

TUVA WIDÉN
CRAFT! DEPARTMENT
MASTER 2, SPRING 2020

Artificial Resources

An Artistic Exploration of Material Subjectivity

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WORD COUNT: 5173

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates questions concerning the illusion of control and how a change of attitude can counteract an irreversible deterioration of our living environment. The key question is how an artistic practice can help to challenge contemporary attitudes and the assumption that the living planet is an inexhaustible and limitless resource. The aim is to explore three fields of experience where a shared and mutually independent relationship is possible: with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the living planet. It examines contemporary research that identify and describe the destructive development of a culture with an over-naturalized relationship to these three fields of experience. It discusses how an artistic practice can operate on a methodological level to contribute to the development of this research from three perspectives: (a) by how it relates to the materials used to communicate, (b) by how it is embodied or corporeal, and (c) by how it can apply what is called techniques of subjectivity. The essay also describes Tuva Widén's specific piece exhibited at the spring exhibition at Konstfack 2020 and explains how the outlined methodological principles are applied in this specific work.

Key words: Resources, Instrumentality, Fragility, Vulnerability, Care, Dependence, Empathy, Nature, Culture, Body, Subjectivity

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INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a tendency to treat ourselves, our fellow human beings and the living planet as instruments for external ends. We talk about the forests, the mountains and the free flowing waters as natural resources to be used in a non-ending economic growth and development. In a similar way, we also speak about humans as resources. Large scale companies call the department that is supposed to care for its employees and their working condition *human resources*, and the workforce is often treated as replaceable and instrumental. In a similar way we also treat each other as instruments. We have a tendency to relate to one another as means to be used to achieve our individual goals and we neglect the moral principle of treating living beings as ends in themselves. This has resulted in a situation when we also treat ourselves as instruments. We exploit our own feelings and experiences and show them off to others in order to give the false impression of happiness and success in an endless and empty competition.

Recently, voices are however starting to be heard that are calling for another point of view and a new way to relate to the planet, each other and ourselves. Some people are starting to point out that an instrumental treatment of the life of this planet, including our fellow humans and ourselves, is devastating, not only for the natural environment, but also for how we view our own subjectivity and for our dignity as human beings.

The purpose of this essay is to show how my artistic practice is an attempt to help understand, spread and develop the shared and basic message of these voices. Against this background, I also want to show how my own work is an attempt to identify the experience of subjectivity where this is commonly considered to be absent. I want to explain how my work is based on a principle where I infuse my artistic visions with the possible subjectivity of the materials and techniques I use. To provoke questions related to the instrumental treatment of ourselves, each other and the planet, and to questions common assumptions of what subjectivity is, and to whom we are entitled to ascribe it, I want to explore the conditions of subjectivity by

examining what happens when a artifact, made by humans hands, is treated as having a life of its own.

In order to reach this end, this essay has three parts. In part one, I discuss a number of voices that all emphasize and describe the destructive and dangerous development of a culture, such as ours, that has an over-naturalized relationship to the mysteries of life and that also try to develop and outline alternative ways of treating the living planet and its inhabitants. In part two, I describe how my own artistic practice operates on a methodological level to contribute to this development. I discuss (a) how I relate to the materials I use to communicate, (b) the embodied or corporeal aspect of my work, and (c) what I call techniques of subjectivity. In the third and final part of the essay, I discuss the specific piece that is exhibited at the spring exhibition at Konstfack 2020 and describe how my methodological principles were applied in this specific work.

1. SURVEY OF THE FIELD

When we construct our social profiles, we often exploit ourselves as instruments or means to be used in the marketing of ourselves. We do this to get a job, to get famous, or to reach some similar end. Whether it is a cause or an effect, this is however also related to how we treat our planet and its inhabitants. Often, we are discouraged to talk about the will and subjectivity of plants and animals, because this would make it morally problematic to treat them as means for us to use. In all these three cases the principal is the same. Subjectivity is replaced with instrumentality. Endurance, tolerance, strength, power and influence are taken to be criteria for what gives us our value. But this kind of perspective fails to appreciate the value of subjectivity, of our ability of empathy and of our ability to let be and let grow. To capture these other and more important criteria for value, we need to look at ourselves, at each other and at the planet in a new light, and reevaluate what we find important. If we are not instruments, if our function as instruments for external ends is not the core of what we are, we

need to ask how we can understand, articulate, define and manifest those other characteristics that make us ends in ourselves.

In recent years, many voices have started to call for this kind of change. Here, I want to briefly discuss three themes that are especially relevant to my purposes: (a) the problems of the measured man, (b) the problems of culture and instrumentality, and (c) the question of the communicating planet.

THE MEASURED MAN

According to one recent voice, the growing instrumental treatment of humans neglects many of our key competences. It is argued that an over technical measurement of human production and work disregards important parts of what we are capable of (Bornemark 2018: 9). This is especially the case when it comes to important human abilities, such as the ability to care for each other and to understand complex emotional circumstance without explicit guidance. On this view, there is also a dangerous and neglectful development of our social and political environment. In order to quantify and measure the accomplishments of various practical skills so as to make it possible to compare and evaluate, many human abilities that are implicit and unmeasurable, are neglected (Bornemark 2018: 13). According to philosopher Jonna Bornemark this is especially evident in works where human interaction is important, such as in teaching and healthcare.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND INSTRUMENTALITY

Closely related and according to another important voice, there are good reasons to think that our culture is also starting to transform us into our own instruments. Paraphrasing author and researcher Helena Granström, we are not only beginning to treat ourselves as instruments to reach an often empty and utopian form of success, this kind of treatment also prevents us from understanding what it means to be an end in oneself (cf. Granström 2016: esp. 7-9). When we

become our own means, we neglect large portions of the human condition and overshadow the basic experience of subjectivity with tasks to perform and deadlines to reach. We replace our true existential bewilderment with arbitrary goals and lose sight of who we really are. Granström describes the situation in terms of its consequences:

In some sense, my culture has taught me to be human. In another sense, it has taught me to stop being it. No matter what, it has taught me to understand the following as natural: the acidification of the seas, the rapidly decreasing groundwater levels. Nitrogen-dioxide in the air, the conversion of forests to tree plantations, the extermination of wildlife and destruction of primeval forest (Granström 2016: 7-9. My translation).

The culture we belong to is characterized by science and technology. It can measure with great accuracy the loss of biodiversity and the decline in species populations. This is of course important for many reasons, not the least for the development of technologies to counteract human impact, but we must also ask if there are any treacherous assumptions involved here, that are unnecessary for the sciences as such, but still assumed to be true.

One such assumption concerns the extent of subjectivity, in the sense that we assume that nothing besides humanity has a complex and developed ability to experience, to communicate and to develop desires and needs of its own. This assumption has of course some profit. What one gains by assuming that all other beings, including the planet itself, is without subjectivity, and without the capacity to communicate, is a justification for describing them as a mere material to be used for whatever ends one may see fit. It is however hardly a basis for care and communication. On this assumption, our powers of manipulation are perhaps increased, but we must also ask if we are ready to pay the price. If it in any case does not matter for the development of the environmental sciences, why would we want to undermine the possibility of a deeper and more complex relationship with our external world?

Unfortunately and however obvious the answer may seem, there are strong forces working to preserve assumptions such as the one outlined above. In our cultural mythology there is no outside world to enter a relationship with. What is available are resources to extract and process. The culture that shaped me does in any case not see nature as a subject. If I hear the trees speak to me, my culture can assure me that I have wrongly humanized this being, that I have attributed a will to it and that it's voice, in fact, is my own. I have projected my own feelings on a being who cannot feel such feelings. But can this really be true?

Maybe the answer is both yes and no. Maybe the difference is not that great, because maybe the ability to see oneself in the other is a condition, and the only possible basis, for empathy. Perhaps we need to acknowledge that projected subjectivity is a condition for true subjectivity, in the sense that it is I who ascribe it to you, in the same way that you ascribe it to me. If the only way to be able to see the other as truly different is to be able to see what allies us at the same time, maybe it shouldn't even be called projection, but a reflection. Subjectivity is something created in a relation. And if the outside world is like me, it means, at the same time, that I am like the outside world. Perhaps it is precisely in this reflective relationship that true understanding and empathy can arise (cf. Granström 2016: 24).

Another similar assumption in our cultural mythology concerns the value of strength and weakness, in relation to care and dependence. In analogy with many of the competitive mechanisms of our society (e.g., in our economy, our elections and in school), it is often assumed that characteristics such as vulnerability and fragility are weaknesses that need to be cured. In this precarious world, to be fragile or dependent is often seen as something bad. This is however problematic because if we do not acknowledge the importance of being dependent, we will fail to understand both our own and our mutual needs.

In relation to the work of the art collective *World of Matter*, Michel Serres argues that the origin of the environmental crisis can be located in a misconstrued relation to the material world around us (cited in Demos 2013: 199ff). Serres emphasizes the importance of

highlighting the conditions of dependence in subject-object relation and in our social and natural environments (cited in Demos 2013: 199ff). As we shall see more below, only a brief look at non-human mechanisms of growth and complexity underscores Serres' argument and gives another picture. The flower always cracks the asphalt. On this basis there are also good reasons to refocus our understanding of fragility and vulnerability as something more than the breakable and the delicate. Fragility needs to be revalued as a productive position, condition or state of mind. This is especially true in cases where care is important. Care is traditionally female-coded and has often been considered a less valued property. Being needy and dependent, vulnerable and fragile is something that has been considered a weakness. But, then again, are we really ready to pay the price of these assumptions?

THE COMMUNICATING PLANET

Our instrumental treatment of each other and ourselves is an important factor in explaining why we have come to treat the living planet as an exploitable resource. Since we do not even allow ourselves and our fellow humans to be subject and ends in themselves it is hardly likely that we can treat the rest of our living environment as such. Or perhaps it is the other way around. Since we treat the rest of the living environment as a dead resource to be exploited, and not as the living, developing and conscious being it is, we fail to appreciate what it means to be alive.

New research has however argued that subjectivity, in the forms of perception, consciousness and desire, should be ascribed to a much larger span of beings than traditionally assumed. According to Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, in their important book about the intelligence of plants and vegetative life, there are not only good reasons to reevaluate the criteria we have for subjectivity, in the end, we also need to think harder about who should be treated as an end in itself.

When it comes to perception, for example, Mancuso and Viola argues that there is no big difference between human, animal and plant life, but to get this point, we must remember that our way of thinking and talking about plants is characterized by millennia of prejudice and misleading concepts (Mancuso and Viola 2018: 123). We have a tendency to distance ourselves from plants. Unlike us, they are more like a colony than an individual. They have a corporeal structure that is so different from ours that is sometimes difficult to remember that they are alive (Mancuso and Viola 2018: 124). And insofar as we assume that we are alive and endowed with subjectivity, and the plants are essentially alien to us, it is also natural to assume that they are not. But that does not mean that the assumption is true.

What most people don't think about, or even are aware of, is that plants and trees have a fantastic way of communicating with each other. Although they do not use voice and gesture, as we, their complex network of roots and mycelium is an efficient and complex vehicle of thoughts. As a consequence, the minds of plants are also much more sensitive than ours. Besides the five senses we share, they possess a further dozen. They can, for example, sense and calculate gravity, electromagnetic fields and humidity. They can analyze the content of a variety of chemical substances. And contrary to what people generally believe, the similarities between plants and humans can also be understood in terms of our shared social behavior. The plants interact with other plant-organisms, insects and animals and communicate with by using chemical molecules. In this way they do not only exchange information, but also desires and needs (Mancuso and Viola 2018: 13-14). In order to transfer information from one part of the body to another, the plants use not only electrical, but also hydraulic and chemical signals. They thus have mutually independent but sometimes interoperable systems that works within both a shorter and a longer radius and can reach areas of the plant that are both close and far apart, from a few millimeters to several tens of kilometers away (Mancuso and Viola 2018: 87-88).

All of this points in the same direction. Our cultural mythology tells us that only humans have sentient and communicative subjectivity. But as Mancuso and Viola has shown, there is

evidence to the contrary. A more general perspective of the same basic problem, is Timothy Morton's discussion of the concept of nature in his book *Ecology without Nature* from 2007. Here Morton reassess the distinction between Nature and Culture in terms of how it has distanced us from the environment we share subjectivity and experiences with and prevents us from thinking in ecological terms. According to Morton, Nature has become something that stands outside of us, something that you, for example, go out into. The view of nature as something outside of us has as such also alienating us. To counteract these consequences, Morton proposes that we release the term Nature and replace it with the term Environment, because it is impossible to imagine man as outside the environment in which he is (Morton 2007: 3-5). In Morton's formulation of the human-nature relationship, we are supposed to include ourselves in a kind of mesh where man and nature are intertwined in a common yarn. It is a picture that shows the fact that man is neither opposed to nature nor in some way inhabits nature. Humans are to be described as part of nature's yarn, something that cannot be invented or sorted out.

2. NON-INSTRUMENTAL TREATMENT: AN ARTISTIC PRACTICE

If Mancuso and Viola, Morton, Serres, Granström and Bornemark are on the right track, our culture is in desperate need of a change of attitude. We need to see subjectivity and consciousness where such things are not supposed to be seen. Part of the purpose of my project is to help raise this awareness and to discuss the possibility that if one is unsure, treat it as if it were alive! Methodologically in my work, I try to do this on many levels. In what follows I will give a brief outline under three headings: Material Communication, Corporeal Perspective and Techniques of Subjectivity.

MATERIAL COMMUNICATION

The materials I choose to communicate with are very important. They are important, however, not primarily, or at least not only, as instruments to be used in the embodiment of my artistic

visions, but rather as a form of subjectivity that contribute their own point of view. The choice of material thus involves an extensive tactile research that investigate and tests not only how we experience and relate to the individual material but also how the material interact in relation to its environment and to the bodies of its spectator. The objects I make are in constant dialog with the bodies they are in relation to. Therefor the scale and proportion of the material is also very important. In my earlier works I have explored the experience of larger objects. Currently, I work instead with small objects, objects that force the spectators to come close and to look at the details. I even want them to experience that their perceptual tools are sometimes insufficient. Most of the objects I make can fit in the palm of the hand. Thus, they also invite the spectators to relate to them as possible tools or object to be used or held. They are also designed to make the spectators feel a need to experience them tactually. The objects are not only made to produce an experience of a possible action and event (such as the desire to use or touch them), they are also made to provoke a feeling of sympathy and affection. In the end, and even if only implicit or subconscious, this might also provoke a feeling of a desire to care for the objects, awakening an experience of the objects beyond their presence in the room and beyond the reality of their existence as artifacts.

All materials I choose to work with have their own capacities, with different possibilities and limitations. Somehow I feel that the materials have their own directions or aims and I can, together with them, put them in motion. This form of material agency is central to my work and relates the negotiation of the border between conscious and non- conscious existence.

In my current work, I use materials such as wax, bronze and copper in combination with sticks, logs, shells and other forms of objects I find in nature. The colors are important. The color of copper, for example, is similar to some versions of the color of the human skin. This feature of the metal is important because it can help to give an experience of corporeality and of being alive.

The projected or reflected form of subjectivity, or life, that the right materials can give to the objects also connects to how my artistic practice concerns communication and communication my means of natural materials. By a natural material I mean a nature-made-material. This includes materials and objects that I find in nature.¹ In this sense these natural materials are more than mere materials. Their unprocessed and partly undestroyed biology bears traces of what it means to be part of a living system. It is also these “memories” that gives them their form, structure, density and color. These nature-made-materials can for these reasons bring with them a different chain of associations than man-made, or artificial materials. But this also raises an central questions: When does nature becomes material in my work? What happens?

To answer this question, I need to take a step back. As we have seen, our culture has a tendency to transform everything, including ourselves, into artifacts. We live in a world that is increasingly made up of artificial objects. The consequence of this is also clear. According to Langdon Winner, “the more of our surroundings created by ourselves, the more our participation is required to maintain it” (cited in Granström 2016: 26-27). The more we interact with artificial object, the more we think that all objects are artificial. And insofar as we think that what is artificial is lacking in subjectivity, this world get less and less a voice of its own. In my work, I try to counteract this tendency by my choice of materials. The objects I chose to work with, the way they can be combined, and the way they can interact with the context where they are presented, help me to tell a story about the conditions of subjectivity and consciousness. I try to reach beyond our common assumptions and everyday treatment of one another as means for our individual development and our instrumental relation to our

¹ My work is in this sense related to the work of Charlotta Östlund and especially to her piece *Wasteland Stanzas*. On her webpage she writes: “*Wasteland Stanzas* consists of humble objects, each and every one gently, painstakingly assembled, mostly from parts of plants, and some including artificial components. The exhibition is a result of my long-lasting interest in the relations between pre-existing things and objects I’ve made myself, and also in the relations between ephemerality and permanence. I have always drawn parallels between them and the preconditions of our human life, our wishes and actions. That is why I collect materials, often plant parts, modifying them and sometimes combining them with components made by me. This method then serves as a platform for examining the human condition. There is a tension in my works between fragility and durability: overblown coltsfoot and pearls, lichen and bronze, petals and stones, all these components have different life spans. Sometimes I use an element just once, others can, coupled with a new component, build up into a completely different work altogether” (Östlund 2017).

natural environment.² In this way, my work is also an attempt to expand the way we see and traditionally use materials. I investigate different ways to combine materials and find new ways of using and seeing them.

CORPOREAL PERSPECTIVES

Everything is in relation to one's own body. The first experience of something is the one that meets you physically before the thoughts and reason try to organize, categorize and sort things out. I want my work to express the human and the earth's condition and the hierarchy between man and nature. But I also want us to shift perspective, by depicting nature from another position. Normally, when we distance ourselves things become small. This happens because of the rules of perspective, but also because of power. We are the big ones and what we display is small. I want to challenge that system. The artist Pippilotti Rist discuss this perceptual issues in an interview where she says that "depending of what state of mind we are, if we are sleeping or half awake, for example, the size is relative. What we experience always depends on how big we think we are in relation to the given world" (Blomberg 2019). On this view, everything is always in relation to something other. To switch perspective is a method for me to try to understand how we see and experience objects and things depending on scale and spatiality. Size is thus a partially important aspect of my work. I want the viewer to experience my work with their body.

In addition, and closely relates, movement is also a big part in my work. I want the viewer to interact with my work. What happens when we enter a room? We start a movement. That is also important for the fragile aspect of my work. I want to make us aware of the impact we have on the things and the environment around us. I want to illustrate the importance of being

² To some extent, and especially in relation to the examination of a certain limited and human perspective of nature, my work has important points of contact with Katja Pettersson's work and her piece *Welcome Back*. On her webpage she describes the piece as an examination of "the Anthropocene, the epoch in which we find ourselves today; a period defined by human behavior". She also explains that her work is "concerned with trying to find our way back to our relation to nature. With the elements as intermediaries I hope that, rather than experiencing guilt about what we have destroyed, we can enjoy our earth in a way that changes us and what we do"(Pettersson 2017).

dependent by changing the structure of power and by showing how we are able to comprehend nature from many different angles. For this reason I have partly worked with close-ups that become individuals. The purpose of this is to generate a feeling of recognition or empathy. I want to show what happens if the smallest thing is allowed to take the space that corresponds to its actual importance. I want the viewer to recognize, and somehow understand, what it is she is looking at, but at the same time make her realize that it is changing. Part of this work is also a matter of working with dichotomies, such as light-heavy, fragile-massive or solid-porous. These dichotomies help to emphasize a balance in the dualities and help the viewer to see the living whole in the fragmented and dead parts.

TECHNIQUES OF SUBJECTIVITY

Another important aspect of my attempts to reach beyond an instrumental understanding of ourselves, each other and the planet, and to communicate the need to see subjectivity where it is often considered absent, concerns what I choose to call Techniques of Subjectivity. Due to the specific communicative and intersubjective relationship I try to develop in relation to the objects and materials I work with, there is a constant and important process of failure involved. The objects do rarely turn out exactly according to my vision, but since my vision is to allow the object and material to contribute with their own subjectivity, these failures are a constitutive part of the process. This process thus involves a particularly open attitude. I need to enter the process by using the opportunities that arise during the work. I need to pay attention to what happens with the objects and material I work with by tracking glimpses or fragments of change, small variations in surfaces and color shifts, and try to allow myself to see and listen. In every step of the process, changes and re-evaluations are of the utmost importance. The results are also often a surprise, but that doesn't mean that I am less aware of what I am doing. The results are instead intended to be a mix of conscious, intuitive and external decisions. The various Techniques of Subjectivity I have performed in this way have involved traditional craft and artistic techniques, such as casting, installation and spatial design, but I have also needed to develop new ways to use these traditional techniques. When

it comes to casting and electroforming metal, I have, for example, tried to develop the traditionally very predictive techniques into techniques where the material and the process itself is part of shaping the results. I have wanted to allow the objects to grow on their own, not only as a way to investigate forms and shapes, but also as a way to examine how subjectivity corresponds to how we experience notions such as positive and negative, inside and outside, filled or empty, solid or as trace.

When it comes to installations and place specific objects, I have had a similar idea of material agency in mind, but I have also tried to communicate something about the method itself. I work with different scales of the objects, in relation to each other or to the environment, as a way to understand how we see and experience objects and things depending on scale and spatiality. This interaction with the objects is a natural basis for the chance to experience the imagined subjectivity of the artifact and open up for the possibility that they might easier communicate some kind of resistance to being the objects they in fact are. In this aspect of the work, I also relate to the room where the artifact are presented, their spatial design and their framing. I want to challenge the way we see and understand things and objects depending on scale, spatiality and body by testing scales on objects in relation to each other and their surroundings.

3. ARTIFICIAL RESOURCES & MATERIAL SUBJECTIVITY

In the specific artifacts designed for this MA-project, I have made a group of sculptures. These sculptures are made of objects found in nature together with other materials such as wax, copper and bronze. Some parts of the objects are close ups, small studies of bryophytes and lichens.



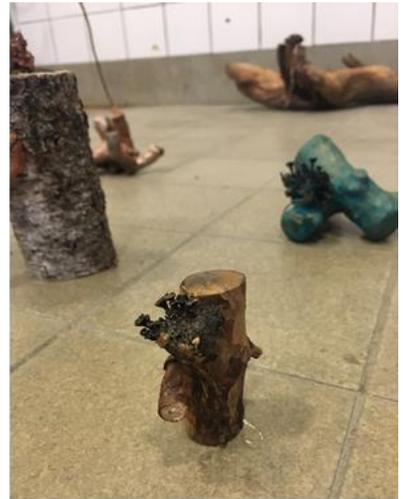
MA-project, process images.

The purpose of this is to show that we can understand something about ourselves by looking at how we manipulate and control the world in which we live.



MA-project, process images.

In the same way that we treat our nature, for example, by forcing something to grow into something else, in the same way we try to adapt to the patterns that we believe are right. I want us to recognize something in ourselves, to feel a connection and to make us want to be part of the same living community. That is also why I have chosen to make objects that look a bit like us. I have wanted them to be individuals that we, on some level, can meet and interact with.



MA-project, process images.



MA-project, process images.

In this way I hope that the viewer have a better chance to feel empathy with these traces of life. I want the viewer to feel the need to care. And I hope I can help emphasize the need for a responsibility, build not on duty and guilt, but on sympathy and love.

CONCLUSION

Right now we are living in a narrative about human being as the measure of everything. But we have also started to tell another story. “In some sense”, T.J. Demos prophesies, “it is the artists that will tell the new story” (Demos 2013: 200). An image we often see is one in which nature is good and culture is evil. This maintains a dichotomy that is not very productive if we want to change perspectives on our relationship to the planet. This place, inhabited by about 8.7 million other living species besides us humans, cannot be saved by political-economic-technological strategies alone. The change must happen at all levels and particularly within the cultural sphere. With the work described in this essay, and the corresponding exhibition, I hope to contribute a little to this new story. I hope that my work can help to show that our relationship with our surroundings is a relationship between living and sentient subjects, much more than usually assumed. I hope to have shown that we are not the only living sentient subjects in this world and that we do not have the right to extract the greatest possible benefit from the world around us. I hope to remind my readers and viewers of the fact that we are part of a living whole and that we are not alone. If instead of looking at our surroundings in terms of function, or in terms of a defined purpose, we may be able to see that it has its own justification for existence. Perhaps we cannot see the purpose and meaning of the whole. But that does not mean that it is not there. If we start to look at the planet in this way, we can perhaps also start to reevaluate ourselves. We are ends in ourselves, we are subjects, and we need to stop treating each other as means to use in the pursuit of our own imagined individual success.

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APPENDIX: POST-EXAM REFLECTIONS