Conversations with Myself: Sketching Workshop Experiences in Design Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

I was not born a designer – sometime this identity shift must have happened. I was unaware of it, and if asked, I would still not know how to define a "designer". Drawing and sketching are activities intrinsic to the design discipline, and are widely understood as tools for communication, documentation, or artefact-driven reasoning. But are they also essential to the understanding of design knowledge? Or a symptom of a designer's identity rather than a tool for "designerly ways of knowing"? During a week-long design workshop I dealt with difficulties making sense of a panoply of embodied design methods in the absence of a sketchbook. In this pictorial I describe my self-diagnosis as a sketch-bound designer, unable to digest abstract knowledge without holding a pen. I advocate for sketching as focusing, and a primary activity in design epistemology that needs no other than a first-person reason to be performed.

Authors Keywords

sketching; design epistemology; designerly ways of knowing; embodied interaction; design methods.

CSS Concepts

• Human-centered computing~Human computer interaction (HCI)

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2021, I was kindly invited to participate in a week-long workshop with other academics centred on a specific approach to research and design: soma design. In this pictorial, I offer an autoethnographic account of this event [4]. After more than a year and a half isolated in pandemic-ridden world, I was finally granted the chance to gain new design knowledge together with others – in the same room! Packed in my bag were watercolours, a notebook, pens, some of my prototypes, and my primary platform for digital sketching: an iPad Pro. As a new PhD student, this was a golden chance to find a path for my research, and be guided through new perspectives within design epistemology.

As the workshop developed, most of the activities involved an embodied engagement, using methods such as body maps, enactment, bodystorming [9]. We danced, touched, talked, punched, talked, talked, discussed, and

possibly talked some more. The majority of the sense-making happened through valuable group discussions where understanding of the design material and research approaches were thoroughly dissected.

However, by the third day, something was lacking. From my perspective, these methods were failing at reaching out new depths, and I had difficulties formulating or being able to make sense of all of these activities and

discussions. To fully be emerged in the work, my mobile phone was disconnected and purposely avoided to a greater extent – many of these engagements actually made use of our entire body and therefore, taking photos was not a possibility. While we knew most workshops were being video-taped and the documentation would be available to every participant, I was haunted by the lack of first-person perspectives in these tapes (I also knew

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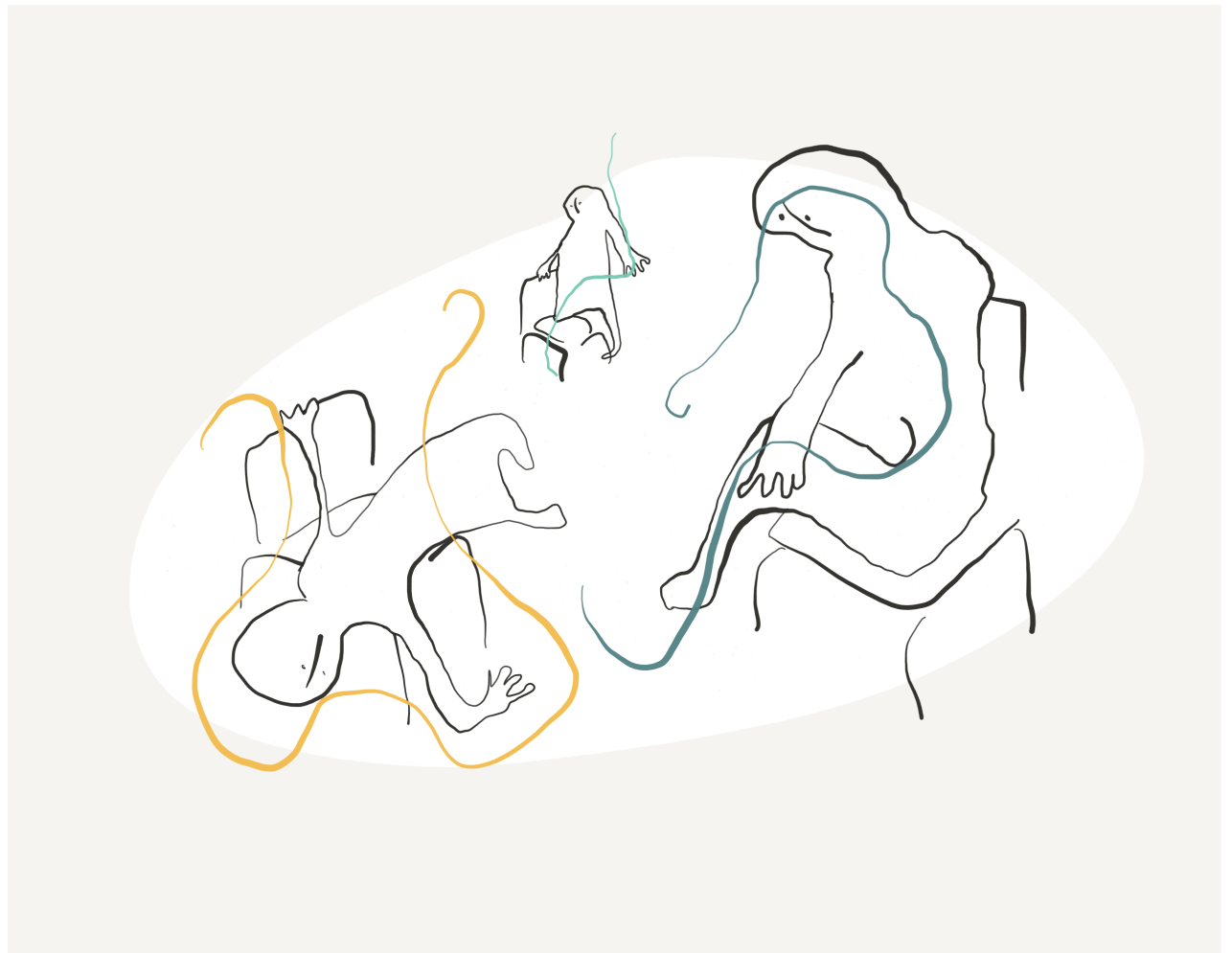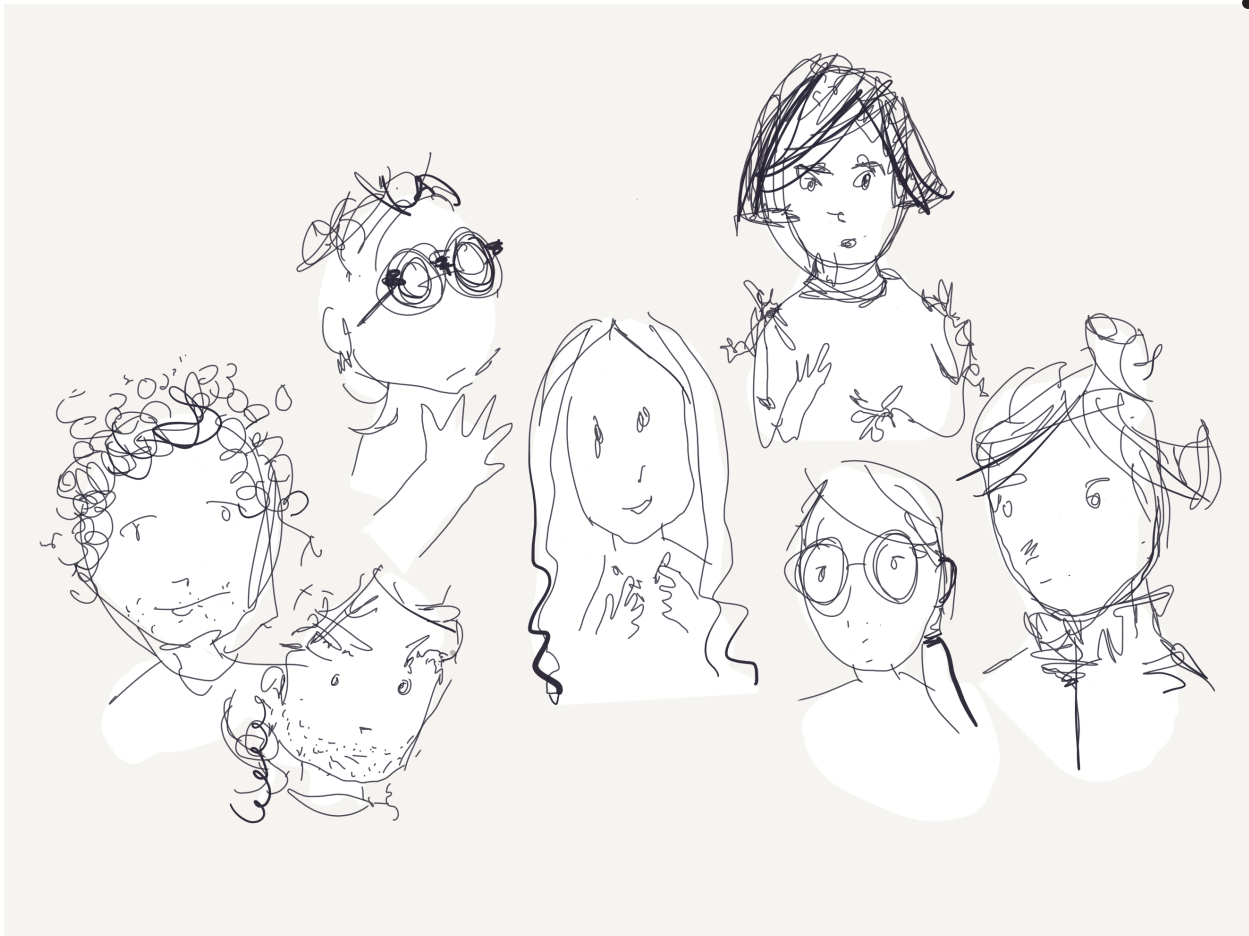
I would most likely never watch them again). There was an overwhelming feeling I was missing something. While it could be expected that all the revelations would descend upon me after some days, I was afraid I would forget the details and intricacies of the discussions that had intrigued me. This, until I decided to start sketching.

In this pictorial, I offer an intimate text and a set of illustrations representing my struggles with "Ways of Seeing and Ways of Knowing, Ways of Saying and Ways of Showing". Each image is paired with a detailed description in alternate text, not immediately explicit to allow the reader to create their own interpretations before reading my own.

A DANCE WITH SKETCHING

For once, the Deweyian integral experience was failing me, I was distracted and dispersed [3], afraid of loss of both meaningfulness and memorability. It was a feeling in my body, a difficulty in expressing an anxiety. The event was engaging and very well organized. Why was I feeling so overwhelmed? I was prepared to sketch, to document this design workshop through the imagination of future artefacts and notions – I was expecting design *things* as an outcome. But the knowledge being manipulated was of a higher level – a level of introspection, not based on the practice of design of *things*, but on a deeply personal understanding of design epistemology. The workshop was not developing the familiar practice-based reflections in-action [15], rather making evident that I was struggling with "designerly ways of knowing" [2] from a researcher's perspective rather than a designer's. As Mäkelä et al. puts it: "Drawing, like dancing, is an exploratory, sense-making process where the observer, and the thing or idea observed, are inextricably bound together in a physical, material space/time relationship" [13], and that dance needed to be initiated.

Sketchnoting

Finally, I unpacked my digital sketching tools. I had decided to go back to making my usual effort of

SKETCHNOTE WITHOUT THE NOTES

documenting discussions through sketchnoting [14]. I listened to others, and interpreted their words onto paper. I tried doodles, scribbles and diagrams. This is an ubiquitous practice in my work life. I used them for meetings, supervision, workshops – these documents are usually appreciated by the participants, and give me the chance to revisit the content of each of these experiences in a quick manner. But sketchnoting or live notes changed nothing in my struggle. While sketching has a variety of purposes and types to aid in thinking [8], I was unaware what I needed was sketching as an aid for knowing through feeling – not only live, but as a break.

Focusing

In a rare moment of alone time, I realised I had been neglecting my own personal space for reflection. I needed and craved sketching. The practice I had carried with me through years made it become a focusing activity:

> *Focusing starts with a concrete feeling in your body – in your stomach or your chest. It is a kind of inward bodily attention that a few people have naturally, but which most people don't yet know. Focusing is not being in touch with emotions or feelings and it isn't guessing or figuring things out in your head about yourself. It is a way of getting a body sense - I call it a felt sense – of how you are in a particular life situation. There is a way of staying with this feeling and coming back to it over and over again. With practice, there is actually a point at which time slows down. You may think you have stayed with this feeling for an eternity, when in fact only a few seconds on the clock have gone by. And there is also a point at which space changes. You were at first quite literally in your chair and now there is this new space. [5]*

The lack of sketching was growing as a knot inside of me: I felt it in my throat. What I needed was to engage in
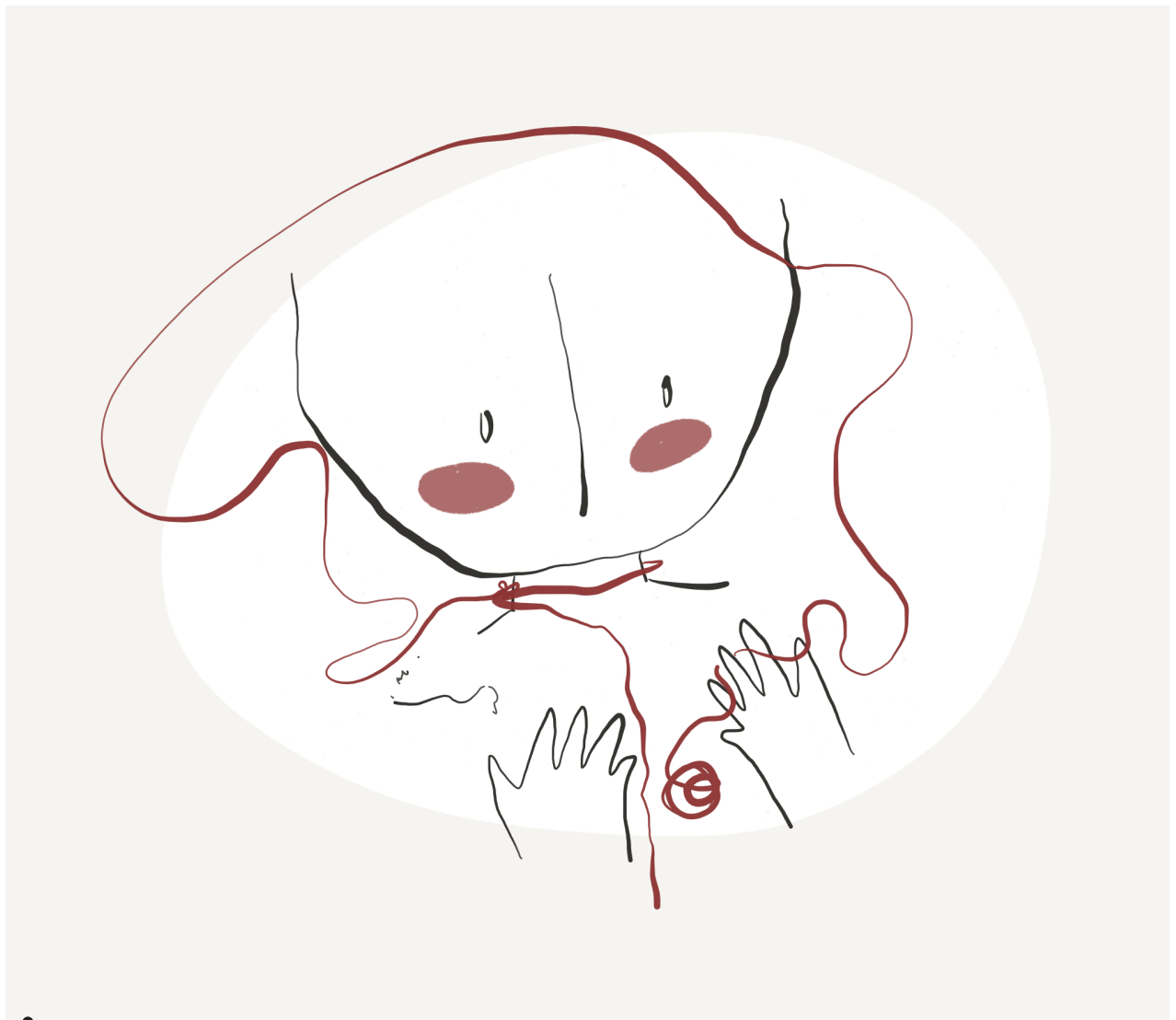
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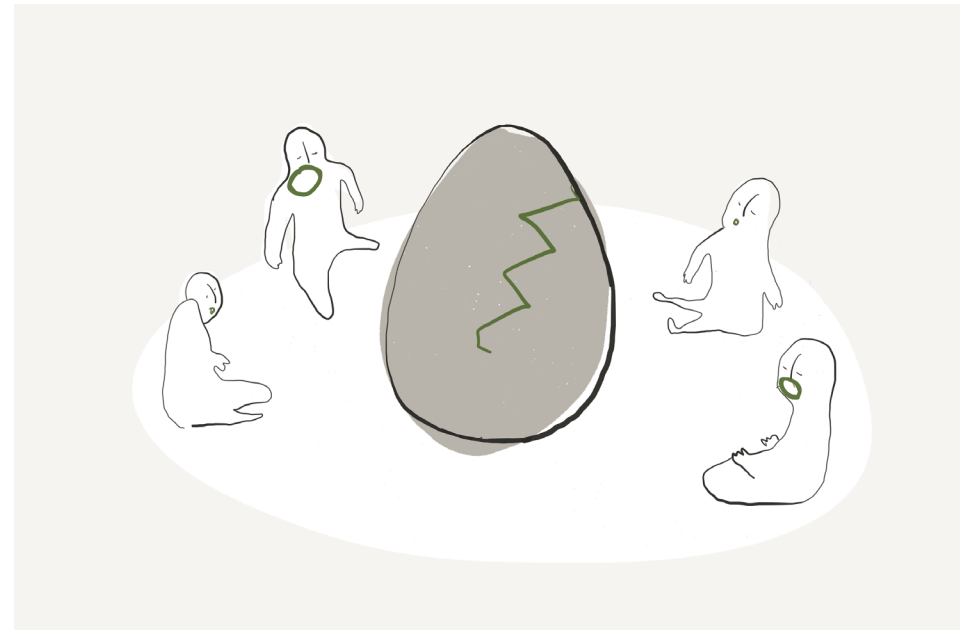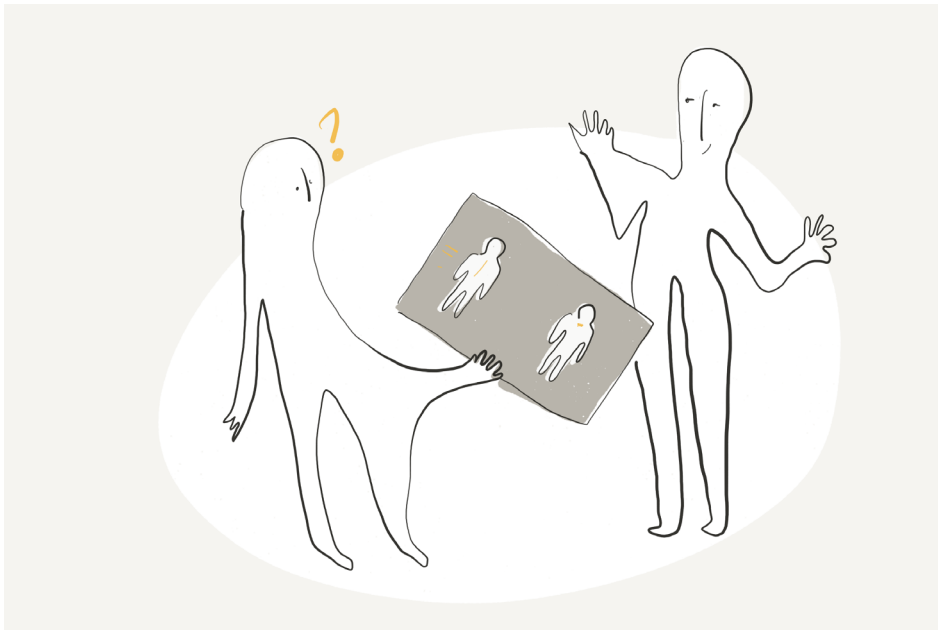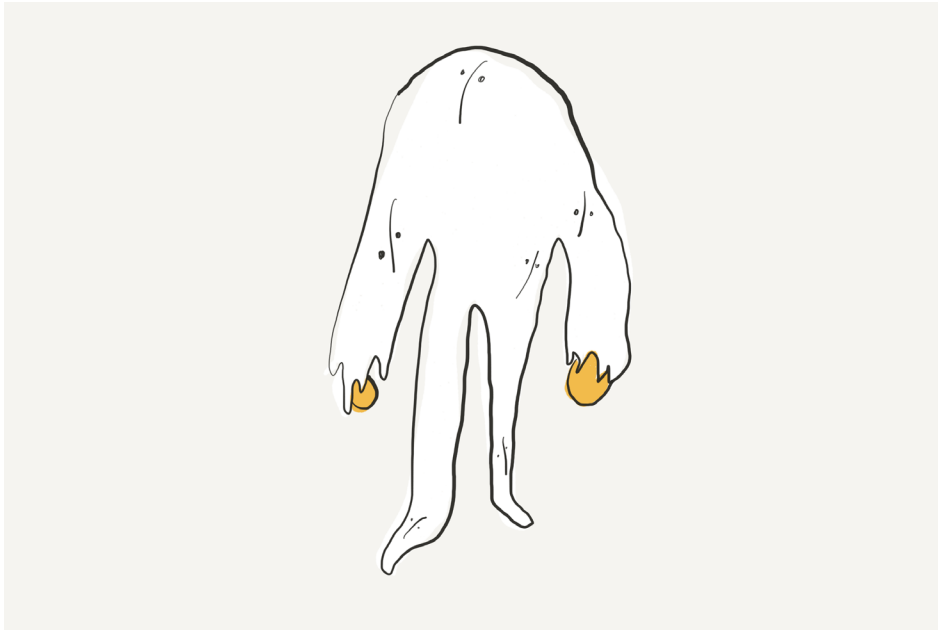
what Ings would call enstasis, "an induced interior state of self hood where one dwells in the creative potential of what is not yet formed" [10].

Over My Shoulder

Towards the end of the workshop, I started illustrating our final group discussions. While watching me sketch, other participants picked up interest in my interpretation of the knowledge, creating a chain reaction. I saw their body shifting over my shoulder to get a better view of my drawings. Did my sketching just influence thinking as if I was talking over the speaker? What would happen if everyone in the room would be sketching? Would the sketches infect one another, like a viral disease?

This effect reminded me of the body maps we had often used: a sketching method used to evaluate an experience by filling in two outlines of a human body before and after the experience [1]. The point is to elicit a reflection on the felt experience. Often, when filling my own, I would glance over to my neighbour participant, at times feeling inadequate in my own approach.

RESOLUTION

The sketches produced during this week varied in detail. By the end of the workshop, the conversations with myself were hardly expressed in text or words – even when writing this pictorial, I am uncertain of what has exactly changed through these experiences in design epistemology. But my understanding of design knowledge has somehow shifted. I know this, because the anxiety was not there anymore after the sketches came to be. The knot was still present, but defined, under control, frozen. I had found the new space, where time had slowed down.

I have learnt I am sketch-bound, and designerly activities will cause a type of embodied obstruction which can only be resolved by picking up the tools again. This was the time the work of Kirsh [11] became real to me: I was literally thinking with *things*, and I depended on that kinaesthetic engagement. Although this insight
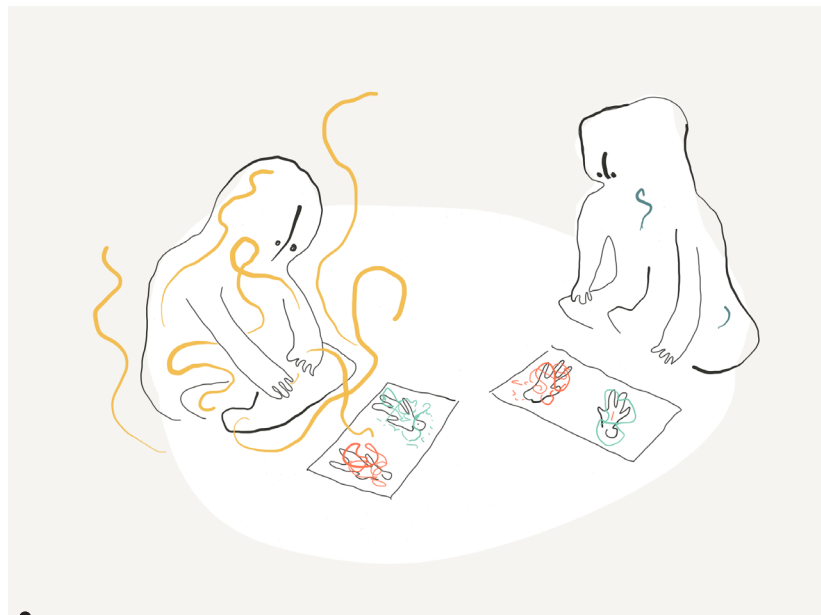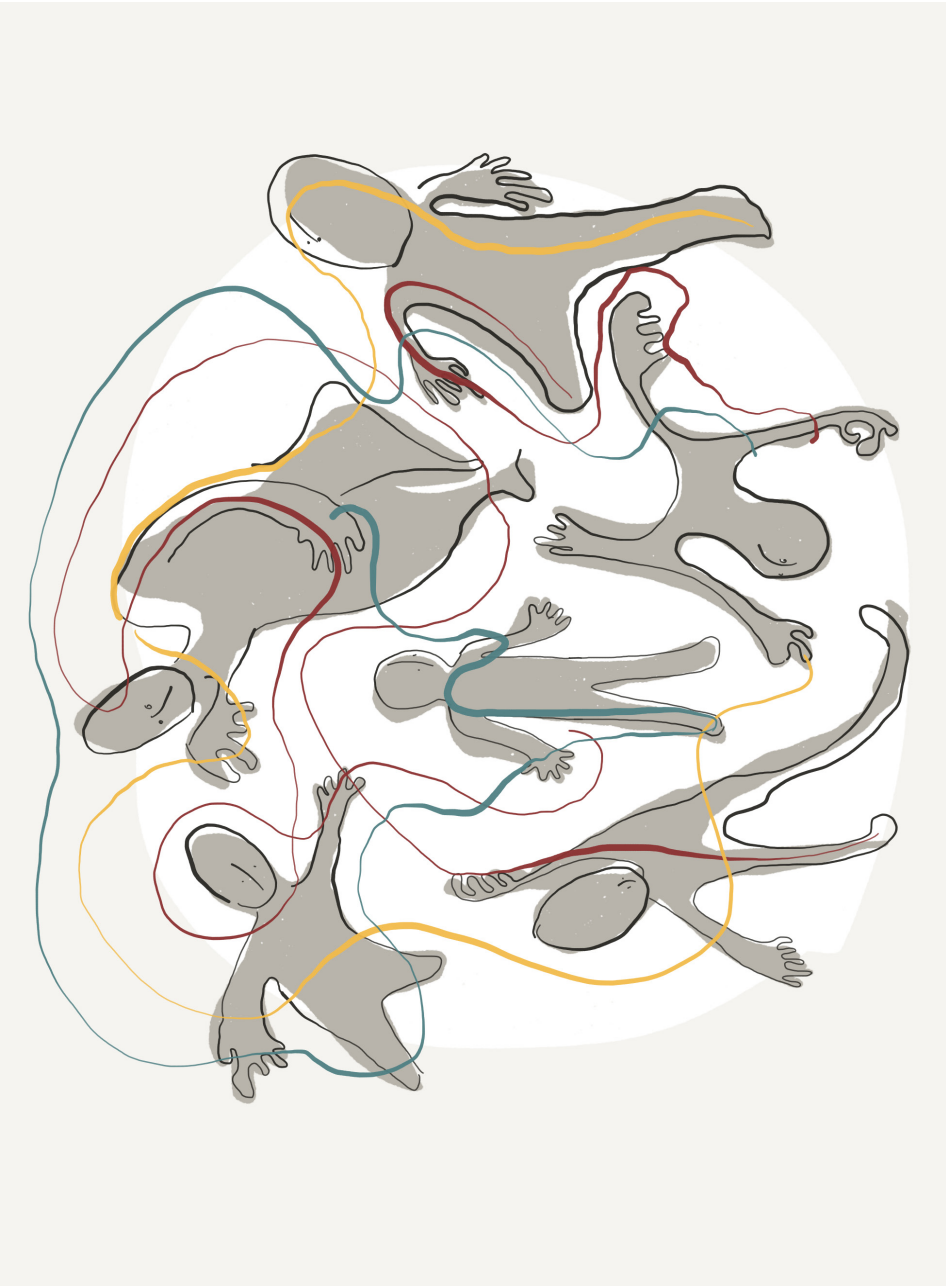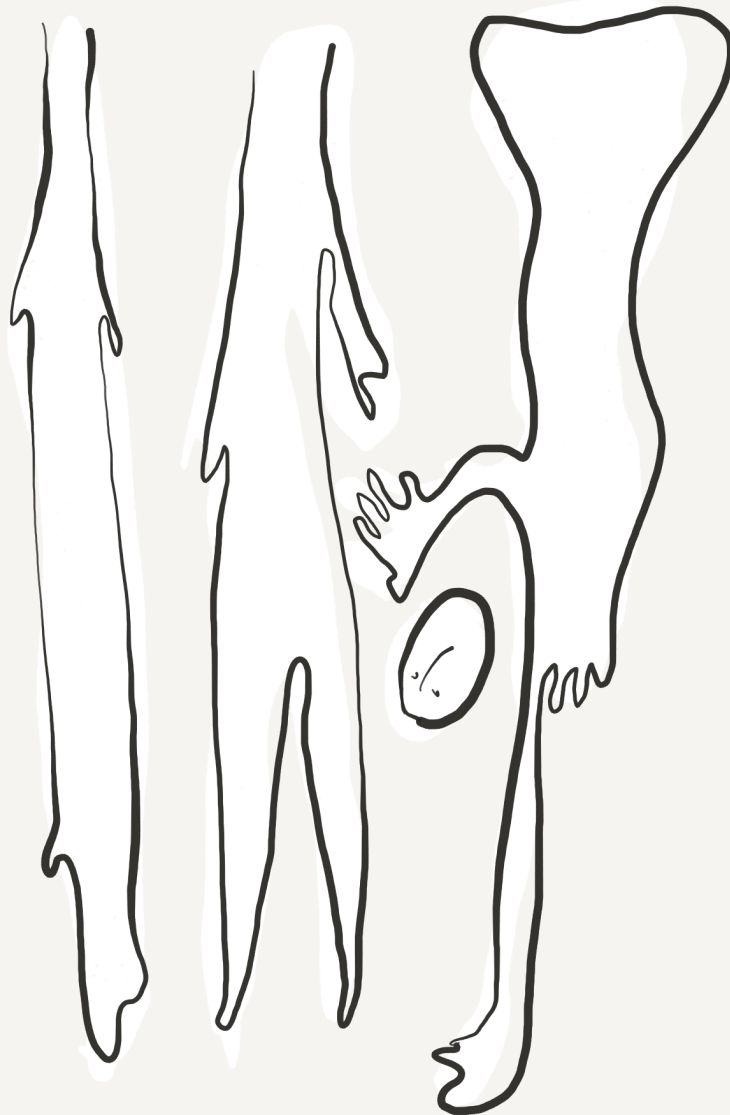

BODY MAPS
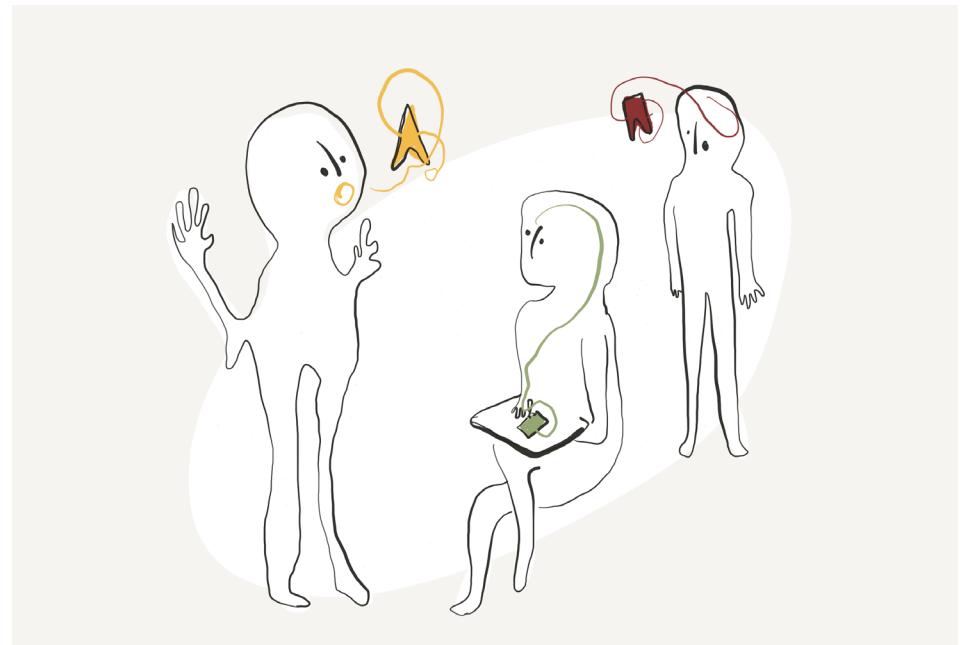
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is still not untangled, I have now explored the shape of the entanglement through sketching. As posed by Goldschmidt, "[Experienced designers] produce the sketch in order to have a dialogue with it, and the sketch's backtalk is the reward they get for bringing it into being" [7]. But the dialogue here is not only a tool for reasoning [6], but also therapy, a necessity. The embodied relief I felt when finally sketching had not even been there at night, when I processed my thoughts before falling asleep. If anything, thinking alone made the obstruction worse.

One interesting detail is that the Deweyian experience was reconstructed, but it expressed itself as a conflict between expectations and outcomes: I had found the pauses that unified the experience: "[When we have *an* experience], There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation." [3]. The experience of the workshop had started before the first day and ended after the last, and acknowledging this transition happened via the sketches, and not through words.

WORKSHOP FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

As the workshop closed, I absorbed how much I had learnt from others. But this knot of knowledge, which for me could only be resolved through sketching, had no space to exist. I needed my own time for drawing, and I had kept myself from it. I wonder at times, if each of the participants had a similar feeling but with whichever is their favourite activity for conversations with themselves. Each time I spoke, the knot grew, and had further and further threads hanging loose.

Each sketch helped identify one of these threads: but they are my threads to pick up again. Could others also formulate their threads in their own ways? How can we facilitate a pluralistic first-person process of documenting and sense-making? Koulidou et al. [12] for example, propose a method of Dialogical Sketching as an aid to investigate the sense of self in co-design.
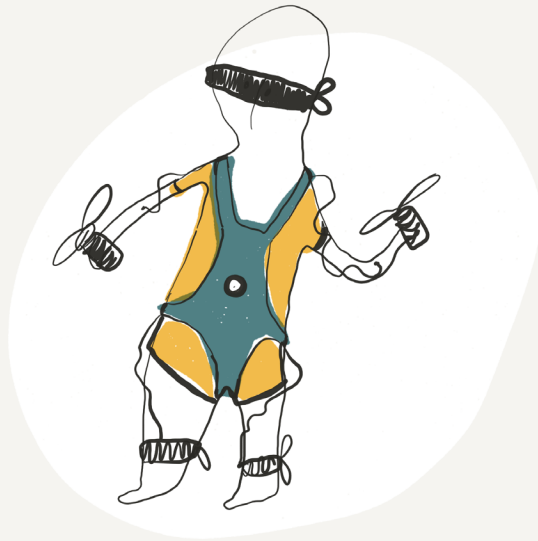
I advocate for including yourself when attending workshops, prioritising conversations through and with oneself. Take a look at the schedule, at the venue: is there a time and space for your own thoughts? Is there a pause, a place of rest? This requires the possibility to take the time and space to find one's own way of discovering the right communication venue. For me, it seems to be sketching. For others, perhaps other artistic and creative practices in dire need of acceptance in research [16]. And while sketching may not be the universal tool, it is one that affords reflection, and should be encouraged beyond a means for documentation or dialogue with others – but also as a conversation with the self.

Insight into own work

Inside my unpacked bag were a set of drones - one of my design materials. After almost a year of living with drones, my perception of what defines the technology was shaped by each small experience I had with them. This means, within myself, there was a design material baggage. I was eager to share this with others, this somewhat intimate first-person relationship with the design and reserch material.

During the first days, there were other participants who also had baggage, and I was curious about their relationship. When looking back now, I wish I had given even more space to engage with others through the design material – by actually doing, sketching, building together. Yurman exemplifies this beautifully with other researchers through the fluid medium of watercolour [18]. At the workshop, we talked and enacted dreams, but I left my own drones behind. In this process, I caught glimpses of the baggage in others as they demonstrated their designs to me: how they handled their designs, how they packed them, how they touched them, their body language when recounting stories. I imagined research and design paths for myself and my drones: a type of future enquiry [17], but a personal one.

I did not take out my sketching material during the workshop to develop any of these imagined worlds. Why not? Perhaps it felt like the wrong method at that time, because it was mine, and nobody else's. As a friend said, my workflow felt smothered, I struggled not because the material was hard to grasp or... weird as it often was referred to, but because I could not tackle it from my own perspective. The offering was like cold hard stone, it did not give way to my touch? Could I be failing at being talked into a research perspective just because the water was too cold?

CONCLUSION

During the first day of the workshop I was convinced I would be documenting my experience through sketching as a way of reporting back from it. I had planned on embedding myself deeply into the material of the workshop, letting it lead my process, being open to new perspectives. Maybe I should have still kept my most familiar design tool. But I thought there was no time, no opportunity, I was too engaged in the moment, to eager to participate. I did not sketch because I felt as if nothing could be communicated, as I could make no sense of the knowledge I was acquiring – but I had missed the point. I needed sketching as a conversation with myself. Perhaps I should consider which conversations I am supporting in workshops, with my students, with research participants. Not only between themselves, but with themselves. Am I affording space for it?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
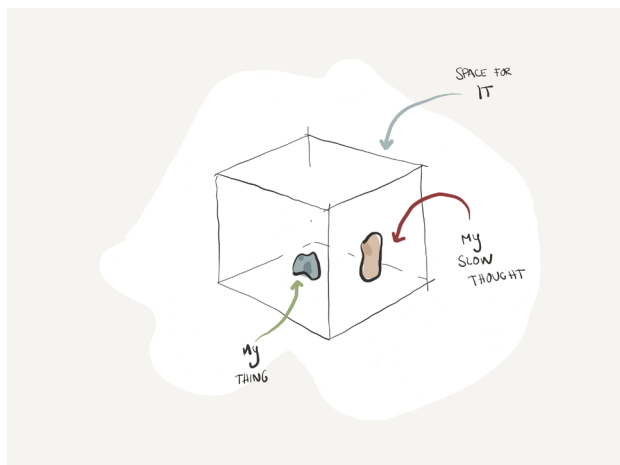
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