

## **Tales of Transformational Encounter in Digital Arts Practice: Co-forming Connective Togetherness through Techno-Sensual Acts of Love.**

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### **Slide 1:**

*Welcome and Introduction:*

**Alice:**

Hi, I'm Alice Tuppen-Corps Ph.D. Practice-based Researcher from De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, and will be speaking from the perspective of the 'artist-researcher'.

**Gaia:**

And I'm Dr. Gaia Del Negro, Research Assistant at Canterbury Christchurch University, UK and I will be sharing from the perspective of one of a 'participant-explorer/researcher'.

**Alice:**

Today, we are going to discuss our experiences of 'togetherness, pleasure and discontent' in relation to my PhD. final project, 'Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform', hereon abbreviated as (TETTT).

Together we invite you into dialogue with ourselves as we talk about tales of 'transformational encounter in digital arts practice' and the process of 'co-forming connective togetherness', through 'techno-sensual acts of love.'

We hope to demonstrate through our presentation what we consider to be a 'techno-sensual third space of love' and how this works methodologically to enable new spaces of therapeutic, technological and transformational togetherness, pleasure and its discontents.

Gaia:

So let's enter into a reflexive interweaving dialogue about our lived experiences of togetherness and separateness as we relate our stories to the four experiential project phases of TETTT and ask each other what was 'good enough' (Winnicott, 1971) or troublesome in our techno-sensual 'dance' of love?.

**Slide 2:**

Alice:

Contextually I am going to situate our presentation within the remit of my Ph.D. which seeks to understand how the performativity of digital technologies can be used to generate a new form of emphatic relational space between people.

I am looking at how performative digital media can serve to house a new form of empathetic void (or space), a type of 'feeling architecture' (after architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2012:11) within which humans can experience a deepening relational encounter with themselves and each other, gaining through techno-sensual and aesthetic interactions, the ability to further interrogate and transform worlds.

Simply put, my objectives are to:

- 1) work with people – aims, objectives, research questions
- 2) develop a system for enhancing emphatic relational space between people - Evernote
- 3) use creative and artistic practice methods to translate into a performative space – TETTT
- 4) capture end - user experience in order to evaluate the worth of this process

**Slide 3:**

Alice:

So let's take a look at my form of Digital Arts Practice – Process and Method.

**Slide 4:**

Alice:

The specific TETTT research project will undergo four key phases:

Phase 1:

◦Open Call for Participants. (Email, Facebook, Conference Networks, Public Domain – important that the participants are ‘self-selecting’. (It is of note here that the Tales we will convey today of our ‘Togetherness and its Discontents’ were made possible by an emergent collaboration which started in the ESREA Milan ‘Resources of Hope’ Conference in 2015 in which I participated in Gaia’s workshop. Peter, another participant in the TETTT project also came through the ESREA Network – now how positive is that! :).

So the call asked for:

People over 18 to self-identify as being at, or wishing to reflect upon, a ‘threshold’ point/s in their lives and that TETTT would aim to create a form of ‘third emphatic space’ that would help identify how these ‘aha moments’ could bring change.

I made it clear that the ‘Touch: Traction: Transform’ project required a willingness to explore notions of identity, intimacy, communication and engagement with technology and new forms of performative encounter that could house the potential for transformational growth, shift and transition.

And that outcomes would take the form of selected interactive artworks which would form the basis of the TETTT exhibition in April 2018.

From this premise:

- 21 Participants became engaged in Phase 1 (of which Gaia is 1)
- We produced a 21 Day Co-forming Dialogue. Words, Videos, Sounds, Photographs, Objects using Evernote Software

The Structure of Engagement was:

1. Artist ‘Prompt’
2. Participant ‘Response’
3. Artist ‘Noticing’
4. Artist ‘Reframing’

The subsequent days prompt was formed from Participant Responses and the Artists original Artistic Intention.

7 Touch            7 Traction            7 Transformation Prompts.

Which we will look at shortly.

**Slide 5:**

Alice:

Phase 2. Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform (TETTT). Phase 2. Read Slide.

**Slide 6:**

Alice:

Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform (TETTT). Phase 3. All 10 Participants meet, cook, feast fashion items and film in The Gallery.

**Slide 7:**

Alice:

Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform (TETTT). The Gallery Exhibition. Phase 4. **Photos.**

**Slide 8:**

Alice:

Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform (TETTT). The Gallery Exhibition. Phase 4. **Plan.**

**Slide 9:**

Alice:

Transformational Encounters: Touch, Traction, Transform (TETTT). The Gallery Exhibition. Phase 4. **Object Examples.**

**Slide 10:**

Alice:

So let's move on to speaking about our process and experience within this initial framework by sharing with you some examples of the process of 'co-forming connective togetherness' in Phase 1 in order to see how early emergent images, gain strength, focus and resonance that permeate the more final Phases of the TETTT.

**Slide 11:**

Alice:

Read slide Prompt.

Phase 1: Evernote. Artists Prompt: Day 2. Transformational Encounters. Touch as the, 'the mother of the senses', architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2012:11). Nesting.

Wikipedia defines:

'A nest is a structure built by certain animals to hold eggs offspring, and, occasionally, the animal itself.'

'A nesting function in computer programming is a function which is defined within another function, the *enclosing function*.'

In his book 'The Eyes of the Skin' Finnish Architect Prof. Juhani Pallasmaa writes that 'Touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves.' (2012:11)

How do you nest?

What is your experience of nesting?

What nests have you built, destroyed, abandoned, redesigned?

**Slide 12:**

Gaia:

And my response: Read Slide Prompt.

Gaia on nesting

How do I nest?

I nest by choosing objects that have personal association, affective value, memory, imaginative resonance, objects of desire that make my home alive.

I grow plants.

I make tea which I get far away and bring home like birds.

I appropriate family objects for my nest: great-grandmother's wardrobe, a cousin's mirror, mother's knitted shawl.

Mostly I read books in bed.

I open my nest to friends and cook us meals.

Nesting is relaxation and clearing.

I cannot but build nests wherever I live. My current nest in Milano I redesigned while I lived in the UK, which gave me the right distance to imagine myself in it - inheriting a nest by transforming it. Today I brood my egg here

and it feels safe enough  
to prepare a new flight.

**Slide 13:**

**Alice:**

Techno-Sensual Acts of Love What does third space 'look' like?

Primarily TETTT is a 'listening, noticing, feeling, prompting and responding space' whereby together artist and participants generate and shape new learning experiences within a living 'techno-sensual framework', as *an architecture of love*. A relational system that crosses virtual and actual spaces, and comprises people, technology, narratives and films that form an embodied empathetic third-space, *a feeling void*, that permits humans to experience a deepening encounter with themselves through which to search and distil meaning.

Here it happens at least twice – (convergence of experience) once in the Evernote Platform and again in The Gallery as illustrated in the diagram and by the quotes from a former participant and audience member in two of my earlier pieces of research.

'If it's a unique contribution to knowledge then it's unique contribution to love'  
(Situating the Reciprocal' Participant, 2016).

Through a form of technological, sculptural, filmic and relational aesthetics, it specifically allows us to think about the way we experience life, 'I was living in their and Alice's world during that time of engagement and yet it couldn't have been more simultaneously my own journey.'

(Point. forty Audience Member, 2014).

**Gaia:**

A context was created that has time-space boundaries and is defined by our presence, me and Alice (and the other participants in a peripheral sort of way) (this becomes a community space later in the process although only some of us will actively participate, and each according to their time and taste).

For me a techno-sensual third space of love was the technologically mediated dialogue with another woman researcher and artist who sent me stimulating questions to reflect about my life, my feelings, my sensations, and my imagination.

Because a medial process is involved, I can access that space from anywhere anytime, usually from my home in the morning with breakfast. This is stimulating because I am guided by example to experiment with technology and try other ways of communicating / refracting / seeing other sides of my story.

It reminds me of the “writing as inquiry” approach, expect that I write not just with the words.

I create performative texts for the researcher to experience and respond to.

\* this has limits. A slight sense of anxiety is created in the material being and not being available, existing and not existing. The digital notebook could become inaccessible (and it does at one point for research purpose). The beautiful material in neither here nor there. It is ‘sensual’ yet I cannot touch it. Hold it. Hang it on a wall. Show it to people (it makes me quite proud and has become an important object – transitional? – in these months in Milan).

**Alice:**

\* often I felt a sense of being a ‘not good enough’ ‘mother/other/artist’ of feeding more ‘noticings’ to some and neglecting others. I felt a deep need to ‘hold the space and create ‘poise’ by not rushing in to ‘fill and rescue’ participants but also not stepping back so far that I lose contact with them (causing a break contact in Gestalt terms). It was so important to me that we ‘met’ each other with equal presence (not adult to child). This draws on the experience of my earlier Ph.D. formative works – ‘Situating the Reciprocal’ about not leaning in so far that I lose myself but not withdrawing so far I disconnect.

**Gaia:**

I experienced this techno-sensual third space much like the transitional space originally theorised by Donald Winnicott (1971) and his interest in exploring how an infant can separate from a prime caregiver in psychologically healthy ways.

Alice, like Winnicott, through her prompts, playfully situated a form of ‘serious enquiry’ in the holding framework and medial ‘objects’ of the Evernote platform. Like other transitional phenomena, we were suspended somewhere between inner and outer reality.

According to Winnicott this third area, is experienced by ‘the baby’ and here instead by the ‘participant’, as a resting-place. However here, instead of just a ‘resting place from the task of reality acceptance’, Evernote became a nurturing place of being ‘reflected back’ and in this ‘togetherness’ potentially reconfiguring what reality could be.

Winnicott said that indeed this is a space of love, dependent on,

‘very specific conditions of being ‘reflected back’ (ibid. p. 86) or, in other words, of being loved. ‘Cultural experience’ is for Winnicott ‘the common pool of humanity’ (ibid. p. 133) to which we may contribute, and from which we may draw ‘if we have somewhere to put what we find’ (ibid), namely a transitional space of creativity and ‘play’ that inspires our trust.’ (Gaia, DN (2017) Thesis).

In relation to what Alice has just said about equal presence, adult to adult, Winnicott applied the same principles to processes of separation and self-negotiation in adult life also, trying to make sense of how people can 'move from dependency and defensiveness towards greater openness to experience creative forms of endeavour' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 82).

**Alice:**

To this effect, my artist's intention revolved around a philosophical, ethical, muliebral, 'artistic love' which I embodied as an enabling standpoint for my participant engagement and subsequent artwork generation in order to bring about new forms of experiential learning and constructive dialogue by adopting a stance of 'Love' and fostering 'Trust' through the gift of 'authenticity' in my own prompts that in turn allowed the 'authenticity of others to be permitted, welcomed and emergent.

At its best this felt like a co-forming and playful 'dance' or as one participant said a 'slow courtship' between adults. Yes, love and mothering comes into it. But the most effective material emerges in the space between two adults – a charged space that allows for engagement with difficult thoughts, anger, envy, painful points of traction too but a space that is 'good enough' not perfect, for disappointment and pain too, to surface, be shared, held and processed.

**Slide 14:**

What does Third space feel like?

**Gaia:**

I don't know what 'third space' is in the theory but it feels like this image from Pina Bausch that Alice sent to me as her 'Noticing on Day 11', suspended, airy, wet, sensual, flowery, generative, potential, transforming/becoming.

This image from Dancer Pina Bausch is just one example from our dialogue.

Although digital, the space is sensual. It involves text, images, clips, hypertext links. It is poetic in quality, imaginative, resonant, there were many others such as these.

**Slide 15:**

**Gaia:**

My mother's shawl. Which reoccurs through all Phases and that I wore for filming in Phase 2 and Feasting in Phase 3 flows with me...

**Slide 16:**

**Gaia:**

'We swung like serpents, black carnations.'

**Slide 17:**

**Gaia:**



One day Alice noticed, 'This is it on my 'red' alter - it is for us. For you too!

Alice 'notices' in a sensual way through her body. It is not brainy reasoning and argumentation. It is FEELING. (artistic processing really.) which produces insight (she gets things about me I did not see myself).

**Slide 18:**

Gaia:

And dear Frida, Frida Kahlo...

**Slide 19:**

Gaia:

Day 18

Lift – humour – absurd.

The fear of not getting it *Missing out: In praise of the unlived life*.

Ambivalence studious glasses - openly faking it! (Me too and flowers for you! :)

Alice:

Artist and Psychotherapist Bracha Ettinger's concept of 'Carriance' is theoretically foreground as a means of exploring affective places of feeling that allow, 'the other', to be 'within me charged'. Ettinger's calls this 'Thinking (M) otherwise' (2006).

I wanted imbue the process and content of the prompts with a sensuality that whether 'we' are physically and energetically residing in male or female, (and potentially states in-between or be-coming) bodies right now, that what we all have in common is that we have all been 'carried' within the female womb, body - space...

When I reached out to participants with my muliebral, prompts I encourage them to try and encounter the work from a suspended state of 'un-gendered being'...a third space, a place of becoming...

Muliebrity from the word 'mulier' means 'woman' and is a cognate of the word 'mollis' meaning 'soft'. To 'mollify' usually connotes a 'softening' action of 'hurt feelings or anger'. Indeed Gill, proposes that in our (arguably) post-feminist society a useful gyneacentric approach is to instead adopt a 'feminine sensibility' in which, 'media culture should be our critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire – rather than an analytic perspective' (p6:2007). Therefore, I approached my *inquiry* from a fully embodied enlivened body-space, virile in its muliebral strength, reaching out to encounter participants 'human to human'. This self-permission motivates in participants the same 'softening' into their own deep in-vivo selves. This activates a space of potential that cannot be reached from analytical discourse alone. This form of digital (Harraway, 2010) maternalism (Ettinger, 2016)

offers an environment that is ripe for enabling new forms of dialogue in all bodies, regardless of sexual, racial or gender identification (Cixous, 1979).

Gaia:

This 'encountering state' that Alice talks about artistically is also one that made me think of Belenky's 1986 seminal work on *Women's Ways of Knowing*, in which she set out to explore ways in which women know.

Drawing on feminist voices in philosophy and psychology, Belenky interviewed 135 women to identify 'aspects of intelligence and modes of thought that might be more common and highly developed in women' (ibid), such as 'interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought' (ibid). They found that 'the development of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined' (ibid. p. 18)... in a form of *connected knowing*.

... The quest for self and voice plays a central role in transformations in women's ways of knowing. In a sense, each perspective we have described can be thought of as providing a new, unique training ground in which problems of self and other, inner and outer authority, voice and silence can be worked through. (Belenky *et al.*, pp. 133-134)

A *connected* epistemology 'involves intimacy and equality between self and object' (p. 100), which means that 'the focus is not on how They want you to think [...] but on how they [...] think; and the purpose is not justification but connection' (ibid. p. 101). The most liberating way of knowing is to integrate all the different perspectives on it, in both the private and public spheres of life, as no one perspective is sufficient by itself. For constructivist women (and men) it is possible to 'move beyond systems' (ibid. p. 140) and 'make connections that help tie together pockets of knowledge. There is a new excitement about learning and the power of the mind' (ibid).

Alice:

And it is in Phase 4 when the exhibition comes together in physical form that it is hoped that audiences will in turn be able to 'tie together pockets of knowledge' experienced by residing in the objects and worlds of the participants. In a sense the TETTT exhibition will be a form of Evernote materialised.

But before we move on to the imagined 'end' of TETTT let us just dwell a moment longer in its process.

**Slide 20:**

Alice:

Day 20 "Unfinished conversations"

So today I invite you to **invite someone 'out' and allow them 'in'** through your listening. What is their story? What needs to be heard? How does it feel to hear it? Where do you feel it? Your listening allows their story to be heard and to emerge - you complete their story in your listening... Think in your listening about: 'always work within 'the interest of **deepening understanding and promoting dialogue**' (Nicolson, 2005:42)

**Slide 21:**

**Alice:**

And this is an important visual – the mother shawl. The mother/other that 'I get/am'. Do you remember the holey blanket – mothers shawl - a lightly held knitting with a clearing hole to breath – let's together let that breath out...these are Gaia's responses.

*(Gaia video plays whilst we read the dialogue – Gaia as Gaia and I reading 'Mum'. Gaia you need to insert video onto this slide in place of the screenshot)*

**Gaia:**

Without realising it I actually collected material for this prompt. I had not spoken to my mother for a while. Not a huge while but I had not been 'really' speaking with her for a while.

In fact I had been avoiding to engage in conversation on the phone and had discharged her attempts to invite me to places / invite herself to my place. I shall remind you that my mother lives in Tuscany and I live in Milan.

When I decided to call her she had just come back from a weekend in Naples with friends and had taken a test of Japanese language, which she has been studying this year for the first time.

I was a bit nervous as I knew I had kept her away and she had sensed that obviously, and she was now offended as I could guess from her texts.

Calling her on Monday 5th June at 8pm.

**Alice** reads M **Gaia** reads GDN

GDN: "Hi Mum. How was your exam today? and How was Naples?"

M: "Exam went quite well, not so difficult. Naples was great..."

(EXTENDED DIALOGUE TO FOLLOW).

Analysis: Mmmmmm mum and I responded to your prompt and got our stories out.

We went through crisis, uncovered family patterns, and came out with an affective understanding of the problem. Possibly something has changed.

**Slide 22:**

**Alice:**

And finally as I bought Day 21 to a close I asked:

What's in your backpack?

So today I invite you to pack your bag for your journey. What have you learnt on your journey so far... (in life and in the last 21days...)... what is coming with you?

Read Slide.

**Slide 23:**

**Gaia** addresses Alice:

I would invite Virginia Woolf to have a look at my altar of intimate resources coming out from my green backpack ( a wonderful Ferrino back pack that accompanied me in India, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Indonesia ).

Virginia is a dear friend. I am sure she knows that. She knows a lot of things this Virginia, in fact she is not so 'virginal' at all. She is a woman who meets the world from the inside out and writes about it. Our dialogue would be something around these lines.

Scene: Cambridge gardens, 5pm on a Tuesday afternoon in September 2017. The two characters are sitting on the grass and taking tea from a blue porcelain teapot. objects are spread in front of them on a blue shawl.

**Slide 24:**

**Alice** Reads to Gaia.

My Altar of Intimate Resources.

My feet feature a lot.

My holey orange womb blanket.

My other (m) others long long card...

My m-other reborn on a book.

Virginia Woolf is a Woman. She meets the world from the 'inside out'.

And so Grand(m)other Woolf meets Little Red Riding Hood.

“It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; a great delight to put the severed parts together.”

“You need to find your own land, your own words. And not take those too seriously either.”

**Slide 25:**

**Play film.** We stand watching the film, our back to the audience, clothed in our red hat, coat and red cloak and mask (maybe holding hands?).

Alice leaves just as the film ends.

**Slide 26:**

Gaia:

And she left. I got to the library and find the quotation. Not sure what to do with it but thought I might note it down for future reference:

*... behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (Woolf, 1985, p. 72 \*)*