

# Imogen Stidworthy Detours

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*This text was co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of four special contributions to e-flux journal – two texts published in the present February 2021 issue, and two in the recent November 2020 issue. This collaboration aims to expand on the themes raised in the contemporary art festival Survival Kit 11. Titled “Being Safe Is Scary,” after a piece by artist Banu Cennetoğlu for Documenta 14, Survival Kit 11 took place in Riga from September 4 to October 4, 2020. It was organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and curated by Katia Krupennikova.*

*Exploring the mechanisms shaping the politics of safety, and taking the heavily charged title “Being Safe Is Scary,” the festival aimed to establish a continuity of urgent discourse on security and political violence. At the same time, the festival sought to explore how it might be possible to transform the suppositions that undergird this discourse – reconnecting safety to practices of love, intimacy, sharing, commonality, mutual support, attention, care for each other, and care for the environment.*

*Yazan Khalili (who wrote a text in collaboration with Ariel Goldberg) and Imogen Swidworthy, both featured in this issue, are artists who participated in Survival Kit 11 (Being Safe is Scary) with their works Centre of Life (2018) and Iris [A Fragment] (2018–19), respectively. Both texts are seen as extensions of the artworks and experiments with artistic forms as text.*

## 1. Black Hole

When Iris Johansson first connected with her reflection in the mirror after many years of being put in front of it by her father, it was a terrifying experience. It took months of training<sup>1</sup> before she could control her fear, and the black hole she had always seen in the reflection was slowly replaced by the image of herself. Her father put the mirror inside a cupboard so that he could control and frame the image – a proto-cinematic technology, literally, in that it prefigures Iris’s use of the cinema screen a few years later. He isolated small parts of her face at a time so that she glimpsed them through the cracks between his fingers or framed between his hands – a series of close-ups. Each feature was accompanied by a word: “ear,” “nose,” “mouth,” “hair.” This wove connections between the sensation of her face beneath his hands, the image of it in the mirror at a distance, and the word used for it. The process unfolded through several sensory and perceptual registers at once: sonic, visual, spatial, bodily, verbal. Through multisensory modes of seeing and voicing, Iris developed a relationship between her feeling (of)

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Imogen Stidworthy, *Balayer – A Map of Sweeping*, 2014–18. The video still portrays Christof Berton, who from the age of ten was part of the community of adults and nonverbal autistic children developed by Fernand Deligny at Monoblet, Cevennes, France. The community lasted from 1967 to 1991.

“me,” her appearance, and words. She learned to “meet my self in the mirror and call her ‘I,’ even though ‘I’ was not ‘me.’”<sup>2</sup> These personal pronouns are as precisely chosen in English as in Swedish; in her autobiographical book, *A Different Childhood* – written in Swedish – Iris refers to herself as “Iris” or “the girl,” until the period when she committed to “become ordinary” and connect with the social world, and switches to “I” and “me.”<sup>3</sup>

I turn around slowly and see Iris sitting where she sits. Her body becomes by itself an independent thing. She becomes essence and I myself and the essence can leave the immaterial body and be between it and the material body sitting on the swing.<sup>4</sup> What was strange was that ... *something* ... was in between these two states, the child sitting on the swing, concrete, and the sweep [immaterial body] in the atmosphere. This *something* was aware of both and could register both from the outside. It is still very inexplicable to myself but it is a very, very clear memory and experience of it.<sup>5</sup>

Iris describes being in *and* without space, a paradoxical state in verbal terms. Samuel Beckett once evoked *being* with an image of the tympanum, a thin membrane in the ear (commonly known as the eardrum): “I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating ... on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don’t belong to either.”<sup>6</sup> In the moment of speaking, I hear my own voice: being is imagined as the sensation of the tympanum resonating with the voice. The membrane marks difference as well as connection between voicing and listening, and between what is felt as inside or outside the body. Being is a threshold state, where spatial distinctions collapse into each other.<sup>7</sup>

“Turning around like corn in a mill I float between querns, / I have thrust myself up to my throat into two-dimensional space.”<sup>8</sup> Arsenii Tarkovsky imagines the movement of voicing in these lines from an early poem. He evokes being as the impulse to speak before sounding as voice, engaging the folds of the larynx so that they flutter faster than the blink of an eye between opening and closing – between a three-dimensional passage and the one-dimensional line of closed lips. Being has neither inside nor outside, but is both at once.

*I press my palms together and try to sense the line between them. The more I try to pinpoint the more resistance spreads, left and right hand become one thing, a zone of heat and pressure with no center and “between” is an inside with no*

*surface. Their difference is only tangible when the slightest sideways movement rubs skin against skin. Before I know it the sensation has transmuted into words – “two hands!” – and a rub-up between different forms of thought: one fully embodied, the other as verbal language.*

Glossary: “Go-between”: Iris Johansson is a Swedish writer<sup>9</sup> and therapist who specializes in working with groups. As a child she was nonverbal and learned to connect with language in a communicative sense at the age of twelve. Later she was diagnosed as autistic, and today she moves between verbal and nonverbal modes of being. Fernand Deligny (1913–1996) was a French pedagogue, writer, and filmmaker. Between 1967 and 1991, he developed an experimental living space with nonverbal autistic children outside institutional and therapeutic frameworks, near the village of Monoblet in the Cevennes, France. Phoebe Caldwell is a therapist and writer in the UK who specializes in nonverbal communication using a method known as Intensive Interaction. She works mainly one to one with nonverbal people on the autistic spectrum, in contexts of state care. Johansson, Deligny, and Caldwell each have a practice of living or working with nonverbal people involving techniques and technologies, vocabularies and forms of mediation. And they speak both ways, committed to communicating their findings to wider networks through words, films, and forms of mapping. Through them we come closer to the languages and voicings of nonverbal people, and so they figure as *go-betweens* with nonverbal being, including our own.

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*In July 2018, in Fagersta, Sweden, Iris told me about her father’s voice and how first, as a young child, she connected with its sound through the skin on his back. Next, she connected with his words, and then, in front of the mirror, she connected his words to things – to what she saw in the reflection.*

You know, when this black hole was in this mirror moving round, I could not look in the mirror. In the middle it was black like the eye, the pupil in the eye – that was black. And that was like ... that was *själ* – that was total nothing. If you look at the television and see a typhoon, and when they have filmed from above the typhoon, down into the typhoon, this was in the mirror. In the middle it was black like the eye. No depth, no height, no ... It was a vacuum.

So my father he often took *my* hand and lifted out my hair and helped my hand to



Imogen Stidworthy, *Iris (A Fragment)*, 2018–19. Iris Johansson watching video rushes playing on a laptop and commenting on the material, which consists of a therapy session with a client (seen out of focus, on the right) filmed the previous day.

hold it up, and me to look at it. Or he put his hand in front of one eye and let the other eye see [*puts her hand over her right eye*]. And he often said, “Look at me, look at me,” and then I looked up at him; then my eyes came close to this [whirlwind] in the middle. Then he took that [his hand] away [from my eye] and then I reacted on that, and then he put his hand on the other side [*puts her hand over her left eye*] and I reacted on that, and so on.

And sometimes he held his hands so I saw a little in the middle of my eyes [*she holds her hands over her eyes, leaving a tiny gap to see through*], and he said, “Your nose is there! Your nose is there!” and then I saw in the mirror and then there was a nose there, or a mouth, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Later, Iris very consciously built her sense of relationship with herself, verbal language, and the social world through mirroring. At around twelve years old she used a mirror to model her facial expressions on another girl’s. By alternating her attention between the girl’s face and her own, comparing and adjusting until they appeared the same, she made a connection with herself through the appearance of the girl. In her teens, she went through an intense period of cinema-going, watching six or seven films a week. She used cinema to perfect her social performance, by observing the expressions of the actors. “One way to learn how one should be, how to act, was to go to the movies,” she explains. “There, all possible human behaviours were playing out on screen.”<sup>11</sup> The actors’ rehearsed, exaggerated behavior was easy to memorize. For over a year, Iris studied the minutia of their gestures and facial expressions and practiced them in front of the mirror at home for hours at a time. She became a mirror reflecting back to people the kinds of social expression they expected to see, to take away the fear that her “wild” appearance triggered in them, and open the way for them to be able to connect with her on their own terms.

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The external life – what a person normally thinks of as her life, what most people agree on: eating and sleeping, going to school, having a family, and living in a society – the value of all this I was oblivious of for the first ten years of my life. I called this the ordinary reality or the ordinary world. I had another habitat where I knew the world. This was a condition that was light and colourful and where I was

everywhere myself, and which I called Out, or the real reality or real world or the immaterial.<sup>12</sup>

Iris can still go into the different realities she lived as a child, as well as new ones she has learned to be in as an adult. One reality is not forfeited for another;<sup>13</sup> rather, each is produced by a different mode of (her) being, with its particular sensory perception and ways of being-in-relation with people, self, and things, just as each mode of being produces its own reality. There are no hierarchies between different realities. Knowing and meaning emerge differently in and as different modes of sensory perception, which for Iris are shaped by being in what she calls the “real reality,” being in the “ordinary reality,” and being autistic.<sup>14</sup> When she is in the real reality, she receives “valuable information” and knows things that we do not know, or do not know that we know, in the ordinary reality.<sup>15</sup> Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela write, from a biological perspective on consciousness, that “this inseparability between a particular way of being and how the world appears to us, tells us that *every act of knowing brings forth a world.*”<sup>16</sup> Iris’s real opens to both the ordinary and the real reality, and is always to some degree in both. The interplay between them confuses my dualizing impulses and tangles up its values – “real,” “staged,” “fake,” “authentic.” Each is real and authentic in its own terms.

“The primary is where nothing else is,” Iris explains. “It is part of the real world, it comes from the real world, and I have only taken part of that reality which other people can see, and made a concept from it. When I say ‘where nothing else is’: If I say ‘I feel safe inside’ – that is where nothing else is. I don’t feel scared or anything else, I feel safe. It’s the basic.”<sup>17</sup>

The primary is not some kind of objective reality, or an ideal state. Iris describes it as “a kind of knowledge,” and also as “what counts when nothing else counts.”<sup>18</sup> She further defines the primary as individual and more than individual being. Perhaps it is a state of being unmediated by terms other than one’s own and so, in a completely contingent sense, it represents a certain truth. Her therapeutic method is based on her experience of the primary in its negative and positive modes, and a conviction that all the problems we experience are produced by fear. Fear takes over when a person is unable to connect with the primary, and Primary Thinking Work is about helping people to connect with the primary in its positive mode. “You cannot help another person – if you try to,” Iris explains, “you may succeed in making them feel better, but they will be dependent on you

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Image of Janmari from the archive of Jacques Lin (2005). Video still.



and will not lose their fear of their own fear.” Iris creates a “parenting” around a person, a space of such safety that she or he will have the strength to connect with her or his fear. This happens through a touching or overlapping of the “communication fields” which surround each of us: an indirect, immaterial touch between bodies. “When one wishes to communicate with a particular person one gathers up the atmosphere and directs it at that person ... The other does the same thing and so they meet in a mutual atmosphere. In that moment the total atmosphere changes and the situation is redefined.”<sup>19</sup> When a person is in a state of fear their communication field is torn, and part of what Iris does is to go into their communication field and “mend the holes.”<sup>20</sup>

Films are made and viewed in the “secondary,” which is the domain of culture, language, and the social world. But certain films connect with the primary, and watching films together is an important practice in Primary Thinking Work.<sup>21</sup> Iris’s favorite director is Andrei Tarkovsky, who “connects with something that is essence, especially in *Stalker*.” Her favorite actor is Matt Damon, because he is able to engage with his role as a fictional character through primary dimensions of (his) being, and through this becomes a channel for the viewer to connect with the primary (of theirs). And so, in Iris’s personal narrative, as in her therapeutic work, acting, mirroring, scripting, and staging, in all their artifice, are channels for connecting with the primary. “Artifice” comes from the Latin: *ars* (art) + *facere* (make) = “make art”: a channel through which to connect with the primary, as well as the different realities we produce.

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*“You want expression, but I cannot give you expression,” Iris tells me.<sup>22</sup> We are in Fagersta, Sweden, in June 2018. The place is an old barn in the remote countryside, similar to the barns that Iris and her daughter Anneli grew up in, a generation apart. The two women are having a conversation about Iris’s training in front of the mirror as a child, with her father. She is speaking in Swedish and each time she pauses, Anneli translates into English and into her own words, on the fly. The two women are sitting close together on a short bench, at right angles to each other. Anneli is facing Iris with her legs on either side of the bench, framing her mother’s body. Iris is looking straight ahead towards the open doors of the barn and beyond. The staging brings them very close to each other, so that their bodies are speaking to each other as much as their words.*

*Emma<sup>23</sup> and I circle around them with cameras held waist high. As we move around, we record the distance between them as well as the distance between them and us. Through our*

*viewfinders, the gap between their bodies widens, narrows, closes, and opens up again. The two women slide back and forth across the visual field, eclipsing and revealing each other. The split-screen shot of nurse and patient in Persona<sup>24</sup> flashes up in my mind’s eye – the two faces spliced together from separate film strips so that they are both split and merging.*

*Anneli and Iris mirror each other in the rhythms of their voices, hand gestures, posture – and even in their hairstyles. They mirror in relay, voices picking up one from the other, arms sweeping in lines and loops. Iris’s description of her mirror training is happening in a space of mirroring between mother and daughter, two scenarios seventy years apart, and we are weaving them together with the cameras. Later, putting the footage from both cameras together in one frame, in certain moments their bodies become completely confused and it is hard to tell them apart. As Emma and I circle around them, our distance from them is marked in sonic space by the sounds of our feet shifting our weight across the creaking floorboards. The image frames rise and fall with the movement of our footsteps, which have fallen into sync with the rhythm of their gestures.*

Glossary: “**Rub-up**”: The rub-up<sup>25</sup> is what is produced in encounters between people who voice themselves through different forms of language. Bewilderment, energy, friction, heat, intimacy – the rub-up arises in grappling with unfamiliar terms, in not understanding. When language reaches its limits, our relationship with it is exposed in new ways, and in this sense the rub-up is inherently reflexive. In these conditions we learn to attune to different registers of voicing around and beyond our own, broadening the scope of communication. Some may be unrecognizable to us as voicing at all. The rub-up emerges in many shades whose affects are wide-ranging, contingent, unpredictable. In any relationship, especially between people who do not share (a) language, it is impossible to say how the other is experiencing it. And so, in the encounters I set up with or between people in the course of research / developing an artwork, my attention is on the rub-up happening between them, or between “us,” and how it affects (my) language.

## **2. Un blanc (a blank)<sup>26</sup> / “One cannot just point a camera at it and catch it: the very effort to do so will kill it.”<sup>27</sup>**

Monoblet, Cevennes, France, some time in the early 1970s: Fernand Deligny recounts a story involving Janmari, a nonverbal autistic boy who resides with him in the collective living space in Monoblet. The story begins with Deligny explaining something to a visitor in his study and

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Top: Image of Christof Berton from the archive of Jacques Lin (2002). Video still. Bottom: Imogen Stidworthy, *Balayer – A Map of Sweeping*, 2014–18. The video still portrays Christof Berton.



while tapping his finger on the table “in response to some surprise or other that had emerged from the wandering lines that we scrupulously trace.” The wandering lines were the routes taken by the children around the living areas, which the adults traced on sheets of semi-transparent paper. At that very moment, Janmari, “who teaches me the most about what I’m telling you and who was then fifteen years old, and autistic – though that particular word seems to be falling out of fashion,” was passing by.

[Janmari] left, quickly, and reappeared sometime later and deposited a pile of mud on my table not very far from where my tapping had taken place ... There it was, in the dross of damp earth and ash, what in archaeology is called a find: all the pieces of a clay ashtray that, four years earlier, had sat on the table where I had been tapping my fingers ... A clay ashtray had been broken and the shards tossed into the basket of papers we piled up and used to light the bread oven ... And in the blink of an eye the shards buried for five years in ash and earth were rediscovered.<sup>28</sup>

*Monoblet, May 2014. It is early afternoon and the last stages of post-lunch cleanup are happening in the kitchen next door, out of sight. Janmari is sitting bolt upright and alert, sniffing the air, listening. He will not relax until he hears the almost inaudible brushing sound that tells him that the pan scourer is back in its place, in a little wooden box above the sink. What can my camera and microphone possibly pick up of what this means for Janmari, or the quality of this kind of attention? Jacques Lin is resistant to my desire to develop a work here; this is not because he has a problem with me being around, or filming. Rather, it is his despair at how limited the recorded image is, including, above all, his own recordings. (I recently watched Jacques’s video footage of Janmari, shot in 2001.) After a lifetime of recording the people he lives with, Jacques sees only the failure of the footage to communicate what he sees in it. Its meaningfulness is trapped in what he alone can see. In his eyes, the recorded gestures appear in and as the accumulation of gestures witnessed over decades in all their repetitions and variations – this is what is clearly not visible in any recording.*

Because there is a clear difference between seeing and being seen. / As soon as there is some SELF, we are dealing with looking. / When looking predominates, it is at the expense of what? / At the expense of seeing, as I believe an autistic child sees, without even having any awareness of

being.<sup>29</sup>

Here Fernand Deligny reflects on the nonverbal autistic child’s act of seeing, taking into account that this child’s sense of self cannot be assumed, or even imagined, by “we who speak.” As Deligny insisted, “When I say: ‘to see hands,’ one must be skeptical. It would be better to say ‘to look at.’” He brought his questions to bear on his practice of filming and the framing of a subject. “‘To film’ is strange – why not ‘to camera’ [*camerér*]?” he asked.<sup>30</sup> In the infinitive, the noun becomes a verb. Playing with grammar, the masculine noun (in French) confers subjecthood onto the camera, and creates a certain independence for the camera in relation to its operator.<sup>31</sup> Deligny picked up the camera warily to both work with and to resist its power to make images – a tension that runs through his incessant questioning of the visual image and of cinema. Thinking in the infinitive, he filmed in the infinitive – “camera-ing”: using the camera as a tool to produce a nonsubjective gaze.<sup>32</sup> This is a meta-cinematic practice in that making a film is not the main object.<sup>33</sup> The operation recalls one of Deligny’s earlier meta-cinematic uses of the camera, when he was trying to make a film with a group of disadvantaged youth but ran out of money to buy film stock.<sup>34</sup> He set up the camera with no film in it and let them put their eyes to the viewfinder, triggering a self-staging with the camera, a film without a film. Having the camera in their hands in this way produced a certain power, and the camera became a tool for shaping relationships.

It is possible that by following them, those “wanderings,” journeys or gestures whose project escapes us, to follow them with the hand and with the eye, gives rise to a way of seeing that pierces the linguistic covering that our seeing inherits from birth and some say well before.<sup>35</sup>

Fernand Deligny developed a network of living spaces outside institutional and diagnostic frameworks at a time when French state care mainly involved locking autistic people away in psychiatric hospitals. He resisted writing about the children in clinical or critical terms. Instead, he followed their wandering lines, straying from grammatically correct sentences<sup>36</sup> and wandering along with their elaborations, rhythms, and constant detours.<sup>37</sup>

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Giorgio Agamben identifies the moment at the beginning of the twentieth century when people’s gestures were captured and played back to them as moving image for the first time. “In the cinema,” he writes, “a society that has lost

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its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss.”<sup>38</sup> Cinema was not the cause of a loss of meaning in bourgeois society, but it produced a new gaze through which this reality could become apparent *and* which made it happen in new ways.<sup>39</sup> Gestures lost their relation to “all naturalness,” just as we lost our ability to decipher them. “And the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers,” says Agamben, “the more life becomes indecipherable.”<sup>40</sup> *Indecipherable* – like the stereotyping of the gestures of autistic people as “unreadable,” “meaningless,” “out of control.”<sup>41</sup> Loss of “naturalness”: reflexive awareness slips into self-consciousness, which can overtake us in encounters with ourselves via visual technologies. This evolves into new forms with each new media regime in ways that can make us step outside ourselves or lock us into the image of our own appearance.

### 3. “You may be invisible. I may be blind to you. That is – until you make yourself processable.”<sup>42</sup>

*Phoebe Caldwell is hovering in the doorway, her eyes following “Olly,” who is nonverbal and autistic, as he moves around the classroom. He has just passed her and is moving quickly across the floor towards a far corner. His movements are agitated and twitchy, he is panting rapidly. He spins and twirls by the window, biting his hands, then turns and flies across the classroom again, passing by her, apparently not seeing her, tracing wide loops back and forth. The camera follows unsteadily, trying to keep up, to keep him in the frame. The footage takes on an uncomfortable edge, as though the viewer is stalking him. The camera is close to Phoebe now and she can be heard panting too; each time Olly passes her, she adjusts her panting rhythm to echo his. He comes a little closer with each flyby. She moves into the room. He approaches Phoebe and brings his ear near her mouth. Her body seems to be morphing, concentrating into a panting ball. Now he brings his cheek to her mouth to feel the pressure of her breath. Then a smile spreads across his face. Their breathing is synchronized now. With his fingertips he lightly and searchingly touches the sides of her face, as if he is blind – trying to recognize her. His saliva is falling in a thin line past her mouth and sliding down the front of her sweater. She is oblivious to it. They move around each other with mouths open, inches apart, and she mirrors his gestures, touching his cheek and breathing rapidly. His smile opens into an expression of outright joy and he laughs out loud.*<sup>43</sup>

Each [autistic person] uses a unique language to make sense of their world. And

it’s that we’re going to use because it’s so much of an essential part of their life. This is the thing that they really tap into ... Olly breath-holds and it was when I started tuning in to that breath-holding rhythm that he *really* started to get interested and started to come back for more. And then he was taking my arms and getting me to squeeze his chest ... I started breathing in his ear and echoing his breathing and he turned around and grabbed both my arms, and looked deeply into my eyes and then he just gave me a huge hug, which he’s ... I’ve never seen him do that – not like that. It’s as though he says, “Finally! You are talking to me!”<sup>44</sup>

Glossary: “**Voicing**”: In encounters between people, different forms of language communication may be happening, but we cannot be certain. What we take for a voice may not in fact be a form of address at all. (“He missed the voice, or the voice missed him.” – Fernand Deligny). Or a voice may take a form that we do not recognize as a voice. To engage with different forms of language means widening our scope of attention to different registers, so that *voicing* includes speech sounds and sonic utterances, but also somatic registers of bodily gesture and movement, rhythms, spatial and temporal forms, imperceptible vibrations, and silences. Voicing: “calling forth” in the impulse to mobilize oneself towards another or to “me.”

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As a therapist, Phoebe is with her “communication partners” for a few hours at most, in intense one-to-one engagement. They are nonverbal people on the autistic spectrum; she is a specialist in nonverbal communication who uses Intensive Interaction, a form of mirroring behavior.<sup>45</sup> This mirroring of gesture and sounds does not aim to produce sameness, but variation, “even the slightest difference,”<sup>46</sup> which is where language and the call and response of communication begin. She is called in to make contact with a person, usually during a moment of crisis when she or he is in the full throes of an autonomic storm, or “autistic meltdown,” triggered by sensory overload. She brings to bear her forty years of clinical knowledge and research into autism, but the interaction itself is about immersion, flow, empathy, and intuition: the tacit, unthought knowing of embodied experience.

I find myself being fragments of other people. I don’t know which bits are me; who I myself am – and who everyone else is, is not clear – the edges between us seem to soften ... Until I look in the mirror, I have no



Imogen Stidworthy, *Jamie*, 2018. Video still.

idea what I look like or who I am.<sup>47</sup>

Losing a sense of bodily boundaries can happen when we are dancing, attuned to another person, or immersed in nature. Many people on the spectrum describe intense feelings of a “leaky sense of self”:<sup>48</sup> becoming confused with other people or with one’s surroundings, losing or having no sense of being “me,” in ways that can sometimes be existentially threatening, but also exhilarating, liberating, and joyful.

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Christof Berton, who lived year-round in Deligny’s network of collective living spaces from its early days, spends hours at a time handling a book with total and intimate attention.<sup>49</sup> He flicks the edges of the pages across his lips and nose, breathes in their smell, in a highly multisensory form of reading. Iris Johansson and Donna Williams, the writer, artist, and activist (who was also good friends with Phoebe), have both described the pain they experience when clothing touches their skin. People on the spectrum often have extraordinarily heightened sensory responsiveness; they are so open to stimuli that sometimes the nervous system has to respond by filtering or blocking sensory input, to protect itself from overload.<sup>50</sup> “A friend on the spectrum describes the response of her nervous system to any form of emotional warmth as like being ‘hit with an emotional taser.’”<sup>51</sup>

An autonomic storm is a state of physical and emotional chaos experienced by an autistic person. It can feel life-threatening, throwing the limbic system into fight-or-flight mode.<sup>52</sup> When nonverbal autistic people are in pain, they cannot necessarily communicate about it, locate it in their body, or know what is triggering it. If there is no way to stop it, they may try to create a distraction powerful enough to drown it out: they may hit their head against the wall, as Janmari used to in *Monoblet*; they may tear the skin of their lips, as Iris used to as a child; or they may throw themselves off the kitchen table, as did a small boy who Phoebe worked with. She realized that a certain tone in his mother’s voice caused the boy unbearable pain. Throwing himself off the table was a way to distract from it with a more powerful sensation – a different pain, but at least one of his own making.<sup>53</sup> These are extreme measures for relief. Witnessing them can be very disturbing for others, but they are a form of self-care.

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When I was a child I was taken to America. And my mother had to go somewhere, and I was left with strangers for ... a while. And they were very kind, and I disregarded them completely, and I went down to the gate

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and I bellowed. And all my self was in that misery and despair of abandonment. And I can still hear that bellow, silently. That silent bellow. She came back of course. I think, touching that despair and abandonment when there is nothing but ... but ... a sort of empty horror, has helped me enormously in reaching ... um ... in aligning myself with some of the states of the people I see. Because most of the ones I see are very distressed – that’s why people ask me to go ... I’ve been changed basically by this ... um ... experience of other, of not-me – of me and not-me getting together, you know, in the sense of ... ah ... deep encounters with ... ah ... with the quiddity of – ahh ... of ... of different-from-self, of not-me; knowing in a sense that one doesn’t normally know.<sup>54</sup>

The voice of a traumatic childhood experience becomes a source or resource for attuning with others in their trauma. “Aligning myself”: not to touch but to *co-respond* – for a person in sensory overload, a certain distance between *me* and *not-me* is needed for close contact to be possible at all. Phoebe’s “bellow” is a seed of recognition that resonates with her communication partner and touches, without coming too close. On the borders of language, sometimes this is all there is between people, and sometimes it’s all that’s needed.

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*In a video clip filmed by a colleague of hers, Phoebe is seen making her first visit to see “Pranve,” a nonverbal autistic man.<sup>55</sup> He is known for being violent, and many caretakers have refused to work with him. Phoebe stands outside his front door waiting, even though the door is open. She is waiting not because she is scared:*

The first trick is that you don’t go in – you’ve got to establish communication *before* you invade their personal space. That’s rule number one. So what I did was I listened when his mother opened the door. I will listen for any sound, or breathing – ... *hhhh ... hhhh ... hhhh*, as little as that – that can be the rhythm.<sup>56</sup>

\*

Gary Peters, a professor of philosophy and performance, writes about “improvisations that are ‘hyperaware,’ ... that in their profound concern for the other open up a performative space that is attentive to, responsive to, and, above all, supportive of the mark-making project of the other.”<sup>57</sup>

Improvisation is a part of all communication, verbal or nonverbal,<sup>58</sup> and

descriptions of actors practicing free improvisation come close to how Phoebe engages with “me and not-me getting together ... knowing in a sense that one doesn’t normally know.” When Intensive Interaction is working, the binary of self and other dissolves and there is no hierarchy. Therapist, patient; neurotypical, autistic; initiator, follower – the roles alternate and become indistinguishable.

And towards the end we had the most extraordinary engagement and he was inspecting me from about *that* distance away, inspecting me and curious and laughing and joyful – and I felt similarly warm. We were locked into each other in a sort of *duende* ... And we had this extraordinarily prolonged gaze, rather than a stare, a sort of mutual gaze. And it was very moving for him, and for me obviously – for both of us.<sup>59</sup>

Like the call and response of mirroring behavior, sameness and difference fold into each other in the rub-up of communication happening, and the language of each person is changed. Phoebe does not look for feelings of love, or for the ecstasy of being able to step outside herself, but they are part of the experience – ecstasy, from Greek, *ekstasis*: “standing outside oneself.” Being fully open to another person opens you to feeling less yourself. Unconditional openness is in fact essential for the interaction to “work” at all. In this sense it is part of the therapeutic responsibility, but it demands letting down all your social defenses in a way that is usually only “safe” in conditions of complete mutual trust or vulnerability. When Phoebe meets her communication partner, she or he is a vulnerable person at their most vulnerable. There is no place or even possibility for social defenses, and so each of them is open and vulnerable enough to feel safe with the other.

\*

Different forms of voicing call me to listen with all the senses,<sup>60</sup> because when I engage with a language I do not know, I do not know what I am listening for.

\*

In February 2018, Phoebe was invited to a special school to consult with the staff and meet some of the students. With plenty of notice and in no state of emergency, it was an opportunity for me to film her at work, which we’d both been looking for since we first met. I went alone to the school to prepare before her visit. One student was too agitated for me to spend any time with, and others were leaving for an activity, but I filmed Jamie. The next day, not a single meeting between Phoebe and the students worked out.

The agitated boy was walking so fast through the narrow corridors and up and down the stairs that she could barely catch a glimpse of him. Another boy was upset and had to spend the entire time calming down in a quiet room. Jamie was locked into his screen and Phoebe didn’t seem to want to disturb him. My footage shows her sitting patiently on a chair while bodies move rapidly through the frame – we couldn’t capture a single moment of Intensive Interaction.

*February 2018. A young man is hunched in front of a laptop clicking rapidly through something on the screen. Sound effects and distorted voices fill the room. His back is rounded and his head sinks almost to the level of the monitor in front of him – he is fully absorbed. A young woman rises from a sofa nearby and intervenes with a word and then a gesture, reaching out towards him. He catches her hand with his eyes still locked on the screen, smiles as she bends down and puts her head on his shoulders, tickling him under the arms for just a moment, before withdrawing to her seat. All around are signs of the protocols of industrialized care and education.*

*I’m warned that the boy can get very agitated, he might jump around or attack me. On my first visit I want to give him space, not to impose. I place myself and the camera as far from him as I can, hugging the wall – can a meter here or there make all the difference? – and find myself constantly tracking back and forth through the viewfinder between his face, hands, mouse, laptop, and feet. Before long he becomes agitated and a caretaker motions for me to leave the room. The footage is shaky and nervous, a recording of my state more than his.*

*The next day, I come closer. The camera is directly in front of the boy, a short distance from him as he works, taking in the table, the wall behind, and a window to the left. I detach myself from it, leaving it steady, allowing things to move in and out of the frame while I expand attention to what is happening around and between all of us. The boy’s face is masked by the laptop, only his eyes appear in the narrow strip between the top of the screen and his thick hair. From this position, what is recorded shows more about what he is doing than who he is. Who is he? In terms of educational profiles, medical and social classifications, he is a vulnerable teenager on the autistic spectrum. He has learning difficulties and exhibits “challenging behavior.” He is seventeen years old. He is a young man. He is Jamie. As a subject for the camera he could be presented in the mode of a portrait, to try to capture something of his character. The camera could focus on him, on his activity, or on his relationships with the people around him. Who or what is the subject here? Resisting being caught*



up by who he is, I try to keep attention on what he is doing. And what he does is fully described on the level of sound. After fifteen minutes of observing him through the viewfinder, I suddenly become conscious that the repetitive whine coming from the laptop has changed. It is not the sound of a video game, but of cartoons – cartoon voices! In the jumble of noise, one voice pushes its way into my awareness. It has been repeating persistently for the last ten minutes and suddenly I register words – slowed down, emphatic, and dragging: “But I’m different from you guys!” The boy is talking to me, or to us! I move around to stand behind him and watch what he is doing. He is working like a DJ, moving the mouse at lightning speed between several Disney clips opened in different windows, cutting between scenes and changing playback speeds at the same time. He returns over and over again to one scene, in Hercules: “But I’m different from you guys!” He is cutting his own script together at 0.25 x speed, and this is how he is talking to all of us in the room.

X

All images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

14/16

e-flux journal #115 — January 2021 Imogen Stidworthy  
Detours

1

“I saw something fuzzy that moved sometimes and stood still sometimes. I saw two different shapes. Father was like he was, quite distinct, but the other was a peculiar little thing, I don’t know what, and it was that he told me to look at.” Iris Johansson, *A Different Childhood* (Inkwell Books, 2012), 45.

2

Iris Johansson, conversation with author, Fagersta, Sweden, June 2018.

3

In this text I refer to the three people who figure in it according to my relationship with them. It seems appropriate to reflect these relationships in the context of research in which interpersonal bonds are my main focus. Having worked closely with Iris Johansson and Phoebe Caldwell over several years, I use their first names only, after introducing them. Fernand Deligny died in 1996 and I have no personal relationship with him, and so I use his full name.

4

Iris, *A Different Childhood*, 212. This passage is read aloud by Iris in the video sequence that is part of my installation *Iris (A Fragment)* (2018–19).

5

Iris, email to author, September 2019.

6

“Perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition.” Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable* (1953; Grove Press, 1979), 352. Cited by Mladen Dolar in his essay “The King Listens,” commissioned for the exhibition publication *In the First Circle* (curated by Imogen Stidworthy in collaboration with Paul Domela, Tàpies Foundation, Barcelona, 2012).

7

This way of conceptualizing the voice is formulated in the work of Kaja Silverman, Guy Rosolato, and Jean-Luc Nancy.

8

Arsenii Tarkovsky: “From a volume of stone I learn language that is beyond time. / Turning around like corn in a mill I float between querns, / I have thrust myself up to my throat into two-dimensional space, / And the millstones of life and death have pulverised my spine.” From the poem “From a volume of stone I learn language that is beyond time,” in *Poetry and Film: Artistic Kinship between Arsenii and Andrei Tarkovsky*, ed. and trans. Kitty Hunter Blair (Tate, 2014).

9

Besides *A Different Childhood*, Iris’s books include *En Annorlunda Liv* (A different life) (Forum, 2013), and *En Annorlunda Verklighet* (A different reality) (forthcoming 2021).

10

Iris, conversations with author, Dahab (South Sinai, Egypt), recorded during research and filming for the installation *Iris (A Fragment)*.

11

Iris, *A Different Childhood*, 316.

12

Iris, *A Different Childhood*, 205.

13

If she is alone for more than four hours Iris can slip into a negative mode of real reality where “nothing moves inside” and she can initiate nothing. She avoids this by making sure she is in contact with people regularly and follows a precisely timed daily “schedule” starting at 4 a.m. each day.

14

Contemporary diagnosis frames autism as a developmental and neurological condition with certain characteristic effects, such as issues around processing sensory information through a hypersensitized nervous system. This produces infinitely wide varieties of affect, one of which is sensory overload (“autonomic storm”), experienced by many people on the autistic spectrum (discussed below in relation to the work of Phoebe Caldwell).

15

Iris sets out proposals for alternative social and economic structures in her books *En Annorlunda Liv* and *En Annorlunda Verklighet*.

16

Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Shambhala, 1992), 26. Italics in original.

17

Iris, telephone conversation with author, August 27, 2019.

18

Iris, conversation with author, Fagersta, July 2018.

19

Iris, conversation with author, Dahab, February 2018.

20

S. J., conversation with author after a therapy session with Iris in Fagersta, July 2018.

21

Iris, conversation with author, Dahab, February 2018.

22

Iris, conversation with author during filming in Fagersta, June 2018.

23  
Camerawoman Emma Dalesman worked with me in Egypt and Sweden during filming for *Iris* (A Fragment).

24  
Ingmar Bergman, 1966. Bergman's image of two merging personalities: a hard-edged vertical cutting together of two strips of celluloid / two shots / two women's faces spliced together.

25  
Dictionary definitions of "rub up," without a hyphen, include "to revive or refresh the knowledge of" and "to improve the keenness of (a mental faculty)" <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rub%20up>.

26  
*Un blanc*: a cartoon speech bubble with no words in it; also a figure of speech, introduced to me by Jacques Lin one day when we fell silent during a conversation. Along with Gisèle Durand, Jacques Lin was one of the first adults to join Fernand Deligny's experimental living space in Monoblet, in 1967. Between 2013 and 2014 I carried out research and filmed in the small informal care home in Monoblet, where they still live with two of the autistic children (now adults) who grew up in that community. (While there I developed material for the installation *Balayer – A Map of Sweeping*, commissioned by the São Paulo Biennial 2014.)

27  
Trinh T. Minh Ha, "Speaking Nearby," interview by Nancy N. Chen, *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 21 (March 1992): 82–91.

28  
Fernand Deligny, "Acting and the Acted," in *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Catherine Porter (Univocal, 2015), 135–36. In this essay Deligny uses this anecdote to show how such "initiatives" by the autistic children reveal "aspects of 'ourselves' that escape us" (137). The story has been retold time and again by people connected with his experimental collective living space, especially Jacques Lin, who includes it in his autobiographical book *La vie de radeau: Le réseau Deligny au quotidien* (2019).

29  
Fernand Deligny, "When the Human-that-We-Are Is Not There," in *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, 201. Throughout this part of the essay, Deligny refers to Lacan's notion of "the real," as developed in the latter's text *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (W. W. Norton, 1991).

30  
Fernand Deligny, "Camerér,"

*Camera-Stylo*, no. 4 (September 1983). Also in Deligny, *Oeuvres*, ed. Sandra Alvarez de Toledo (L'Arachnéen, 2007), 1742.

31  
Deligny was friends with Louis Althusser and was interested in the latter's concept of interpellation: the process whereby language constitutes people as subjects in terms of how they are addressed.

32  
This paragraph draws on a commentary by Jean-Francois Chevrier on Deligny's essay "Acheminement vers l'image" (literally "On the way to the image"). Both the commentary and the essay are published in Deligny's *Oeuvres*.

33  
I began using the term "meta-cinematic" during my doctoral research to speak of a particular relationship between the filmmaker, their recording equipment, and the situations they encounter. I see this relationship, which is central to my work, manifesting in different ways in the practices of go-betweeners like Iris, Phoebe, and Fernand Deligny. Meta-cinematic situations give rise to a reflexive awareness that is less about making films (whether or not this is happening) than shaping relationships between people, in the rub-up between (their) different forms of language. These kinds of affects are an inherent part of filmmaking, but working meta-cinematically is about activating and channeling them towards other ends, including how they unfold in the space of the artwork. In this context the artwork is itself a form of language or voicing (in my practice, the artwork contains different voices and forms of language). Working with artworks and installations in a meta-cinematic modality produces different modes of awareness and relation with visitors, as well as between them. ("Meta-cinematic" is also a term from 1950s film theory, referring to an approach to filmmaking whereby the viewer is made aware that she or he is watching a fiction film. "Orthodox reflexivity affirms the role of narrative structure as a transparency; modernist reflexivity seeks to reverse this role." William C. Siska, "Metacinema: A Modern Necessity," *Literature and Film Quarterly* 7, no. 4, January 1979, 285–89. In other words, meta-cinematic filmmaking affects the relationship between the viewer and the film – but this is not the same as using it as a relational tool between people.)

34  
Fernand Deligny worked with troubled young men in the context of the experimental project "La grande cordée" (literally "The great cord/belt," 1948–62). Organized by an informal group of mainly

communists, the project involved creating a constellation of living spaces in youth hostels for "juvenile delinquents," away from their families and outside established institutions. This was immediately after WWII, when Deligny was working with the French Resistance. Deligny was instrumental to the project and it was his first major experiment in alternative social relations. See Yves Jeanne, "Fernand Deligny: liberté et compagnonnage," *Reliance* 21, no. 3 (2006): 113–18.

35  
Deligny, *Oeuvres*, 812.

36  
Deligny developed a very singular writing voice as he tried to take account of the nonverbal within verbal language.

37  
"Detour" was a key term used by Deligny and the other adults of his community. It described a child's indirect and elaborate route from A to B as he or she carried out a task (fetching a water bucket, putting away the laundry). Through the practice of mapping the children's movements, it emerged that the "ornamented" (*orné*) lines of such routes were neither excessive nor meaningless, but absolutely necessary to the task being carried out. They were also found to relate to the presence of objects or past events no longer visible – like the spot on the table in Deligny's story about Janmari and the ashtray.

38  
Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52–53.

39  
See Raymond Bellour's discussion of this history, as analyzed in Hilary Radner and Alistair Fox, *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

40  
Agamben, *Means Without End*, 52–53. The scope of these effects is part of the history of post-cinematic affect and how it both emerges in and shapes contemporary subjectivities and technological and globalized conditions. See Steven Shaviro, *Post-cinematic Affect* (Zero Books, 2010).

41  
Giorgio Agamben begins "Notes on Gesture" by describing the spasmic, uncontrolled movements of people with Tourette's syndrome (52–53). He suggests that some time after the arrival of cinema, everyone lost control of their gestures – that "ataxia, tics, and dystonia had become the norm." His words evoke the current "overdiagnosis" of autism and the tendency to see signs of autism all around, in social behavior, computing skills, or

how we behave with our screens. For example: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5849631/>.

42  
Janet Gurney, conversation with author. Gurney is a close associate of Phoebe Caldwell and director of the London-based charity Us in a Bus, whose therapists use Intensive Interaction and other methods of nonverbal communication with people on the autistic spectrum and people with learning difficulties.

43  
Description of a scene from the DVD *Autism and Intensive Interaction: Using Body Language to Reach Children on the Autistic Spectrum*, by Phoebe Caldwell with Matt Hoghton and Penny Mytton, (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 75 mins.

44  
Phoebe, conversation with author, 2018, about her methods in the scene described above.

45  
"Mirroring behavior" is a term from developmental psychology. It refers to the playful preverbal interactions, using sounds and gestures, between an infant and a parent or caregiver. It is seen as an essential stage in the interrelated processes of individuation and language development. See, for example, Daniel Stern's study of infant development, which was groundbreaking at the time of its publication in 1985: *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (Basic Books).

46  
Phoebe, conversation with author, February 2016.

47  
Phoebe, citing a friend who is on the autistic spectrum, in her book *Hall of Mirrors, Shards of Clarity: Autism, Neuroscience and Finding a Sense of Self* (Pavilion Publishers, 2017), 8.

48  
In *Always More Than One*, Erin Manning draws on research into preverbal infants and their unbounded state of bodily and subjective openness (to environment, to parent/carer), questioning the cultural preoccupation with the individual and advocating a process of individuation that is much more about being in relation (with others). Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Duke University Press, 2012).

49  
Christoph Berton still lives with Gisèle Durand and Jacques Lin and figures in my installation *Balayer – A Map of Sweeping*. See the image at the start of this essay, a video still that shows Christoph using a pen to make marks on a piece of paper as he listens to the sound his pen

makes.

50

For example, the strip lighting used in most schools and care homes interferes with the cognitive processing of many autistic people, causing their vision to fragment and making it hard to focus.

51

Phoebe, *Hall of Mirrors, Shards of Clarity*, 12.

52

Donna Williams, cited in Phoebe, *Hall of Mirrors, Shards of Clarity*, 36.

53

Phoebe, conversation with author, February 2017. Phoebe advised the mother to speak in a natural tone instead of her special voice. The boy's table-jumping stopped immediately and he was able to stop wearing the helmet he had been using for several years.

54

Phoebe, conversation with author at Phoebe's home in Settle, Yorkshire, 2017. The passage is part of the voiceover in my video (*Phoebe*) note towards a future work (2017).

55

The video is from Phoebe's personal archive.

56

Phoebe, conversation with author, Settle, Yorkshire, 2017. Part of the voiceover in my video (*Phoebe*) note towards a future work.

57

Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 53. In the context of theater, free improvisation is an approach to improvisation developed in the 1950s and '60s by the director Peter Brooke, to achieve the closest attunement between actors and open up new dimensions of relation between them and with audiences.

58

The Indian screen-music composer Mani Kaul made a comparison between the role of rules in improvised Indian raga music and the role of rules in spoken language. "I am speaking English, my second language. I have no idea what I am going to say next and nor do you. I am improvising. But the moment I make a mistake, you will know it." From a lecture delivered at the School of Sound, South Bank Centre, London, June 2000.

59

Phoebe, conversation with author. *Duende* is "a heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity, often connected with flamenco," according to Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duende\\_\(art\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duende_(art)). Federico Garcia Lorca said that "all arts are capable of *duende*, but where it

finds its greatest range, naturally, is in music, dance and spoken poetry, for these arts require a living body to interpret them, being forms that are born, die and open their contours against an exact present." "Play and Theory of the *Duende*," lecture delivered in Buenos Aires, 1933.

60

Phoebe, in numerous conversations and publications.

16/16

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Detours