight INTO THE OCEAN

“The river carries a history of the land and the people who live on the land, stories collected from a thousand feeder streams and recorded in pockets of sand, in the warm and cold currents, the smells of the water, the mayflies”¹

~ Kathleen Dean Moore

Like a river, we are bodies of water. We carry nutrients and toxins, erode and shape the landscape. Each of us, we carry stories of other bodies of water. We gather from thousands of tributaries, record them in pockets of memories, and release them elsewhere for others to collect. Our permeable bodies are inextricably caught up in the currents of other bodies, and therefore are never fully able to control the elements that course through us. What once became part of our bodies, and what our bodies changed the meaning of, still expands beyond the ‘containers’ of our skins, as much as a river flows into an ocean. We cannot exist without leaking or absorbing.

The hydro-logic is inherently organic, owing to the fluid, malleable, and permeable nature

¹ Moore, 1996; x11

of bodies of water, which are perpetually shaped and reshaped by external influences. This thesis has sought to apply such logic to a creative design practice, and to examine how practicing as a body of water would shape the course of the research, including the framing, methods for gathering and documenting materials, experiments, evaluation methods, as well as the process of creating the artefact itself. A hydro-logical mode of *doing*, therefore, is to embody the fluid nature of creative practice, with careful attention to the eroding, transporting, and depositing of various forms of knowledge.

One might argue that all forms of research are shaped by external influences, especially within variants of practice-based research. Nevertheless, the hydro-logic takes a step further than simply being aware of these influences, by demanding that the practitioner *actively responds and attends* to these currents. Notably, the decisions made during the process are not solely based on the practitioner’s rational or creative judgement, but instead, are highly informed by the knowledge, people and circumstances that seek confluence with the research. The unexpected happenstances become adopted as valuable *agents* in practice, as the practitioner’s ‘intentions’ are continually challenged, disrupted, convoluted, and distributed. However, while the hydro-logics intimately intertwines the practitioner’s process with other currents (of existing knowledge, domains, lives, watery embodiments), the practitioner must also be constantly aware of the situated particularity of her context which inevitably influences her creative practice.

Employing the hydro-logic process necessitates a highly reflective and reflexive way of working, in which the practitioner maps her process *in movement*. Such mapping takes on a looping form, whereby the continual reflections on one’s journey *as* it unfolds, are immediately fed back into the very journey itself. Therefore, the hydro-logics as a mode of *doing* is a phenomenologically *living* mode of doing research, for the practitioner is constantly attending to how her experience of navigating through the world is configuring her research. However, being a form of scholarly research, the practice is simultaneously tethered to the wider academic tradition. The hydro-logic inquiry still seeks to generate new knowledge through practice and its outcomes, which can then be disseminated and scrutinised as a critical transpersonal body of knowledge.

The significance of this research is two-fold. Firstly, it demonstrates how feminist new materialism’s way of thinking hydro-logically has shifted into a hydro-logical mode of creative *doing*. The figuration of ‘Bodies of Water’ has widely been discussed within

Environmental Humanities as an “aqueous imaginary”,² employed to argue for the relational fluidity across ecological, political, social, cultural, economic, and colonial divisions. However, despite its increasing academic attention, the hydro-logic had yet to be fully examined through a potential creative lens. In order to expand the notion of ‘Bodies of Water’ towards an artistic orientation, this thesis explored what it means to practice experimental design *as* a body of water, whereby the focus had been on the hydro-logic design *process* rather than establishing a geopolitical argument. Therefore, this research process moves beyond mere reflection and towards reflective *practice*.

In addition to practicing hydro-logically, this paper was largely concerned with how this living, fluid, and slippery form of design research could be captured and disseminated as a body of knowledge. Filled with uncertainties and unknowability characteristic to emerging sites of knowledge production in exploratory practices, this research has sought to understand and reflect upon how such ‘leaky’ process could be framed in light of a design discourse. With this endeavour, I hope to contribute to the yet-dawning debates on the purpose and nature of experimental design practices.

Furthermore, this research adds to the emerging site of transdisciplinary creative studies which value the confluences between fields of knowledge. Thus, while being grounded upon design research methodologies, I seek to contribute to the expanded field of design through the interweave of theory, practice and poesis. In so doing, this endeavour resists the academic obsession with categorisation and the traditional linearity of thesis-driven practices, and directs design research towards the generative cross-fertilisation of transdisciplinary knowledge.

Secondly, this thesis explored the hydro-logic process through multimodal book-writing. It has examined how a book *performs* research, while contributing to filling the gap in the design discourse regarding book-as-process. Even beyond the design scholarship, moreover, book-as-process has rarely been studied in its own right. Therefore, this research contributes to how book-writing can generate *a way of practicing*, instead of being concerned with a fixed outcome or a ‘message’ to be conveyed. Specifically, it has demonstrated that multimodal book-writing as *process* (spanning from experimental

approaches, ethnographic research, visual and textual writing, editing, to reviewing) is a rich reflective site for practice-based creative investigation. In this paper, this has been evidenced by the analysis of the process and the resulting artefact which embodied the practice self-reflexively. Through this journey, there have been births of new methods (and combination of methods) of doing design, emerging out of the dialogue between the hydro-logic mode of practicing and the framework of ‘bookness’. Indeed, this paper uncovered their mutual responsivity, whereby the hydro-logic informed the book-writing, and, in turn, the process of book-writing illuminated what it means to practice hydro-logically.

Finally, this raises the question of; who is the audience of this research?

As this thesis is an exploratory proposal that operates at intersecting sites of emerging knowledge production, there is still much need for development. However, my first hope is that *The Asymptotes* and this paper can be used in experimental design discourses as a case study, whereby the hydro-logic has been embodied as a design process. Moreover, I hope to inspire more designers, students, educators, and researchers to embark on using writing *as design material and process* within creative practices and education. I hope that *The Asymptotes* becomes part of shaping design as a discipline that leaks, absorbs, and seeks confluence with other forms of knowledge.

My second, perhaps a larger hope, is for this research to bridge the gap between academia and the wider public through the book-artefact. As a book, *The Asymptotes* – being a ‘learning diary’ and another ‘version’ of this paper – can become untethered from scholarly contexts and infiltrate into people’s *living* experiences. In so doing, readers who are outside of, or unfamiliar with the design domain could still become co-creators of new knowledge in dialogue with the book. As a book that resists transparency, *The Asymptotes* is elastic and generative, capable of engendering change and growth as it converses with different readers. It is designed to blur the boundaries between bodies of knowledge, suggesting possibilities for connections instead of fixing them, so that every reading invites a renewed variation and participatory responsivity. I hope that *The Asymptotes* invites experiences of reading as bodies of water – as bodies which are inextricably caught up in the currents of other bodies.

2 Neimanis, 2012

EPILOGUE

A Field Guide

A Field Guide *for* bodies of water acknowledges the fact that we are constantly vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation, that we are shaped by different velocities, pathways, flows and mixtures of particular matters. In the process of becoming, bodies get caught up in other currents, weaving across fields of knowledge, spaces, times. It stresses that this endeavour is expansive and complex, and is connected to many more fields, bodies, and voices than this Field Guide can ever contain.

So this is one stream out of many – one journey out of infinite possibilities. This is a story of *a* body of water, caught up in currents of other bodies of water. It has also been a personal journey of struggles, encounters, discoveries and growth. The featherlight fragment of ‘me’ that I found during the Experimental Design course has grown through this thesis process. It has been probed, savoured, and provoked, and through my own teaching experiences over the past months, has also been intellectually challenged through a pedagogical perspective. As I engaged in the research seeking for the hydro-logic, I have come to deeply understand how, I too, am intimately enmeshed within currents I never thought I belonged in.

Perhaps one weakness in this research is the less explicit connection to the commonly-accepted institutional understanding of ‘Design’ – this paper could easily become a

Literature or Fine Art discourse as it draws on sources such as literary theories and artists’ books. As such, throughout the thesis process, I have repeatedly struggled to acknowledge the role of ‘Design’ in explaining my work to others. Yet I realised that this struggle has always been – and will always be – part of my creative practice. The way I have come to understand design, and the way I would like to continue to operate within the Design discipline, is to grapple with belonging at the edges of these disciplinary boundaries.

The space of design is constantly evolving. For me, it is a space that gives me permission to explore creative processes that synthesise various bodies of knowledge; to let them leak and absorb; to gather fragments of voices – harvested, gifted, or lost and found – and to produce meaning from the polyphony of these breaths. Perhaps this space will be called something else in the future. Perhaps it will be taken under the wing by another field. Maybe it will even have its own disciplinary label, for better or worse.

I am not yet confident enough to claim that I have found a fixed place to belong, or that I exhaustively understand what ‘design’ means for me, but I feel a sense of comfort and warmth like never before. This partly comes from having carried out a research process that is true to my own exploratory thinking, but most comes from the space of the Contemporary Design programme and the acceptance of the people around me who have continued to nurture my designerly visions – who supported my journey to seek for a place of belonging.

Now, I know that design is a place I can call home.

* * *

So, this is a Field Guide to one stream out of many.

A Field Guide does not give you precise instructions on how to navigate the terrain, and likewise, despite being an academic paper, I have attempted to leave space for you – the reader of this paper – to *experience The Asymptotes*, and for you to discover some of the aesthetic, stylistic, cognitive and interpretive alchemy on your own that I have refrained from mentioning here.

I think there is a lot the book *knows*, that this Field Guide does not.

My hope is that the reader – whoever you are – is able to infuse the book with your own interpretations and knowledge, making connections and leaps that no other body of water would similarly experience – to take part in the dialogue of creating new modes of possibilities; to generate productive ways of relating; to make space for uncertainty, changeability, and flux.

I hope this Field Guide still allows space for that to happen.

And perhaps someday, we will navigate through these journeys without a Field Guide.

Until then,

hydro | logics

“The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences, [and] its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness”.¹

~ Trinh T. Minh-Ha

¹ Minh-Ha, 2019; 2

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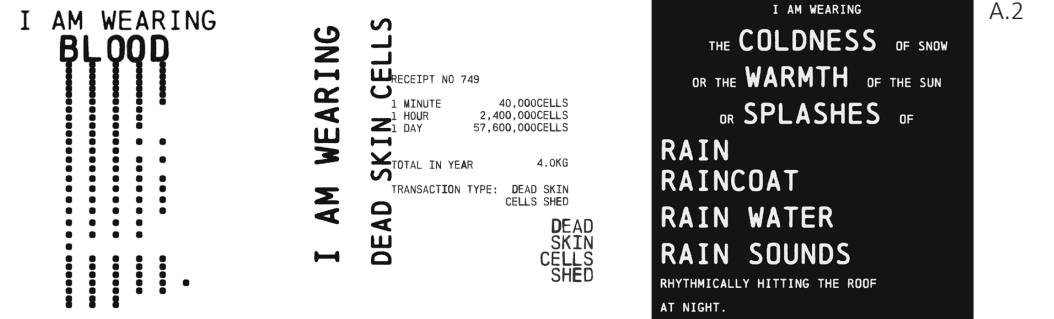
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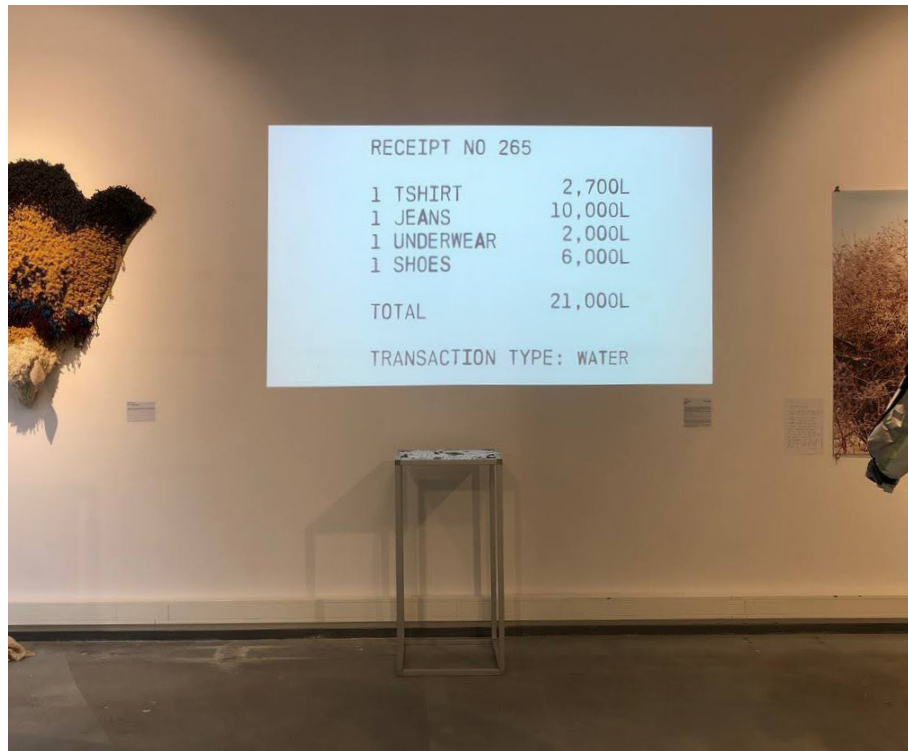
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APPENDIX



A. Outcome of Experimental Design Course 2021

A.1



Figures A.1 - 4

i am wearing. (2021)

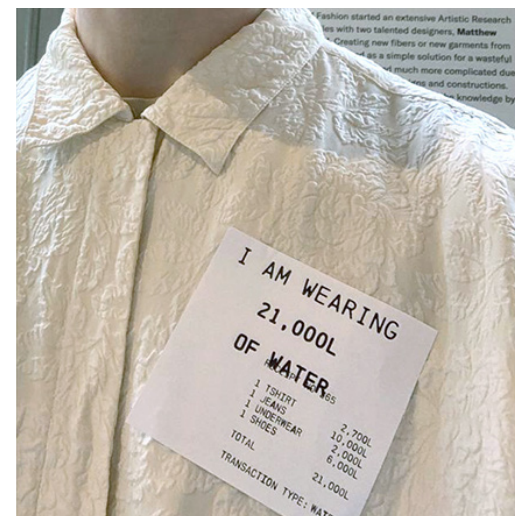
Motion graphics film with sound, stickers.

Exhibited at Dutch Design Week 2021 in collaboration with New Order of Fashion

Image credits: Alejandra Alarcon (A.1), Niklas Alenius (A.3), Bailey Birtchet (A.4)



A.3

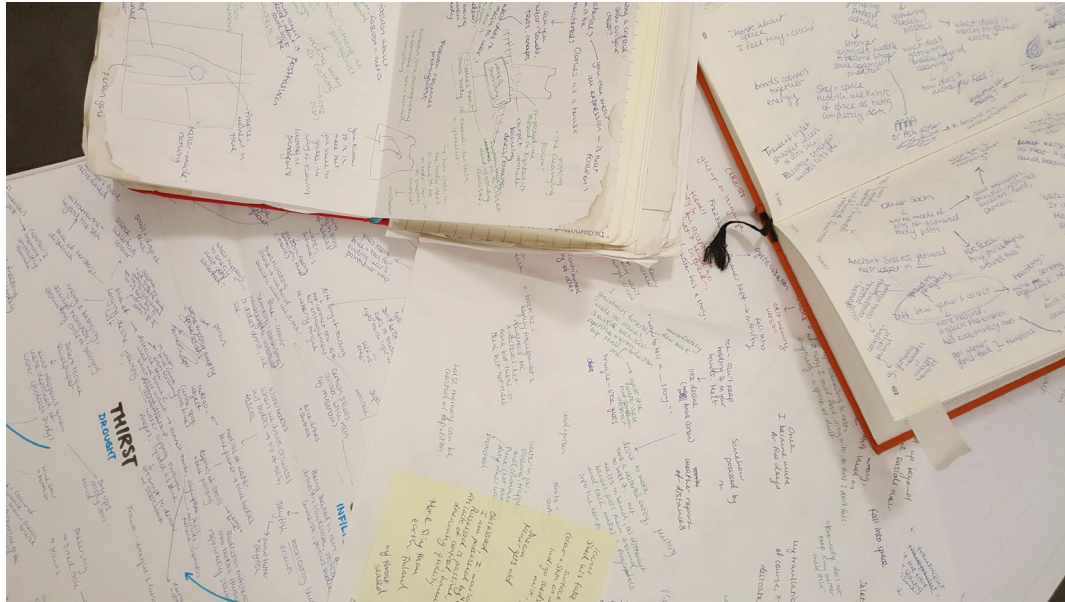


A.4

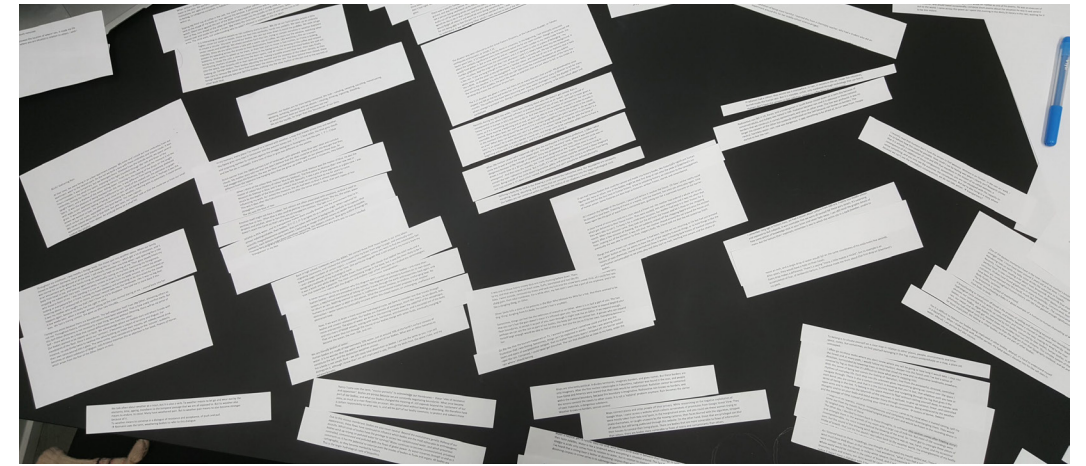
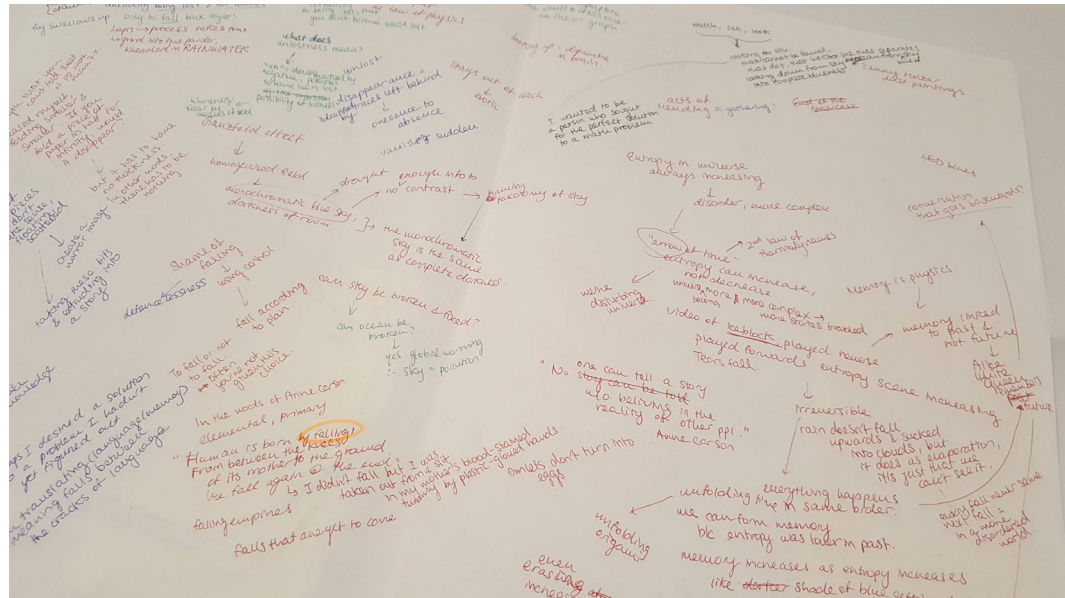


B. Additional Process Documentation

B.1



B.2



B.3



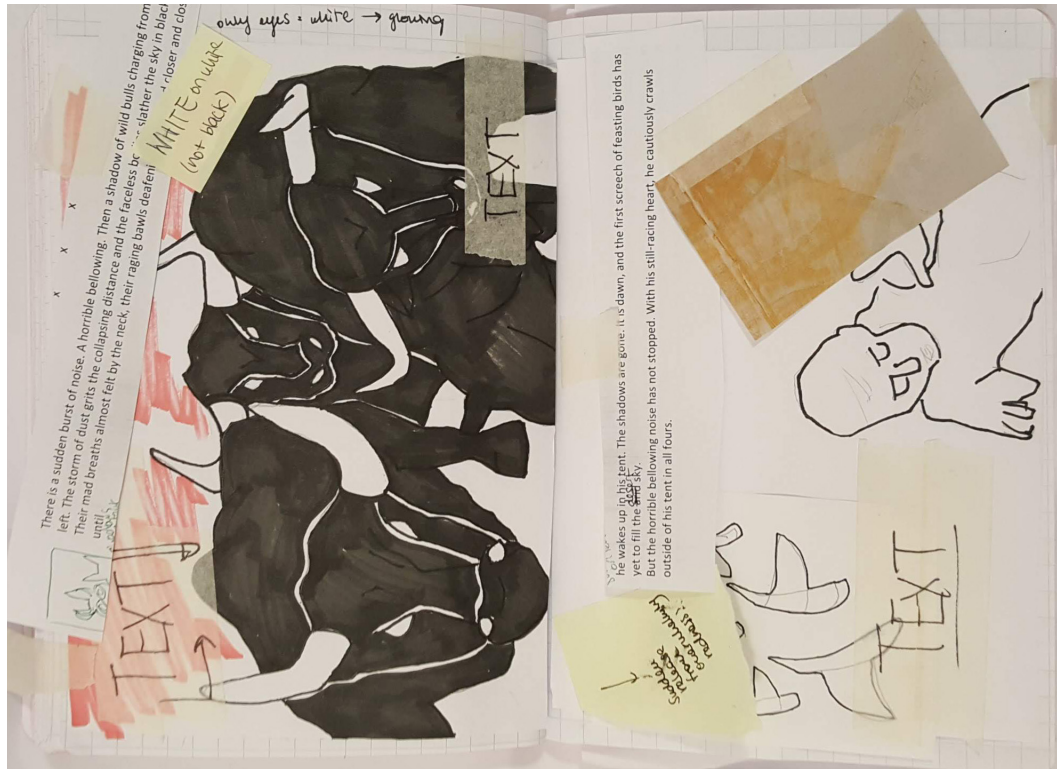
B.5

Figures B.1 and B.2: Mental 'taggings' as network of ideas, which would eventually grow into the 'Wall Map'

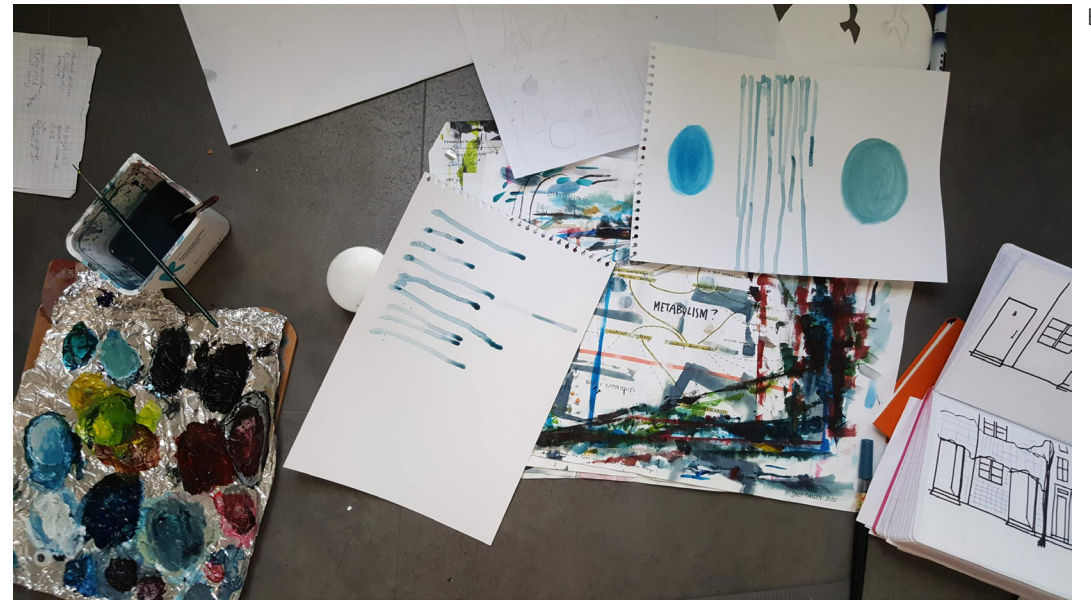
Figure B.3: Sections of prose were printed and cut before being taped onto the wall.

Figure B.4: Sketch made during the research trip, later used to create experimentations with cyanotype.

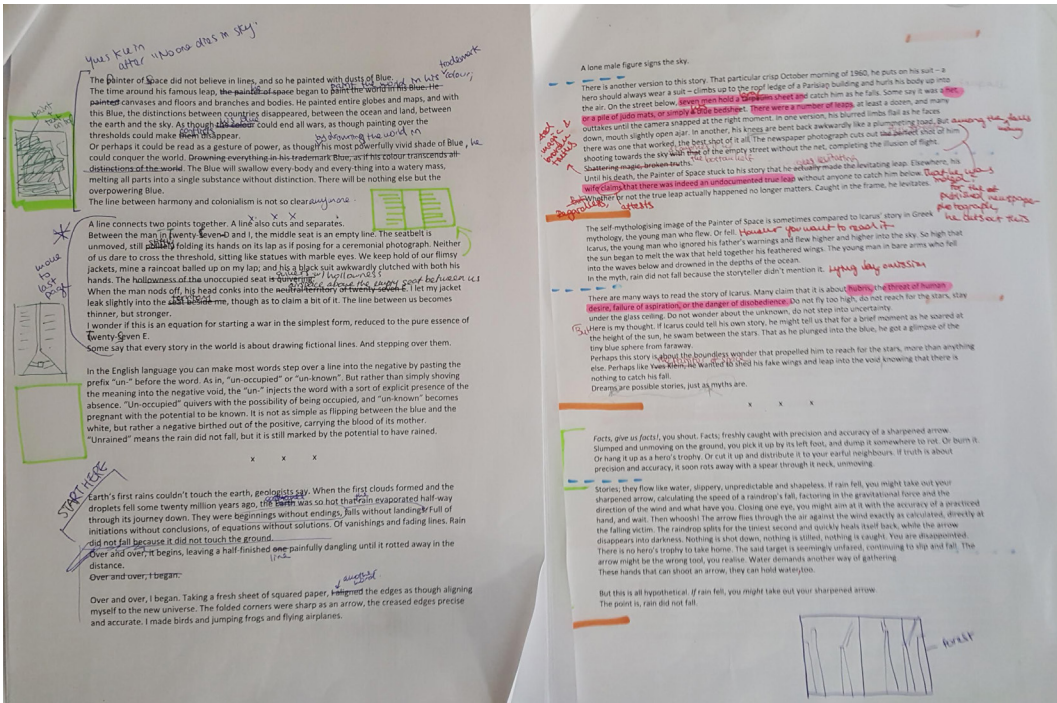
B.5



B.7



B.6



B.8

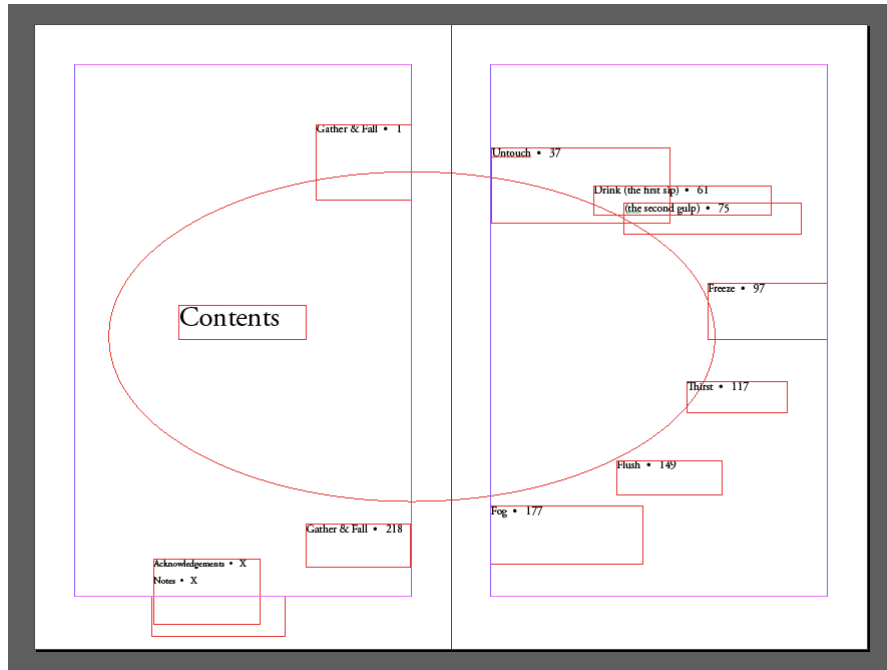


Figures B.5: Page from the 'Dummy Book'

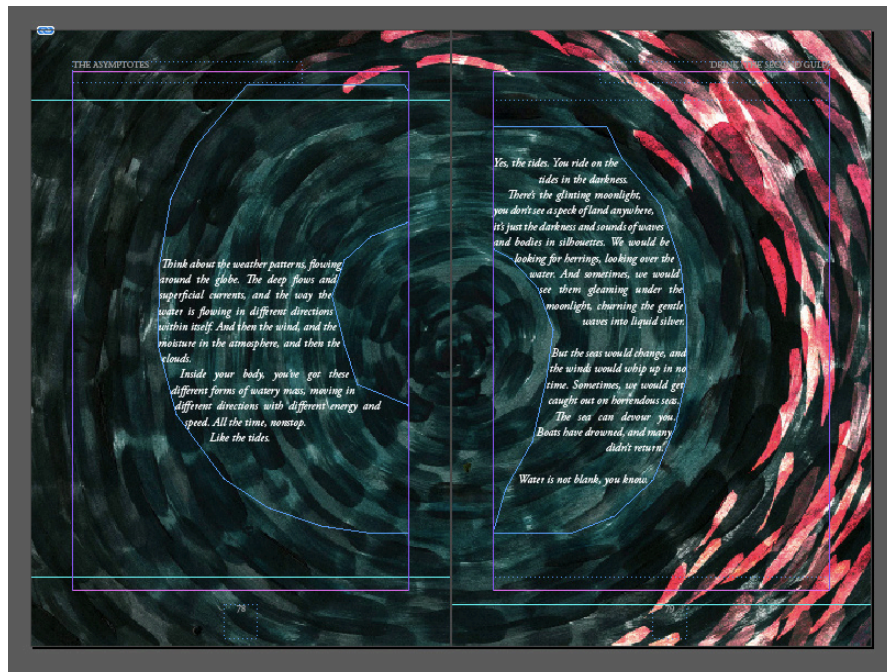
Figure B.6: Editing of the prose separately from the artwork

Figure B.7 and B.8: Creating and editing the artworks based on previous visual writings.

B.9



B.10



Figures B.9 and B.10: Digital manuscript where the visual, textual and spatial were reconfigured in dialogue.

C. Book Review Evaluation Data

1. List THREE keywords that you think are the main “themes” of the book

Observations

Perceptions

Time/Space

Human Perception/Unique Perspectives

Science vs Philosophy

Snapshots of History

Beginnings and Endings

Time

Truth vs. Untruth

Stories

Nature (in itself and of things)

The Colour Blue

Personal Identity

Connection

Myth-making

2. Write a brief SUMMARY of the book in your own words (think of it as a ‘blurb’ that goes on the back of the book)

As the Aussies would say ‘A leap into “The Wide Blue Yonder”’; this poetic romp through quantum physics, the peculiarities of space time anomalies and the every present chaos caused by entropy in the universe and all captured during the duration of one short flight. This book brings into focus the stark reality that human consciousness is the unique witness to an ever-changing universe through the medium of storytelling and memory.

The book explores snapshots of history framed through an intriguing and creative narrative that examines events from multiple unique perspectives. It examines the fundamental

debates of science versus philosophy, how these ontologies may coexist and whether either can be fully trusted. The narrative takes the reader through a journey of introspection and discovery - every read provokes new thoughts!

The Asymptotes is one long inner conversation and coming-of-age tale mixed with memories, stories, and conversations with friends and family. Readers are taken on a beautifully illustrated and free-flowing journey of time that begins and ends with the phenomena of rainfall. This book courageously approaches the blurred line between truth and untruth, reality versus fantasy, deception, illusion, and dreams.

Told from seat Twenty-Seven-F, The Asymptotes brings together a number of stories, often very human, and intertwines them with contemplations on the nature of things and thoughts. It equips its reader with a number of facts (the water is indeed blue!) and takes them into unexpected depths. While it may induce feelings of melancholy, reading The Asymptotes is a rich and rewarding experience.

In The Asymptotes, the speaker explores the nature of myth and dreams; the duality between real and make-believe; the circularity of truth and fiction; wholeness; social dichotomies; cultural and ethnic experience; belonging. The flowing semi-narrative buckles into caverns of thought (spanning art history, science, memory, wordplay) but rebounds continually to the airplane seat from which the speaker narrates. In this train of thought, we are travelling but never landing anywhere, like the eponymous asymptote. The book asks, "How do you find an equation for something with infinite beginnings, but without any endings?" The question I am left with is not how close we *can* come to the invisible, untouchable lines that draw our world, but rather how closely we *dare* to approach them.

3. Pick TWO quotations from the book that stood out to you.

Why did you choose these quotes? Please give a reason for each one.

"We remember the past, but never the future. The past can only hold lower entropies, trailing its fragrance behind us. Inside this arrow of time, the universe only flows forwards."

I'm acutely aware of the fact that realities that I have known are stuck in the past. An old

photograph of friends, family and places that no longer exist. Frozen in time. Especially as I grow older. The past seems to dominate ones thoughts as the future is somewhat limited.

"This very young man, he speaks to the stone, he was in the bomber command during the war, flying. Then one day, he fell from the sky."

It a very poignant childhood memory for me and one that connects me to my father. As is the case with so many sad, melancholic memories it was/is also painfully beautiful. The clear song of the skylark over the chalk downs only emphasised the tragic beauty of the moment.

"It was all a dream" is an ending of betrayal."

This instantly provoked an early memory of one of my school teachers telling us not to use the "and it was just a dream" device in creative writing and it just made me smile to see it written down on the page.

"A myth bypasses the idea of the absolute linear truth, and instead seeks for another sort of truth. A kind that builds upon foggy stories, the gathering of voices, and believing in the realities of other people."

I think this quote resonated with me because it links to the idea of human perception and how the way one person views a situation may be very different to the ways in which someone else views that same situation and this the conclusions they draw. And, in a way, it is due to this quirk of the human mind that myths are born. I also find this interesting because it comes back to that ongoing debate between competing ontologies and thus contrasting beliefs about how the world can be observed (and if there is even a single truth to be observed). I come from a very positivist background and in my research I work based on the idea that human behaviour can and should be measured in an objective way. This is very different to how other disciplines view human behaviours, which is quite interesting.

"Drip by drip I lick the tears of blue that oozes in like milk. The clouds have disappeared, leaving a plain stretch of colour without a distinction between the sky and the sea. Liquid sunlight streams in from the slits and my tongue absorbs its warmth." (p.63) "Liquid sunlight runs down into my back like thick honey, and my body becomes a dripping silhouette of dusk." (p.89)

These sentences stood out to me because of the metaphors and imagery. The writing is beautiful!!

I love the comparison of the blue sky and sea to milk. I think the contrast between the blue and white is interesting. It also communicates how rich and thick the sky and sea are in the narrator's eyes. I've never thought of the sunlight as a liquid, so the idea is intriguing. I can almost feel how dry the air is in the airplane and the sky, sea, and sun are all very hydrating.

Later in the book, the same liquid sunlight is described as honey because it is dusk. I imagine the gold and orange sticky sunlight reflecting and dripping down the narrator's body and creating a black outline.

I really enjoyed how you compared the natural elements (sky, sea, sunlight) to liquid forms such as milk and honey. I love the idea of people absorbing nature in this way. I also loved the color imagery.

"We're trying to understand each individual thing without knowing how they all work together. And they used to just cut it all up, destroying all the connections, destroying a notion of fluidity, destroying the capability of how it all worked. You even see it in our politics and social structures that is made of divisions. And those divisions create a kind of a blindness to the whole picture." (p.49)

This quote really resonated with me because I agree with it. A lot of people, myself included, like to focus on one thing and try to dissect it to understand it, but it's important to remember that things cannot be understood without considering its environment, connections, and history. It reminds me that we are all connected in this world and that gives me a sense of comfort. I believe that the world would be a more peaceful place if there wasn't so much separation and division.

"I needed rain, at least a drop, for I had long decided to start my story with it."

I am a sucker for various levels of 4th-wall-breaking and found this quote very playful. Not yet knowing what to expect of the book, I enjoyed being entertained at the very beginning, and while the book then had a whole lot more to offer, this instance stuck with me.

"In the moment the Seventh frame was snapped, I was barely a toddler, asleep on the other side of the world. I don't recall ever being told about the attack – it was probably one of those

stories you picked up as a child from grown up's remarks, gathering the faint residues of those hushed conversations."

This quote was probably the most uncomfortable I felt reading the book. I was not aware of what *The Falling Man* was referring to until reading this quote, and presumed it was a similar situation to the *Painter of Space*, perhaps as I had gone through a similar discomfort when I thought he had committed suicide when reading about his falling photo. The realisation genuinely sent shivers down my spine, as even through the text and silhouette image, it carried a proximity to death and tragedy, that I wasn't expecting. I think this part was what brought on the melancholic side of the book out to me and I would go on to notice it more, but this resonated with my innate fears and thoughts the most. It wasn't a bad thing in any way, just an emotional moment in reading the book.

"How do you find an equation for something with infinite beginnings, but without any endings?"

I love this quote because it touches on some kind of existential concern, and it aptly summarizes the book's pattern of questioning. To me, it touches on a universal feeling we have in trying to understand ourselves, wanting to understand others, our mortality, our inherited elements and traumas, the good and the bad. This question feels unanswerable to me. Is it meant to be answered, or accepted?

"I translate the myth of myself back to the world." (92)

This line provoked me so much, it is exactly how I feel! We go inward and think and create and ruminate and build stories (about ourselves, about the people around us, our families, our experiences, our daily lives, our patterns) and then we are left to assimilate (or not) and create something out of that tangle of feelings and experience, fact and fiction. Much of this synthesizing happens subconsciously, but occasionally we become aware of the massive effort that goes into building a single person and then we must reckon with how to translate it into something that we and others can understand, for better or for worse. Our self-mythologizing is ongoing.

4. What aspects of the book did you enjoy and why?

I liked the use of contemporary language, stream of consciousness, that really pinned the action in the here and now. I particularly liked the description of the plane landing and the feeling of denser atmospherics that it created as the plane descended. I also enjoyed the delicate interplay between text and the painterly illustrations.

I loved the illustrations throughout - I feel that it really added to the narrative. I also really liked the familiarity of the recurring narrative threads, like dreams or *The Painter of Space*.

I loved the wording. Some phrases that I enjoyed:

p.3 “cancelled my frustration” – I thought this was funny. It would be so nice if we could ‘cancel’ our feelings.

p.11 “I carefully return each organ into the container of my skin” – I liked the imagery; I thought it was funny.

p.18 “fabricated magic, broken truths” – I like the sense of betrayal in these words. Almost like oxymorons.

p.28 “vintage sweat” – I thought this was a very nice way of describing something gross.

I also loved the artwork. Specifically,

p.102-103 for its icy cold blueness. Although the two are very different, they work well together visually. I love the different shades of blue and white dripping down on p.103. The overall atmosphere reminds me of a glacier.

p.118-119 for its colors and connection to the writing. I can almost feel the dry roughness of the situation just by looking at the artwork.

p.192-193 for its different blues. The flow on p.192 makes me feel like I am in the ocean or inside a strong gust of wind. The ombre on p.193 makes me feel peaceful and calm.

I really enjoyed the flow of the book - I think that it seems disconnected on the surface, but it wasn't really. It felt like it was mimicking the flow of the mind and thoughts so well, jumping from idea to idea, but never too far to feel disconnected in any way. In a way, that felt really relatable and I found this aspect exciting - to see where it would naturally go next, where it would progress.

I also really liked the idea of dreams, their realness. I think it in a way connected to me

liking the flow of thoughts, as that in itself was very dream-like. I like to imagine the book as the very real dreams of the author. I am quite a dreamer and daydreamer and it was interesting to read a book that in a way followed a dream structure.

I also really liked the falling words design as well as the curved design of the chapter names, it was just visually and aesthetically pleasing to see on the page.

First, I like the poetic writing and language play (e.g. poetic: “Number Four and Number Three are not connected, but the doors were never locked”; wordplay: “strangebodied”). It was a pleasure to read and to immerse myself in. It made reading the entire book such a treat. Like entering a different mindspace!

Second, the illustrations gave the book great depth and set the tone for my reading. I can imagine that my experience would be very different reading this if there weren't these accompanying illustrations. The images brought me closer to the themes and subjects the text referred to, and also the artistry of the writer. It made the text feel more personal.

Third, I enjoyed the themes the text deals with (fiction, truth, myth-making, social experience, cultural background, belonging, science, etc.) as well as the formal structure of the book. The chapter divisions helped me conceptualize even better what the text was telling me, and it was fun to follow that as one train of thought. For example, in “Overflow,” all these stories seem to tumble out from the speaker's subconscious, like overflowing water. It made great sense to include them in this section.

5. Which elements did not work for you, and why? How would you change it?

It didn't really explore the other universe of human emotion but I can see that there were limitations of time and the length of the book. In fact it would almost require another book, perhaps.

On page 8 and again on page 105, you wrote “downhills”. To me it would read better if it said “downhill” instead, but this may be an artistic choice that I completely missed. The other thing that I noted down was that on page 98, you wrote the following sentence: “My thumb is left on the shutter a fraction too long and it snaps away thirteen instead of one.” You referenced 13 photos of the blue but in the image accompanying this bit of

text you have 23 blue rectangles, which confused me a little. But that just might be me misinterpreting it all. I realise that these critiques come from a very analytic scientific perspective, but it's something that I find tricky to let go of even when I read something as more of an audience member than for my research or work.

1. The phrase, "as if hitting a homerun" on p.2. I didn't understand the connection between the narrator's body sliding into a seat and a home run.
2. I thought the book flowed very well overall except for p.66. It felt a little abrupt and out of nowhere.
3. I didn't understand the taxidermized birds in the bathroom! Why are they there and what do they symbolize?

I'm quite into details, and a level of sameness, so there are two details that took me out of the experience a little bit:

On page 98-99, 13 picture of blue are taken, but the visual has 23 rectangles of blue. I don't know why I felt the need to count them but I did and was displeased there were 23 because I wanted there to be 13 of them.

On page 200, the sentence 'They speed through time, makes news, and gets recorded in an eternal loop of legends.' is either intentionally or accidentally grammatically incorrect and again, it took me out of the flow, as instead of the contents, I was drawn to focusing on the flaw.

There were certain sections of prose that didn't work for me. They felt too abstract in its poetry. I found the writing worked best for me when it was grounded and poetic but not trying too hard. For example, on page 67, "vomiting sunbaked bodies onto the sand" didn't leave me with any concrete image as I couldn't figure out what it referred to. It felt like something that 'sounded' better than it actually helped to advance the text.

6. Any conclusive thoughts to end your review? (Optional)

The book did make me contemplate the delicate nature of life on our planet. The interconnectedness of all life forms and the ever present key to all life, water, as it condenses and evaporates or freezes.

I'd say the feeling I felt the most was melancholy but it didn't feel like a bad kind of melancholy which is probably a weird thing to say, but that's the closest I can describe it. I don't think I thought much reading the book, I just immersed myself in it, although I did feel compelled to look up the little facts it offered (I had no idea water was actually blue!).

I wanted to say additionally that it was difficult for me to choose only two lines to quote above. I also love this line: "Above the clouds, the landscape is emptied of weather. A place that is eternally blue, eternally rainless. According to the weather report, it had just begun to rain under the clouds. But above it, the rain did not fall. The rain did not fall because I had transcended it." (p. 44) This quote stands out to me because it made me think of times when I've been above the clouds in an airplane and had a feeling that that space existed outside the laws of the world below. But the line stood out in particular because of the ending: "The rain did not fall because I had transcended it." It made me wonder if the speaker (or I, relating to the feelings and experiences of the speaker) would want to transcend the bounds and confines of 'below clouds'. Would it be helpful? Does it give clarity? Does it make us feel more or less connected?