

# Touched by a Lighter Sensitivity; or, On How Not to Break the Egg

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This text is conceived as 'contiguous writing' – a mode of creative-critical writing that seeks to *touch upon* rather than being explicitly about. It draws on the experience of encountering *A Pool of Light*, an immersive residency-based installation by Belén Cerezo, at the Collection Museum, Lincoln, May 2019.

*Candling* — a bright light is shined from behind, for identifying the presence of embryonic life forming beneath the delicate surface of an egg's shell. Within this process, the affirmation of aliveness is witnessed through the growing sense of opacity: as the chick swells, the translucency of the shell diminishes, when backlit it is illuminated. The light makes visible that which is hidden within the egg — a luminous void reveals the absence of life, whilst the becoming of nascent form shows itself as density and shade. To the untrained eye unaided by the light, the fertile and the infertile egg can look indistinguishable. However, one holds the stirring of new existence coming-into-being; the other, at best, is destined only for consumption. Handle the egg lightly. Be patient so as not to crack the shell. Unhurried, its latent potential quivers towards actuality. Bringing into form takes time. How then to make visible the process of artistic exploration, the gestational coming-into-being of art in its making?

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*Poiesis* — to make: to bring into existence that which did not exist before. Yet, artistic process often begins before knowing what it will become, striving to bring forth that which is not yet known. Like the candled egg, its first signs of life might well seem opaque and formless. Take care in the candling of artistic practice — the making visible of artistic process in its unfolding — for too much light can scorch and burn. The artist's residency can provide a space of incubation, creating the dual conditions of open-endedness and pressure. The presence of witnesses can intensify the artist's own engagement, calling for a commitment not always possible to sustain when working alone. Alternatively, an onlooker can distract or hinder, forcing the performance of practice in lieu of its practising, the re-presentation of artistic exploration absent of corresponding vivacity or life. Avoid the desire (in self and others) to understand, if this means to comprehend too eagerly, to seize or grasp at meaning before its time. Rather, deepen understanding by dwelling in the proximity of practice as it is *practised*: in the midst of, before, beneath, among.

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A space. An artist. Objects. Materials. Technologies. Light. Air. The artist candles different objects: glass vessels, a comb, a net, a woven cloth, a golden braid, printed text, thin fragments of coloured film. One by one, she takes them to a source of light, illuminating them gently from behind; turning them over in her hands, over and over. Yet, her backlighting of the objects is not to check for life as with the candling of the egg. Rather

hers is a practice for bringing *into* life, enlivening. Sorceress, magician — she takes familiar objects and plays with them until they become *other*. The object's vitality, its vividness, is amplified in those moments where it becomes least known, estranged from its habitual use or function. The artist uses the light not so much to see or reveal, as to transform. This transformation does not have a clear destination or goal — for the artist works from her experience of not knowing in order to create something not known. Here, artistic experimentation differs from those pursuits intent on the expansion of knowledge, on moving from a state of not knowing to that of knowing more.

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Rather, for the artist, the aim might be to actively summon into being something wild or unbounded, resistant to easy assimilation by existing categories or names. Towards the condition of between-ness: no longer and not yet. Defining edges soften, becoming porous. Slowly, she tilts object towards image — three dimensions collapse into two. Projected into space, the cohesion of the image fragments as it touches surfaces and walls, bodies and other things — two dimensions expand into three. Dimensional shimmering: a perceptual sleight of hand. The image has duration — it unfolds in time and space. The image wavers — fluctuating in the whirl and breeze of machines, a draft of air stirred unexpectedly in passing. Contingent image: dependent on the presence of other agencies and forces, subject to chance, to happenstance. Incidental image: image as event, as occasion. Incident — from *incidere*: to fall or find a way, to light or strike upon. Appearing. Disappearing. Always in transition, never still. The image refuses to settle or be stable.

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Or rather, the image is actively prevented, thwarted. Yet, effort is required to resist the lure of image; moreover, the seduction of representational form. The artist disables the possibility of a single privileged view — there is no front from which to passively observe. A threshold must be crossed: from *extra-* (outside, beyond, without) to *inter-* (between, in the midst), *intra-* (within). Shift of position from that of *looking at* (which maintains the illusory division between subject *seeing* and object *seen*) to that of *being in* (dissolving the boundary between self and other, I and world). Art and audience become blurred: visiting bodies make surfaces for projection, intervening presences that absorb or deflect the light — a part of, not apart from. The artist keeps the image from happening — images are invited to the cusp of appearance, before they are knocked back. *Prevent* — from *prae* 'before' and *venire* 'to come': the image is suspended, interrupted, delayed.

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The artist has a job to do, a role to perform. Her task is to keep the situation *alive* — endlessly bringing-into-being whilst disallowing the *telos* of an end. An attempt is made to resist resolution, not to allow the work to become too quickly fixed into definitive form. This is not to privilege the process above the product, but rather to dispense of these categories altogether, since here they no longer serve. The work of art *is* the work of art. What is encountered is the endeavour of practice, where the means are not separable from the end. The *working* of the work (its moments of epiphany and revelation) can be unpredictable, unforeseeable in advance. Known only when seen, recognisable only when found. Necessarily then, the artist proceeds somewhat blindly, in the absence of a clear plan. Yet, this is not to say that artistic work is vague or imprecise, unthinking or impulsive. Rather, because she does not yet know what she is searching for, the artist must remain vigilant and alert, attentive and receptive to the possibilities within every instant. Too strong her intent and she misses the *kairos*.

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Improvisation strives to circumvent the habits of repertoire, avoiding the familiar paths of the past repeating. Activated in the present moment, to improvise is to work with what is immediately to hand. Yet, this practice cannot be forced, for it requires a certain letting go, the subtle play of tact. Bide one's time, for tact is the act of knowing when to hold back. Attuned action — a light touch, sensitive intervention. Not the heavy hand of brute mastery or control, but softly, softly, feeling one's way. *Thinking-with* the situation live in the now of its emergence: listening out for what needs to be done. Allied to the faculty of reason, the eyes often strive to see, to seek, to know. Yet, to think with the body is a sensorial event — intermingling of sensation and perception, feeling and desire. Towards thinking, or rather thoughtfulness-in-action, for beyond the cerebral introspection or ideation of thought, thoughtfulness involves a state of absorption coupled with the cultivation of care and attention for others and their needs. Thoughtfulness does not grasp or reach for knowledge as something to possess or own. Rather, it is a way of being in the world open to the transformative potential of being touched.

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*Palpar* — a Spanish word meaning *touching-feeling*: to stroke gently or to caress, to appreciate or understand. Palpation — to examine by touch, feeling for tenderness with the fingers. Palpable — capable of being perceived, the intensity of an atmosphere or feeling when experienced *as*

if tangible. Touch knows through contact made; its mode of knowing is not that of objective distance but of a subjective relation felt. Proximity. Intimacy. Contiguity. Adjacency. Touch knows from nearness, from being alongside, not by overlooking, not from above. To touch is to be touched — categories of subject and object are rendered unstable, unable to be clearly ascertained. Consider hand touching hand — feel the meeting of forefinger and thumb, or else two palms skin-to-skin pressing. Which is touching, which is touched? Yet, touch extends beyond the cutaneous, beyond the felt frictions of surfaces and skin. For whilst the skin's membrane can serve to separate self from world, a deeper touch invites their re-connection, through one's willingness to be touched by, for being affected, for being moved.

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To be touched does not always require direct contact, the stripping back of experience to its most essential, elemental or bare. It is not a case of striving towards some authentic felt experience, recoverable beneath the layers of mediation that shape our perception of the world. Technologies are a living part of a reality that together we share. Indeed, filmic technologies have the capacity to augment and transform human experience, creating an expanded perceptual field beyond what can be known by the senses alone. Close-up, microscopic worlds unfold, below the range and stretch of human vision. Distant galaxies are brought to life through the reach of telescopic lens. Slow motion and time-lapse techniques reveal manifold temporalities within living existence, different registers of non-human intensity and duration. The frame and the fragment focus attention on details that would otherwise go unseen. A select edit can shock and startle, exercising the senses that through the laze of habit might have become dull or numb.

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Lens technologies are often associated with vision and visibility, the camera as prosthesis for the eyes. How then to disrupt the frontal view, the bipedal orientation of a human perspective? Go to ground — drop the eye-line from vertical to horizontal. Refuse coherence — thwart the tendency of eye and mind to view the situation as a whole. An experimental practice can create the conditions for encountering the world in other ways. Beyond the conventions of the cinematic gaze, immersive installation can be used for nudging the experience of film from the eyes towards the other senses. A tactile media, film can touch as much as be seen and heard. It can be made to surround — where the image is not experienced at a distance, in front, but is felt underfoot,

behind, above, around. Implicate: from *implicare* — to involve, entangle, embrace. Immerse — to plunge into, to be absorbed. *Mediality* — a shift away from what a medium *is* (the disciplinary demarcation of edges and borders) towards what mediation can do, what it enables or affords. Medium — an intervening agency, the method or the way. Medial — situated in the middle, always in the midst. From linearity to circularity: no discernible beginning, no end as such.

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The work of the artist might well begin in the absence of a clearly defined question or place to start. Yet, this is not to say that she sets out from nothing — from blank slate or empty stage — for there is always a *before*. Still, she ventures from where she finds herself, at this moment, here-and-now. Artistic process involves a reciprocal relation between thinking and making — the edges where one starts and the other begins can be difficult to discern. Thinking-making — a complex relation, from *com-* with, together, and *plectere* meaning to weave, to braid, entwine. Making-thinking. Which comes first... the chicken or the egg? This question speaks of a desire to differentiate cause from effect; moreover, to establish these relations within a chronological timeframe. It can seem that causes come first, whilst effects necessarily follow. Resistant to the sequential logic of *this-follows-this*, the conundrum of the chicken and egg refers to the interweaving of a mutually dependent relation. There is no ordinary cause, since each is dependent on the other for its coming-into-existence. Likewise, one might consider the relation between artistic thinking and making, even between artist and art. As the artist works to create the conditions for artistic practice, in turn, the practising of artistic work shapes her subjectivity, her way of being in the world. Art and artist are thus radically co-constitutive: each draws the other into being, affirmation of a mutual bringing-into-life.