

**Closeness-at-a-distance:  
Reaching out through pedagogies of making**

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*(Submitted: 22 October 2024; Accepted: 10 March 2025)*

**Abstract**

Elmarie Costandius's experimental pedagogies challenged the stasis and restriction of top-down, monomodal, cerebral notions of learning, and of knowledge as handed down by experts. The shock delivered by her arts-based approaches was not explosive, but rather a set of vibrations that reconfigured what it means to experiment, traverse, reconfigure, and communicate in classroom events. Her pedagogies fostered encounters with doing, making, and intra-acting as embodied modalities of exploration—approaching new forms of knowing. This article unfolds from our attunement to this gesture of reaching outward. The closeness we seek to approximate emerges from our reaching out towards meaning, memory, and our sense of resonance with Elmarie and each other as kindred companions in thinkingdoingbecoming. We compose this article as a “processual monument” that pays homage to Elmarie's legacy by advocating for art-based and transmodal practices in higher education pedagogy and inquiry.

**Keywords:** arts-based pedagogies, collaboration, experimentation, re-membering, transmodality

**Introduction**

*Always curious, she allowed the world to lead her, materials to teach her, contingencies to guide her. (CFP CriSTaL, 31 May 2024)*

Elmarie Costandius's experimental pedagogies sought a 'shock to thought' (Massumi, 2002) as a counter to the stasis and restriction of top-down, monomodal, cerebral notions of learning, and of knowledge as handed down by experts. She wished teaching and learning to become more exploratory and open – to new ideas, to prevailing circumstances, and to the diversity and promise of her students. For her students, colleagues, and all those privileged to participate in her workshops and learning encounters, the shock delivered by her arts-based pedagogies was



not explosive, but rather a set of vibrations, tremors which reconfigured what it means to experiment, traverse, reconfigure, and communicate forms of knowing. Her pedagogies fostered encounters with doing, making, and 'intra-acting' (Barad, 2007) as embodied exploration—gestures for reaching out towards new forms of knowing and becoming. This article unfolds from our attunement to this gesture of reaching outward. We, Francois—a fellow artist and art educator – and Denise – a teacher educator in the field of literature and literacy – explore and experiment with scholarly writing as a means for approaching 'closeness-at-a-distance'. The closeness we seek to approximate emerges from our reaching out towards meaning, memory, and our sense of resonance with Elmarie and each other as kindred companions in thinkingdoingbecoming. We make use of imaginative play to traverse spatial, temporal, and disciplinary distances and differences. We meet online to read, write, make, and play together, guided by speculative intuition with the aim of enabling response-able closeness to the fluid dynamism of *pedagogies of making*.

We pay homage to Elmarie's legacy by advocating the foregrounding of transmodal art-based practices in higher education pedagogy and inquiry as 'ethico-aesthetic and political' processes that move in 'disobedient' (Atkinson, 2018: 1) relation to normalised and normalising practices of sensing, feeling, thinking and making. When referring to art, we purposefully move beyond the conception of art-for-art's sake to argue for the importance of 'artful' (Manning, 2016) practices as 'transmodal' (Newfield, 2014) conduits for thinking and learning differently. When asserting the importance of developing concepts that are situated and grounded in Africa and the Global South, Elmarie (Costandius, 2019: 2) championed the vitality of making processes. Learning-through-making 'shift[s] or influence[s] our being/thoughts/actions' in ways that 'open up new avenues to understand issues from more perspectives *in our own context*.' (Costandius, 2019: 2; emphasis added). Collaborative arts-based projects, for Elmarie (and her collaborator Karolien Perold-Bull), hold the potential to foster much-needed 'critical citizenship and social transformation in South African higher education' (Perold & Costandius, 2015: 210).

Our inquiries recount and re-member<sup>1</sup> some of Elmarie's pedagogical practices of learning-through-making, using materials such as clay and enlarged printed maps of South Africa as 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010).<sup>2</sup> We, too, process our own learning through bodymind actions of making, using materials other than keyboards, mice and typed-out documents. We search for, forge, and find articulation for multidimensional notions of closeness—paying attention to our 'modalities of approach [rather than rushing towards] modalities of arrival or capture' (Moten & Harney, 2021, 55: 2). We learn from Elmarie about the value of concepts that refuse a 'fixed identity' (Costandius, 2019: 3). As opposed to the 'fixedness' of knowing, we urge towards the indeterminacies of coming-to-know by reaching out through the 'process of actively finding relations [and] new connections' (Costandius, 2019: 3), during our encounters across

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<sup>1</sup> Our remembering includes first-hand experiences of participation in some of Elmarie's workshops at CHEC (2017-2018), as well as discussions with Elmarie about her innovative pedagogies at gatherings related to the project "Doing Academia Differently" (2021-2022).

<sup>2</sup> 'Creating Concepts' workshop, CHEC, Mont Fleur, 2018

distances and differences. Our thinking and theorising thereby become the ‘physicality’ (St. Pierre, 2015: 92) of a ‘creative, material, tangible and embodied process and not only the I (cognitively) alone that creates concepts’ (Costandius, 2019: 3). Our modes of inquiry attend to the agentic qualities of more-than-human entanglements that emerge from intra-acting with drawings, photographs, texts, discursive questions and responses. These moments of transmodal play and exchange resulted in the Figures placed throughout this article as part of our text. This process unfolded when Francois sent a physical package of images, texts, and collages that he had made to Denise (see Figure 1), who responded via WhatsApp and email with short poems, open-ended questions, and discursive writing. During virtual meetings, we engaged with these “raw” materials – collaboratively – to develop the digital collages that appear as the Figures below. These Figures (see Figures 1 - 4) offer diffractive glimpses of our thinkingdoingbecoming by superimposing images from our past classroom activities, personal correspondence, notes, photographs, gestures in paint and pen, as well as references to those whom we think-with. Through the collage-like layering and use of colour, texture, shapes and opacities, these Figures contribute an affective quality to the conceptual concerns with which they co-compose meaning. In addition to these Figures, the material that we think-with also includes extracts from a collection of poems edited by Elmarie, as part of the project: *Reconfiguring Scholarship: Doing Academic Writing, Publishing and Reviewing Differently* (CHEC, 2018).

As an act of paying tribute to Elmarie, our thinking/writing/playing/making with these materials seeks to form a “monument”. Not a monument that closes down and fixes in place what it commemorates (as a past gone by), but a monument in the Deleuzoguattarian sense as that which ‘confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the [present] event.’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 176). In this way, we think of our inquiry as a *processual monument* that sustains the vitality of Elmarie’s pedagogies, feeling the sensation of her contributions always anew in the present, and as a provocation to future (re)makings.

We engage with our materials diffractively and attune our explorations to the affective dimensions of knowing and coming-to-know. We follow the pull of a ‘feltness’ (Springgay, 2021) that draws us closer to the theorising that finds expression in Elmarie’s writing and pedagogic practice. Instead of prioritising only written academic language, the composition of our article (or monument) enfolds theorising, discussion, images and poems as co-constitutive modalities for collective sense-making.

Motivated by Elmarie’s propensity for discovery, our investigations resemble a curious meandering that seeks to diverge from well-worn pathways. Being open to what lessons may lie in wait, we foreground the pedagogical richness of process over the prescriptive tendencies of prefigured outcomes. Our monument to Elmarie is a ‘re-membering’ (Barad, 2017) not of the past but of the ways in which her work and life offer us hope and possibilities.

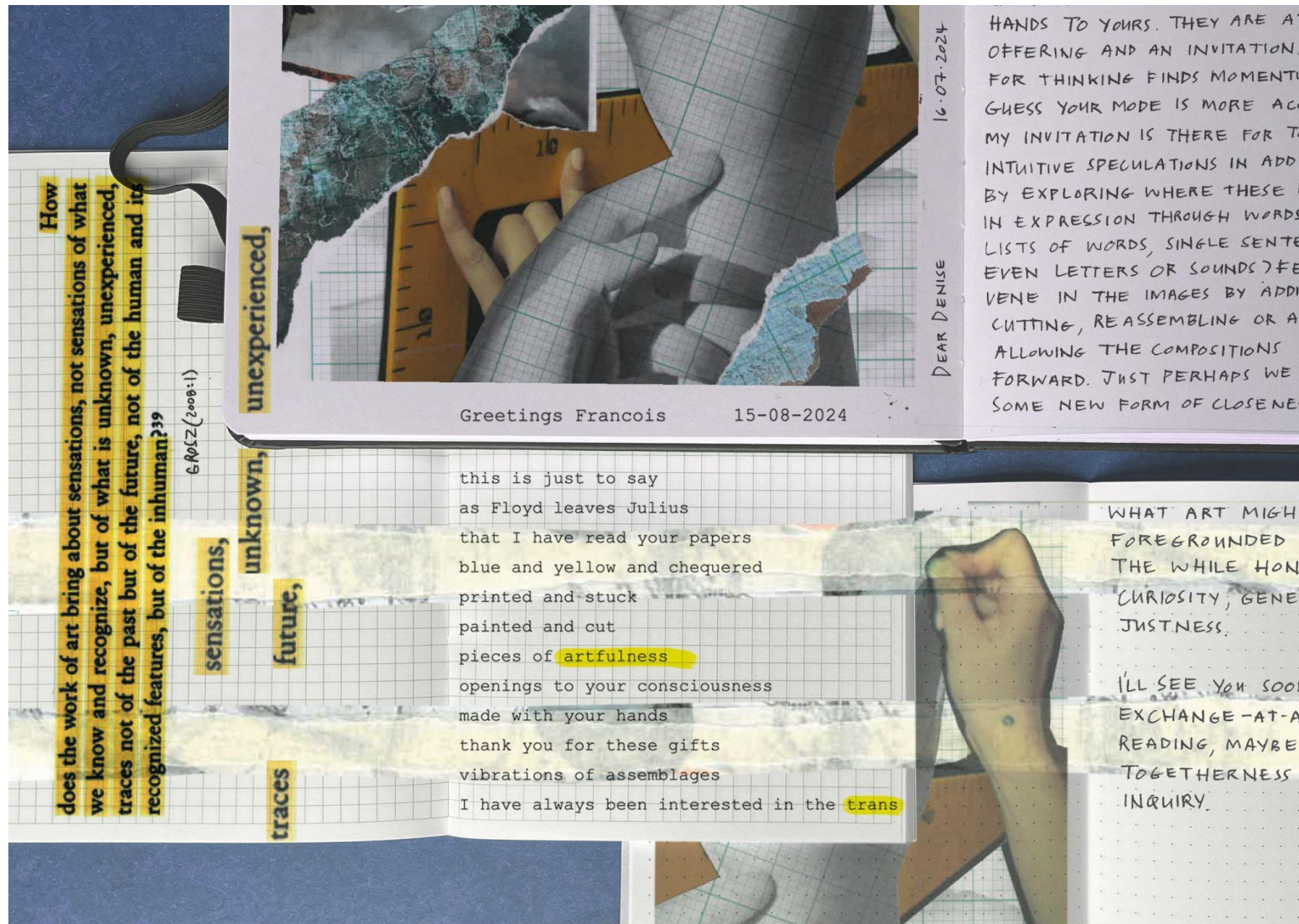


Figure 1: Corresponding, together-apart



### Towards closeness-at-a-distance

Our aim – to *enact* closeness at a distance – is a gesture that reaches outward, towards an expansion of thinking and doing collectively. We seek to approach a generative proximity that fosters ‘the conditions under which something new [might be] produced.’ (Smith, 2014: 180, cited in Costandius, 2019: 3). ‘Closeness,’ in our thinking-with the term, is animated by the futurity implied in the statement ‘we are not there *yet*’. As a processual ‘location’, closeness operates as a spatial-temporal ‘middling’ (Manning, 2016). It acknowledges the incompleteness of our thinkingdoingbecoming as a practice of reaching, urging, and gesturing always to the not-quite-yet. Closeness, as the traversing of conceptual and affective ‘distances,’ operates in the realm of ‘assemblages’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 4), treating the assemblage not as a thing but as ‘the process of making and unmaking the thing’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: 1).

Theories, papers, words  
 letting go of what is  
 embracing what is yet to come  
 [...]
   
 Then the thought—a moment  
 a moment of clarity, but  
 it disappears as fast as the clouds over the mountain  
 leaving little traces of being.

(Annadine in CHEC, 2018: 8-9)<sup>3</sup>

Our central concept of closeness-at-a-distance acknowledges the interdependence of two (or more) ‘lines’ pulled closer—not towards an endpoint of ‘sameness’ but ‘toward a retexturing of [differentiation in] the relay that comes [from] the force of all that does not quite come into contact.’ (Manning, 2020a: 3). We consider *distance* as the ‘enabling constraint’ (Manning, 2020b: 79) that affords us closeness. Distance, however, is not to be thought of as that which renders a view from the ‘outside’. When embraced by the approximating force of becoming-close (like an ocean wave approaching the shoreline as a meeting point that is never fixed), distance operates as a middling zone shaped by the dynamics of intra-action. Foregrounding intra-action requires ‘emphasising the value of difference’ (Costandius, 2008: 174). In the collaborative meeting of our ‘mismatched’ (Berlant & Stewart, 2019: 5; Figure 2) minds, we explore the fragility of our disciplinary edges (Manning, 2020b: 7) to converse across notions of transmodality and artfulness in our inquiry into pedagogies of making. Our speculative creative collaborations (such as the act

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<sup>3</sup> The poems used throughout the article are extracted from the publication “Reconfiguring Scholarship.” The poets are all referred to in citations by their first names, as they were attributed in the original publication.



Figure 2: Distances diffracted

of composing our Figures) allow us to establish closeness through the diffractive intra-action of image and text – approaching each other and our search for collective meaning from our respective disciplinary backgrounds while not reducing our thinking to the limitations of pre-defined concepts.

### **Pedagogies of making: arts-based and transmodal practices**

Art-making and transmodal pedagogic practices share the commonality of being 'already in the act' (Hicky-Moody & Page, 2015: 1). When thinking with Elmarie of *art as a verb*, rather than noun (Perold & Costandius, 2015: 210), we come to ask alongside Manning 'might there be a way to reclaim the processual that has increasingly become backgrounded in the definition of art as tied to an object?' (2016: 46). How might we open up towards artful modalities in pedagogy in ways that 'begin not with the object but with *what else* art can do' (Manning, 2016: 46)? We shift our attention away from seemingly discreet objects to the unexpected unfolding of events. In this journey towards closeness-at-a-distance, we are opened up to the relational dimensions of experience. Delinking art from an agentic creator and a resulting product, we are able to recognise the surprising ways in which the 'world kicks back' (Barad, 2007: 215). Our conception of what constitutes the artful, therefore, moves beyond the indexing of objects and well-known categories of artefacts (such as texts, paintings, poems, drawings, sculptures, plays, etc.) to draw instead into focus the processual attitudes of curiosity, exploration, experimentation and speculation as the operative dimensions of artfulness. These attitudes for approaching practice share a performative understanding of how doing, thinking and becoming co-constitute one another – always in material entanglement and intra-active relations with the world.

Becoming-with critical arts-based pedagogical encounters  
obliquely  
different levels of intensities  
between, through one another  
coming-to-know  
experiential  
embodied  
how to find forms  
expressing the ineffable

(Nike in CHEC, 2018: 19)

**Denise:** For many years, my pedagogic approach has been situated within a framework of multimodality, a framework that considers meaning-making and communication to occur through multiple and hybrid forms rather than through language only. This framework – specifically that of multimodal social semiotics (Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014) – offered inspiration to me as a literacy and language teacher educator, through its expansion of the semiotic

space of the classroom, which invited other forms and modes to speak alongside language. Fragile at the edges, amenable to the opportunities provided by a particular socio-historico-educational context, I implemented this framework. I wanted to explore how language and literature classrooms could 'become more democratic spaces through addressing a central issue in teaching, learning and its assessment, namely, the forms of representation through which students make their meanings' (Stein, 2008: 1). My focus was on student learning rather than teaching - various types of students' making and expression. For example, literacy was learned through the making of dolls, theory through the making of models, and Shakespeare through the unmaking and remaking of the original text.

**Francois:** I share your interest in shifting the focus from teaching towards learning. While I only recently started engaging with the critical language of pedagogic theories, I have been conditioned in my approach to classroom encounters by my background in Visual Arts. I remember, as an art student, often working late into the night making and re-making works (like paintings and drawings or digital creations) in what seemed like an endless process in which the materials or techniques would continuously deliver something unexpected – provocations that would resist the idea of finality or completion. Each moment of pause in a work seemed to prompt the question 'what-else' in ways that would spill over into more iterations and proliferations for the work to continue.

**Denise:** Semiosis (meaning- and sign-making) is ongoing. Students' individual 'texts' are punctuations in an ongoing transmodal semiotic chain. Our own Figures similarly function as punctuations in an unfolding transmodal semiotic chain. I bring my previous work along towards you, as you bring yours to me, in our journey towards establishing closeness-at-a-distance with each other, Elmarie and others we have thought and worked with. Transmodal activities, such as these, have the potential to centre learning as border-crossing activities that make, unmake and remake the classroom as a semiotically expansive and vital space.

**Francois:** Yes, this process of 'making and unmaking' (Costandius, 2019: 3) texts and artefacts I have come to understand as a type of pedagogical motor. It is within the in-act of coming-to-know – as a middling with material (re)configurings – that learning reveals itself as emergent, contingent and co-constitutive through more-than-human relations. Attuning classroom encounters to the processual openings of the artful enables a 'pragmatics of the suddenly possible' (Atkinson, 2018: 2).<sup>4</sup> The force of art in-the-making – artfulness – offers learning a *launching ground* and a *leaping momentum* that embeds future-oriented speculative practice in the material-discursive entanglements of the present and its pasts (Atkinson, 2018: 2). Learning-through-making seeds possibilities for new forms of learning. When shifting our modalities from the reproduction of 'what is' to material

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<sup>4</sup> Atkinson borrows this phrase from Susan Buck-Morris (2013).

experimentations with ‘what is possible,’ artful practices enliven encounters with the co-constitutive force of unanticipated relations (Costandius, 2019: 3).

**Denise:** Transmodal artfulness offered a launching ground and a leaping momentum to the classroom activities of students who were studying to be English teachers. The original play of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was remade as an African masked performance by this group of students. Shakespeare’s story of shipwreck and subsequent settling by a deposed leader on a remote, uncivilised island was transformed into a mimed, wordless, quasi-African masked ritual. Central characters were presented as masked figures: Alonso, King of Naples, wore a mask representing PW Botha<sup>5</sup> in order to signify usurpation, illegitimacy, domination and injustice in the apartheid state; Caliban, a native inhabitant of the island, conventionally presented as a lowly beast or monster, was transformed into a fabulous antelope through the mask he wore - vital and harmonising with nature; when the island is colonised, Caliban’s mask was changed into that of a miner, evoking capitalist exploitation of black migrant workers in South Africa (Newfield, 2009: 106-10) (See Figure 3). This open-ended, indigenising, collective version of transmodality as a pedagogic event simultaneously facilitated a subversive shock to conventional literary interpretations of the play and a response-ability by the students to the injustices of educational and social life in mid-1980s South Africa. This re-signification of the play through its re-materialisation as an African masked performance – a liminal ritual – contributed to a fostering of ‘critical citizenship and social transformation’ (Perold & Costandius 2015: 210).

This event of transformation shows the imaginative and critical possibilities offered by artful transmodal practice when integrated with context-specific, inter-disciplinary embodied experimentation. The process provides ‘a powerful medium to imagine and realise *positive hope* through *tangible* experience.’ (Perold & Costandius, 2015: 217 - emphasis added).

Distance is frightening, perhaps hope  
 Barriers are limiting, maybe pointing  
 Familiarity is knowing, perhaps blurring  
 Separation is comparing  
 [or]  
 Leaves room to breathe [...]  
 connects opposites [...]  
 embodies difference

(John in CHEC, 2018: 29)

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<sup>5</sup> PW Botha, leader of the apartheid Nationalist Party, served as the prime minister of South Africa (from 1978 to 1984) and the state president of the country (from 1984 to 1989).



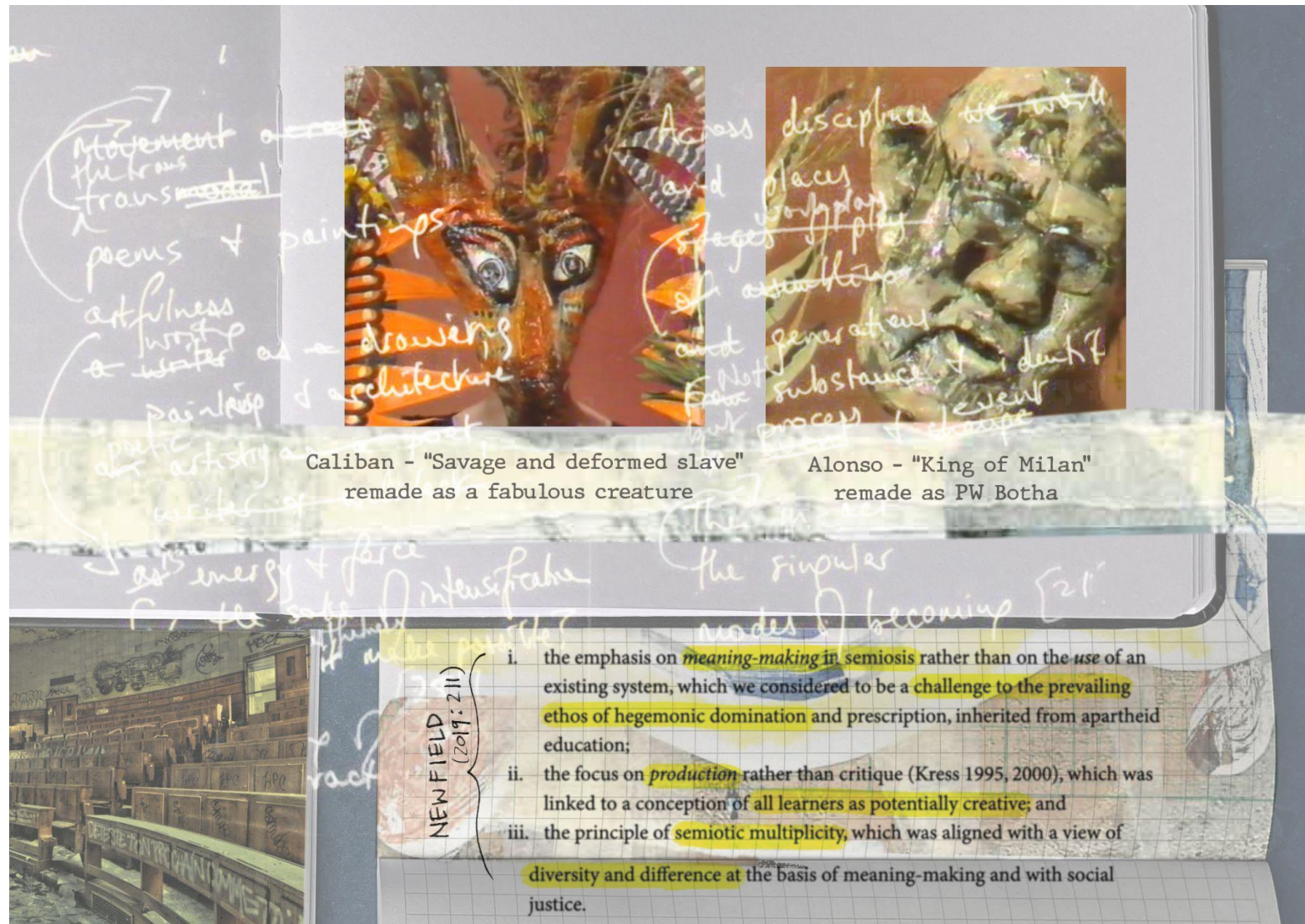


Figure 3: Transmodal re-making of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

**Francois:** Your example reminds me of an experiment in which I invited three primary school children to perform a shadow puppet production they had created for my second-year design students. Their performance (not that dissimilar to a masked performance) was a delicately choreographed projection of shadows onto a white sheet. The task instruction to my students was to engage with this performance as a springboard for making. When asked to develop a creative response to the curious wonder reverberating through the children's performance, my students were seemingly animated, as yours were, by a sense of hopeful possibility. This challenged the arrangement of the learning environment from the typical dynamic of expert-vs-novice to the proposition of the creative process as a seed for continuous imaginings. My students became more sensitised to the affective pull of artfulness and less constrained by the normalising tendencies of disciplinary conventions. By actualising new forms of possibility through tangible and semiotic propositions, the learning process allowed for hope to be thought, felt and experienced in embodied ways (Perold & Costandius, 2015: 217). The value of fostering hope through imaginative speculation lies in 'focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture' (Massumi, 2015: 3). Hope functions as a middling ('being right where you are') and an affective ethical attunement ('being right where you are—more intensely') (Massumi, 2015: 3).

And then  
Doors open and close  
Educators walk into rooms of students  
Teach their teachings  
Then walk out  
What is left behind?  
[...]  
An encounter  
[...]  
Laughter opens up  
[...]  
A different supply chain  
[...]  
Without strict structures and outcomes  
With an AND... AND, and a yet to come  
It changes us into multiplicities  
Assemblages coming together  
Together with us

(Veronica in CHEC, 2018, 38-39)



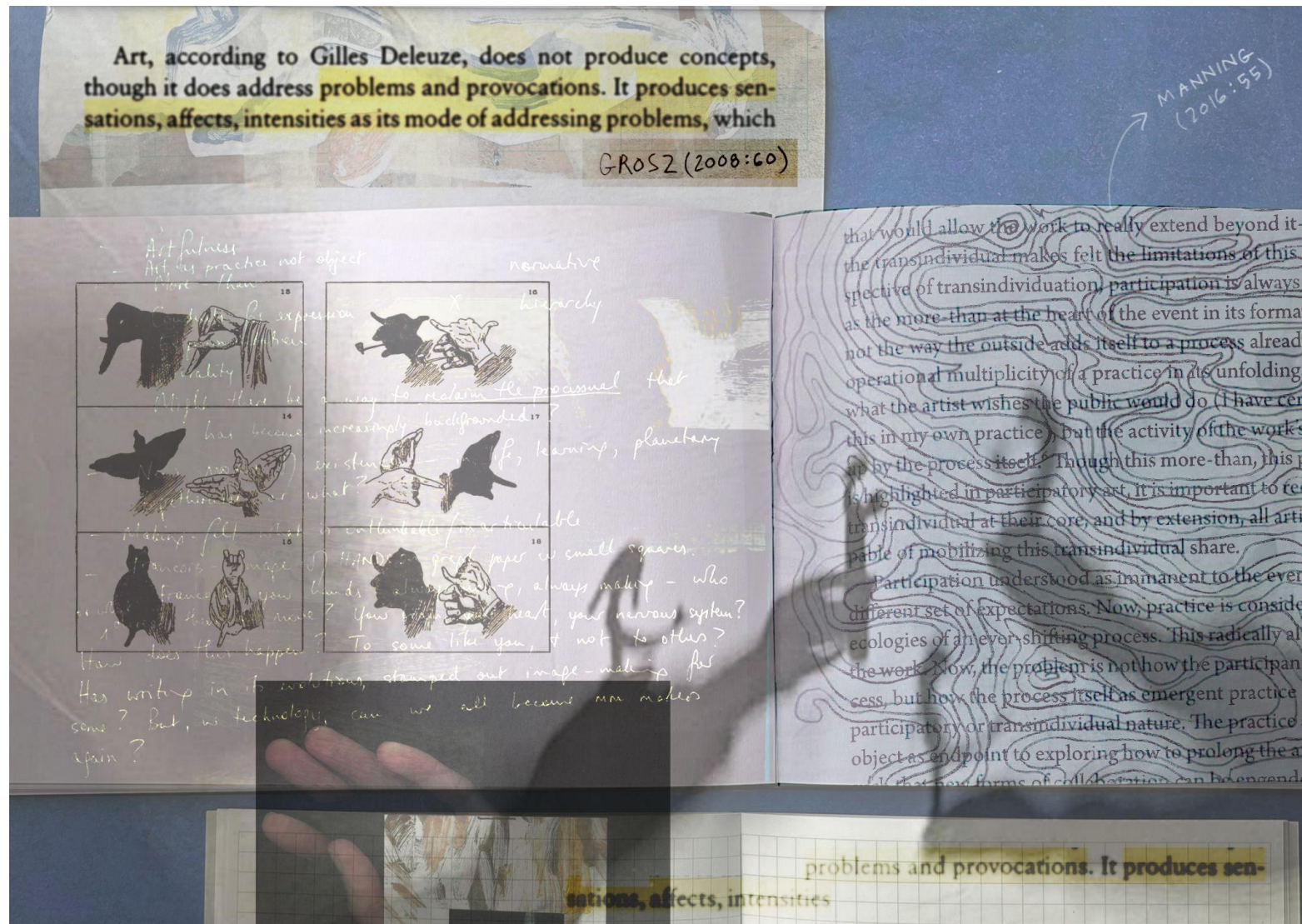


Figure 4: Artful encounters with shadow figures

## Conclusion

Unlike the urge that typically moves a piece of writing towards a conclusive 'arrival,' our fostering of closeness-at-a-distance (ontologically, epistemologically, and pedagogically) remains en route, with the ongoing indeterminacy of not-yet-knowns. As a monument that re-members again and again, we stay with Elmarie in the unfinished-now of the artful—seeking openings for thinkingdoingbecoming to produce thinkingdoingbecoming anew. We celebrate pedagogies of making as transmodal artful encounters that reorient and reconfigure.


Our experimental modality is one of reaching out through differences rather than staying within hegemonic approaches to inquiry, pedagogy and scholarship. Our article, like Elmarie's work, aims to encourage intra-action across human and non-human contributions that include artful engagements with image and text. We seek to provoke a realisation in our readers of the possibilities and interconnections that might emerge across semiotic modes, communicative forms, disciplinary methods, theories, histories, epistemologies, generations, and contexts. We search for lines of togetherness across borders in order to combat cultural, theoretical and disciplinary insularity and dialectical approaches to the transmission, communication and assessment of knowledge in higher education. We hope to foster an affirmative stance that embraces difference as we work toward moving beyond, leaving behind but not wholly abandoning our former practices for thinking, making, writing and collaborating.


We hope this article, as a processual monument, can contribute to Elmarie's legacy of reaching outward—her orientation of working across, between, and co-constitutively together. We have intended that the voice of this article, its signature, is not Francois's or Denise's, or Elmarie's, but a composite of all three and our entanglements with innumerable human and more-than-human others, to offer collective, transmodal, and artful seeds for further exploration.

No longer knowing what we thought we knew  
 New ways of seeing, new ways of knowing  
 [...]  
 Experience anew the life in and relations between objects  
 The air and in the air  
 The earth and in the earth  
 The rock  
 The tree  
 A 'new' new order ordering the world anew

(Fiona in CHEC, 2018, 33)

## Author Biographies

**Francois Jonker** (PhD) is a co-founder and the academic head of the Cape Town Creative Academy. His research is concerned with challenging normative tendencies in higher education research, pedagogies and assessment. He holds a joint doctorate from the University of the Western Cape and Utrecht University. 

**Denise Newfield** (PhD) is a retired professor of English and English Education and a researcher at the School of Languages, Literature and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand. She has published widely in the fields of multimodality, multiliteracies, and South African poetry education. 

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