

(SLIDE 1) TITLE PAGE

Hello, my name is Michaela.

The title of my presentation is *I know it like the back of my hand: inside out, the body as landscape*.

And I have used this opportunity to present something that has come at me from the periphery, outside of my practice making its way in.

(SLIDE 2)

I arrived at this enquiry through an experience I had struggled to make sense of.

I had to undergo a laryngoscopy to determine whether my upper airways were working correctly.

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This is not an image of me, but it exemplifies the procedure.

This procedure had a tube with a camera and a light inserted into my nose and passed along my nasal passages to the back of my throat.

It was fixed in place by headgear, and then I was required to run at pace on a treadmill to see my airways in action under stress.

Next to me was a massive screen showing me an internal landscape that was apparently mine.

Generally, we have a good enough understanding of our external structures.

We can put words to these parts, name them, and locate them.

Partly due to being the owner of a body and basic biology lessons in school saw to that.

The outside of the body gives us lots of clues as to what's going on, on the inside.

This surface anatomy, like a topography of touchpoints, indicates points of reference like signposts.

The protrusion of our collar bones, blades of shoulders, outcrops of vertebrae, indents of ribs and caps of knees. Things that stick out. All visibly shift under the surface of the skin, notations of the skeleton that frames us.

Then come the spaces where boundaries become indistinct. Mouth, nose, ears, and eyes. Spaces where the boundary between inside and outside becomes more fluid, ambiguous.

But go much deeper, the territories become more and more unknown.

Faced with a part of you that's never even seen the light of day, let alone been sighted by yourself. It comes as a bit of a shock to learn what your insides look like.

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To try and understand this landscape is a difficult thing to wrap your head around – that is *where in here?*

I was left trying to understand where that scope had been, how it got from A to B, what did the route look like, and where was the map?

I consorted google, as you do, trying to look at images, diagrams, things that would explain this to me.

Science and medicine map out the terrain of our bodies, with diagrams, imaging, and scans. These visuals, which represent otherwise inaccessible parts, plot and depict these spaces.

Some images appeared so simple; others so complex. Things didn't feel like they matched up. It certainly didn't feel simple when this thing was in my head.

Spaces I couldn't understand, disorientating sensations, a struggle to locate. It was knowledge and understanding of me, my physical self, that I didn't have.

Even if you can come to comprehend where to situate internal structures. There still exists a struggle to relate it to your physical self. We aren't flat, for starters and these images often exist in a digital space.

(SLIDE 5)

Mona Hatoum explores this sense of dislocation within works such as *Corps Étranger*.

CORE EYTRANGEY

Filmed using an endoscopic camera, projected as a circle on the floor, you look down on this footage. Your view is one of absorption, invasion, and invitation.

The word 'hinterland' was used to describe her portrayal of the human body.

The word 'hinterland' meaning

"An area lying beyond what is visible or known."

Which is exactly the space I was trying to grapple with

But, to me, this disconnect felt like a disempowering position, and I was curious to find out if there was a way of navigating this more sensitively

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I began circling the territory of embodiment and tacit knowledge, feeling my way through with research fed by books like these.

All the while, brewing away in the background were the reverberations of the pandemic, 'It wasn't hard for us to imagine that while our bodies are in the world, we ourselves are somehow not.'

And an interesting and undeniable surge for touch, tactility, mindfulness, movement and breathwork practices as well as an awareness of alternative approaches to the brain and body were on the rise

Things that put us back in our bodies.

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In an interview for their recent exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, titled *Slip*, artists Julia Crabtree and William Evans said the following,

‘So much comes to us through images and screens, which prioritises seeing well above our other senses and seems to enable a distanced viewing that lets us believe we are somehow removed or not complicit in what we’re seeing. For us, touch reiterates our connections. We also want our work to feel like a landscape, a terrain, an ecosystem – which, after all, is exactly what the body is.”

And this is a quote I keep coming back to.

And I think this is because it highlights something crucial, it highlights this gap between what we see and what we feel, the gap between our heads and our bodies, the cerebral understanding and the bodies understanding.

‘Human consciousness is an embodied consciousness; the world is structured around a sensory and corporeal centre...we are connected with the world through our senses.

We are physical *things*, existing in real *space*, responding to real *stuff*.

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Even down to the way our brains are mapped out, more receptors are dedicated to sites that can feel and touch – as illustrated by the bizarre-looking somatosensory homunculus map used in neurology to describe how sensory neurons are laid out.

The senses are not merely passive receptors of stimuli, and the body is not only a point of viewing the world from a central perspective.

Neither is the head the sole locus of cognitive thinking,

our senses and entire bodily being directly structure, produce and store silent existential knowledge. The human body is a knowing entity.

Understanding something isn’t a quality that comes to us from the outside; it comes from within; it’s a way of existing.

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An artist who stretches anatomy and existence in this way is Chloe Piene

Her work centres on the idea of the body as site in which to filter and respond to physical experience.

She uses the body as a resource of exploration, having to go through physical experiences, such as hiking, horse riding or swimming, in order to understand the subject matter.

The experiences are then, as she describes, ‘synthesised’ through her, through her hand and drawn out as feelings within her drawings.

And thinking particularly in relation to drawing practice, especially as my MA is in drawing,

I believe that something more happens in terms of embodiment within drawing practice.

Quoting from *The Thinking Hand* by Juhani Pallasmaa,

‘...drawing [is a] spatial and haptic exercise that fuses the external reality of space and matter, and the internal reality of perception, thought and mental imagery into singular and

dialectic entities. As I sketch a contour of an object...I actually touch and feel the surface of the subject of my attention, and unconsciously I sense and internalise its character' (pg. 89)

That gap that I mentioned contracts when I draw,
And like those spaces in the body where the boundaries become indistinct, there is a
'softening' of this boundary that takes place,
that space between my head and my hand shortens.

There is a plasticity in this interaction, reiterating our connections.

and the importance goes both ways, outside in and inside out
it is bidirectional communication
between being and doing, internal and external states, the physical world and the mental
one

Seen in artists such as Natasha Macvoy
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And the works of Julia Evans & William Crabtree, artists I mentioned earlier
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The fact that we not only make but are also fundamentally made by our relational
environments.

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My works

Riddled with loose ends and questions and not knowing, what I have begun to scratch the
surface of goes far beyond the limited minutes I have for this presentation.

I am willing to admit that I do not have many answers, and I am a long way off pinpointing
exactly what territory I am claiming, precisely what my stake in this research is

Where I have begun to root around within this research during my MA,
I have found myself sitting somewhere between a lived experience and a creative practice

And trying to translate this is harder than I could have imagined.

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I titled this presentation 'know it like the back of your hand.'

This phrase comes with the assumption that you know something incredibly well.

It also comes along with words like 'study', 'learning', and being 'receptive.'

I have been led into this research in an attempt to understand the body through a lived
experience, and I would like to end on a lived experience for you, the audience.

Place your hands either on your lap, or maybe the table if you have one in front of you.
Close your eyes
Bring your attention to your hands
and can you sense the pressure of your palms, your fingertips
If I were able to press down on the tips of your fingers, would you be able to pinpoint where that sensation was
Now, direct your attention to the backs of your hands
Can you sense the tops of your knuckles?
Can you feel any sensations across the skin of the back of your hand, maybe the air, a faint breeze, coolness, or warmth?
Do you know where your fingernails start, and do you know where they end?

Ok, pause there, and you can open your eyes.

By reinscribing and heightening our awareness through encounters, when this happens, we start treading on the peripheries of terrains that have always been there, but we just haven't taken the time to explore.

Thank you very much for listening!

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References