

SELF-REFLECTIVE DIARY

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Experimental Design
MUO-E5043
Aalto ARTS
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Week 1

Introduction to feral

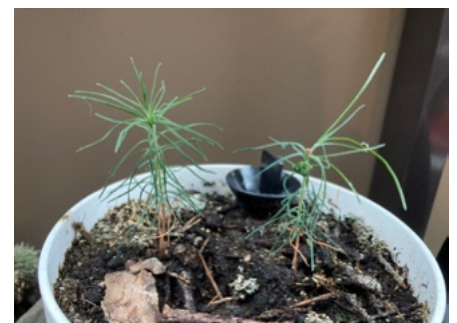
As my other-than-human creature to be presented in class I chose the pine tree, since I see them daily in various stages of their life.

I couldn't bring an entire pine tree with me to class, so I brought a little pine cone. This cone I found last winter from outside. I brought it with me back home, and the increased temperature activated the pine cone, made it open up and release its seeds that looked like tiny wings. I have planted four of those seeds, and I now have four pines growing at my place, two of them in the balcony, two of them inside.

What makes pine trees so interesting to me is their scale: they can grow in various sizes and shapes, hundreds of years old. Only the dying and decaying process of a pine tree can take up to centuries.

In my point of view, the pine tree is mostly viewed as a resource for the forest industry in contemporary Finnish culture. But in the old pagan mythologies it was the tree of the bear and could be carved to hold the names of one's deceased family members.

I think pine trees are fascinating and I would love to get to know them better as living creatures.



Nuukso trip 26.10.

The change of environment from classroom to Nuukso felt refreshing and somewhat necessary for the attunement to the more-than-human theme of the course.

My derive prompt told me to focus on the soundscape of my surroundings and move accordingly. It was a windy day, the wind was moving the dead leaves of the trees and created a beautiful whoosh in the forest. As soon as I started focusing myself on the natural sounds, the ones coming from humans felt irritating, I had to get away from talk. The forest base was covered with dry leaves, I was generating a lovely sound myself when moving.

What was fascinating about the whoosh of the leaves in the wind, was the fluidity of the sound: sometimes it faded away, sometimes the wind blew so hard that it surrounded me completely. And it was only the trees with the leaves among all the ones with needles, so not every tree was joining the choir. Some trees were whining in the wind, creaking when moving. And the layers of the sound were interesting too, dry leaves tickling each other, a tree singing, the forest singing.

Back at home I noticed that I had carried a couple of dry leaves in my pocket from Nuukso. I placed them on my balcony with the other objects I had collected from forests.



Week 2

Lecture: Jaz Hee-jeong Choi & Markéta Dolejšová – Feral Knowledge & Data in Creative Practice-based Research

A lot of reading to do for this week, which felt intense but also gave me a good overview into the topic and some of its key terms.

After the lecture I asked Markéta and Jaz a question that had bothered me: so much of the data in this realm of research felt very subjective, the experiences of more-than-humans were most of the time based on human interpretations. How can this kind of data and research become valued in a scientific system where we live, where qualitative data seems to build reality?

Markéta replied that it is difficult, that in our position we should focus on making the qualitative data meaningful for ourselves.

Sharing and feedback: more-than-human places

It was very nice to see what kind of more-than-human places the other students in my class had selected for their projects. I feel it is these kinds of moments of sharing where really interesting questions and conversations are being born. I enjoyed sharing my ideas of others' projects and giving them my feedback.

For my more-than-human place I quite spontaneously chose my balcony. I sat there last weekend for the first time in a long time. I looked at the plants that I had been growing, some were dying, and that was ok. Balconies are interesting spaces, they are designed and built for us humans but especially here in Finland you see people using them quite rarely. Unless you smoke, or air your blankets, or read a book on a sunny summer day, the balcony, this outside space remains unhabited, at least by humans. I've seen an old lady in the building opposite of mine feed birds on her open balcony. I don't know what she leaves there, but when she's gone the balcony is full of sparrows, crows and great tits.

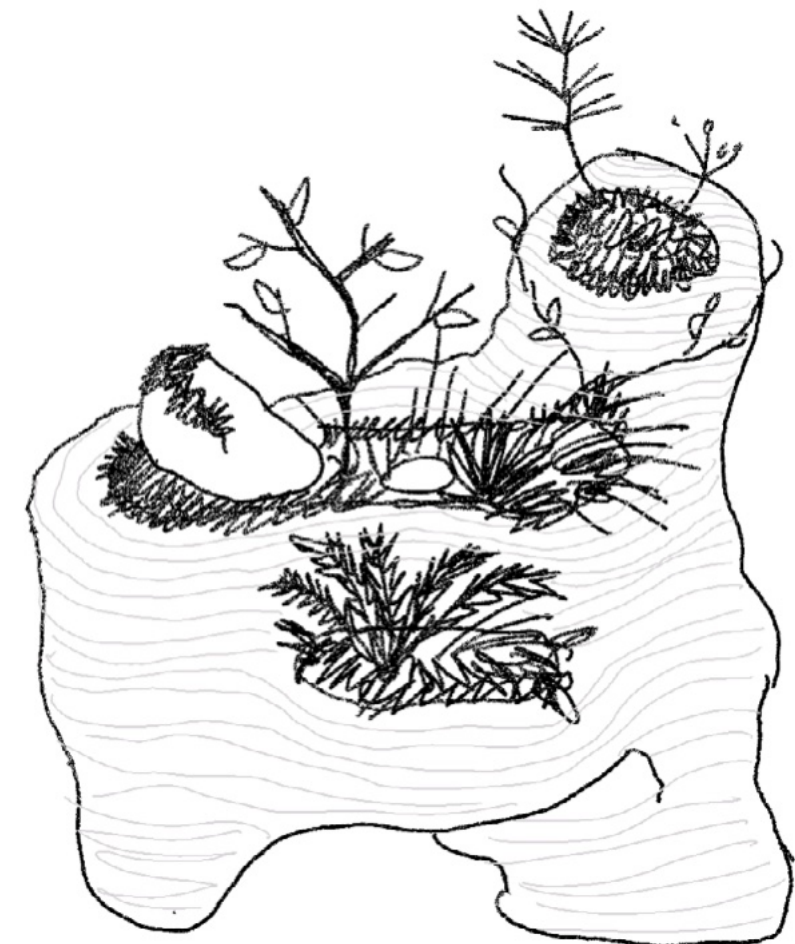
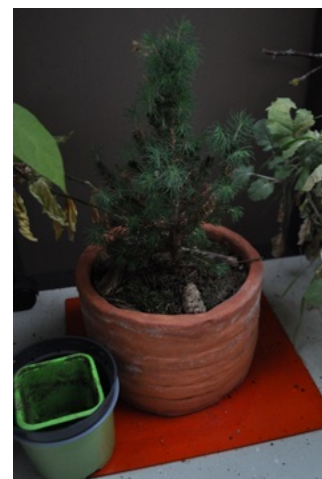
I looked at my balcony. What kind of life there is, saplings of pine and spruce, dried up lichen, sticks, bark, stones. Almost as if I had unconsciously tried to create an ecosystem, a little forest for myself. But how was that ecosystem doing and who was it really for? And what would it really need?



Week 3

The more I have started thinking about the term feral and reflecting on it in my personal life, the more it has started to feel like the general condition of life itself: surprising and uncontrollable. Oh my hair is an absolute mess! No worries, it's just feral, let it be. Weird feeling in my stomach, feral again. That one houseplant that has exponentially grown and taken over my table, that I feel extremely annoyed by and ready to ditch. Yes, feral as well. But can I learn to live with this plant and moreover live with this feeling, that not everything, especially living, should be there to please me?

With these kinds of thoughts and feelings I have observed my balcony and the more-than-human creatures there. And it feels impossible to co-create anything else, than some sort of platform, that allows the others to create systems and lifeforms of their own. Maybe they can allow me to become more feral in my design process?



Tuesday 7.11.

A friend asks if my pine trees are still alive.
The conversation roughly translated:

Hey is the pine still alive?
And if yes can I have a picture:D

Yeh there's four of them and they are pretty small, I'll send you a photo tomorrow when there's more daylight

These are the two smaller ones still inside, I was thinking if I should still before the coldest winter plant them in a bigger pot and put outside, or will it be too big of a shock? These two bigger ones are outside and they are doing fine

Ooo fine!
They are so small that I would not change them in a bigger pot yet. About putting them outside I cannot say, I hadn't even thought about putting them outside, but now I'm thinking like wtf it's a pine and it should handle it:D

Well this exactly:D maybe I'll try to put the small ones outside as well, maybe they'll get some emotional support from the bigger ones

Haha maybe:D
One thing that I'm considered by is if the roots will freeze in the pot when they are not covered in the ground

Are they not freezing in nature then?

No after they have made it deep enough, only the surface of the ground freezes

But don't pines grow in some pretty barren places as well, like rock dents where there is not that much soil?
Interesting

Yes they do but somehow I would rationalise that when you move them from inside to outside it would be a bigger shock for them that if they had grown from a seed in some rock dent
Except that you have been having them outside
I would probably keep some of them inside and then in the spring you can compare what's the situation

This will be an exciting winter

After the conversation I started googling how to isolate pots for winter and felt extremely stupid. I had been dreaming of building an ideal environment for my pines whereas I wasn't even aware of what they needed to survive. I felt like a human-centred idiot.

On Wednesday we all presented our more-than-human places to Markéta, and received a short feedback from her. I talked about my balcony, the many species present and especially the pines and the conversation I had been having with my friend about their survival. I should care for them but I don't know how, I am like a bad mother.

Markéta told me that this was an interesting space to be in, this care glitch. "Who can care for whom?" she asked, and added, "it is difficult to be a mother to a pine. I don't really like when people call themselves 'dog mothers' as if they were the mothers of their dogs. How could they really know anything about a puppy's and its dog mother's relationship?"

She also recommended to me the book Finding the mother tree by Suzanne Simard, a Professor of Forest Ecology at the University of British Columbia. In this book she presents her scientific research on plant communications. "There are basically mother trees that communicate to the other trees and care for them," Markéta said.

During the sharing circle I also made notes from the discussion about domestication: it is basically building dependencies, the more-than-human becomes dependent on the human.

And this is exactly the situation that I have created in my admiration for the pine tree: I had four creatures growing at my balcony, who wouldn't survive without me pouring them water or wrapping their pots in plastic isolation for the winter. I couldn't grow a mycelium network in the next three weeks that would allow me to communicate with the small trees. I started looking at my balcony with completely new eyes. Was this even a good place for them after all? There was no deep soil where they could hide their roots for the winter. Rain would not water them. I stared at the row of balconies of the opposite building from my window. I felt alienated from my lifestyle, was this good even for me?

- “I want to grow pine trees on my balcony”
- >what a selfish, human centred desire!
- I should care, but I don't know how
- Who can care for whom?
- Pine needs friends
- Finding the mother tree
- Multispecies home?
- Domestication > Building dependencies
- Feral data?

Thursday 9.11. Soundscaping workshop with Ville MJ Hyvönen

Ville's workshop about soundscaping was inspiring. I thought his insights on deep listening and psychoacoustics were really interesting and somehow relevant. I have a very sensitive hearing, and sometimes it feels like my head is exploding due to the amount of noise around me.

Ville: what is music?

We experimented with different music tools: ether for electrical waves, Polyphonic whale and different microphones. The contact microphone resonated the most with me, it records the movement of the surface instead of the air and Ville also talked about how it could record the sound of the trees moving in the wind. I immediately thought about large pine trees, maybe I could record their movement? Maybe I could play the sounds as a lullaby for my little pines?



Milan Knížák. Friendship with a tree from Performance Files. 1980

Photo: Milan Knížák

Week 4

Tuesday 14.11.

Today I sat down with my project and tried to collect my ideas.

I realised that this act of bringing life, plants, materials, more-than-humans to my balcony was actually a recurring process: the same happened to me in the Netherlands. I was also trying to create conditions for life on our tiny concrete cube of a balcony in Eindhoven. Especially during the lockdown, life on the balcony revealed its importance. I would sit with the plants and feed fruit flies to the spiders. Maybe this state of isolation made visible the companionship that I was forming with more-than humans.

However I feel that this type of companionship has mostly been formed in my own terms, giving the more-than-humans what they seemingly need (water, food), instead of really contemplating their perspective on a deeper level. Had my "resques" for plants actually been captives, as I had placed them in an unnatural environment where I pretty much had control of them?

Do the more-than-humans want to be there? Can they even live there? Is this the only way I know how to invite wilderness to my own space, through the act of domestication where the other creature becomes dependent on me? Also what am I not inviting on my balcony in my omnipotent creator mode action? Mess, birds that might get trapped or shit on my furniture, too much rain... In my current balcony there is still a glass surface separating it from the outdoors, it still remains partly in my control.

During the weekend I had checked out the weather forecast and the temperature would be dropping under zero the coming week. My little pine and spruce trees needed isolations, as I in my human-centred naivety had not even thought about their roots when placing them on my balcony for winter.

Usually the trees sink their roots in the protection of the soil, which also protects them from the cold since usually only the top surface of the soil freezes. However there was no deep soil on my balcony and I therefore had to make a conscious effort to try to help the little trees to survive the coming winter.

I used wood chips, plastic foam wrap, cardboard and tape and felt like an idiot again. Nature had developed such sophisticated ways of mutual collaboration and coexistence to live through the seasons and here I was wrapping the poor trees in plastic. There were so many better solutions out there that had taken thousands of years to develop. And somehow that seemed to always be my issue, I didn't have enough time to come up with something better than, well, plastic.



Winter came to my balcony. The cold, decay, stillness and rest. I wish I could have joined the hibernation.

My Balcony

This is actually a recurring process, the same happened with my balcony in the Netherlands

MY EXPERIENCE AS A KEY SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Partly conscious process of gathering objects, plants and materials that I connect with the feeling of wilderness

→ Bring them to my balcony

→ Do they want to be there?
Can they even live there?
→ Is this act of domestication the only way I can invite wilderness to my balcony?

→ What am I not inviting?

- mess
- birds
- too much rain

Glass window separates

My balcony is the only outdoors space, that I have a partly control over (It's a rental flat, I can't go crazy)

Private, safe

What do I miss, what would I desire it to be?

→ A natural environment
A forest

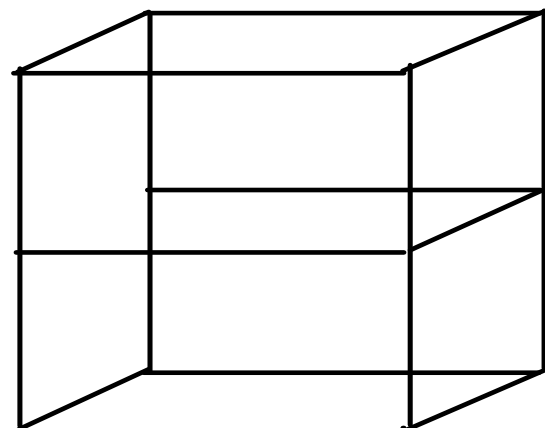
Spend time with:
craft, grow, map, drift,
make sense with

Isolating the pots of the pine trees and the little spruces

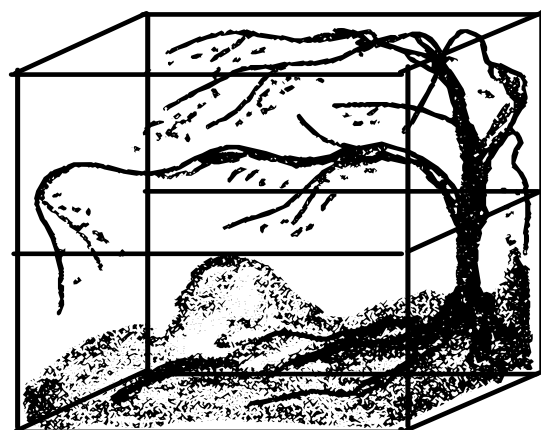
→ consciously making an effort to help them survive in this unnatural environment

→ No soil to dig their roots

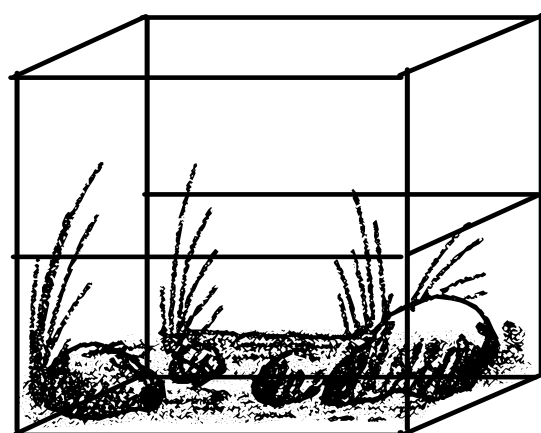
→ I use plastic foam and tape, nature has much better solutions, I don't have time



My balcony is this weird, empty, isolated, outdoors cube, that I have a partly control in creating.



What would it be in my dreams?



What would it be in the dreams of someone else?

A rounded stone?
A spider?
A dead leaf?
Moss?
A pine tree?

Wednesday 15.11.

Group trip to my balcony, to Luise's parliament of nature, Soli's Apollonin puistikko

After seeing the other locations I felt that my project was still very abstract. Maybe it had to do with my more-than-human space being much more personal that also my whole observation felt more personal, more inwards.

Thursday 16.11.

Some general feedback on the more-than-human places:

Relationships

What creatures/things/more-than-humans will you observe? What is my position?

What is the scale of domesticity we are facing in our lived environments?

"All" forests in Finland

How hard is it to leave something untouched?

Balcony as a diary/archive

How do you experience/read?

IDEAS

Macro photography

Lullaby for the pine

Hibernation suit

Visual speculation on balcony worlds

After this week's group visits to our different more-than-human places I felt a need to break out of my thought bubble and to do something else with my balcony. I needed to do something concrete that would allow me to produce some kind of feral data. And I decided to start experimenting and borrowed a camera and a macro lens from Takeout, and decided to dedicate my weekend into taking closeup photos of the creatures on my balcony.

I didn't manage to get the preview of the camera to work properly. That meant that my whole photographing process became quite random, well, feral again. But it was fascinating to see how the extremely zoomed in photos started to reveal to me worlds that I could not see with my bare eyes. Spider webs around the lichen, mould on the dry leaves, beautiful patterns that remind me of stretching marks on the trunk of the spruce.



Sunday 19.11.

STORIES FROM THE BALCONY

The balcony as an archive, what if I would just document the stories of different objects?

Gas tank
Brush
Table
White bucket + plants from bird seeds
Fire wood
Bird feathers
Dead basil
Ceramics
Mark
Stones
Empty containers
Trees: pines, rescue-spruce, gift-spruce
Chair

After spending time with the balcony and its creatures and their own tiny words, a question occurred in my mind: Where would I hide here?

What is the design logic of this space? Is there?
>Organic archive

>What are the characteristics of something that I just let be?

Something that I care
>Needs to be taken CARE OF vs LET BE

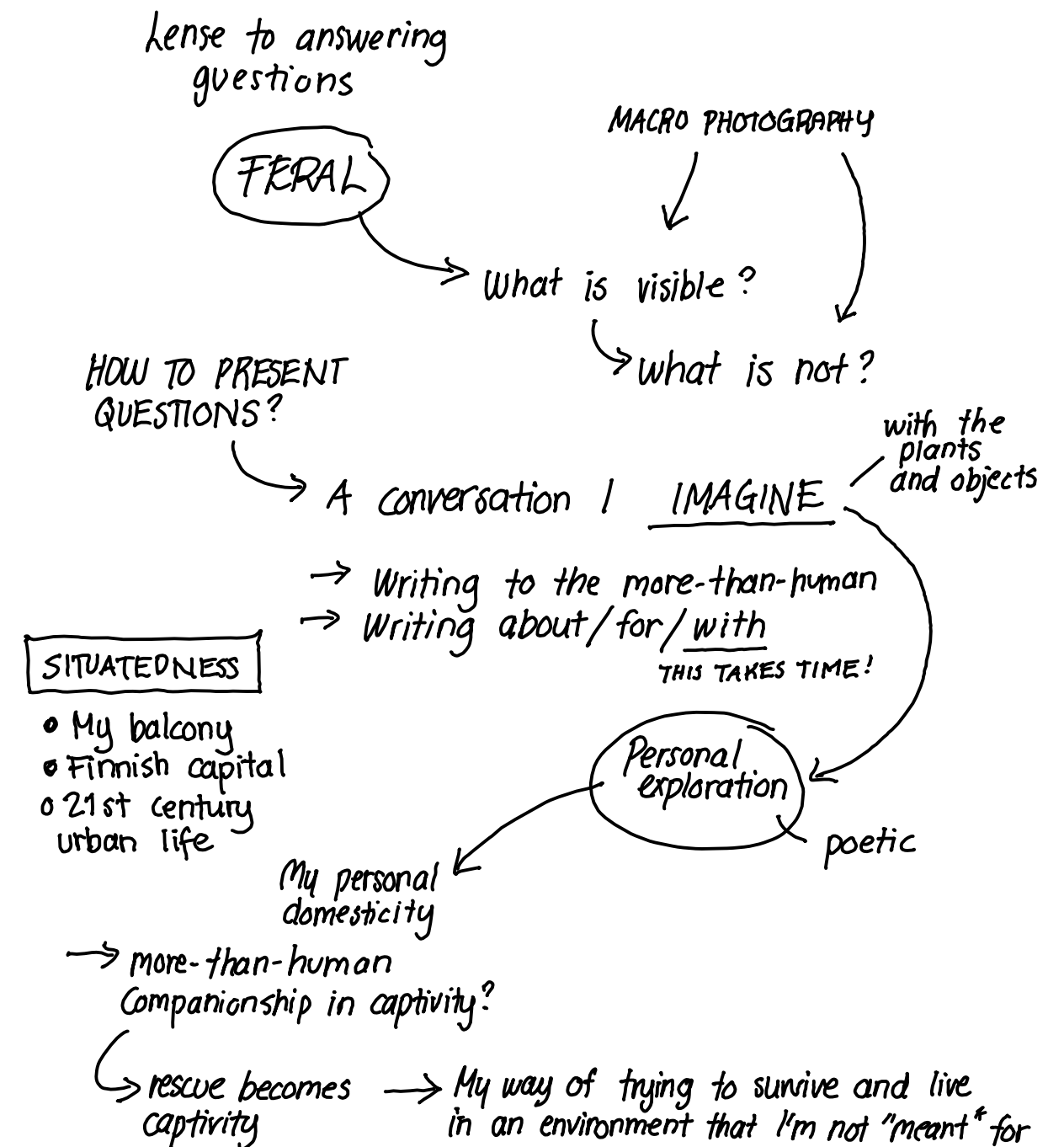
Who has the right to care for whom?

Questions,
questions,
QUESTIONS???

Week 5

Wednesday 22.11.

FEEDBACK 22.11.



Thursday 23.11.

As they had before, Zoe's workshop and writing exercises really helped me to start writing. I realised that writing personally does not need to be about writing from the first persona. I can write personally through different, imaginative characters.

And I started writing, first from the point of view of the pine tree:

The pine tree smelled gas and gagged. It realised that it had not sprouted in a forest as its mother had intended. For some reason it found itself growing in a plastic pot, on a concrete balcony, behind a glass, with its mother nowhere near by. And now it was doomed to spend its first winter living next to a disgusting gas tank.

I was weirdly outside, but not completely. Wind had not come to dance with my needles as my mother had told me he would. I hadn't felt the kisses of raindrops on my face, even if I sometimes heard them right next to me. But I was the most worried about my roots, I was pushing and spreading but kept on hitting a hard wall.

Zoe's writing workshop's final assignment: Write from the perspective of your mth-place/feral artefact communicating with you. What does it want to ask you, what does it need to say.

I started writing to myself as my balcony. And it felt right, I could be personal in my way of relating, I could be critical towards myself with an imaginative voice. All my thoughts about the habitants of my balcony could be presented through a dialog. And my balcony was an agent too, it was the place with a certain form and assumed function that I was working with and observing. Why would my balcony not be speaking?

*I'm not a forest,
even if you would
wish me to be.
I am a balcony, built
by humans, meant
for humans,
whatever that means.
You humans seem
to like hard concrete
and metal surfaces
and to be surround-
ed with glass.
Why?*

Week 6

Final presentations

The feedback that I received after presenting my final feral artefact, a video about an imaginary conversation between me and with my balcony that I decided to call *Maybe I wish that you were a forest*, was generally really positive. We discussed the conversation, if it was apparent that I was talking with my balcony and I replied that eventually the whole thing was a conversation with myself. I had no big final conclusion for my project, it was more for me to ask questions. I have no idea where this imaginative conversation with my balcony would lead. I was told to maybe write about this speculative aspect of my project in my creative essay.

For me this imaginative conversation with my balcony was a format to present my inner dialogue, the thinking process during this course and the questions that spending time with my more-than-human place had raised in me. Speculating about the dialogue allowed me to be very personal and poetic and to leave things open, which is something that I'm not very often allowed in commercial design projects.

I think this process has definitely allowed me to develop sensitivity towards more-than-humans and taught me to allow time for the observation of my relationship with them. I have also learned that not everything I do, see or feel has to be rational, measurable or objective, and the same applies to other creatures.

