RADAR
Research Archive and Digital Asset Repository

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

‘Energy Trees’ for a humane and viable future: a social sculpture approach linking individual and social capital

Maris Palmi (2015)

https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/3ceeac77-3a38-4e33-a48f-78a054d26476/1/

Note if anything has been removed from thesis:

Copyright © and Moral Rights for this thesis are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

When referring to this work, the full bibliographic details must be given as follows:

Palmi, M (2015)
‘Energy Trees’ for a humane and viable future: a social sculpture approach linking individual and social capital
PhD, Oxford Brookes University

WWW.BROOKES.AC.UK/GO/RADAR

‘ENERGY TREES’
for a Humane and Viable Future: a Social Sculpture Approach Linking Individual and Social Capital

Maris Palmi

School of Arts
Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment
Oxford Brookes University

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2015

Abstract

This reflective commentary is an exploration into pragmatic and encouraging ways of how to become actively involved in the field of social sculpture. Inspired by Joseph Beuys' famous quote 'every human being is an artist', this practice-based research study supports the hypothesis that, as potential artists, each human being is highly talented, and therefore able to bring great value to their communities and to the wider society. It suggests that one meaningful *gift* we could make to our society is developing and employing our talents – our unique inner capital – for social benefit and the common good; and that the consequence of this significant contribution would be synergetic growth and development of both individual and social capital. Therefore it would be of equal benefit to individuals, society, and environment. This study is informed and inspired by a set of dialogues and exchanges with Professor Shelley Sacks: the founder and director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University, and a leading expert, researcher, and developer in the field of contemporary social sculpture. The core part of this practice-based study, which is entitled the 'Energy Trees' project, is an exploration of how to create a space and conditions in which individuals can focus consciously on their positive qualities. The main components framing this practice are social sculpture strategies such as *gifting attention, visualising the invisible, reflective dialogue*, and *imaginal thought*, combined with its central methodological element of *positive focus*. Together these elements create a methodology that enables a more enlivening, encouraging, and connective way of perceiving the *self*, its social value, and its potential to contribute to sustainable and humane forms of social development. This process has been undertaken with twenty self-selecting participants who nevertheless reflect different backgrounds and age groups. Offering an artistic counterbalance to the destructive negativity, which seems to predominate in many current views, the visual embodiment of these twenty processes has confirmed the diversity and richness of human talents, capacities, and strengths. This study has also confirmed that more frameworks in which individuals could engage with their invisible inner capital are needed.

Table of Contents

Title Page 1

Abstract 2

Table of Contents 3

Author's Declaration 4

Acknowledgements 5

1. Introduction 6

2. Dialogues with Shelley Sacks – Exploring the Field of Social Sculpture 9

3. Dialogues with Myself 16

- 3.1 Encountering the question 17
- 3.2 Looking for the path through doing 19
- 3.3 Finding the way 21

4. Framework informing and enabling the practice 24

- 4.1 Concept 24
- 4.2 Approach 26
- 4.3 Ethics 26
- 4.4 Structure of participation 27

5. Dialogues with the Other – Evolution of a Social Sculpture Practice 29

- 5.1 Kate: First steps 31
- 5.2 Annelinde and the Social Sculpture Research Unit Community: Work in progress ... 37
- 5.3 Sara: Seeing the invisible 43
- 5.4 Alissar: Gaining positive feedback 47
- 5.5 James Thomson: Reflection instead of solutions 49
- 5.6 Isabel: High expectations of the self 52
- 5.7 / 5.8 Moide and Lola: Working with groups 55
- 5.9 Stephan: To participate or not to participate 58
- 5.10 Maris: Self-exploration 61
- 5.11 Ere: Effortless learning 66
- 5.12 Anita: Societal pressure 69
- 5.13 Nina: What do you think? 72
- 5.14 Hans: Endless field of explorations 74
- 5.15 Chris: Duration and location 77
- 5.16 Sarah: Keeping still 79
- 5.17 Walter: Altruism versus competition 81
- 5.18 Tom: Storytelling 83
- 5.19 Li: Beyond translation: the language of 'warmth' 85
- 5.20 Ellen: The last one for now: another way of telling 88

6. Reflections and Insights 89

7. Conclusion 92

Bibliography 96

Online Credits 98

Picture Credits 99

Appendix – Substantiating raw material 100

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at this or any other institution.

Signature _____

Printed name Maris Palmi

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Shelley Sacks for her guidance, encouragement, inspiration, generosity, and time throughout this research journey. If an *energy tree* was created for Professor Sacks, the capacity for exceptional commitment towards her faculty and students fused with warm-heartedness would instantly emerge.

I would like to thank Dr Ray Lee for his precise and thoughtful advice in the Monday evening PhD sessions.

Thank you to Dr Wolfgang Zumdick, Dr Hildegard Kurt, and the Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU) community for their invaluable feedback.

I thank all the participants and their responders who made the 'Energy Trees' project possible!

I would like to thank my family – my parents who, 15 years ago, bought me a one way ticket to Hamburg; and to my sister Jaana and her husband Ralf for picking me up on the other end and for always providing me a *warm* place on their couch. Thank you also to my brother Madis and his little family.

I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my best friends: to Urs, Kutsuk, and Chirt, without whom this research project would have never emerged and probably never been completed. You three inspire and encourage me the most, and so each day, to *jump* further than possible!

1. Introduction

In 2012, Professor Shelley Sacks gave me the opportunity to join her research team at the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University, in order to undertake this practice-based study. This reflective commentary is a documentation of this intensive and inspiring cooperation, and an exploration into pragmatic and encouraging ways of **how to become actively involved in the field of social sculpture**.

My exploration is based on an understanding that, at its heart, social sculpture is an act of *giving*. Inspired by Joseph Beuys' famous quote 'every human being is an artist', this study supports the **hypothesis** that, as potential artists, each human being is highly talented, and therefore able to bring great value to their communities and to society more widely. Building on this hypothesis I propose that one meaningful *gift* we could make to our society is developing and employing our talents – our unique inner capital – for social benefit and the common good. I suggest that the consequence of this significant contribution would be synergetic[1] growth and development of both individual and social capital, and therefore of equal benefit to individuals, society, and environment.

Yet, these individual resources are often overlooked, one could even say *hidden, ignored, and denied.*[2] Rather than seeing our positive, beautiful, and energising sides, the perception of destructive negativity seems to dominate everyday life: it becomes obvious just by turning on the daily news. In contrast, my **research aims** to offer an artistic counterweight to this habitual and discouraging way of perceiving life by developing an encouraging and inspiring framework in which individuals are able to re-discover, recognise, and acknowledge their own inner resources, and in doing so become more aware of this *invisible capital* and its real value to the wider community.

---

1 Synergetic effect: 'arising between two or more agents, entities, factors, or substances that produces an effect greater than the sum of their individual effects.' (What is synergistic effect? Definition and meaning | Business Dictionary, 2015)

2 The 'Hidden, Ignore, and Denied' (H/I/D) social sculpture practice is one of a number of 'Working with Questions' processes that Sacks has developed to experience questions as trajectories, which if followed, allow 'answers' to unfold. H/I/D offers a particular space to discover what in our society needs to be 'gifted' more attention.

Hence, the **core part of this practice-based study**, the 'Energy Trees' project, is an exploration of how to create a space and conditions in which individuals could focus consciously on their positive sides – their talents, capacities, and strengths – instead of what they feel they might lack. It further aims to offer a direct sense of how, by applying one's current qualities, one could bring great value into personal and social situations.

The main components framing this practice are social sculpture strategies such as *gifting attention, visualising the invisible, reflective dialogue*, and *imaginal thought,* combined with *constructive feedback* and *the principle of positive focus*. Together these elements create a **methodology** that enables a more enlivening, encouraging, and connective way of perceiving the *self*, its social value, and its potential to contribute to sustainable and humane forms of social development.

Developing 'Energy Trees' involved 20 qualitative, semi-structured, reflective dialogue processes with volunteer participants. The process centred round asking each participant: 'What are your most significant talents, capacities, and strengths?' Insights were gathered using a **method** of repeated reflection on action.

Undertaking this practice-based research has allowed me to gain **new knowledge** and contribute to the territory in the following ways:

- developing a body of understanding on the role of contemporary social sculpture strategies and the artistic mode in transformative processes;
- offering a new a social sculpture practice, 'Energy Trees', developed by a method of repeated reflection on action;
- creating a reflective and encouraging space for individuals to discover, recognise, and engage with their talents, capacities, and strengths;
- offering a pragmatic approach for becoming active in the field of social sculpture, and contributing positively to society simply through recognising, valuing, and employing one's individual talents for the benefit of others;
- demonstrating the strategic importance and impact of a *positive focus approach* in transformative processes;
- exhibiting the results of the 'Energy Trees' project to raise public awareness of the richness and diversity of human talents – the true social capital.

This reflective commentary is **divided into seven chapters**: **this first one** provides an overview and the purpose of this research; **chapter 2** explores the field of social sculpture in a dialogue with Shelley Sacks; **chapter 3** frames the research question, reflects on my first practical attempts in the field, and establishes a mode and direction of how to approach the process of developing a social sculpture practice; **chapter 4** outlines the concept, method, and structure of 'Energy Trees'; **chapter 5** shows the evolution of the social sculpture practice 'Energy Trees'; **chapter 6** draws a conclusion and reflects on how 'Energy Trees' could evolve beyond this study; **chapter 7** contextualises this research project as a whole.

2. Dialogues with Shelley Sacks – Exploring the Field of Social Sculpture

'Every human being is an artist.' (Joseph Beuys)
'There is only one field of transformation. And no-one is outside.' (Shelley Sacks)

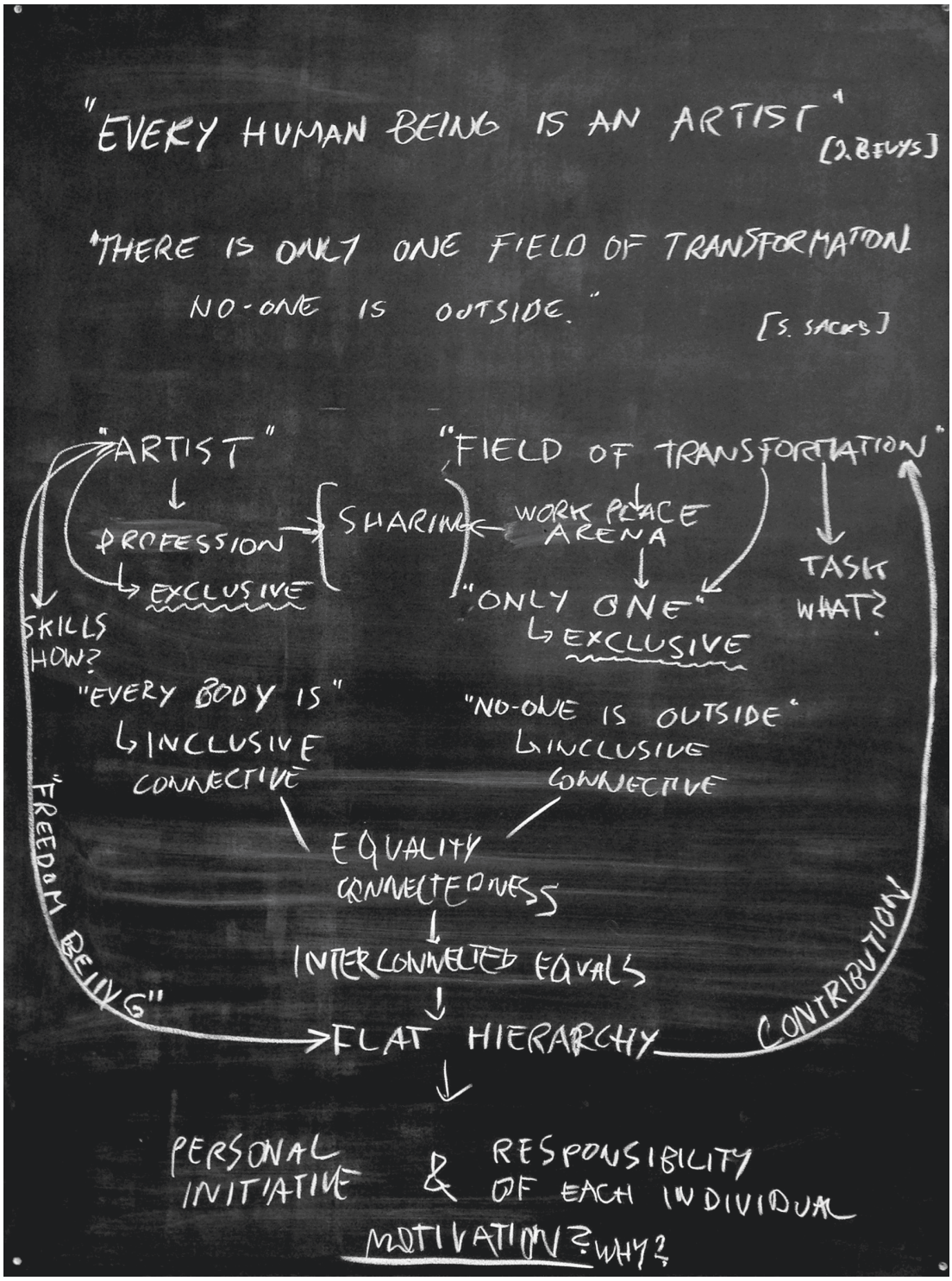


Fig. 1: Exploring the 'Field of Transformation', September 2015

I always wanted to do something creative in my life, but the idea of doing art for arts' sake, or to express myself, never inspired me enough to follow the path of becoming an artist. However, learning about Joseph Beuys' expanded concept of art some years ago gave me a whole new perspective on creativity and artistic activity. I discovered that being an artist, in the Beuysian sense, goes beyond self-expression and shifts the emphasis to each individual as creative contributor to the social good. In fact, when Beuys first introduced his expanded conception of art in the late 1960s he underlined that 'every human being is an artist'[3]. Each individual, he argued, has the creative potential to contribute to the shaping of a free, democratic society, and that the society itself should be seen as an enormous work of art: 'a total art work of the future social order' (Tisdall, 1979: 269).

Whilst exploring ways to work with my design training, I became curious about social sculpture, and discovered that Beuys' former student and co-worker, Shelley Sacks, had subsequently developed contemporary understandings and practices, creative strategies, and a great deal of educational work in this evolving territory. Sacks, one of the leading researchers and developers of contemporary social sculpture worldwide, founded the Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU) in Oxford, launched in 1998 by Johannes Stuettgen and Caroline Tisdall at Oxford Brookes University. Today, much of Sacks' work is concerned with bringing an accessible yet subtle understanding of social sculpture into a participatory civic and educational context. In a similar fashion to Beuys, Sacks uses language as one of her core strategies to engender awareness of our potential, responsibility, and freedom to become active in shaping this 'future social order'. To emphasise the significance of transformative social action, Sacks asserts: 'There is only one field of transformation. And no-one is outside' (Sacks and Zumdick, 2013: 62).

Although the notion of social sculpture seems on one level to be fairly simple, on closer examination it is complex and multidimensional. A linguistic analysis of the Beuys and Sacks quotations above reveals two parameters that apply to all human beings: *artist* and *field of transformation.* One could argue that the first defines a mutual role for and the creative potential of each individual, while the latter is a metaphor for society as

3 Beuys, J. (1973) *'I am searching for Field Character'*, published also in Tisdall 1979: 268-269.

a common arena in which to realise transformative work. Thus, we are all given the same profession: 'every human being is an artist'; and we are all sharing a workspace: 'no-one is outside'.

Paradoxically, these parameters seem to be exclusive and inclusive at the same time. The field of transformation is exclusive and unique, because there is 'only one' such field. On the other hand, this singular arena belongs to everybody, as everybody is situated in this field: 'no-one is outside'. Also, the profession 'artist' involves both exclusivity and inclusivity. Being an artist is often understood as something special, yet Beuys and Sacks incorporate each individual into this unique position.

An extended analysis of these quotes reveals two further significant parameters – equality and connectedness. Because we all share both *the profession* and *the arena*, one could also say that we are therefore interconnected equals. Equality and connectedness, however, are characteristics of flat hierarchies, which rely on the personal initiative and responsibility of individuals. Hence, it seems that social sculpture – as a shared field of transformation – can only flourish through the initiative and responsibility of the individual, and has thus largely a great deal to do with individual motivation and drive.

My own search for such motivation led to an intensive dialogue process with Professor Shelley Sacks, carried out between February 2012 and December 2014 in Oxford. This dialogue, containing more than 25 hours of transcribed material, was one of my primary methods of gaining direct insights into contemporary social sculpture strategies. I discovered for example, with regard to the question of motivation, why and how Sacks relates this to 'inner movement'. 'How to mobilise people internally' (i.e. how to activate people's inner field to become 'agents of change' on many different levels) is a question central to her social sculpture work. Her methodology incorporates Bertolt Brecht's strategy of 'Verfremdung' – 'making strange' – which is based on the idea that in challenging and disrupting our habitual ways of seeing, we might be able to experience and recognise the real problems and challenges of our society and become mobilised internally: *moved to engage* more in the political realities and the social dimension of our lives. Sacks says:

> A huge part of my work can be seen as a practice for people to become conscious… more aware. That is why the University of the Trees starts by creating a 'field of awareness'; and Earth Forum is about getting people to experience and to notice how they think as well as what they think, with the view that this might actually affect how they act. They might, in fact, take more responsibility for their actions. They might realise that they have a certain freedom that they didn't realise before. [Once] you can see what [you] think, if [you] don't like the way you think, you can change how you think.

Thus, one could say that the motivation to become active in the field of social sculpture can only come to individuals – evoked through inner movement – and arise within. This, according to Sacks, is provoked by new questions, new insights, and seeing things differently. Therefore, becoming active as an artist, in an expanded sense, requires a different awareness of the self: one in which recognising oneself as an artist may be a first step. From Sacks' perspective, disrupting our 'habitual way of seeing ourselves' is significant for any transformation:

> Recognition is the first step in the process of internal mobilisation. Another step in this process is the commitment itself. It is not just enough to recognise and acknowledge how we think or what a habit is [...] we have to have the commitment to develop another way, an alternative, instead of just negating what [exists]. So this commitment is… [to do with] the will to keep on trying to find alternatives instead of slipping into known ways that are inappropriate. Commitment [also] has something to do with feeling and with heart.

What is it, then, that defines an artist in this expanded sense as a social sculpture practitioner? Recognising a fine artist is relatively simple: it is someone who provides visible evidence of an artistic action through painting a picture or sculpting a form. But what is the evidence for a social sculpture practice or action? The difficulty here is that much of it happens on an invisible level, starting with shaping one's invisible *inner field* – a complex territory, containing thoughts, attitudes, habits, and fears, as well as capacities. Hence, Sacks describes social sculpture as being also a 'territory where inner and outer work coincide' (Kagan, 2011: 305), and the place wherein this *invisible inner shaping* happens as a 'rent-free space'.

Sacks' metaphor of the 'rent-free space' is a central element in her Earth Forum practice. Having participated in several Earth Forum processes as part of my expanded literature review, my experience was that, through language, Sacks

talks participants into their own 'rent-free spaces' – into an imaginative studio or a workplace, in which indivisible, immaterial forms such as thoughts or attitudes become tangible *sculptures* that can firstly be recognised, observed, and explored, and then, if it seems appropriate, re-shaped. Walking through my 'imaginative studio', I experienced that it is only I who have access to this imaginative 'rent-free space' in which to do this transformative work: to re-shape my thoughts, perceptions, or habits. I also realised that I could choose which of the existing *sculptures* I wanted to re-shape; but, even more importantly, I could also *sculpt* new kinds of forms and thoughts and share these in the outer field. Thus, once again, I faced the question of individual motivation and will – the question of what it would take to roll up my sleeves and start the *sculpting* in both inner and outer spheres.

Although all social sculpture practice is voluntary, Sacks stresses that this freedom is synonymous with responsibility – which Sacks redefines as the 'ability-to-respond'. She argues that working in the field of social sculpture simultaneously requires engendering the ability-to-respond, and activating and shaping both the inner field and outer field. However, with regard to this outer shaping, Sacks emphasises 'the goal that shapes this shaping', and this goal both in her own practice and in the field of social sculpture is 'a humane and ecologically just society' (See Appendix. Note 5).

On the other hand, this transformative work can begin on a very subtle level, in which there might initially be no specific or spectacular outer action. Referring to Beuys' statement that 'thought is plastic' (Bunge, 1996: 24; Zumdick, 2013: 131), Sacks argues that *thought* and *practice* are inseparable, and that on an invisible level a *thought* is already action. Hence, conscious work in the inner field with one's thoughts could in this sense be understood as integral in the field of social sculpture:

> Thoughts are not 'nothing'; they actually have a strong effect. Our thoughts are already forms. They are manifestations of our inner attitude, understanding, and views. Often, this is [something about which we are] completely unconscious, and this is why one of our practices, in fact our first work, can be to at least notice how our thoughts shape, or are the substance, of what we do – they are not separate from practice.

For Sacks part of this 'first work' has also to do with 'gifting our attention'. Although she writes about it in the context of an essay concerned with 'giving and ecological

citizenship' (Sacks, 2011: 38-43), she nevertheless leaves open what the focus of this attention might be. However, since she understands 'gifting attention' as essential to enabling 'presencing' [4], or 'coming to oneself', she also emphasises it to be part of the individual's social sculpture practice, enhancing their capacity to discover and shape their individual agendas from 'inner necessity' (Hayes, 2011: 83). It therefore seems that working in the field of social sculpture has to do with *an ability-to-respond* and to consider where to *gift* one's attention. This suggests that a more differentiated and reflective perception of the self, the other, and the world is necessary. In addition to this both Beuys and Sacks emphasise that social sculpture has to do with movement. Rather than remaining stuck in stagnant forms or opposing black and white categories, social sculpture is concerned with the many shades of grey between these polarities – with the new possibilities that overcome fixed oppositions and emerge in the movement between the poles of *chaos* and *form*.[5] Perhaps this is why different nuances of grey are often found in the visual elements of social sculpture work. Beuys is well known for using grey felt as one on the main materials in his work, whilst the miniature aquarelle paintings in Sacks' ATLAS of 'pathways to ecological citizenship' – with its dark grey spaces, which nevertheless arise from the most diverse, beautiful, and colourful substance beneath and within – are like a chorus whispering thoughts about the future: 'another world is possible'.

My search for personal motivation and meaningful action was further accompanied by regular exchanges with my fellow researchers at the Social Sculpture PhD Fora, initiated by Professor Sacks. While offering a valuable platform for presenting and discussing work in progress, as well as for reflecting on the wider context of contemporary social sculpture, these monthly meetings became of significant importance to my study – in fact, so valuable that, over a period of four years, I attended nearly every meeting. These fora were not only significant in offering a framework for mutual feedback, but were even more so because I learnt how my colleagues were working with the contemporary social sculpture strategies in their specific fields.

4 Sacks' uses the term 'presencing' in a way that is closer to Martin Heidegger than to Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge. For Heidegger it has more to do with *Anwesenheit* – being present, whereas Scharmer relates this to our capacity to 'tune into' the needs of the future (Sacks, 2011: 38-43).

5 Beuys' 'theory of sculpture' is a threefold model including chaos, movement, and form (or thinking, feeling, and will). It emphasises the middle element 'movement' which in its fluid responsiveness, overcomes the binary oppositions and allows new appropriate forms to emerge (Tisdall, 1979: 44 and Zumdick, 2013: 133).

Surprisingly, I found that the majority of the SSRU researchers had no formal artistic background, as one may expect when a faculty is situated in a university's School of Arts. The majority actually came from completely different disciplines, such as health care, education, archaeology, computer science, law, or philosophy. What this interdisciplinary research community shares, however, is an interest in exploring how to contribute toward the shaping of a free, democratic, ecologically viable, and just society, and to do so in a creative way.

One of the most valuable insights I gained in the PhD fora was experiencing the significant roles of focus, persistence, and courage in undertaking this study, especially so at the very early stages of developing the 'Energy Trees' project. Although I felt confident about my project from the very beginning, I simply lacked the capacity to articulate my concept coherently, when first introducing it at the PhD fora. This lead to a great number of critical questions and a confusing debate about whether my intentions were really relevant in the context of social sculpture. Even though this critical debate offered great value in numerous aspects, it also meant that I lost my initial enthusiasm and began doubting my intentions before exploring them in practice. In metaphorical terms, I started to doubt my capacity to paint before ever making a single brush stroke. Nevertheless, surprisingly, these doubts actually became a turning point in my study. On further reflection, I understood that, in order to develop a practice that was meaningful for me, I needed to find some courage, and learn to trust my ideas and intuition. I understood that it was for myself to discover and to choose wherein to *gift* my attention. Furthermore, I decided to focus persistently on those factors that brought my research project forward, rather than being concerned about possible hindrances along the way. Perhaps this insight could also be valuable to others who consider working in the field of social sculpture, yet who hesitate because their ideas may not have an immediate or clear connection to social sculpture. Looking back at my work, I understood that finding a personal entry point to the field was a process of *becoming*, rather than of *being* – first ideas and initiatives must not necessarily make perfect sense; but with a lot of work, enthusiasm, and encouragement they can evolve into something meaningful.

3. Dialogues with Myself

'And so the need to open up spaces, in our private and public lives, to (re)discover and follow our questions, to take them as companions and guides, so we can work with them to re-view and re-shape both personal and social forms.'
(Sacks and Zumdick, 2013: 14)

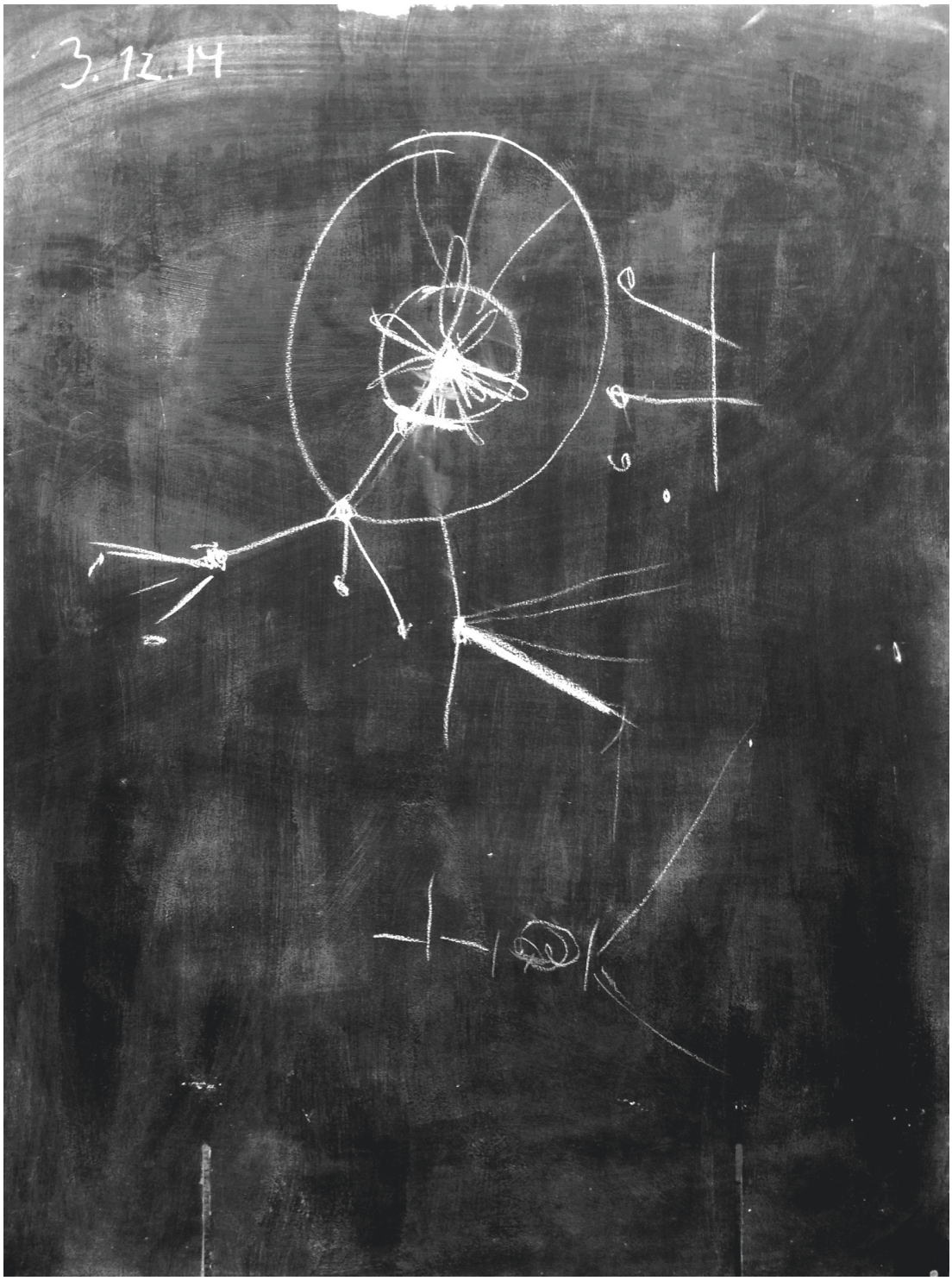


Fig. 2: Exploring the inner and outer fields, December 2014

3.1 Encountering the question

At times, undertaking this research felt like a journey through a dark old forest with my questions in my rucksack[6] telling me not to worry about getting lost, while purposely guiding me into the unknown. The first year goes by; being stuck in the middle of the deepest forest, I wonder 'Is this how it's supposed to be?' In the second year, nothing changes, except feeling even more lost. Then year three seems to bring some light far in the distance, although at this point it is hard to say whether it is real or an illusion. But it is too late to give up now: there is no way back. Then, completely exhausted, walking toward the light, hoping to reach the other side by the end of year four, mysteriously, everything falls into place. 'I told you not to worry,' says a satisfied voice in my rucksack.

What motivated me to undertake this journey through the *dark forest*, to enter the unknown territory, was the question of how to become actively involved in the field of contemporary social sculpture and, as individuals, contribute toward a more humane future social order.

And so I began to realise that becoming active in the field of social sculpture is largely a matter of personal motivation and initiative, a question of will. Looking at my own daily life, I realised that it was filled with activities that I *had to do*, of which earning money to buy food and pay rent were the main part. There was not really anything I *wanted to do*, except watch my daily soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* as some small compensation at the end of another boring, remote-controlled day. But the space, time, energy, and inspiration to imagine achievable alternatives was lacking, because the immediate consequence of not continuing with this moronic everyday cycle of being – no job, no food, and no home – seemed even worse.

Yet, what if I was not stuck in survival mode? How, for example, would I shape my life, if basic income[7] was a reality? Would I be able to unfold my potential and become an 'artist' in the Beuysian sense? Would I be more likely to contribute towards a positive 'future social order' if not worrying about food and shelter? Could I make a meaningful

6 Social sculpture can also be understood as a field of questions. Hence, the focus in its practices is not necessarily searching for answers. Rather, it is searching for questions. Sacks' 'Working with Questions' practice initiated by: 'What questions do I carry in my rucksack?' explores 'questions as forces', offering a space to reflect on and discover one's motivations and interests.

7 'A basic income is an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement.' (What is basic income? | BIEN, 2015)

contribution to society if these basic needs were cared for? What could I contribute today, tomorrow, or in the next three months? While reflecting on these questions, I realised that contributing simply means to give, to help, to collaborate; and logically, I can only give what I have in abundance.

'Abundance?' I thought, grasping at 'nothing' in my empty pockets. What is it that all human beings have or could have in abundance?

In Beuys' expanded conception of art 'every human being is an artist'. For me this is equivalent to saying every human being has *talents*. Could our talents be understood as our individual sources of energy and abundance? And if so, could one way to understand our contribution to society be through developing and *giving* our talents? In fact, one's talents only seem to gain currency and be validated through *giving*, because they emerge mainly in the encounter with another – with someone who recognises, appreciates, and receives their value. Hence, the paradox here is that talent, particularly talent that relates to the sphere beyond oneself, despite being the inner resource of an individual, only emerges and increases when given to another. This echoes Juliet's ever-growing love for Romeo: 'The more I give you, the more I have. It's endless,' (Hutchinson and Shakespeare, 2013: 38). Thus, in order to develop ones individual talents giving is not an option but a necessity. Talents come fully into being only when applied, through interaction and engagement. If not actively used, a talent is like a seed on asphalt – an unused, wasted, and ignored potential. Finding a suitable terrain for its germination – in the case of human beings, a social context – enables the talent to grow, develop, and contribute to the needs of others and of the context. One could therefore say that talents, as individual resources and individual capital, given an appropriate context, are able to transform into *social* capital.

Should it not therefore be a social responsibility to ensure that individuals have the most favourable ground to grow their talents, enabling a virtuous, ever-growing circulation and synergy between individual and social capital? Without this, seeds are left to wither on the asphalt, their potential disregarded. A seed, unlike a human being, does not have to walk around, looking for suitable ground to unfold: the wind can lift it up and take it to where it might thrive. If an apple seed planted in a fertile ground can become a vigorous apple tree, producing the most delicious apples, then why plant it in an inappropriate

place, cause it to suffer, and be surprised about the poor harvest? Why leave human potential to chance, waiting for wind on asphalt? In the image of the abundant apple tree, the connection between talent and giving is also apparent – an apple tree is not growing apples for itself, but for others. Giving away its harvest is in its nature – doing so anew each year, effortlessly, and in abundance. To make a change in society, would it not make more sense to plant apple trees that have the vitality to grow delicious apples rather than disregard what they need and leave their potential to wither?

3.2 Looking for the path through doing

> *'The phrase 'gifting attention' – in German 'Aufmerksamkeit schenken' – is of primary significance in our attempt to connect with the world and to shape a viable future. Yes, attention is the first gift that we give to the world.'*
> *(Shelley Sacks)*[8]

Based on previous reflections upon ways of engendering participation in the shaping of our lives, I decided to centre my practical explorations on developing an approach to enable greater awareness of the existence and value of one's individual talents – how to 'gift' our attention to our talents. The following three attempts contributed to evolving an appropriate form for my final practice: 'Energy Trees'.

The first exploration: Talent cookies

The idea was to enable food to take on a deeper meaning than that of fulfilling basic bodily needs. My intention was to present food as transformative nourishment for the human spirit, soul, and body simultaneously. Rather than being a sweet compensation for an unfulfilling life, my intention was for the 'talent cookies' by enabling one to get in contact with one's real inner talents, to provide an imaginative and nourishing link between ones current situation and ones future possibilities. And that this, in turn, would give one the necessary power to handle challenging situations in everyday life. Having explored this with different participants and groups, I decided not to take this forward. It was clearly too abstract and also liable to cause inappropriate associations, such as seeming to promote 'legal highs'.

8 Sacks and Zumdick, 2013: 56

The second exploration: Talent capsule

The idea was to create a 3-dimensional protected space in which to engage inwardly and silently with the questions, 'What are my talents and how am I using these in my daily life?' The talent capsule aimed to create a space for new perceptions, inner focus, and reflective thought. The reason for not taking this experiment forward was that instead of enabling a focus on one's invisible inner resources, the visible physical form of the object dominated and became the focus itself. One aim of contemporary social sculpture practices is to develop and work with 'instruments of consciousness' rather than producing 'objects of attention'.[9] Having experienced this issue in practice, I began to explore different approaches to engaging with and highlighting our talents.

The third exploration: Talent discs

Ongoing explorations evolved into an idea for creating an archive of human talents. To develop this I asked people to consider what they thought their most significant talents to be; to write on a cardboard beer-mat-like disc, and then to *gift* these to the archive. The reason for not taking this exploration forward was that it did not engender much reflective exchange and the *gifted* talents remained words on a paper disc.

Insights

On reflection, an overriding reason why none of these ideas and explorations really worked had to do with the fact that I was trying to envision potential end forms and approaches that were somewhat removed from my knowledge and experience, which was being directed outwards into known approaches. I was trying to do what I thought was expected of such work, ignoring what I truly wanted to do, and, even more importantly, what I was able to do. I had forgotten to focus inwardly and, therefore, ignored the core principle of my thesis – that of acting in accordance with one's individual talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions. Although my intention had been to enable a direct and enhanced awareness of one's talents, I had to accept that the ways I had been trying were

9 Sacks, S., 2014. Academic profile. [online] Available at: http://arts.brookes.ac.uk/staff/shelleysacks.html [Accessed 27 October 2015] and Sacks, S., University of the Trees: 'Instrument of Consciousness' [online] Available at: www.universityofthetrees.org/about/instruments-of-consciousness.html [Accessed 18 November 2015].

inappropriate. Not least because I am a terrible cook and have minimal 3-D making skills. It took some effort to return to and re-enter these attempts and explore why things had not worked as intended. Part of this involved recognising the mismatch between what I had intended and *my* talents!

This provoked a shift in focus. Instead of trying to devise an appropriate end form, I decided to begin with myself. I started to look for connections between my talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions. This became the basis for developing 'Energy Trees'. It was also clear that whatever I brought people into had to offer an embodied and imaginal experience. But in order to develop such a process and shape the project, I first had to locate and recognise the visible and invisible materials in myself. Not only was this practice intended to highlight 'the artist' in others, first it had to be meaningful to and support the 'artist' in myself. Having realised this I shifted my focus inwardly to explore what was needed to become more aware of my own inner resources and their value for others. This was the starting point for developing the 'Energy Trees' practice.

3.3 Finding the way

This practice-based research was in part a study of myself through engagement with my own actions and envisaged practice. Within this I explored the *positive focus approach* to my inner and outer resources. The task I defined for myself was simple: find a way to create value for others in accordance with your *talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions.* In other words, do something you *can and want to do*, just as an *artist* would.

Although this may sound simple, in fact, quite the opposite is the case. Finding an *intersection* between these four parameters of talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions was an intensive, introspective, and reflective research journey, with regular dead ends.

What helped me identify my way within this field of parameters was the compass of 'effortless action'.[10] While evolving my practice, I checked regularly how I felt about the

10 Singerland describes 'effortless action' as a state of harmony containing 'complex cognitive as well as somatic elements … [the] individual still makes choices – and may even at times pause to weigh various options or consider the situation ahead – but even such deliberations are performed with a sort of effortless ease.' However it is not about 'instinctual or merely habitual forms of actions […] a higher degree of concentration on the part of the agent allows a considerable amount of flexibility and response […] it is not to be viewed as mindless behaviour but should rather be seen as springing from the embodied mind' (Singerland, 2000: 300).

specific forms and ideas I was working with, hoping to achieve such effortlessness by doing things playfully and with ease.[11]

Although this may sound like an *easy way out*, it was just the opposite. In fact, it meant struggling to find an appropriate and genuine modus operandi, a way that would therefore also be self-determined and independent, a way into the inner field, to experience the self as an artist; and into the outer field of the world to try contribute to positive and creative change as a conscious 'freedom being'. Finding a way to work with these parameters was not an endpoint; it was, instead, an exciting beginning, and a foundation for developing the 'Energy Trees' process with 20 participants.

And so, the discovery of the four parameters, were not only a turning point in undertaking this whole study, but were also an enhancement of my personal motivation and creativity. Seen as an image, this intersection of parameters could be described as an upward spiral, synergetic and three-dimensional, where all four components – *talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions* – in meeting, amplify and enable each other. Having found a suitable match between my inner capacities and outer possibilities, I was able to explore what I was truly interested in. It also seemed like this confluence and cohesion released more vitality and the necessary energy to do this work. Was this coming from within? I became an early riser, enthusiastic to work on this project from 7 a.m. everyday. Well, almost. In comparison to the first three years of my research, in this final year, I accomplished much more, and with less effort. In fact, it was only in achieving this *state of mind,* that I was able to approach my practical work creatively: with real curiosity, inspiration, and intuition. I experienced my creative capacities emerging naturally only once these four elements came together. Hence, it seems that locating and connecting with one's talent is essential to be able to unfold one's creative potential and become an artist in the Beuysian sense. I would even argue that, rather than being a phenomenon in isolation, creativity is a complementary element, most likely to emerge in reciprocity, when one's true talents are brought into an appropriate context.

---

11 In the course of my research I realised that this 'play drive' not only has parallels to Schiller's third force that offers an alternative to the two poles of instinct and reason, but that this third force maps onto the Beuysian theory of social sculpture in which 'movement' is the third force.

So, although latent in each individual, creativity cannot be assumed in all circumstances. For example, I am unlikely to discover any creative potential when having to sing, play an instrument, or solve complex mathematical problems. I also failed to realise my creative potential when trying to bake simple biscuits or build a 3-D model – yet in 'Energy Trees' I succeeded. I had no expectation that my own creativity and inner resources would emerge so strongly while encountering others in front of a blackboard (see 4.4). This only evolved in action, and in experiencing that my work was of value to others. Developing my own creative potential therefore evolved in time, but only in the appropriate conditions. However, it is also clear that the *less productive* years of this research played an important role. This time was used to activate my inner field: to observe, to experiment, to deal with difficulties, including despair, and to learn through failure what I *could not* and *did not want* to do, and which also had no value to others. Only by investing a great deal of time, effort, and careful observation, but most importantly, by focusing on the positive and constructive findings, was I able to recognise the intersection of my *talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions* and, from that point onward, approach my practical work fairly effortlessly. This experience became an understanding that fuelled and informed the work with others and confirmed this study's findings of how the discovery and articulation of a set of positive capacities and their relationship to personal motivation, can lead to an engaged and response-able life practice.

4. Framework informing and enabling the practice

'ART=CAPITAL' (Joseph Beuys)[12]

4.1 Concept

Both my theoretical and practice-based explorations have led me to conclude that being active in the field of social sculpture is, at heart, an act of giving. Hence, regarding my research question, on how individuals become active in this transformative field, I suggest that it begins with the recognition that everybody has something to give, and that therefore each individual is able, in principle, to bring value to their community as well as to the wider society. Referring to Joseph Beuys' expanded concept of art and his formula of 'art=capital' (Beuys, 2010: 86), I propose that each human being's true capital consists of their specific talents, capacities, and strengths, which in their application – through giving – transform into social capital. Furthermore, paradoxically, I argue that this individual capital is only current, capable of growth and development, and of any personal advantage to its 'owner', if it is applied for the benefit of others. Becoming active in the field of social sculpture has, therefore, to do with employing one's individual capital for social benefit.

Hence, in the framework of this study, the term *individual capital* comprises the intangible resources of an individual, such as their talents, capacities, and strengths, which become evident and visible only in their application. If not applied, this capital remains *invisible* and irrelevant. The term *social capital* refers to the value that individuals can create in their communities and the wider society, when applying their specific talents, capacities, and strengths for their own benefit and the benefit of others simultaneously. This approach would lead to a synergetic and viable circulation between individual and social capital. The idea of synergy is central in this concept, because in order to develop our individual talents, we need a supportive social environment, such as access to education, for example. On the other hand, the development of society depends on the value created by individuals.

12 Beuys, 2010: 86

Thus, my social sculpture practice, the 'Energy Trees' project, focuses on enabling individuals to recognise and become aware of the existence and significance of some of their unique talents, capacities, and strengths as a first step toward becoming a social transformer and an 'agent of change'. It also includes an artistic exploration of contemporary social sculpture strategies, such as *gifting attention, visualising the invisible, reflective dialogue, imaginal thought,* combined with its central methodological element of *positive framing*. These strategic components are defined and integrated in working with individuals as follows: *gifting attention* is a phrase that Shelley Sacks uses, as one of her language-based instruments in her social sculpture practice, to emphasise the importance of the ability to notice, to respond, to connect, to become aware of, in order to enable transformative processes. Based on this understanding, I explore how *gifting attention* could be a means for enabling individuals to become more aware of the existence and value of their most significant qualities. In doing so, *visualising* plays a key role in that process. Thus *visualising the invisible* refers to the exploration of how to bring human capacities – the invisible, non-physical, intangible materials – into a *visible* form, and thus into a greater focus. *Reflective dialogue* is about enabling a more dynamic thought process that follows no other agenda than to reflect on a subject – in this particular framework being talents, capacities, and strengths. Defining specific expectations or desired outcomes prior to a dialogue is to be avoided. Instead, an open, non-judgemental, and *imaginative mode of thinking* is of importance, so that new thought streams and insights could emerge. *Positive framing,* being a central strategy of this practice, specifies that whatever is shared in the process must be encouraging and constructive. Instead of identifying possible difficulties or looking at resources that one may lack, recognising positive opportunities and existing resources is in the absolute focus. Joining these particular components, 'Energy Trees' aims to offer an approach for a more enlivening, encouraging, and connective way of perceiving the self, its social value, and its potential to contribute toward more sustainable and humane forms of social development.

4.2 Approach

Developing this practice involved working with volunteer participants using a method of repeated reflection on action.[13] More precisely, I carried out 20 qualitative dialogue processes with groups and in one-on-one sessions. These semi-structured dialogues were based on three key questions concerning the participant's talents, capacities, and strengths (see 4.3). All 20 sessions were subsequently analysed, and the insights considered for further exploration. A core concern in working with the participants was also to explore my role as a facilitator. In this role I was creating the conditions in which participants felt able to reflect on their personal qualities and to gain new insights into their potential for bringing value to their communities through contributing their qualities. The flexible and responsive character of this method allowed for a certain spontaneity. This enabled me to vary the nature and form of my engagement, to respond appropriately to what emerged in different sessions, and to develop and adjust this social sculpture practice step-by-step. Developing this practice also allowed me to investigate the role of certain contemporary social sculpture strategies in a potentially transformative process, whilst exploring and understanding how to work with these strategies as a social sculpture practitioner.[14]

4.3 Ethics

This PhD study is fully approved by the University Research Ethics Committee at Oxford Brookes University. It also complies with the ethical principles in the field of social sculpture. One such principle is that participation is voluntary and based on open invitation. This practice was also 'first come, first served'. Factors such as age, gender, profession, or cultural background of the participants were ignored. The purpose of the study was communicated openly and in different ways, to give a range of people the chance to decide freely whether they wanted to participate or not. The structure of the process itself enabled both active and passive engagement, with participants always being free to decide their own level of their

13 This core social sculpture approach is also central to the work of Donald Schön. He describes it as a capacity of professionals to 'think about doing something while doing it' as well as to reflect on the actions undertaken and apply previous experiences to new situations (Schön, 1991: 54).

14 Although this process, aiming to support individuals recognising their most significant talents, capacities, and strengths, has some relationship to appreciative enquiry or personal development processes, it is not placed in either of these fields. The reason for this practice being situated in the field of contemporary social sculpture is that the process does not elaborate any personal agendas, action plans, or solutions. Instead, it offers a space for reflection, which nonetheless may lead to new insights, and provide an entry point into more goal-orientated change or development processes.

engagement. The participants were also told they could withdraw from the process at any time and, if they did so, would not be obliged to explain their decision. To choose to be silent or to leave the process would not be taken as a sign of failure.

4.4 Structure of participation

Participation in the project 'Energy Trees' involved two stages: preparation and participation.

Stage 1: Preparation for the session

The participants were asked to prepare for their session as follows:

1. To answer the following question: 'What would you say are your most significant talents/capacities/strengths?' The participants were free to respond to these terms – talents, capacities, strengths – separately or use them as synonyms.

2. To ask three to five people of their choice ('the responders') the following question: 'What would you say – spontaneously – are three to five of my most significant talents/capacities/strengths?' Again, the responders could interpret the terms individually or use them synonymously. I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers, and suggested too that the feedback about another person's positive qualities could be seen as a gift.

Stage 2. Participation in the session

Participation in the actual session involved a one- to two-hour reflective social sculpture process, in three phases:

Phase 1. Gathering the qualities on the black board

Firstly, the participant was asked to share what emerged in the preparatory stage. Having described their most significant qualities, these were noted on the left side of a blackboard. Next, the participants shared the feedback offered by each of their responders. This feedback was documented on the right side of the blackboard. If the responders were present during the session, they were invited to personally offer their feedback about the main participant.

Phase 2. Exploring the qualities together

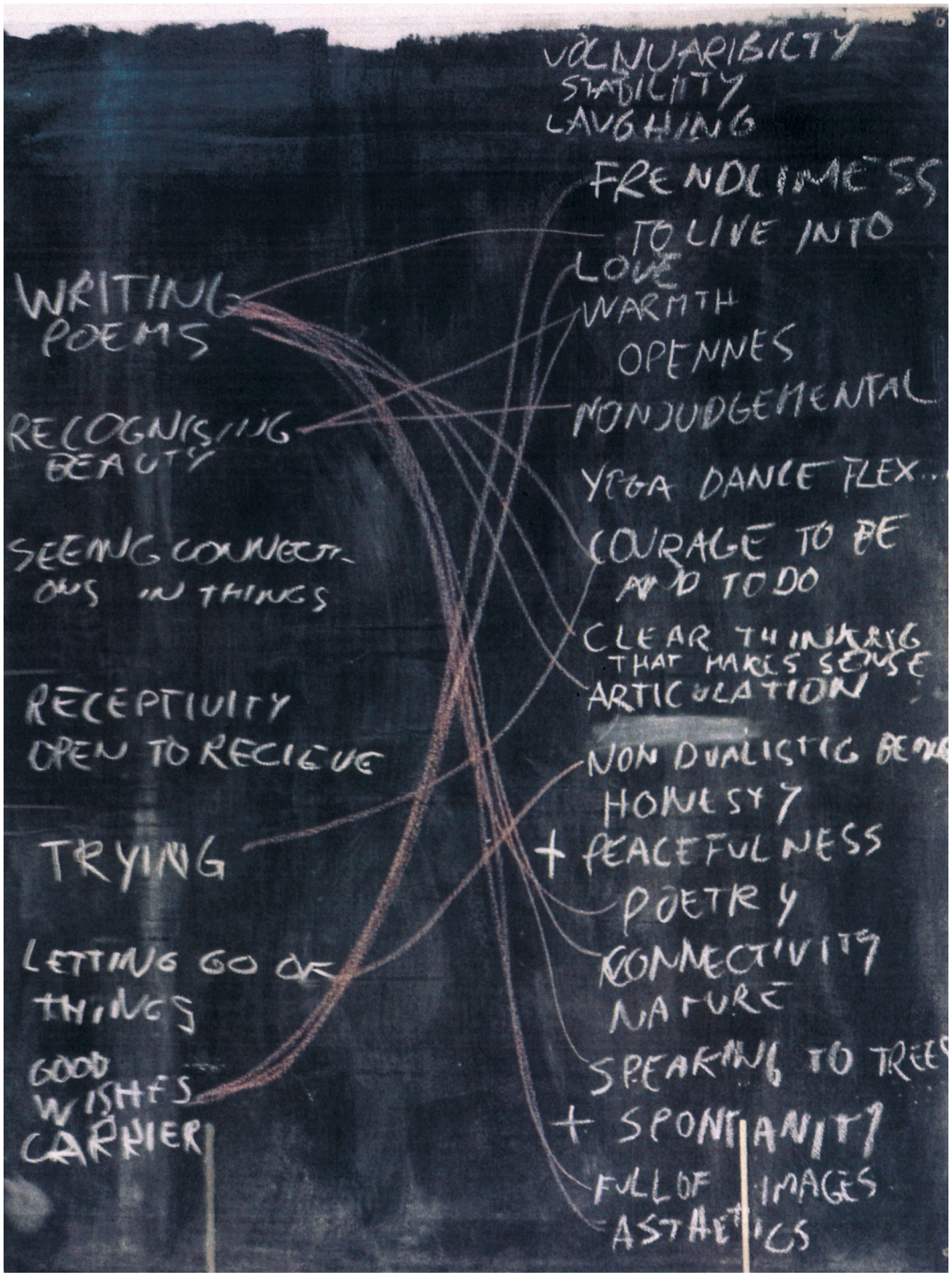
In the second phase of this process I facilitated an exploration of how the perspectives of each participant and their responders connect and inform each other. These connections were visualised and embodied on the blackboard in a form that took on the character of an *'energy tree'*. This reflective process included an expansion of each of the named qualities through visual forms and language – which gave rise to alternative ways of naming, understanding, describing, and perceiving all the qualities first listed. This part of the process lasted as long as the participants were interested and found it useful, but no longer than the two-hour agreed limit. It was usually the most creative part of the process, where the most insights and moments of new awareness were generated.

Phase 3. Employing personal qualities through social engagement

The third phase of this process involved reflection on how to utilise the discovered talents, capacities, and strengths for social good. The participants were asked which, if any, of the discovered qualities they would like to focus on and bring 'into circulation' within the next three months. Could they imagine any context where these qualities would be useful to others and of social benefit? The proposed 3-month timeframe was intended to generate momentum for a more active and situated engagement with what was revealed in the process.

5. Dialogues with the Other – Evolution of a Social Sculpture Practice

The following section of this commentary reveals insights into the twenty reflective processes carried out with volunteer participants in the period between September 2014 and May 2015. The first two sessions will be described and considered in some detail. The purpose of the initial two sessions was to test and discuss the basic structure (see 4.3) with my peers. This helped ensure that the ethical principles of social sculpture were considered and incorporated. The results of sessions three to twenty will be presented more briefly, only focusing on key insights and discoveries. Together, these twenty sessions build a collage of insights that has enabled me to develop this new social sculpture practice.



'For Kate'
Energy Tree No. 01: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Kate, Annelinde, Markus, John, and Maris in September 2014.

5.1 Kate: First steps

My first attempts to shape a practice centred round human talents indicated that, often, people hesitate to speak positively about themselves. They tend to shut off, in particular when they have been asked about their specific talents. 'What, my talents? I don't really have any,' was a frequent response. Yet, I sensed that beneath this negation there was often an unspoken counter question of 'Or do I?', which in a way suggested that this was something for others to answer. 'Alright, answered by others… that's doable,' I thought, and started to explore how to create a framework, in which a 'doubting self' could encounter the 'acknowledging other'. My goal was to create a reflective space that allows individuals to engage with their positive qualities playfully and encouragingly; a space in which a definitive conviction 'I have no talents' could be reconsidered and reshaped at least into a real possibility, if not a self-conscious 'yes, I do have talents'.

My peers Kate, Annelinde, Markus, and John were the first participants to help me – as a group – to test the basic structure of this social sculpture process. In this first exploration I was particularly interested to see whether bringing together a person's self-perception with the perception of others would enable a more empathic, positive, and inspiring conception of the self.[15]

We met one Wednesday evening in late September 2014. The group agreed that Kate would be the main participant, because Annelinde, Markus, and John knew Kate well enough to be her 'responders' and reflect on her qualities, which is necessary in order to undertake this process. At this early stage I only used the word 'talent' in the task description. The additional terms 'capacities' and 'strengths' were added from the third session onwards, to offer the participants more flexibility in describing and interpreting their qualities.[16]

---

15 Sacks stresses the necessity to become more aware of the self – of the I-sense, in order to be able to 'recognise, see, and respect the being of an other' including human and non-human beings. She claims that developing the capacity of the I-sense is therefore one of the central concerns in the field of social sculpture (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012: '45).

16 In this practice participants were free to select and respond to the terms 'capacities', 'talents' and 'strengths' individually, and to use them as synonyms. I never judged, doubted, or questioned the participants' interpretations of these terms. However, if a participant found it difficult to come up with anything, I shared Ken Robinson's concept of being in ones 'element', which he uses to describe the place where the things we love to do and the things we are good at come together' (Robinson and Aronica, 2010: 14).

Although this first trial session, lasting only one hour, was not a complete implementation of the process, I was astonished by the group's energetic, thoughtful, and constructive engagement.

Kate and her responders had about seven minutes for the **preparatory stage**. I asked everybody to be spontaneous, playful, and generous, whilst gathering thoughts about Kate's talents. The attendees prepared their feedback separately and in silence.

Phase 1

We began the participatory stage with Kate sharing her thoughts about her own talents:

> Writing poems, making poems – it's really embarrassing – recognising beauty, seeing connections in things, receptivity, being open to receive, trying, and carrying around wishes.

I noticed that Kate felt uncomfortable and acknowledged what she had just shared: 'Trying! That sounds important.' I did not give any instructions to the Kate's responders how to behave while Kate was sharing her perceptions. Kate's responders joined in on their own initiative and encouraged her through their affirmation and humorous remarks about her ability to 'carry around' good wishes. My sense was that this playful intervention relaxed the situation and Kate felt more comfortable talking about her positive sides.

I then asked Kate's **responders** to share what they had written in the preparatory stage. During the **feedback**, I realised that the feedback was not random – the group had given Kate their full attention.[17] The phrases we wrote on the blackboard were filled with genuine content, resulting from the explanations and from the sincere tone in which the feedback had been communicated. I consciously avoid the term 'discussion' here, to emphasise that there are no right or wrong ways to interpret the words 'talents', 'capacities', and 'strengths' in the framework of this process. However, feedback should always be constructive, focus on positive qualities, and not become a destructive debate or an opinionated argument.

17 Sacks reflects on different aspects of 'gifting attention' in her essay 'Geben und ökologische Bürgerschaft' (Giving and Ecological Citizenship), explaining 'gifting attention' as a mobilising force (Sacks, 2011: 42).

Annelinde said her feedback was based on her experience of Kate's talent for 'clear thinking and articulation'. She described Kate's talent as follows:

> You have a talent for clear thinking, for coming out with new thought streams that feel very connected and really make sense. I learn a lot through how you articulate these new thoughts.

I asked Annelinde whether this had something to do with logic. She responded:

> I was thinking of using the word logic and I didn't write it down. But, actually, logic means that something makes sense.

John doubted whether 'logic' was the best word in that context. Kate added that, for her, logic was something that relates to mathematics. This short exchange helped me to realise that my role as facilitator is also to ask clarifying questions that help to contextualise, expand, and deepen the meaning of the shared feedback.

Markus offered another remarkable layer to the process by sharing this about Kate:

> I also wrote 'vulnerability' but at the same time 'stability'. I almost perceive this as one capacity.

Although we did not take this thought further during the session, it is fascinating to look at the combination of vulnerability and stability. What is the connection between vulnerability and stability? What does this connection give rise to? Does it mean that showing vulnerability requires stability, or that being stable does not necessarily exclude vulnerability? Furthermore, seeing vulnerability as a quality indicates that there is not necessarily a border between human strengths and weakness and that the significance of each quality depends largely on the context of their application.

John was very specific in his feedback. He saw Kate as having the capacity to 'connect with nature, connectivity, and speaking to the trees.' Kate told me in a later conversation[18] that she was 'amazed' to hear that, because, at the time, she had forgotten about having these capacities. During the process however, she realised the following about her qualities:

---

18 I had only one session with each of the participants. However, participants could contact me if they wished to reflect on the practice after their participation. Kate and I had several exchanges, either in person or via email, after her session.

> These invisible things perhaps are not seen as valuable in mainstream culture. It's not necessarily (seen as) tangible or valuable, because there is not this reality there. Then to hear that those things actually were experienced and felt by other people was really meaningful. I don't think I have ever really heard that in such a clear way.

Phase 2

After gathering the self-perceived and gifted qualities on the blackboard, I introduced the second phase of the process, which explores how the participant's and the responder's perceptions connect with and inform each other. Thereby, a recognized association is documented. Through drawing lines on the blackboard connections are acknowledged, and in this instance for example a line between 'writing poems' and 'courage to be and to do' was drawn. As time was limited in this trial session, I suggested looking for strong evidence of a specific talent. This led the group to conclude fairly quickly that all Kate's qualities relate to 'poetry', and so I decided to shorten the second phase and enter the third phase of the process.

Phase 3

The third phase revealed some difficulties for both the group and myself. It became clear that I had not yet found an appropriate way to introduce and articulate this phase of the process, which focuses on how to unfold, activate, and utilise one of the identified personal talents in a social context.[19] Although Kate thought that the idea was interesting, she found it difficult to make a choice in such a short time and said:

> It didn't feel uncomfortable, but how could I possibly choose one thing that is speaking louder than everything else? In a different moment, it might be very easy to see, 'oh, that one thing', but it felt that there was so much and I couldn't really pick one.

John and Annelinde thought it would be useful if the main participant had more time alone, to engage with what had emerged in the process. Markus wondered whether participants might 'feel a bit forced'[20] to work with talents that had become evident through the process. I agree with this criticism. As a facilitator, it is my responsibility to

19 The third phase of this reflective process involves a reflection on how to utilise the discovered talents, capacities, and strengths for social good. The participants were asked which, if any, of the discovered qualities they would like to focus on and bring 'into circulation' within the following three months. Could they imagine any context where these qualities would be useful to others and of social benefit? The proposed three-month timeframe is intended to generate momentum for a more active and situated engagement with what is revealed in the process.

20 See Appendix. Note 1

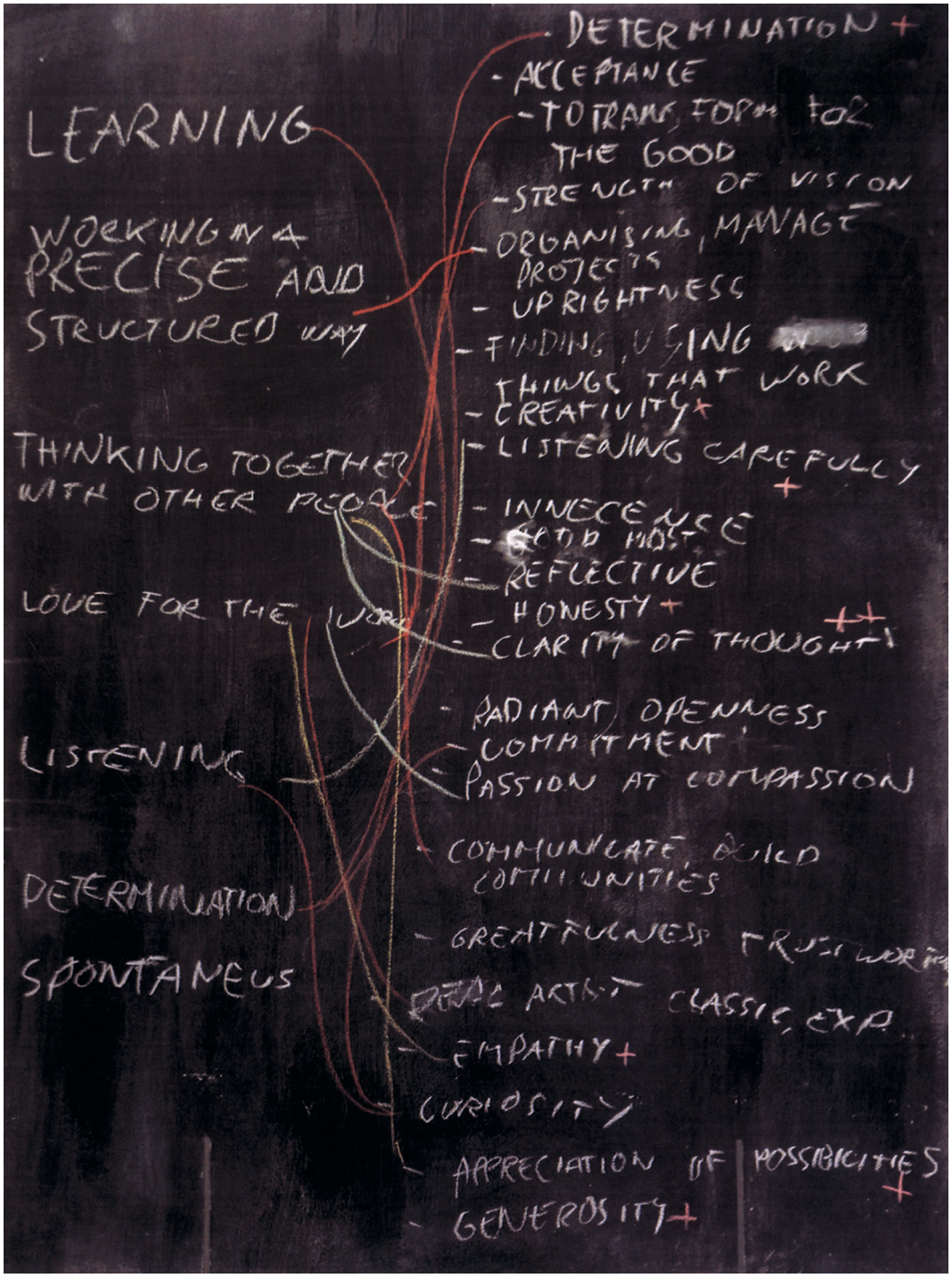
ensure that the participants feel comfortable throughout the whole process, and never feel forced, compelled, or particularly encouraged to do anything they do not want to. I therefore emphasised at the start of all further sessions that the process could be stopped at any point. Furthermore, between the three different phases of the process I also checked if the participants were finding it useful and were happy to continue.

Conclusion

This process with Kate was my first attempt to explore the process with participants in this way. I was surprised at how well the strategy of bringing together one's positive self-perception and the positive feedback of others worked. Even though Kate felt slightly uncomfortable at the beginning of the process, she overcame feeling 'embarrassed' when receiving the feedback. Kate reflected:

> When people say [positive] things about you, [it shows] that they recognise you. It's validating you, and it's making you more real in a certain way. I actually felt almost as if more of my body was alive – like more energy in my body. [...] There are similarities between what I saw, but there are also things that I hadn't said, or that weren't present for me at this moment. [...] It is good to be reminded of your higher nature because we live a lot in a lower nature. Or we remind ourselves of our own hindrances. To be reminded of the higher things that you offer is really clarifying in some way. [The process] gives people a space to actually really say certain things. It does touch you quite deeply when someone says something that they find true in you. There is obviously something that you would hope for yourself to be seen for, something that you feel that you have, but here it comes to another level of reality. It is a movement. It is actually a physical movement inside you.

The first trial session helped me to understand the strategic significance in this practice, of being acknowledged by others. Kate experience was that being acknowledged and seen by others for her qualities brought new energy and movement, and enabled a more empathic and enlivened way of perceiving the self.



'For Annelinde'

Energy Tree No. 02: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Annelinde, The Social Sculpture Research Unit Community, and Maris in September 2014.

5.2 Annelinde and the Social Sculpture Research Unit Community: Work in progress

Having decided to go ahead now with this exploration, I took a chance and shared the practice with my supervisors and fellow researchers in a Social Sculpture PhD forum the next day.[21] Annelinde, having participated in Kate's process and knowing what to expect, volunteered as the main participant. My supervisors Professor Shelley Sacks and Dr Wolfgang Zumdick,[22] together with fellow PhD candidates and colleagues of Annelinde's, agreed to be Annelinde's responders. As part of this monthly research forum, Annelinde's session was a mixture of doing, presentation, and discussion: the first phase of the process was implemented; the second and third phases introduced as an idea and discussed subsequently.

At the start of these explorations, one of my strategies was to leave the participants a lot of space for their own engagement and interpretation of what emerged in the process. This, for example, is why the dialogue processes were semi-structured and based only on three key questions. This is also why I left the key terms 'talents', 'capacities', and 'strengths' undefined in all of the 20 sessions. My main focus in Annelinde's session was to observe what occurs in the first phase of the process if there are minimum instructions and interventions. I was also keen to hear the group's feedback to my proposed approach.[23] The following paragraphs summarise the considerations and insights that emerged in this session.

Difficulties with the word 'talent'

Annelinde felt slightly conflicted when articulating her own talents, because her parents had taught her to be modest. She replaced the term 'talent' with 'capacity' and said:

> Talent, to me, is something that you either have or not; capacity is something that can be developed. I used to be very shy. If you would have asked me 15 years ago – I was very young then – I wouldn't have said that I was able to talk

21 PhD fora are monthly meetings for PhD students in the field of social sculpture to present and discuss work in progress. It also offers a space to test participatory work and gain direct feedback from the professors and fellow researchers.

22 In this 'sessions with participants' section of my 'Reflective Commentary' my supervisors, Professor Shelley Sacks and Dr Wolfgang Zumdick who participated as 'responders' are referred by their fore names.

23 One principle in these PhD fora is to give feedback instead of asking questions. The person receiving feedback only listens to what is said. At the end of this process one has the chance to respond to and discuss what has been said. This enables the researcher to get a better idea of how the practice is working instead of their intention being scrutinized.

> to people or that I was strong. All these things are in motion and they are all things that you can influence with your will to develop certain things.

What about the missing capacities?

Looking at the list of her capacities, Annelinde noted that she is using many of these capacities anyhow, and that she would rather focus on developing new ones.[24] She named 'spontaneity' as an example and reflected:

> Spontaneity – I have some capacity for that, but it is a really important capacity. […] I would like to learn more how to think whilst I'm talking. Sometimes it's possible. But, especially in situations where there is certain expectation of what I'm going to say, I need to prepare very well. I can work in a structured way, and then it's fine; but there is another quality that hasn't developed so much yet. Maybe it comes with experience. So, what about the things I wished were in this list?

Shelley offered a refined solution to Annelinde's desire to focus on *new* capacities. She suggested that the list on the blackboard might offer alternatives for the missing capacities if one could 're-enter' and 'rethink' the qualities listed and then see if anything emerged that would extend the existing capacities.[25]

As a facilitator I realised I could have refocused Annelinde's attention on her listed qualities rather than letting her get concerned about the 'missing' ones. I could, for example, have asked her to describe, more specifically, how and in what contexts she uses her existing qualities, and then, in the third phase, enable reflection on the potential social benefit of these resources. Identifying qualities that one wishes to have may offer insights for the participant, but it is not the aim of this process. The focus here is on becoming more aware of one's existing individual qualities and reflecting on how, through ones daily actions, one might *invest* this newly recognised individual capital more consciously in the social sphere. This would obviously also depend on the possibilities of the context.

What is good and what is bad?

Perhaps, when the group started to disagree in phase one about whether some of the named qualities were actually positive, I should have intervened to bring the group's attention back to the actual purpose of process.

---

24 See Appendix. Note 2

25 See Appendix. Note 3

For example, Bea was confused because she felt that certain listed capacities could equally be used for negative purposes. She said:

> You can be in a corporation and be a very determined manager, good at listening, thinking together, doing precise work and [yet] the outcome would be something terrible that damages the world.

Wolfgang agreed, adding that even generosity, curiosity, or empathy can be used for 'bad aims'.[26] He then became more interested in the 'minus structure':

> What interests me is the minus structure, because we have all these positive things and Annelinde said that she knows all of them – so what about the lack of the things? These are also challenges in our own inner field. I have a very strong sense about the lack of things, things that need to be developed.

To avoid distorting the purpose of this process in further sessions through focusing on the negative potential inherent in a highlighted quality, Shelley suggested considering the quality in terms of its 'good for the society'[27], and that this could be suggested at the beginning of the process. She said:

> If we want a society in which every human being can be 'the artist' that they really are, we need things like basic income, we need more honesty, cooperation – we need all the 'good things'. So it's not only about recognising that we can shape our lives and shape the society, but shape to what [end]! I always say, 'toward a humane and ecologically just society'. There has to be some goal that shapes the shaping. So, when I wrote down 'determination' – I think of Annelinde as an amazingly determined person – I [also] had to write down quickly that you are not just determined, [but] you are determined to transform for the good. I had to qualify it.

From reflection to action

Dianne was sceptical about this practice having any mobilising effect, because people might not believe they have these capacities or might not be motivated to take them forward. She referred to teenagers, 'who can't be bothered' anyhow. Dianne was, therefore, unsure if there was any specific target group who would benefit from such a practice.[28] Shelley thought that the process included some elements that were likely to activate teenagers:

---

26 See Appendix. Note 4

27 See Appendix. Note 5

28 See Appendix. Note 6

> I had a sense that, when we were first stating all our capacities, [...] that Annelinde must be getting so large, not in a proud sense, but you were kind of being showered with perceptions. I think if I had been in such a process as a teenager, it would have been amazing, to hear these things from others – that I was determined. At the time I had not [yet] realised that this was something valuable.

Shelley underlined, however, that the whole process must be clearer, especially the third part, to offer participants a 'mobilising frame'.[29]

Conclusion

My starting point for this session was to let the group engage with the person on their own terms, in order to allow new perceptions to emerge. I thought that articulating Annelinde's perceived qualities in the first phase would open up a space for an inspiring and creative exchange about these qualities. I realised, however, that leaving the process this open was counterproductive. The session turned out to be a rather complex conversation about difficulties, missing capacities, negative connotations, possible dangers, and *what ifs*.

One reason for this might have been that the session shifted between doing, explaining, and discussion. Also, because we did not explore the connections, visually or verbally, between the perceptions of the self and the perceptions of others, the named 'talents' remained two discrete columns of words on the blackboard.[30] In fact, I was stunned by how quickly we lost the focus on Annelinde's talents and the actual purpose of the process.

Although I felt discouraged about this destructive turn at the time, I understand retrospectively that this experience provided valuable insights for further development of this social sculpture practice:

- Methodologically, this practice can only work to *create* social capital if the dialogue process is constructive at all times, and focuses solely on the positive qualities of the main participant. In fact, maintaining the positive focus on such qualities is the most essential principle of the process, which cannot be compromised for other factors.

29 See Appendix. Note 7

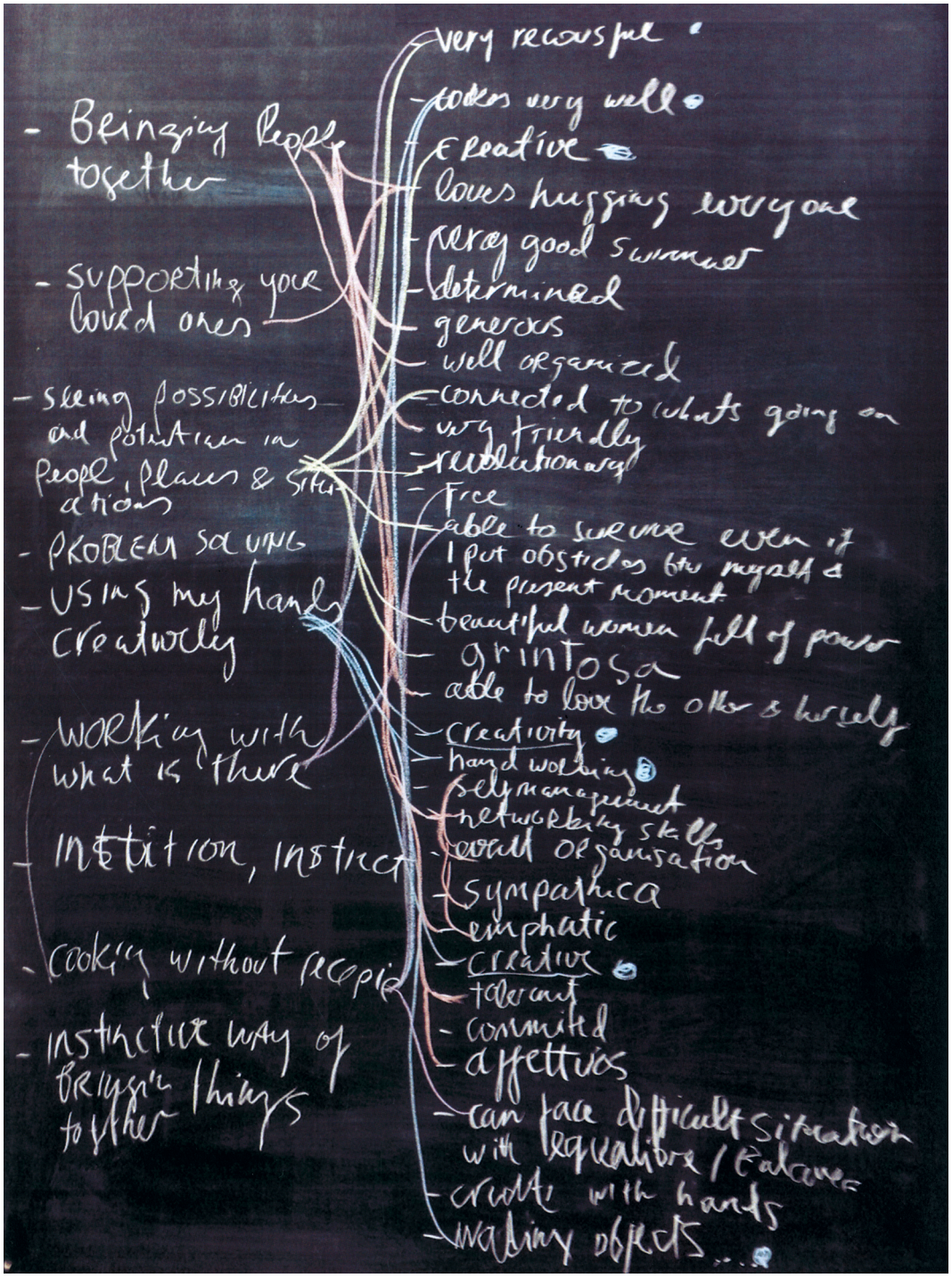
30 I drew the lines on Annelinde's blackboard only after the session to explore the possibility to visualise the connections between a 'participant' and 'responders' perceptions.

- Unlike having negative perceptions of someone's qualities, positive perceptions are not automatic. It requires guidance and conscious attention to avoid focusing on the negative whilst implementing this practice. My role as facilitator is, therefore, to ensure that a positive and constructive focus is kept throughout the whole process.

- The methodological significance of this practice is that it aims to offer an artistic counterweight to the destructive negativity, which seems to dominate the habitual way of perceiving life. This practice offers a framework for perceiving consciously the positive, beautiful, and energising sides of the *self*, and human beings in general.

- The instructions for the practice must be clear and precise, yet allow both individual engagement and flexibility in the process.

- The phrase 'talents' will remain undefined, but extended through the terms 'capacities' and 'strengths'. This should avoid false modesty and other veiling reactions to 'talent' whilst offering participants and their responders more flexibility in engaging in the process.



'For Sara'

Energy Tree No. 03: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Sara and Maris in October 2014.

5.3 Sara: Seeing the invisible

The negative tone that overtook Annelinde's session led me to this question: how can I keep the participant's attention focused on their positive individual inner resources throughout the whole process? How can we access this invisible 'inner field' together and make it tangible? Sara's session indicated that one of the key means to achieve this lay in visualising what emerges in the process – in visualising these invisible qualities and the invisible 'inner field'.[31]

Sara was the first person to be on her own during the process. She had gathered her responders' feedback beforehand and brought their responses to her session. I was slightly nervous at the beginning about whether I was able to hold the space alone, without Sara's responders being present – particularly given the minimalistic setting of the practice. I had reduced the use of outer objects[32] to the absolute minimum, in order to centre the immaterial inner resources of the participant at the heart of the practice, becoming its absolute focus. The only material objects I used were chairs, a large blackboard and chalk as the means for documenting the feedback and for providing a constant overview of what emerged through the process. And so, no *special effects* or *diversionary tactics* were involved: in facilitating my first one-on-one session, I had nowhere to hide, nowhere to run.[33]

When Sara and I met, I did not yet know that undertaking all three phases of the process would result in a visual embodiment of the participant's inner resources, although it had already begun to emerge in the first session with Kate. At the end of Kate's session, John, looking at the way the blackboard revealed a visual energy field, said that he could see in this image why he loves Kate.

---

31 In the context of social sculpture, the 'inner field' is understood to be a fluid and complex territory, containing invisible materials, such as our thoughts, attitudes, habits, fears, but also creative and other human capacities. In one of our dialogues, Shelley said: 'In order to talk about internal mobilisation, I think, one has to get a sense of this inner material […] because otherwise, what is moving? So, for […] a mobilisation, something has got to move. And what is it that moves?' In this sense, my social sculpture practice hopes to 'move' that part of the 'inner material' that involves one's talents, capacities, and strengths.

32 Sacks describes the aim of contemporary social sculpture practices as developing and working with 'instruments of consciousness' rather than producing 'objects of attention'. Therefore, the usage of outer objects is often not the primary focus in social sculpture practices. Often, much of the work happens through language; for example, through questions or different forms of dialogue. Physical objects can also be important, but are used only if really necessary.

33 It was participants' free choice, whether they wanted to attend alone or together with their responders. In total 15 of 20 were implemented as on-one-one sessions, and 5 in groups.

My initial aim was to document the process on the blackboard, so that both Sara and I could see what was being shared. The process was as follows: I invited Sara to share with me her most significant qualities followed by the feedback she had been given by others. I noted these responses on the blackboard and facilitated Sara's exploration of how these perspectives connect with and inform each other. Although making these links visually was straightforward – one could argue, even trivial – to my surprise, the emergent visual form offered more than an informative overview of Sara's qualities. One could say that the documentation became an energetic embodiment of Sara's invisible inner field: a 'Wärmespeicher' or 'warmth store' and 'warmth barometer'.[34]

After the process I was even more surprised that this was not only comprehensible and perceptible for Sara and I, but also for others who had not witnessed the process. For example, Shelley said:

> The image is fascinating and inspiring. It looks like a spine with nerves. Our spine is something very flexible but without our spine we don't function. When you say a person has got spine, you talk about their will. They can stand. That's obviously what this process offers. When a picture emerges like this through a process, you can actually trust it, because that is really what it's giving you. When I saw it, I felt straight away that – just the way it had been drawn – the lines are like nerves, and they make all these connections. They can carry energy and messages and it also gives you strength. It's all in this picture – even these little dots, which are like special focal points.

Although the image results through a predetermined process of documenting the three phases, there is no predefined idea of how the image itself should look. In fact, the outcome is unknown for both the participant and I until the very end of the process. Its visual form depends on what emerges in the reflective dialogue; there are no optical or aesthetic parameters that have to be fulfilled.

Although the visualisation that emerges contains information about the qualities of the participant, the image itself is too chaotic and messy to be an infographic. Perhaps the main difference in comparison to an infographic is that the information it contains has been experienced in real life, and then through the reflective process re-entered and

---

34 Beuys also defined 'Social Sculpture' as 'warmth work' to emphasise that *social sculpture* can only occur in the middle section between the two poles of heat and cold. Beuys underlined that encountering another person with 'warmth' is, for example, a central part of social sculpture (Harlan and Beuys, 2004: 20).

relived again. One could, therefore, argue that, on different levels, the image, as such, is evidence of 'embodied knowledge'. The visual form that has arisen is now in itself a field for exploration and possibilities rather than a container for factual information.

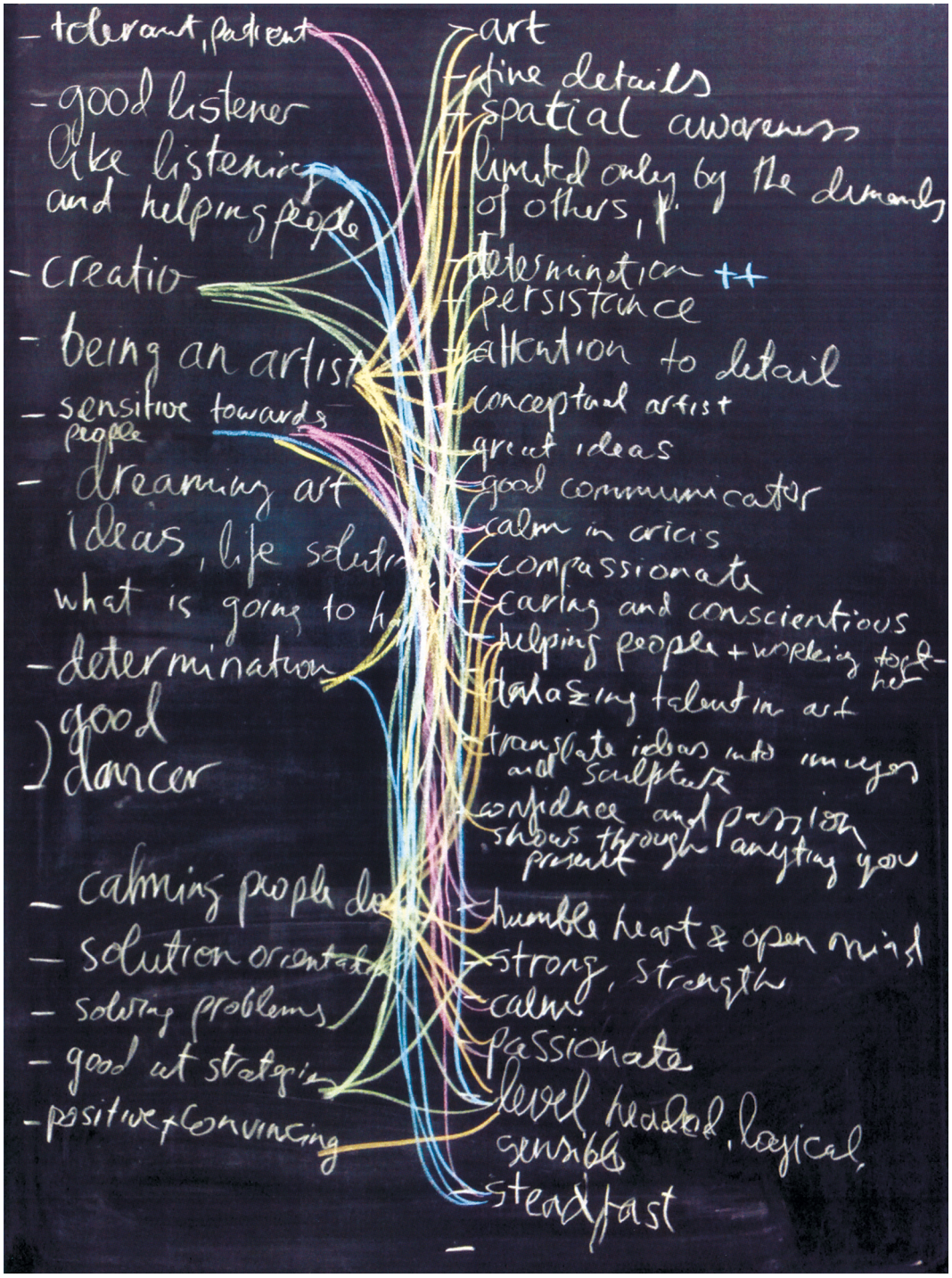
I would also hope that the image offers an alternative perspective to perceiving the self, the other, and the world – an alternative reality that only becomes visible when looking through the 'secret' lenses of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's fox from 'The Little Prince':[35]

> And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.[36]

By the end of the process, I realised I had encountered Sara on a much deeper lever than is usually possible in our daily lives. I was excited about the 17 encounters yet to come.

35 In her practice Earth Forum, Sacks offers the participants the experience of how to look at the world through different lenses, which is her metaphor for different attitudes, sets of values, and a new way to encounter the world. She says that if we recognise the way we see and how it effects what we see, we can change our lenses, our perception – effectively, try out a different set of glasses. The lenses I decided to use in this practice are lenses that only filter the talents each individual has; they are lenses that enable a focused and conscious view of one's individual inner resources.

36 De Saint-Exupery, 1974: 70



'For Alissar'

Energy Tree No. 04: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Alissar and Maris in November 2014.

5.4 Alissar: Gaining positive feedback

> 'I don't know what to expect... Is this supposed to help me in any way? Is this anything about confidence?' Alissar asked this, feeling somewhat uncertain, at the beginning of her session.
>
> 'Do you feel that you need more confidence?' I replied.
>
> 'Yes, I suppose so.'

I could not really give Alissar any guarantees about the outcome, not least because it was only the fourth of the 20 sessions, and I had not yet gathered enough evidence or experience about the impact of the process. I described for Alissar, briefly, its structure, so that she would get a better sense about what to expect, and suggested that we just begin and see what happens. Alissar agreed and, as would be the case in all of the 20 processes, we started with the participant reflecting on their qualities, followed by her responders' feedback.

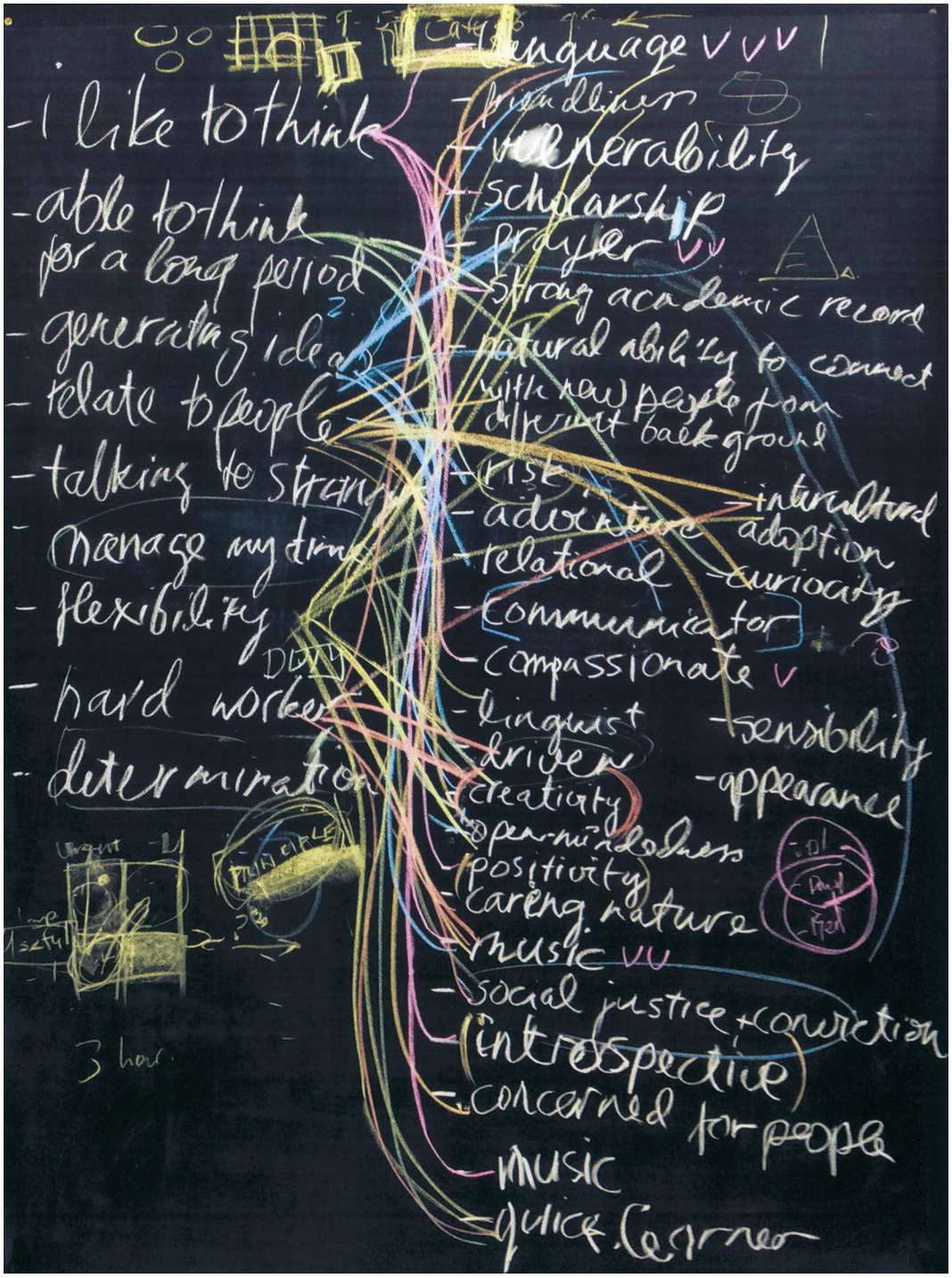
I asked Alissar not to read her responders' feedback before we met, so that we could do this together. Alissar was particularly excited about what her husband had written. Having read his feedback, she was surprised about her husband knowing her so well:

> What surprises me, is my husband knowing a little bit more than I thought he knows about me. That means he does pay attention and I didn't think he pays that much attention. [...] He doesn't talk about these things very much; he is shy and old fashioned. [...] It's just that you never know if quiet people are really attentive and see what is going on.

What surprised me, however, was that Alissar had never asked her husband about his perception of her qualities, nor had he ever shared this of his own accord. This is something I observed frequently when undertaking this practice. For most of the participants this framework was actually the very first time that they had a means of receiving this kind of feedback from their closest friends and relatives. If even the closest family members hesitate to share what they find valuable and true in each other, it indicates that there is something important missing in the way in which we relate to and communicate with each other. Interpreting this missing component as a *spiritual wound*[37] in our society, I suggest that more encouraging and appreciative social frameworks and structures are needed for healing this wound.

---

37 Sacks refers to Beuys' 'show the wound' as an important strategy in contemporary social sculpture. She highlights how to 'put our attention on the wound' relates to the process of recognising and overcoming one's hindrances, and thus enable one to become active in the field of social sculpture (Sacks, 2011: 40).



'For James Thomson'

Energy Tree No. 05: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between James Thomson and Maris in November 2014.

5.5 James Thomson: Reflection instead of solutions

James Thomson was my *blind date*. I was a bit early when I entered the almost empty cafeteria at lunchtime to pick him up for his session. 'Okay, which of these three gentlemen is Mr Thomson?, I thought, and tried my luck with the somewhat tired but smart looking young man in a grey suit, who was just about to unpack his lunchbox.

> 'Excuse me, are you Mr. Thomson?'
>
> 'James, call me James,' said James.

James had seen my advertisement for the study on campus and expected the process to offer him concrete solutions in his career planning. He was hoping it would help him to identify his employable skills, so that he could find a job and finally earn some money. He hoped that people's feedback would bring up things that were 'doable, to get an income from'. To James' disappointment however, what emerged was a list of complex and diverse capabilities, rather than a definite and clear skill set. His talent compass seemed to highlight capacities in all different directions simultaneously, which explains why he felt somewhat disorientated:

> Where do I fit in? How can I be useful to people? I want to be useful. A lot of the time I'm like a square peg in a round hole. I want to do the best I can do.

James realised, however, that in order to feel satisfied at work he needed to find a context in which his versatile capabilities would be acknowledged, and where he could employ these more creatively, rather than merely following instructions:

> I was miserable in my working place, because I was constantly told, 'You have to just do what needs to be done'. And I asked myself what was the point. If I have an ability to think [...] to study, to relate to people, and I don't have the opportunity to use that, then I'm so miserable. It's awful. Knowing that feeling, I understand why people get depressed. To really thrive, I think I want to use these things.

James' struggle in the job market shows the importance of finding the right context in which to employ ones capabilities. The idea of individual resources becoming social capital can therefore only work if an individual has the right framework, whether at work or in private life, to unfold their specific talents. In James' case, his multifaceted skills are not something that can easily be put in a box and labelled as a skill set for a specific

profession. This range of skills, including for independent thought, seem to be qualities rarely required in working situations in which employees are expected to simply follow instructions. However, with the world getting more and more complex, perhaps in the future a complex, multifaceted skill set will become increasingly significant.

Another aspect I would like to reflect on, briefly, is the process of advertising for this social sculpture practice. James was the only participant of 20 who contacted me because he saw the poster on campus. The other 19 participants were personally invited or recommended by previous participants. Therefore, one question is about how to best describe and advertise this practice? The difficulty is to communicate the value of the process before one has done it, because not only is it somewhat unique, but it offers no measurable or standardised outcomes. Even gaining new valuable insights, which was the case for most of the participants, is only a possibility, though highly likely. With regard to James' expectation of concrete solutions, it became clear that I needed to communicate more explicitly beforehand that setting personal objectives and goals is not the object of this reflective practice.

I felt that, due to his very specific concrete expectations, James was left with some confusion and more doubts than he had before the process. Consequently, my question is whether I, as a facilitator, should check participant expectations before their participation is agreed, and, then, if these expectations differ strongly from what the process can offer, advise against participation.

'For Isabel'

Energy Tree No. 06: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Isabel and Maris in November 2014.

5.6 Isabel: High expectations of the self

Coming from Spain, Isabel told me that there she could never ask anyone to give her feedback about her qualities. 'From a Spanish point of view', she said, it would just be arrogant:

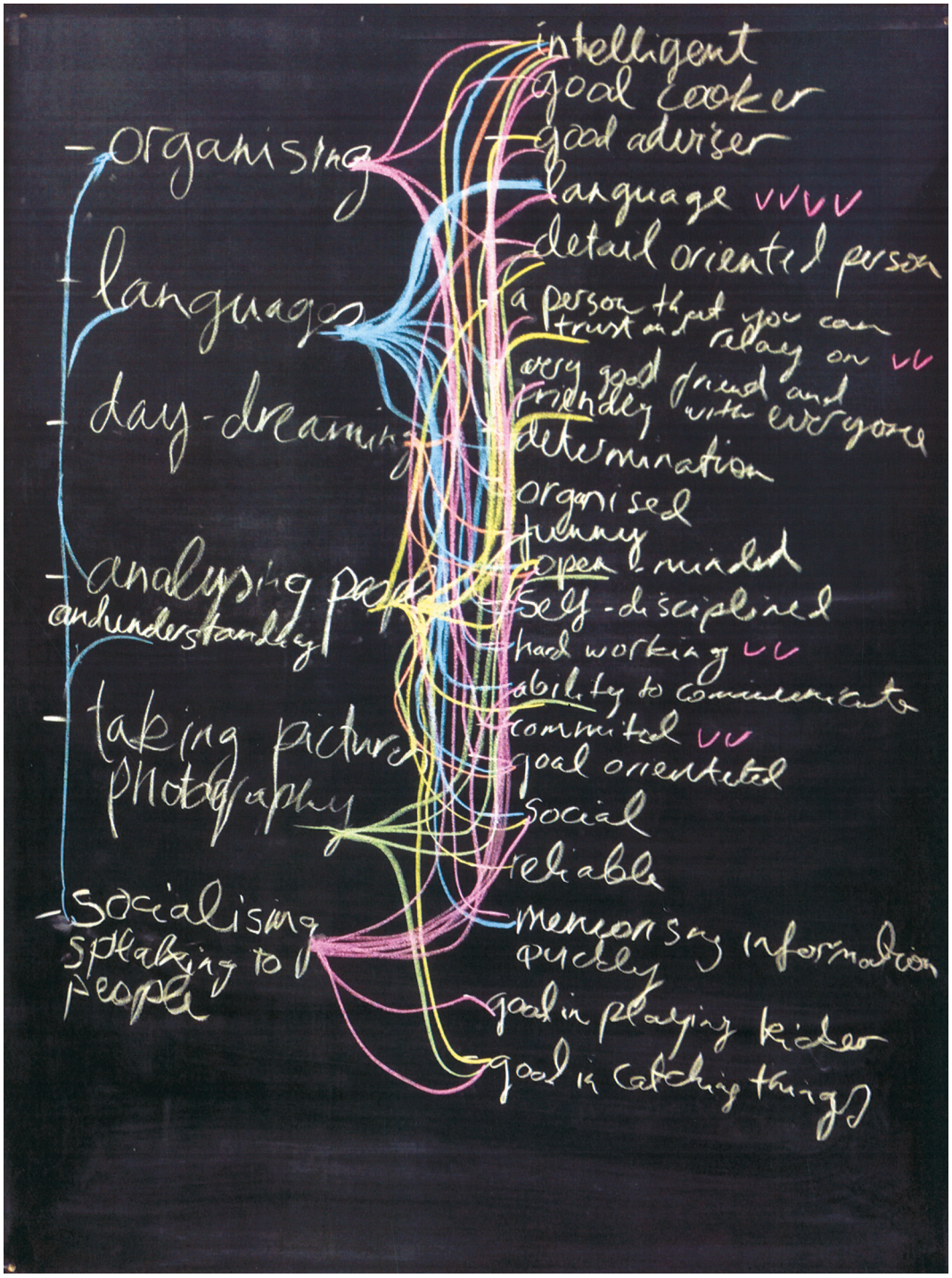
> In Spain, people don't like [saying] things that make another person special, so to say. I could not say in my hometown that I'm an artist. They would say, 'What, do you think you are Picasso now, or what?' This is what they would say.

Maybe it was Isabel's cultural background, which made it so difficult for her to accept what her responders had written about her. Even though she could relate to most of the things that were said, she seemed to feel a bit overwhelmed and somewhat pressurized after the first phase of the process. Isabel said that she could not possibly be that person all the time. Also, some of these qualities would often get her into difficulties:

> I feel under pressure in face of all this… These are like expectations for me. I feel tired already. They are [positive] qualities, but some of them put me into situations where I think, 'Why don't I just shut my mouth?

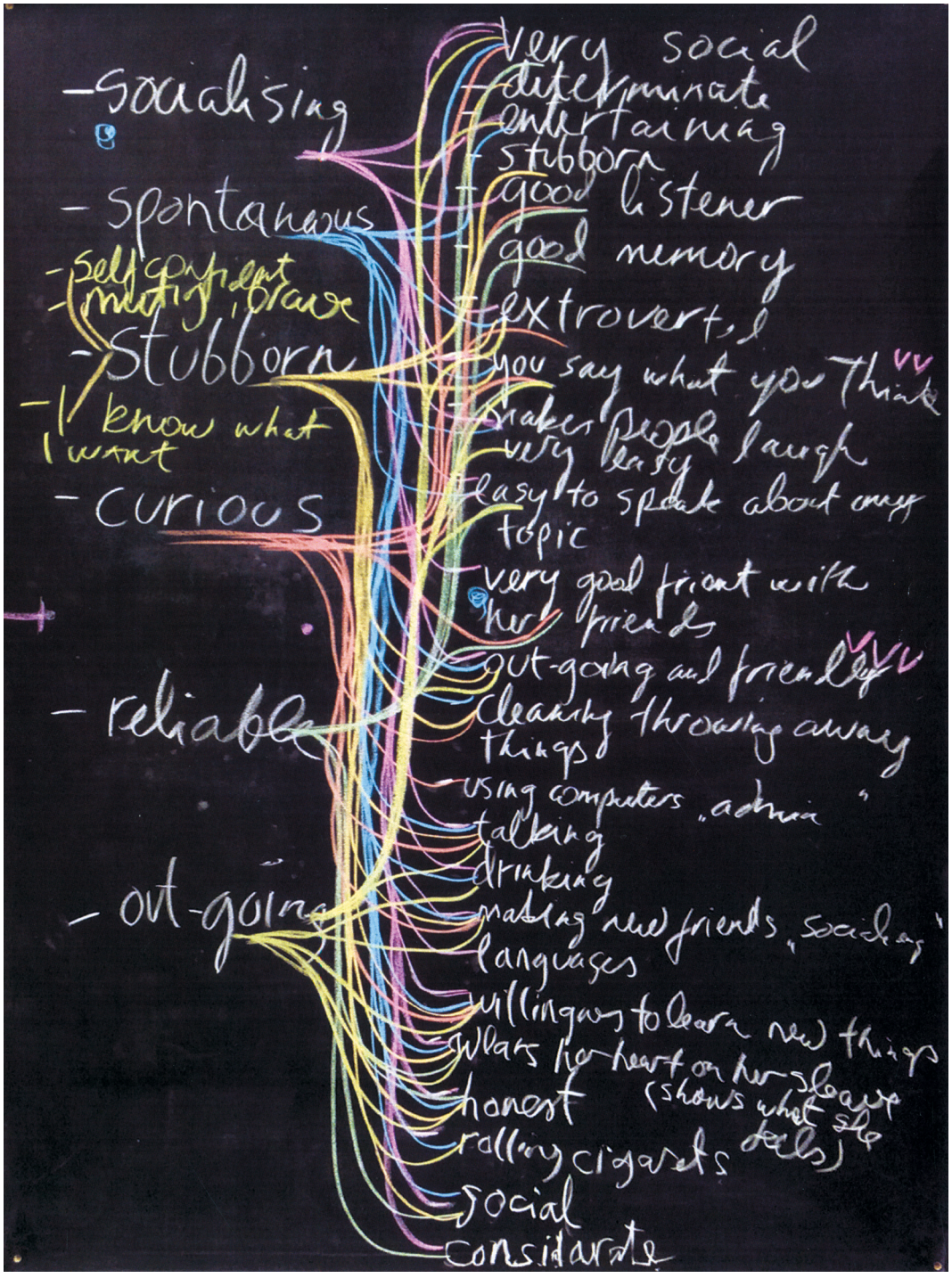
Isabel's conflicted feelings about the feedback revealed that I had not considered that positive feedback could also be received as high expectations or demands for future actions, and may therefore put the participant under pressure to behave or act in certain ways. To prevent this happening, I realised I needed to communicate more clearly that in this framework the responder's feedback represents their *perception* of the participant. Moreover, it could be seen as a gift. From then on I began to suggest that participants should not take this as absolute, but rather take this in and just see what emerges. I also decided to emphasise at the start of each session, that since all feedback given by others is written in chalk on a blackboard, it could be reworded if necessary and is wiped off after the process.

Furthermore, the third part of the process – in giving participants the opportunity to identify their most significant and energising resources – shifts the focus automatically to the qualities about which the participant feels comfortable. In doing so, any of the feedback initially offered by their responders, that they may have felt uncomfortable about or disagree with, fades into the background.



'For Moide'

Energy Tree No. 07: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Moide, Lola, Alba, and Maris in November 2014.



'For Lola'

Energy Tree No. 08: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Lola, Moide, Alba, and Maris in November 2014.

5.7 / 5.8 Moide and Lola: Working with groups

Moide and Lola, both convinced they have no talents, capacities, or strengths at all, were sceptical, yet very curious about the process. I joked that for the research's sake, they were the perfect candidates, because I was particularly interested in finding one or two individuals with no qualities at all.

I suggested Moide and Lola participate together. I decided to try this out, in order to explore whether this might be a potentially flexible aspect of the framework. Being respectively the main participant and each other's responder, they agreed. Also present was Alba, their mutual friend, responding to them both. In addition, Moide and Lola each brought other people's feedback to their session.

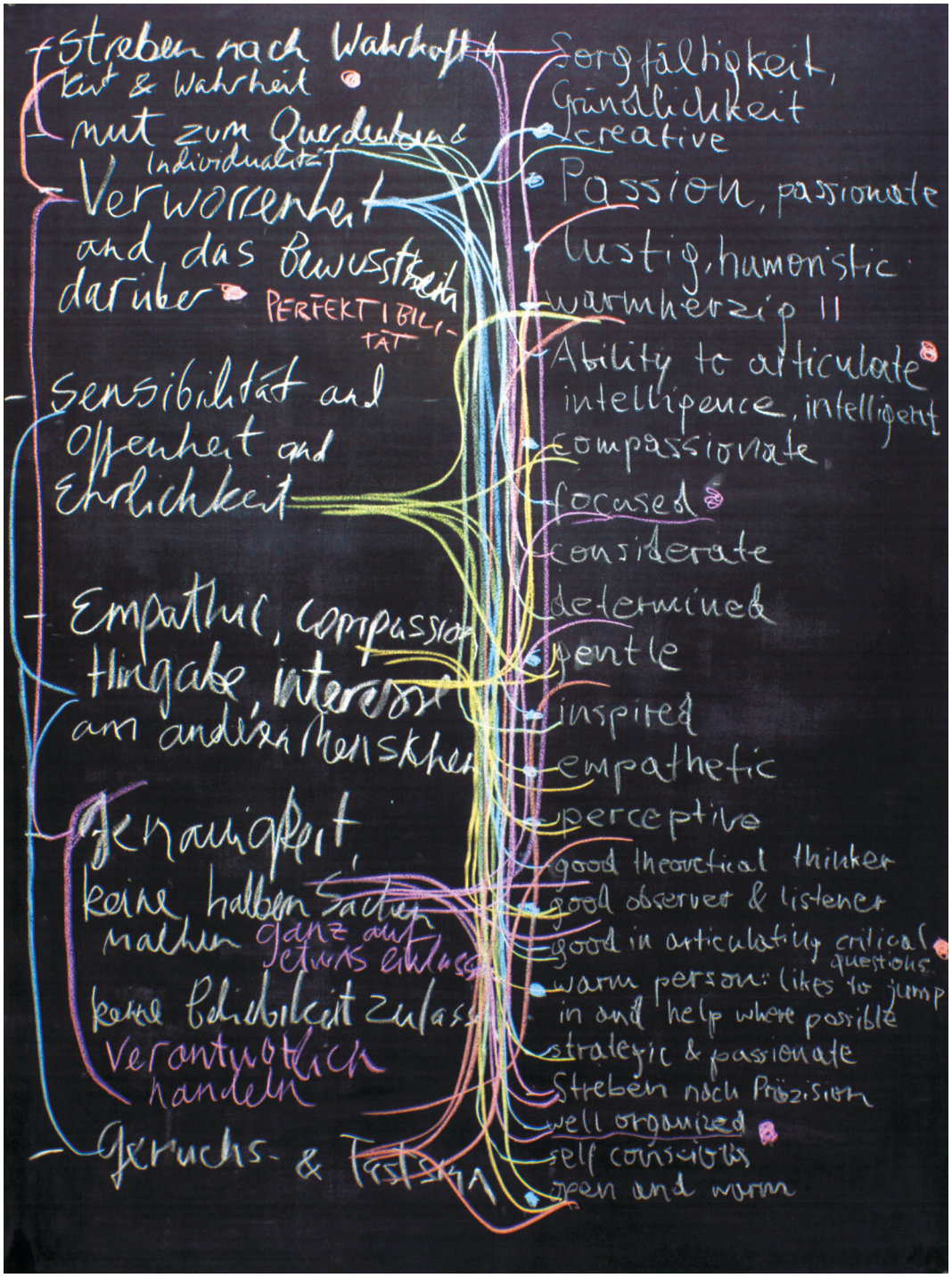
I decided to implement the double session in three episodes. We started with the first two phases with Moide, then the same with Lola, and ended the session in implementing the third phase of the process jointly. In other words, at first we created an *energy tree* for Moide, then for Lola, and then jointly explored the potential social benefit of the qualities that had been highlighted.

As Moide and Lola explored their *energy trees* together in the third phase, I realised that the model could be easily adaptable in a group context where there are shared objectives and goals; perhaps even within organisations. Looking at the most significant qualities of each individual in a group, and then exploring what their value might be within a particular constellation of people, would provide a simple way of seeing what individual capacities each person has to offer, and highlight the contribution this could make for achieving a shared agenda. It could also show how connecting and combining existing resources effectively, might increase the groups' energy level and engagement in working toward the shared goals.

Metaphorically, if a group of people were about to carve a stone sculpture together, then perhaps the most reasonable and effective way would be dividing the tasks in accordance with each individual's resources: some may be physically stronger, preferring rough work; some better working in finer detail; some good at keeping an overview; some good at motivating others; some good for helping the working atmosphere and holding the

team spirit high; some taking care of health and safety; some responsible for catering. These resources together, in their appropriate place, would make a difference to both the process and to the outcome, as well as to the overall experience of those involved. This would be a division of labour based on the qualities that people have and recognise in themselves, and might be less like a machine and more like a living organism.

Wouldn't it be interesting to apply the same approach in 'carving' a social sculpture?



'For Stephan'

Energy Tree No. 09: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Stephan and Maris in December 2014.

5.9 Stephan: To participate or not to participate?

The biggest challenge in this social sculpture practice is its preparatory stage. Implementing 20 processes involved correspondence with around another 20 individuals who were generally interested, yet who in the end did not participate. Their main reason for not doing so was the apprehensiveness or difficulties they had in approaching others about their qualities. Some even said they did not know three to five people whom they could actually ask. Or, if they did, they would find it difficult to trust their responses.

Although Stephan eventually decided to participate, he had the biggest doubts about the process. We had a long conversation beforehand. To him the pre-task seemed impossible, because he could not relate to any of the given terms: talents, capacities, or strengths. He thought it was rather arrogant to consider oneself as talented, and that asking others to share their perceptions was even more difficult.

I did not want to try and convince Stephan to participate, as participants were never *persuaded* to participate. Yet, my sense was that, despite his doubts, Stephan was somehow keen to be involved. Otherwise, why would he discuss something for hours that is voluntary and has no obligation to get involved in?

I suggested to Stephan that he just ignore the task description for the moment and, instead, think of something he liked and enjoyed doing. If nothing came to mind he could try making a guess, or even make something up. My assumption was that, in the given framework, even if he were to come up with the most absurd list of qualities, there would still be a real relationship to his qualities, or, if not, it would at least offer him a starting point for further reflections.

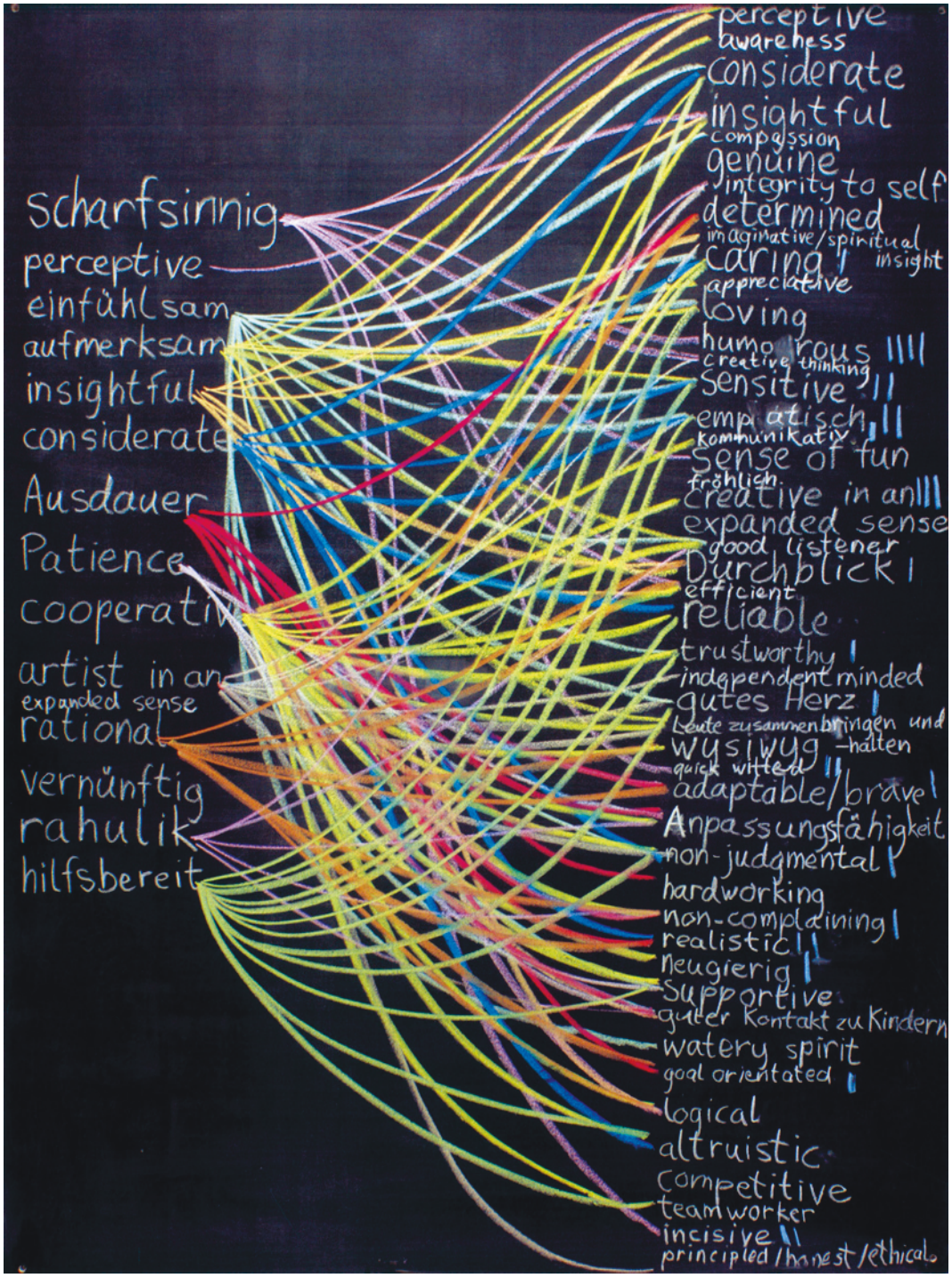
Stephan however still faced the difficulty of asking others. He thought the question was too intimate, and would put both himself and those he would ask in an awkward position. I agreed with Stephan. The pre-task, indeed, is strange and for many requires overcoming something we don't normally do in our daily lives.[38] Unless it is in the context of a talent show on television, 'talent' seems to belong

38 One of strategies in Sacks' social sculpture work is inspired by Bertold Brecht's idea of 'making strange' – 'Verfremdungseffekt'. For example, one element of her *Earth Forum* practice invites participants to go for a '5-minute walk on the planet' and bring back a handful of earth. In doing so, people often realise their disconnectedness to their planet, as they hardly ever touch the soil with their bare hands. One could say that in *Earth Forum* touching the soil with hands is a simple but powerful form of 'making strange' and rupture with the everyday, as well as a gesture of attention, care, and compassion towards the planet.

in the category of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’. As an essential part of the practice, there was really no way around the preparatory stage. I left Stephan with that thought, and we ended our conversation.

To my surprise, two days later Stephan came up with a solution to approaching the pre-task. He asked his responders to send their feedback directly to me, so that it could stay anonymous and therefore avoid any embarrassing intimacy. His responders would then have the space to respond freely or not respond at all. In the end, all of Stephan’s responders gladly replied, and Stephan became the ninth participant in this exploration.

I decided to offer Stephan’s way of approaching the pre-task to future participants. Perhaps this innovation, owing to Stephan’s humility, was itself a manifestation of one of his strengths.



'For Maris'

Energy Tree No. 10: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Shelley, Annelinde, Chirt and Maris in December 2014.

5.10 Maris: Self-exploration

Now it was my turn to be in the spotlight. Walking to the Research Unit, I thought, 'I must be mad, asking others to *waste* their Saturday afternoon exploring my talents'. Stephan and the Spanish people were right: what an arrogant thing to do! Which fool came up with this idea? But, for the sake of *research*, I really had no other option than to experience the practice from the perspective of a participant.

Having already contributed as participant and responder to this study, Annelinde agreed to facilitate this session.[39] To my surprise, I received genuine responses from nine people; I was particularly honoured that Shelley and Chirt – the two people who had encouraged and inspired this project – joined us to share their perceptions.

Told as a story, this is what happened:[40]

In a little village, there was a secret office… Well, I should not exaggerate right at the beginning: it was not really a secret – it was just that nobody knew it existed. On the door it said dryly, 'Want to see your magic stars? Knock and book a trip.'

'My magic stars,' I thought, knocking on the door. A young, pale woman, three and a half metres tall, opened it.[41]

'Yes, hello… yes… so, my magic stars, you say… yes, please show me,' I said, stretching my neck, trying to reach her level.

'Mooi, geen probleem', said the woman, in a strange language. 'The only thing is, they like to hide themselves behind heavy black clouds. First, we need a little help to clear up the sky. At least three others we will need.'

'Three others? I don't know... They're all too busy with their own clouds.'

'Ja, dat is het leven,' said the woman, 'always stuck in the dark, instead of embracing the light around us.'

At first I did not dare ask anyone, but then my curiosity got the better of me and, to my surprise, I found nine helpers. Even my mother and sister came. Everybody wanted to

---

39 I gave Annelinde a script showing how to facilitate the process.

40 Social sculpture practitioners often use storytelling for more imaginative ways of engaging with something.

41 In this story Annelinde represents 'the woman'. Her strange language is Dutch, with the following translation: 'mooi' – 'beautiful'; 'geen probleem' – 'no problem'; 'ja, dat is het leven' – 'yes, such is life'; 'Ja, de warmte is goed' – 'yes, warmth is good'.

help. So, a few days later, I knocked on her door again, with all my helpers behind me, ready to do what needed to be done. 'Mooi, let's go then,' said the woman, and grabbed a ladder.

It was pitch dark when we reached the Magic Star Observation Mound at the edge of the village. The woman put up the the ladder and said, 'You first,' pointing her long, slim finger in my direction. I climbed the ladder and started pushing the clouds aside. 'Ah, I'm too small. I'm too weak. I cannot see anything, I have no magic stars,' I said, insecurely.

'Focus, you have only pushed the smallest cloud I have ever seen,' she said, and helped me a little bit. She was so tall that she needed no ladder herself. Then, one after the other, all my helpers climbed the ladder and pushed as hard as they could. Between the clouds, small lights started appearing.

'Mooi,' she said again, in her strange language, 'now we will have to see.'

'See what?' I asked.

'See which ones are the magic ones. You see, some of them are like pieces of broken glass – although they shine brightly, when you touch them, they hurt you. They weaken you. They may even break you. The magic ones are like raw diamonds – when you polish them gently they will become stronger, and strengthen you too. If you focus on them, they will shine through the darkest clouds. They will become your magic power and help you do good and exciting things in life.'

'But how do I know which ones are like diamonds?' I asked.

'Let's see,' she replied, and asked us to describe the stars. We noticed that each 'star' being had certain qualities: some liked to laugh and have fun; some were perceptive and considerate; some never complained about hard work. My mother even recognised a small cheerful 'star', who liked to talk to everyone. The cheerful star was confident and pleased with herself. She had just won the gold medal for the long jump, even though no one believed that she, this little child, could do it. In fact, technically she was not allowed to participate, because she was really too small. And she did not even have proper shoes. Only her red and white sandals she had put on quickly when rushing off to the annual village games. Despite everybody's doubts and discouraging laughter the little star was adamant. She knew she could do it, and she would. Because she knew deep down that

jumping far was neither a matter of shoes nor appearance. It was a matter of will. And, indeed, she did it – she became a long jump champion in 1984.

Fig. 3: Certificate for winning the first award in long jump, 1984

'Mooi,' the woman said again, unpacking her paint box. 'Now we need to explore the route to your magic star.' She asked us to look, to see how the stars related and connected to each other. And while we were describing what we thought and saw, she was drawing the most beautiful, colourful pathways, which shone like a thousand rainbows in the night sky.

'So: done. Now climb the ladder again and stand right in the middle of the route map. Can you feel it?'

'O-ha, it's warm,' I said. It was actually freezing outside, but I suddenly felt much, much warmer and somehow livelier too. Everyone seemed to feel this warmth.

'Ja, de warmte is goed', nodded the woman, knowingly. 'If you follow a path that has this warmth, you will find your magic star. It can take a while until you find your way. You need to focus and be courageous. Don't be afraid to follow a wrong path for a while. Because when you come closer to your magic star, you will recognise it. Your heart and your stomach will warm up and your eyes will sparkle like this same starry sky. And each time you share your warmth and sparkle with someone else, the magic of your star will double – and you will grow, because your star will reveal your inner strength. And it will help you to do your very best for this world, if this is what you want. Mooi, now who is next?'

It was the little cheerful one that had warmed my heart. I realised that winning the long-jump as a little girl was a key moment in my life. Although as an adult I may have lost this childlike naiveté, courage, and confidence to put myself forward – and often feel discouraged both from my inner doubts and by criticism from outside – I now know that I could still embrace and approach the inner strength and conviction of the little long jump champion, who had not allowed herself to be discouraged by the doubts of others. Regarding the question of how I could share my talents, capacities, and strengths with my community, I recognised that my interest lay in supporting social frameworks that offer encouragement and inspiration for individuals of any age, who may not believe that we are all real champions and, against all odds, we can *jump* further than others would lead us to believe.

Fig. 4: Award ceremony of the Annual Children's Sports Games, Märjamaa, Estonia, 1984

'For Ere'

Energy Tree No. 11: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Ere and Maris in March 2015.

5.11 Ere: Effortless learning

Living in Estonia, Ere participated via Skype. I was curious to learn whether the online setting could still provide a reflective space for participants, even if not physically present. My question was: 'Could I, through such communications technology, offer this social sculpture practice for individuals on the other side of the world?'

The answer is yes, but it requires somewhat different preparation.

Firstly, a stable Internet connection and good video quality are needed, so that participants can follow what emerges on the blackboard. Secondly, participants should be able to focus on the process for about two hours without being disrupted in their own location. Thirdly, participants should make sure that they feel safe, comfortable, and are not feeling tired. All this needs to be discussed and agreed beforehand.

Ere and I had a good Internet connection, a reasonable video quality, and, being at home, Ere also felt comfortable and safe. Yet we had to cancel our first appointment, because when we began, Ere noticed that she was physically and mentally too tired to engage with the subject via Skype. So, we rescheduled. Our second attempt worked.

Ere was the only participant who felt absolutely confident about asking others for their feedback. She also felt confident about all the qualities they shared. One reason for Ere's confidence might be that, following her passion for literature and theatre, she had created a job for herself as an independent theatre producer. Here she could bring her qualities into a context that really interested her. She described her professional mind-set as follows:

> Professionally, my self-esteem is quite good. I work in an area where I know what I'm doing, and if there is anything I don't know yet, it does not discourage me at all – it actually excites me. I feel excited about learning new things and polishing my professional skills. I'm excited about having the opportunity of constantly getting better at what I do. […] I want to grow internally as a person and also professionally. I like the idea that I can be an expert in what I do. I'm not trying to say that I'm super good yet, no – but it feels great to be moving in that direction.

And the 'context' – in this instance the 'theatre' – was equally interested in Ere's qualities as a producer. She reflected:

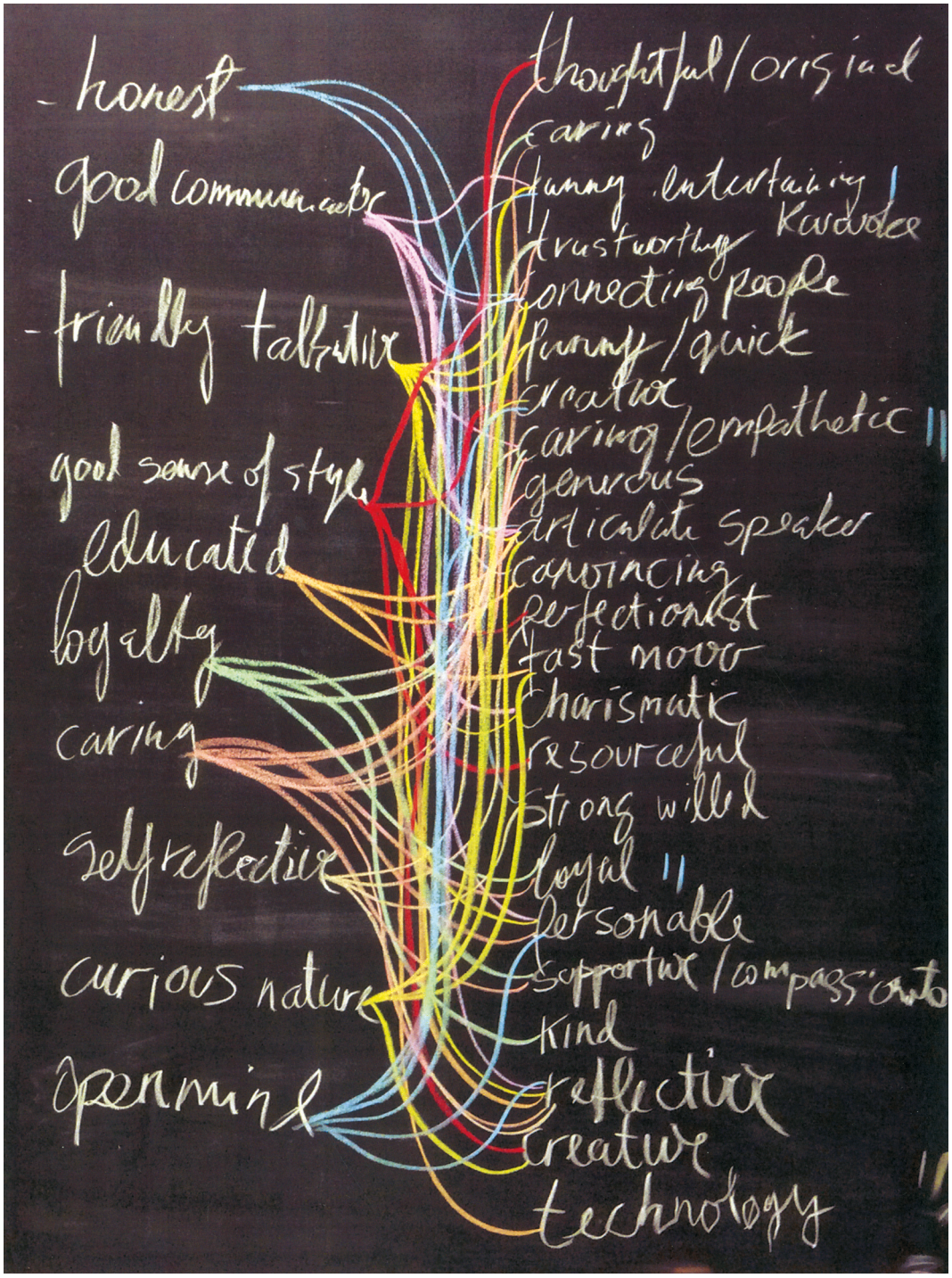
> I have the freedom to choose which projects I want to work on. I don't want to do everything. Over time, I realised that my nature is to be a producer rather than a manager. I'm not good at operating things such as the heating or cleaning of the playhouse. Or, if I am, then it is not because it's my talent. No, it is, because I had to learn how to do these things – they don't come from my soul like a talent would. [...] If someone offers me a job, then it is because they need my support: they need someone who can help them to realise their ideas. Being a producer, I like the process of creating a framework in which others can realise their ideas in the best possible way.

As with most of the 20 participants, Ere preferred to use the terms 'strengths' or 'capacities' when reflecting on her qualities. What was interesting, however, was that in her reflections she linked the term 'talent' to her soul.[42] Becoming a producer, she had created a professional framework to do things that came from her soul. However, in the position of a manager, she felt that she had to learn how to do things that she was not really interested in. These are two significantly different approaches toward doing and learning, one based on outer demand, the other coming from her soul. The latter is a continuous, effortless, and 'exciting' process of learning and doing, based on her inner impulse, her will, and curiosity: 'I feel excited about learning new things'; I'm excited about having the opportunity of constantly getting better at what I do'. Although she is good at both positions, the metaphorical difference is that, for Ere, becoming a manager equals polishing a piece of broken glass, whereas becoming a producer is more like polishing an uncut diamond.

Whether one calls it a talent, capacity, strength, quality, or capability, it requires learning and practice in order to be developed. What does seem to make a difference, however, is where the motivation to learn and to do comes from. Is the impulse coming from within or is it caused by an outer impetus?

---

42 In Estonian there is a saying: 'kohe näha, et hingega asja juures', meaning it is 'immediately visible if something is done with soul'.



'For Anita'

Energy Tree No. 12: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Anita and Maris in March 2015.

5.12 Anita: Societal pressure

Anita, living in Australia, gave me the opportunity to repeat the previous question: 'Could I, through modern communications technology, offer this social sculpture practice to individuals on the other side of the world?'

This time, the answer was 'no'.

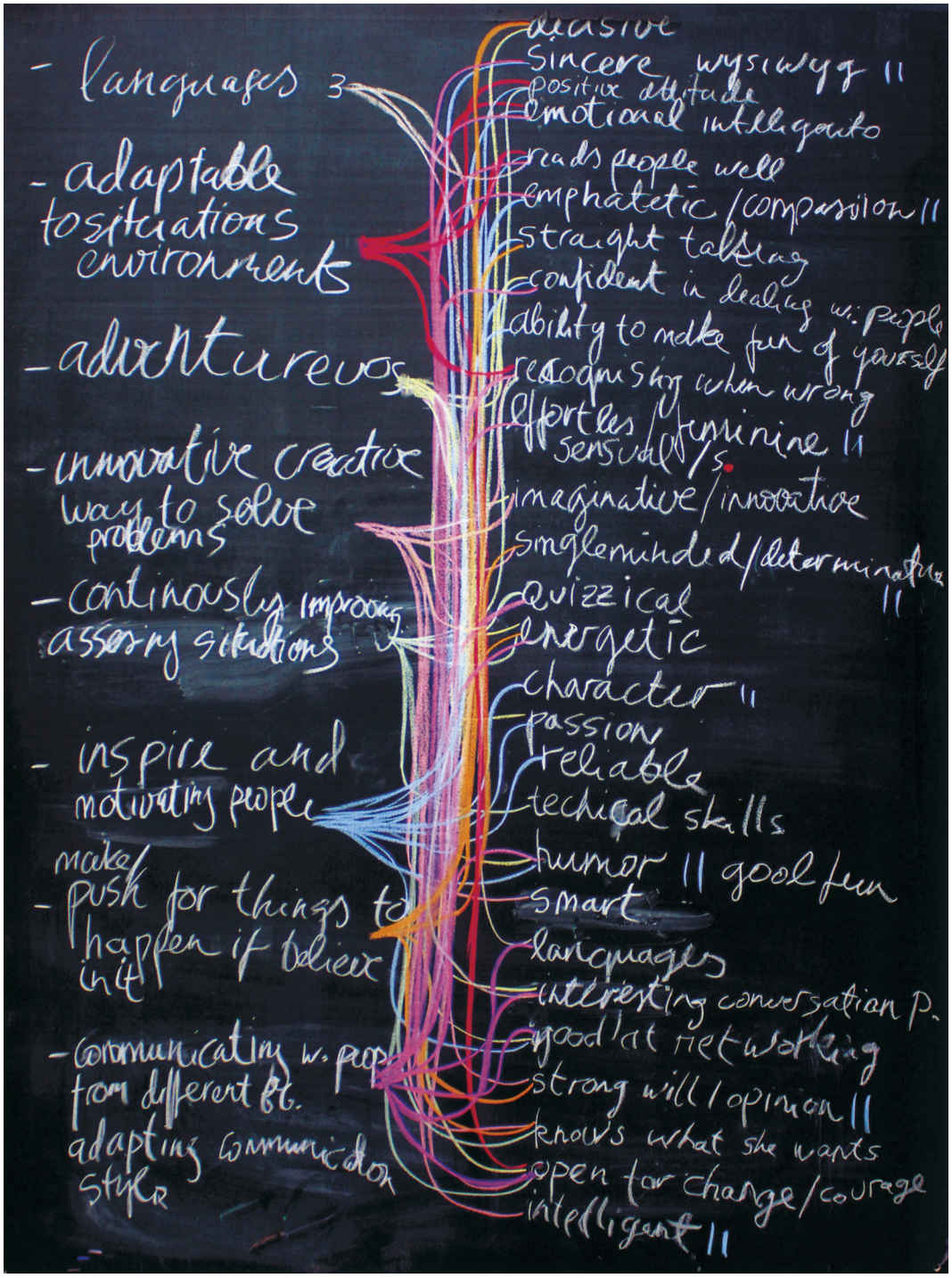
Anita's session was, for me, the most challenging. I could not adequately hold the virtual reflective space between Sydney and Oxford for Anita to feel comfortable with the process. This was partly because of the nature of a video call. As facilitator, I must be able to accompany participants in silence, enter the silence with them and stay with the silence until participants feel ready to continue. Staying silent during a video call is however somewhat difficult. During our exchange I could not always sense whether Anita needed space to gather her thoughts in silence or needed eye contact and input from me.

Although Anita felt 'touched and reassured' by her responder's feedback, she felt irritated about the other two phases of the process. In particular, she said of the third phase:

> The thing that did upset me was being asked how I could help the wider community. At the time, I felt my capabilities were stretched to the limit. I support my friends, co-workers and family and have little time and energy left to give these positive attributes to people who are of little consequence to me. I try very hard to be a good friend, sister, daughter, and co-worker and then to have to be this to others, whom I am not concerned with or care about – I find the idea exhausting and a nuisance.

Anita's negative feelings made me realise that in phase three I need to find a way of being even more empathic and sensitive toward a participant's personal circumstances. Clearly, the third question could be upsetting if understood as a demand to 'go and do something for your community' – particularly if participants are struggling to manage their own daily tasks, and have little energy by the end of the day. The process should never make participants feel pressurised that they are not doing enough for others. In fact, Anita's response showed that in 'trying very hard' to please everybody else, she does too much and neglects her own needs; and that to give, on any level, one also needs to receive. Anita's irritation seemed like a warning signal that her own needs were not being met, and that

she should take more care of herself, communicating to others that she too has needs. This session with Anita highlighted the need to emphasise that the idea of contributing to society is voluntary and can be a useful exploration. Stressing that this is simply an invitation – an approach that is part of many social sculpture processes – will not ensure that phase three is experienced as a positive opportunity. Clearly even an invitation can make a participant feel pressurised to make a decision. And this practice is intended as a space for reflection, not decisions.



'For Nina'

Energy Tree No. 13: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Nina nd Maris in April 2015.

5.13 Nina: What do you think?

Nina, standing at the crossroads in her career, was searching for answers, solutions, and advice. She felt that she needed a career change, as she could not employ her skills in her office job. Yet, at the same time, she felt she could not really change anything in her life before paying off her debts. Also, she was unsure what a concrete alternative to her current situation might be:

> I have two options. I could make a radical decision; a complete change. Or it could be a phased one, exploring first and then slightly changing my current situation. I don't want to work in an office. I want to do something interesting, working with people, consultancy, something more dynamic, related to development and education. [...] I feel a bit frozen, because I cannot make a decision. I still need to pay off my debts. [...] I don't know what is the right thing to do. If I choose one option over another, then I will lose out, because maybe the other option would have been better. But it is silly, because I need to try things first to find this out.

While reflecting on her career, Nina asked repeatedly what I thought she should do. I realised how difficult it was to hold back and not give any advice, as one often might do in an everyday conversation. However, as a facilitator, my task is to listen and ask questions that simply give impulses toward new thought streams and insights. Through questions one obviously can open up different perspectives. But this needs caution. As facilitator, I have to hold back rather than share personal opinions or give advice. Not only is this irresponsible: it is not my expertise, but more importantly looking for such solutions is not an object of this reflective practice.

Through the process with Nina I became more acutely aware that controlling this habitual 'advice giving' impulse is more difficult than I thought. Avoiding giving advice to participants is part of the enabling practice.

'For Hans'

Energy Tree No. 14: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Hans and Maris in April 2015.

5.14 Hans: Endless field of explorations

I was often asked, what the whole *thing* with the *lines* in phase two was? It is a simple and straightforward method to visualise how the perspectives of the participant and their responders connect with and inform each other. There are no limitations, no rights, no wrongs: the participant is free to make whatever connections seem appropriate and to reflect on their reasons for specific connections if they wish to. To enable new perceptions in this phase, as a facilitator, I suggest considering less obvious associations in the form of a question.

In Hans' case it was the less obvious associations that particularly enabled new thought streams and insights. For example, while we brought together his talents for 'structure' and 'flexibility', Hans recognised the value of this method. He realised that although he feels he lacks certain specific skills, linking his different capacities could be a useful strategic method in dealing with situations:

> Making this connection is almost like a strategy I can keep on doing. I can make new connections in situations where I think I cannot do something because I need this and that. But then I could just as well combine my capacities differently, and thus create a real possibility for action.

One such possibility for action was connecting 'fairness and justice' to 'courage'. Hans' insight was that his 'courage' could enhance his strong desire for 'fairness' in his everyday life:

> Connecting these two is almost like an impulse to live something. An impulse towards the future – I want to live my sense for fairness, and I [see now that I] actually have the courage to do it. With this new, stronger awareness, I can now bring this about more consciously.

It was fascinating to accompany Hans in his intense and comprehensive reflection process. Having named 6 qualities himself, and received 32 different outer perceptions, when multiplied, Hans, in phase two, internalised the named qualities 192 times. Delving deeply into the subject and, making about 110 connections, Hans left no stone unturned. Visually, Hans' 110 links looked so blurry and laced that they built a unity, in which separating single links was of secondary importance. Hans' insight was that his qualities are not simply separate parts but rather like 'a space or a field' with endless

possibilities and potential to 'shift and fuse'. Hence, one could argue that the image that arises in phase two, is both 'a collection of parts and also more than just a collection of parts' (Rowland, 2001: 81).

It visualises the deep, inner potential and energy of a human being, which could be released in the appropriate context. Hans' sense of how his separate qualities created 'a space or a field' relates to the Goethean understanding – so significant in the field of social sculpture – that although separate parts can be identified, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.[43]

Hans' session, lasting for three and half hours, was the most intensive. As facilitator, I had to be absolutely focused in order to guide, stay with, and follow Hans' reflections and thought streams. I realised that I needed to consider the relationship between time and intensity. On the one hand, the process should not extend beyond two hours, yet, on the other, rushing through the process should be avoided. In case flexibility regarding the allocated time is required, how much time the attendee has, needs to be clarified beforehand.

43 In Goethean understanding, the relationship between separate parts and the whole is not numerical or reduced to logic; instead, it sees 'the part in light of the whole, fostering a way of science, which dwells in nature' (Bortoft, 1996: 4).

'For Chris'

Energy Tree No. 15: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Chris and Maris in May 2015.

5.15 Chris: Duration and location

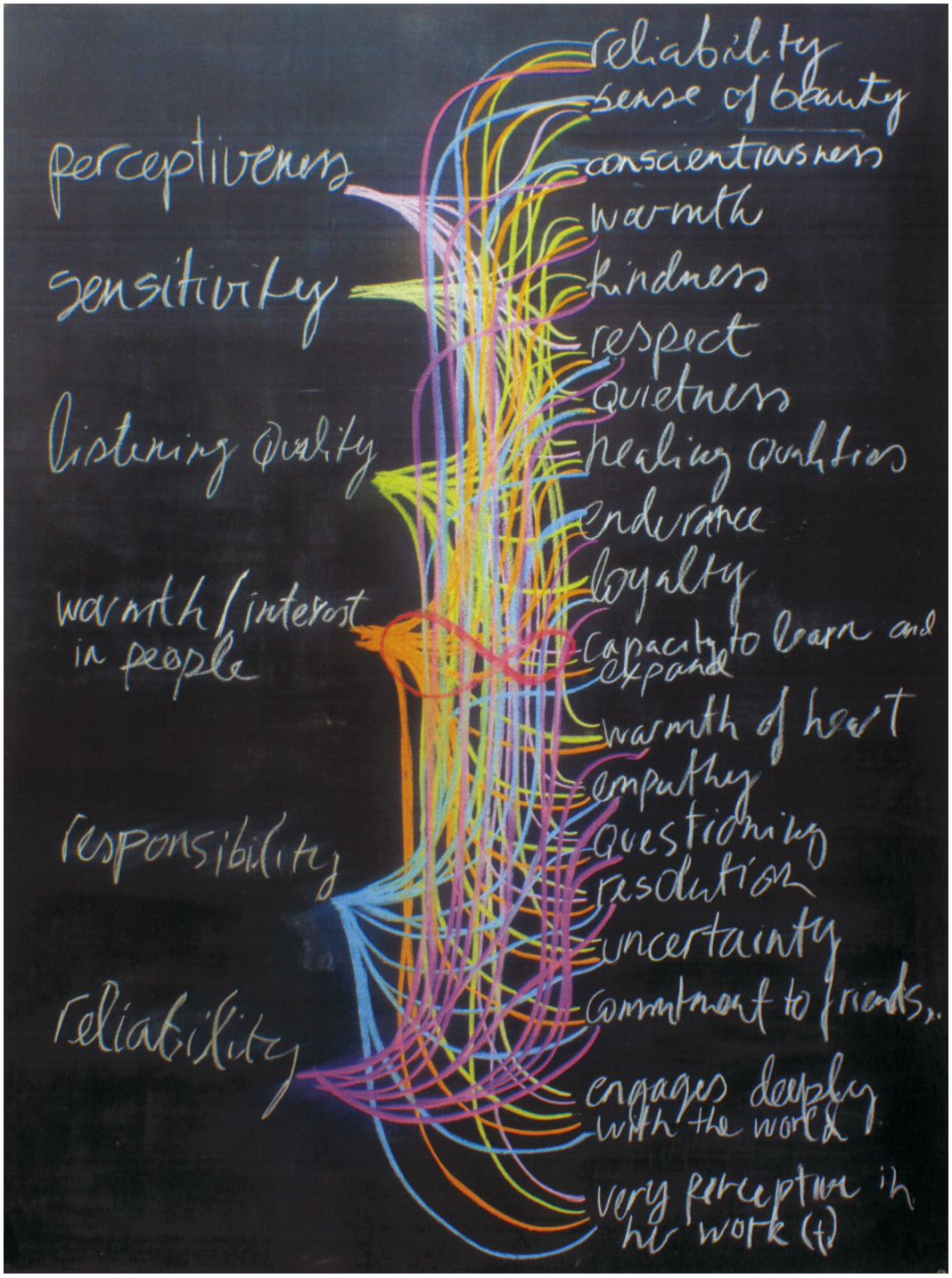
While two hours was too short a time for Hans, Chris thought it was way too long.

Chris is my neighbour. When I told him about the study he said immediately that he wanted to participate, before knowing that the process would take about two hours. When he realised this, he was surprised: 'Two hours to discuss three answers?????!!!!!!! I hope not!!! Let's try and wrap in 15 minutes...' he responded in an email, saying too that he had no time to come to the project space in the Social Sculpture Research Unit.

Although it is a principle that the process should not be rushed, I was curious from a research perspective to see what would happen. What could emerge in 15 minutes around a kitchen table, instead of in front of a blackboard? I informed Chris that I was willing to meet for a speedy version of this social sculpture practice.

The actual event turned out differently. Chris got engaged and generously tripled his time. We spent 18 minutes looking at Chris' own perceptions, 5 minutes at his responders' feedback (Chris had only asked two others), and about 12 minutes exploring how these perceptions connect. In the remaining 10 minutes we looked at how to apply the named qualities for social benefit. I noted everything that Chris shared on an A4 sheet and later visualised it on the blackboard. Although Chris never saw the more dynamic blackboard image, I gave him an A4 print out of his *energy tree.*

Although I question to what extent the process offered Chris any significant insights in the compressed time and kitchen setting, what I discovered, nonetheless, was that the basic structure of this practice does provide a simple strategy to establish a conversation in any context, about human talents. It would clearly be very different and less reflective without the visualising element in it, but it would still open up a space to engage with the subject. So, one could ask, why not sit round the kitchen table with one's neighbour and explore each other's most significant talents, capacities, and strengths?



'For Sarah'

Energy Tree No. 16: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Sarah nd Maris in May 2015.

5.16 Sarah: Keeping still

Sarah heard about the study from other participants and was very keen and excited to participate. She gathered her responders' feedback in just a few days, which was quite rare. Most of the 20 participants needed weeks, sometimes even months, for this preparatory stage.

Toward the end of this study I became more and more aware of the importance of *silence* in the reflective process. It was becoming very clear that it is particularly the silent moments, which enable movement, new thoughts, insights, and awareness. Reflecting in detail on previous sessions, I could see that I had often not giving enough space for silence. Either I had responded immediately to what a participant shared, or I tended to break silent moments too quickly with new questions. I wondered if these interruptions hindered participants from staying with, or concluding, their thought streams in the process. And so, in my encounter with Sarah, I decided to focus on silent moments and consciously give space for more pauses in the process.

The longest Sarah and I spent in silence was for about two minutes, ending with Sarah asking me what I thought about the blackboard image: 'What do you think, Maris?' I cannot really say if two minutes are a long or short period in this framework. I suppose that, as long as participants feel comfortable, the whole third phase could actually happen in silence. And, as a facilitator, it is clearly my responsibility to ensure that participants feel comfortable in the silence and quietness. The principle seems simple: to stay with the other in stillness and encounter them with genuine interest and warmth. What I also realised is that in these quiet moments it is actually the image on the blackboard which does the talking. As the proverb says, *a picture is worth a thousand words*.

'For Walter'

Energy Tree No. 17: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Walter and Maris in May 2015.

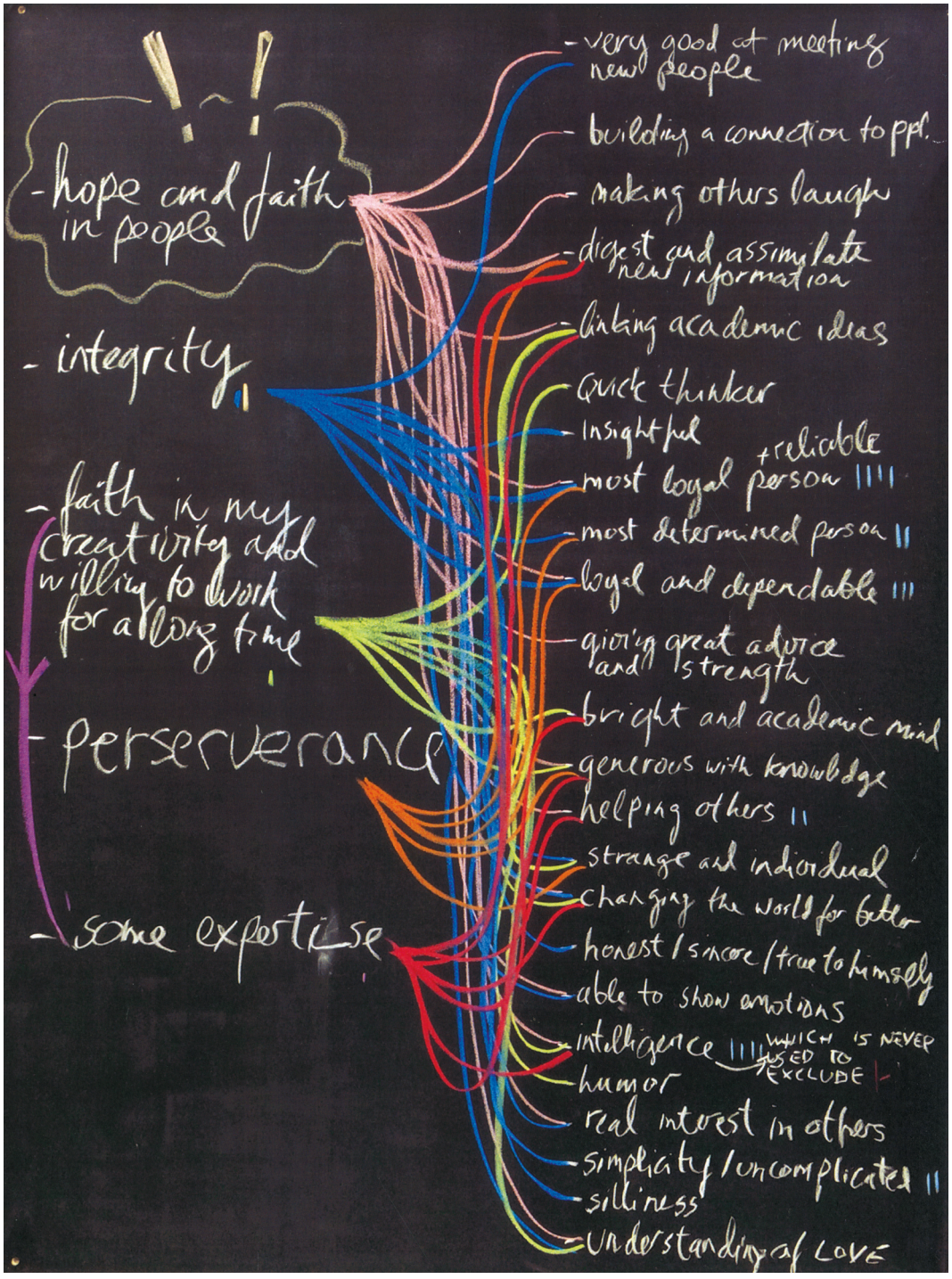
5.17 Walter: Altruism versus competition

Undertaking this study feels like I have encountered the good core, maybe even the heart or soul of each of the 20 participants. What emerged in Walter's blackboard image was a vast range of compassionate capacities, which included 'altruistic', 'helpful', 'giving', 'sincere', and 'good listener'. While we were exploring how Walter's self-perception of being a 'good worker' relates to what others had said, I asked Walter if he might also connect 'good worker' to 'altruistic'. Walter then said that he is actually also very competitive. Feeling a little uncertain, he reflected:

> I don't know. Being altruistic means doing something for others. Is this part of being a good worker? Well, yes, I suppose so. But I'm competitive as well. I like competition. If you are altruistic, you cannot be number one. I like to win. I mean, I know how to lose, but, still, I like to win. Some people don't know how to lose. I do. If you win, I give you my hand. But, still, I prefer to win.

While I was reflecting on Walter's session afterwards and looking at the combination of his altruistic spirit and competitive side, I suddenly thought that Walter's 'good core' has a lot in common with Mishka – the Russian Bear mascot of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. This association was based on my favourite cartoon from childhood with the following storyline. A group of forest animals stands at the starting line to participate in a race. One second before the starting shot, Mishka turns up apologising for being late – he had to take his little brother to the kindergarten before he could join the race. Then the race starts. Mishka runs faster than everybody else. It is obvious that he is going to win. Yet, as is often the case, the fox character decides to cheat and takes a short cut. Mishka, however, while running on the official track, meets diverse forest inhabitants who need his help. He decides to help everybody. As a consequence he is last at the finish line and loses the race. Yet, it turns out that sometimes losers are the true winners: the race committee finds out about Mishka's selfless and altruistic behaviour and decides to declare him the true winner of the race (Soyuzmultfilm 2012).

Walter's participation brought me back to my own question of what the outcome might be when competitive and altruistic mind-sets coexist? Looking at Walter or Mishka, it seems that the existence of these two impulses and mindsets does not mean win-lose, but win-win, and perhaps even win-win-win, where the self, the other, and the community all win.



'For Tom'

Energy Tree No. 18: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Tom and Maris in May 2015.

5.18 Tom: Storytelling

Tom's participation opened up a whole new approach to the preparatory stage. Tom was interested in participating, but he struggled to find the time to ask others for their feedback. I therefore suggested to Tom that I could do this on his behalf, if he would give me his responders' contact details. Tom agreed. We also agreed that his responders would send their feedback directly to me, and that Tom would first receive this when attending his session. The difficulty in contacting Tom's responders via email was to keep the message informative and short, as well as trustworthy. Everybody replied, so it obviously worked.

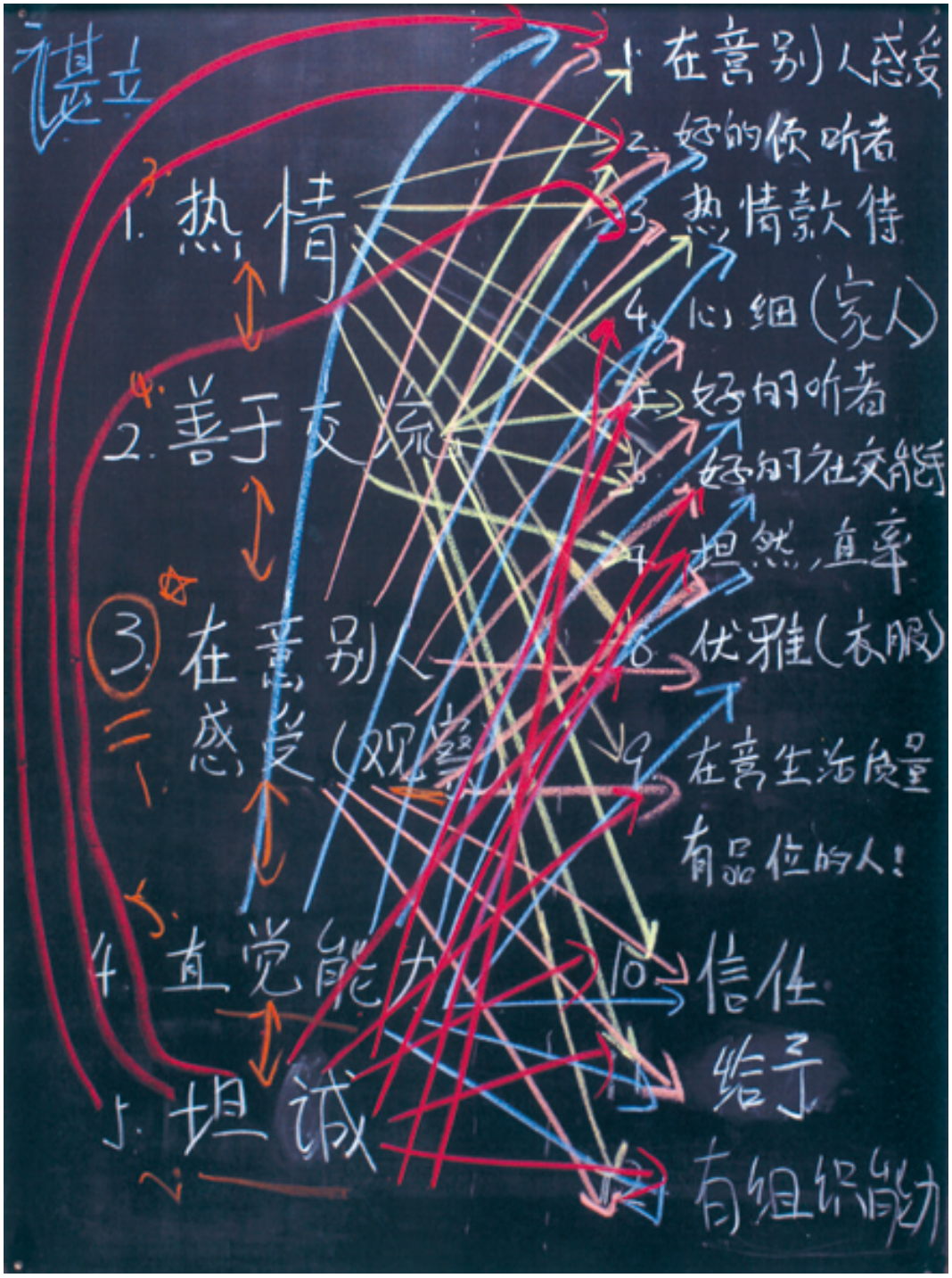
What was also significantly different in Tom's preparatory stage was his method of creating a list of his own talents, capacities, and strengths. Instead of just writing down words, Tom shared five stories, where he felt that he had 'exhibited strength'. His reason for this was that he found it 'impossible' to simply use terms such as 'thoughtful' or 'confident', as they all seemed quite shallow. Tom said:

> When I was thinking about my strengths, they seemed like platitudes. So I kind of worked the other way and thought, 'When have I been in a situation where I think I did something that manifested strength?' And from there I tried to categorise them as to what I thought the strength I'd exhibited was.

Each of the five qualities listed on the left side of Tom's *energy tree* therefore relates to a real event from Tom's life. Each of them is a testimonial or a deed – a lived reality. 'Hope and faith in people', for example, reflects Tom's strength to stand firm in emotional crises, courageously face new life situations, and proactively meet new people, whilst internally feeling 'destroyed' and 'heart-broken'. Tom had, in one such situation, spent his last money to make dinner and throw a party for people he had just met on one of the worst days of his life:

> I felt like it was not the end but the beginning of something. It was like [realising], 'Actually, the world doesn't stop just because you've had your heart broken'. You can carry on with interesting ways. At the time, I didn't realise the significance of what I'd done. Only years later, when I'd become friends with these people and it had become a different kind of life, did I realise that having decided to do that was actually a strength.

I decided to try out Tom's approach with future participants to see if it might be useful for other participants (see 5.20).



'For Li'

Energy Tree No. 19: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Li and Maris in May 2015.

5.19 Li: Beyond translation: The language of 'warmth'

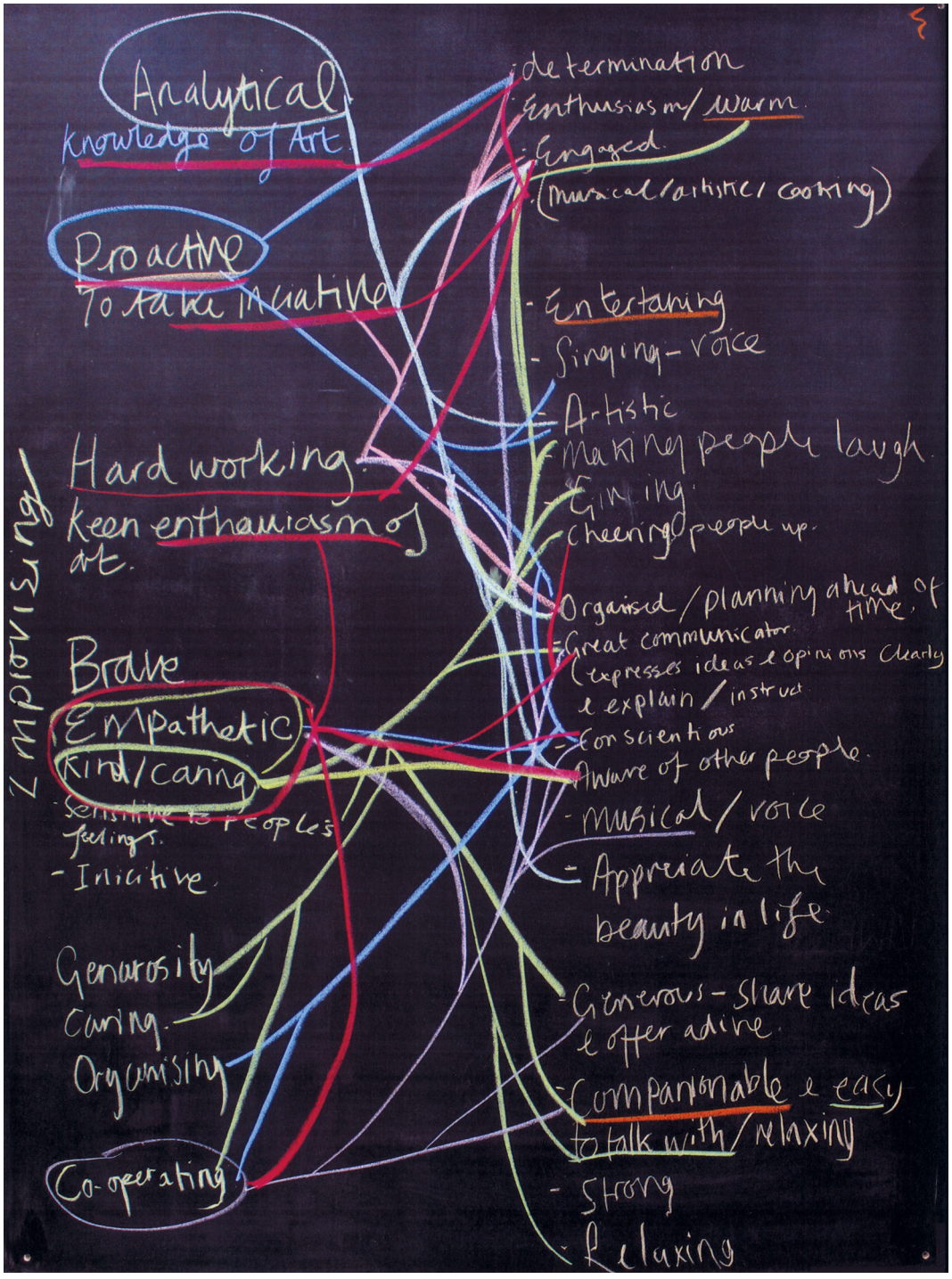
Li is from China. She saw a short presentation of my research project and asked me if she could participate. I was a bit worried at first, because much of this practice has to do with language – looking at alternative ways of naming, understanding, describing, and perceiving ones different qualities is an integral element in this reflective process. My worry was that Li and I would somehow *get lost in translation* instead of deepening, expanding, and exploring the capacities in and connections between the named qualities. Yet saying 'no' to a possible participant was never an option; quite the contrary – everyone was welcome to participate.

I suggested to Li somewhat spontaneously that we do the whole session in Chinese. What was meant to be a joke, at first, was, in part, what really happened: using Chinese characters, Li created her *energy tree* herself. My role in Li's session was therefore to witness the process rather than facilitate.

My new, rather different role raised a question for me, about whether one could do this process alone or if it required another person to engage as a facilitator. What is actually my personal contribution in working with a participant, I wondered? I've also been told that the process could be very easy to replicate. In principle, anyone could facilitate this *Energy Tree* process. And yet, in doing so, it could become rather schematic. What seems simple actually requires finely tuned senses: a finely tuned sense for detail; a sense for another person, and even a sense of the whole situation. Such sensing goes beyond language, drawing an image, asking questions, and listening. It is a kind of 'presencing'.[44] It also has to do with discovering the right temperature for the given setting. It comes down to working with the invisible material 'warmth', which is different from turning on a radiator. This warmth emerges through interaction and encounter. In fact, it is this warmth that enables awareness. To encounter and see the other purely with one's heart has to do with inner temperature, with the will, and, I would even dare to say, talent. Whether facilitating or witnessing a process, my main contribution is simply to take responsibility and enable the *right* temperature when encountering the other. The one thing that cannot simply be replicated is the motivation and inner attitude that enables this work. For me, this is a matter of heart.

44 In the field of contemporary social sculpture, the term 'presencing' is often used in a way that is closer to Martin Heidegger than to Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge. For Heidegger, it has more to do with Anwesenheit – being present – whereas Scharmer relates this to our capacity to 'tune into' the needs of the future (Sacks, 2011: 38-43).

And yet, the simplicity of the concept is also its strength. The work could grow into something bigger than me offering sessions to individuals. With a handbook and appropriate 'training', others could be inspired to develop their own way of working with the *positive focus* method and *individual human talents* as an infinite source of energy and the foundation of social capital.



'For Ellen'

Energy Tree No. 20: Blackboard visualised in the exchange between Ellen and Maris in June 2015.

5.20 Ellen: The last one for now: another way of telling

Doing the process with Ellen was an opportunity to invite another participant to visualise and embody their process as well as to make slight adjustments to the pre-task. Inspired by Tom's method of drawing his qualities out of his own perception of real life events, I asked Ellen to think of five events in her life where she had done or accomplished something that made her feel good and confident about herself. And then, based on that, to reflect on what she thought had informed these accomplishments.

Storytelling proved to be a great inspiration for this practice, offering an imaginative and natural way to access one's qualities. Each story Ellen told referred to not only one, but to diverse qualities she had successfully applied. We wrote down several keywords that emerged through each story. I then realised that using this method allows for much easier accessing of ones qualities than was the case for most of the previous participants. Ellen came up with 17 talents, capacities, and strengths, and each of them was more than just a word or an opinion. They were real deeds and occurrences, leaving Ellen in no doubt that she really possessed these qualities. And so, I decided to integrate this form of 'storytelling' through narration about real occurrences as a revised component of this practice.

It also transpired that Ellen was a brilliant storyteller. And so, facilitating this last session felt like approaching the final stop in a long (research) journey, seated next to a wonderful fellow passenger gathering the *gifts* from her life through stories. For me, as a facilitator, it was a more natural, heartfelt, and inspiring encounter, because I did not have to worry about a participant's potential feelings of awkwardness when reflecting on their own talents and positive qualities.

With regards to Ellen graphically embodying the process: the only instruction I gave was to write her own perceptions on the left of the blackboard and the perceptions of others on the right hand side. Ellen was then invited to graphically visualise the connections between all the listed qualities in whatever way she preferred. I noticed that she worked very intuitively, drawing connections not only from left to right, but sometimes also on either the left or right side alone. Through these experiments at the close of the first 20 sessions, I discovered a possible new direction for my next 20 sessions. In the spirit of one of social sculpture's leitmotif phrases – 'every human being is an artist' – I will offer participants the opportunity to graphically develop their *energy tree* themselves, in the process of its visualisation.

6. Reflections and insights

Undertaking this practice-based research has offered me valuable insights into the field of contemporary social sculpture and the significant role of the artistic mode in transformative processes. Fusing my *talents, interests, possibilities, and intentions* in undertaking this study, I explored and experienced first hand, how to become an artist in an extended sense. This in turn enabled me to discover ways of bringing value to a wider community. Interestingly, having achieved this fusion and confluence in my life, my energy level increased greatly, sustaining my motivation and the inspiration to realise the 'Energy Trees' project. Having discovered my own invisible artistic instruments, I found a meaningful direction and shaped an approach for contributing to and working as an *artist* in the field of social sculpture.

The most significant insight in developing 'Energy Trees' has to do with the experience of the impact of *positive focus*, which is integral to this final social sculpture practice. More than any of the other elements in this practice, it is certainly this central methodological element of *positive focus* that enabled new insights and various shifts in feeling toward oneself and one's situation. At the same time, this has also been the most challenging aspect of this practice. Most participants had difficulties in looking at themselves solely from a positive perspective. They had never done this before. The question in itself: 'What are your most significant talents, capacities, and strengths?' was, for many, unfamiliar and strange. In fact, all 20 participants made clear that for the very first time in their lives, they had had the opportunity to receive feedback of this kind in a focused, reflective, and encouraging way. Most participants had not even thought of their talents, capacities, and strengths as something valuable. Even less had they realised that employing these capacities meant bringing these resources into circulation, and that this in itself was a way of contributing to positive social development and change.

It seems that *positive focus*, if consistently practised, could be one of the most powerful muscles a human mind could develop for approaching challenging problems. Having begun to experience the consequences of such *positive focus* it now seems logical

that one is more likely to succeed in approaching challenges, even with ones existing capacities and talents, simply by focussing on what one has, rather than regretting ones flaws and bemoaning one's circumstances. A good example of the power of positive focus is Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking. Pippi, a little girl, socially excluded for her red hair, freckles, unconventional character, difficult social behaviour, with no mother and a criminal father, is adept at living creatively and with a positive focus in any circumstances. Demonstrating her strength, Pippi lifts her horse in one-hand.[45] Clearly, the strength to lift a horse in one hand cannot come from the biceps of a little girl. Rather, it is a metaphor for Pippi's independent mind, mental strength, and her positive approach toward life and herself.

The visual embodiments in 'Energy Trees' could also be seen as proof of my hypothesis that everybody is highly talented. All 20 participants discovered and articulated many significant qualities, valued by themselves and others, revealing the diversity and richness of human talents, capacities, and strengths. Furthermore, while exhibiting the visual embodiments or visual choreographies of the 20 reflective processes, I was amazed to discover that these images in themselves can offer an artistic counterbalance to the destructive negativity, which seems to predominate in many current views of existence. Exhibiting this work was an opportunity to explore how such forms might work as a means of raising public awareness about the richness and diversity of human talents; of such talents as a foundation of social capital; and of the means they offer for positive change in society.

Certainly, one could argue that encountering oneself on a blackboard, or listening to someone talk about their often unrecognised qualities has little to do with talent, nor has it any positive or transformative social impact. Clearly, my practice is not spectacular. It does not, as does Mariah Carey, hit seventh-octave range high notes while singing to the *world* 'the hero lies in you', but it does have to do with the shaping of a free, democratic society. Regardless of the octave, every voice counts. 'Everybody is an artist' and 'no one is outside'. This is another form of the 'spectacular'!

45 Pippi Longstocking, a protagonist of Astrid Lindgren, is famous for being the strongest girl in the world. Ulla Lundgvist, a Lindgren expert, says that although Pippi could use her strength to oppress the whole world, she decides consciously to use her strength to serve the common good (Astrid Lindgren, 2015).

From the results of this modest blackboard practice, this method indeed appears to be a way to contribute to change on a larger scale than initially apparent. By enabling individuals to find their inner voice and their place in the world, as well as recognising capacities of value to others – it encourages an active engagement in *the field of transformation*. And in so doing individual capital becomes social capital. And so, as this microcosmic process has revealed, in becoming aware of and making use of their talents, individuals are much more likely to contribute to the social sphere and to positive social development.

Developing practices that enhance the third phase of this process – concerned with *employing* our capacities and talents – is vital but lies outside the scope of this practice-based research study. What this study does is underline and confirm the link between the recognition of one's individual capacities and their constituent role in creating social capital.

7. Conclusion

Even though the main aim of my project 'Energy Trees' is enabling individuals to recognise their individual talents and exploring possibilities regarding how, through giving, we can bring this individual capital into social circulation, it is important to emphasise that it is not about altruism. Rather it is about a synergetic model that is equally beneficial for both the individual and their society. My research process has confirmed and convinced me that, only if we, as individuals, have the possibility to do what we do best, can we make the best possible contribution to the society. In fact, this same principle would also be beneficial in a professional context, enabling a more satisfying and effortless engagement with one's daily tasks in the workplace.[46]

Although the idea of contributing one's talents to society might seem simple, my experience is that, in reality, it is much more complex. Speaking from experience – although being brought up by parents and taught by teachers who, I believe, only wanted the best for me – I was constantly told what my mistakes were, what I was doing wrong, and what I could *not* do at all. This approach put my mistakes and deficiencies into a constant focus at a very early age, with the result that, as a young adult, all I had learnt and all I knew was everything that I could *not* do and everything that I was *not*. At this point, my talents were so deeply buried that the idea of having some sort of inner resources, through which I could make a living, not to mention a contribution to society, did not even occur to me. What was clear, however, was the societal pressure and expectations that, to be accepted, I needed first to achieve something and succeed in life, or – weighed down with all these heavy flaws and inabilities in my rucksack – I had to go and do something for the world.

Would things have been different had I received more encouragement and ongoing support? Would my steps into adulthood have been different if I had had a supportive space in which to discover and engage playfully with my talents from a very early age; for being encouraged, acknowledged, and appreciated just for being myself? And, most importantly, through my capacities being valued, would I have learnt to be more appreciative, encouraging, and acknowledging towards others?

---

46 According to Forbes magazine, 87% of workers worldwide either hate or just do not like their jobs. Only 13% of workers worldwide (17% in UK) feel passionate about their employment. One of the reasons cited why people feel frustrated about their jobs is that they do not have the opportunity to employ their capabilities (Adams, S. 2013).

Recognising this lack, it became absolutely necessary to give these buried talents space; actually, to fight for that space, take it over, take it back, reclaim it: to do whatever was needed. Clearly having such space is essential for our identity and self-esteem – to feel valued and appreciated. But we also need to learn how to value, appreciate, and encourage the other: to support each other.

What has also become clear through doing this research project is that only if we are unfolding and working *with* our talents will we experience doing something meaningful in our lives. Working actively with our talents would enable living both a self-directed life and, simultaneously, making a contribution to society, without the self and the social being contradictory. Such creative unfolding and engaging of our capacities is likely to even bring about new synergies between individuals and their communities.

It is, however, important to emphasise that each individual should have the freedom to decide, which of their talents, if any, they would like to develop and offer in and to their communities.

Equally, one could argue that each human being should also have the freedom to choose to not develop their talents, and to not offer these to the society. Without this freedom the danger of being reduced to what one has to give increases, denying that human beings are more than what they do or accomplish. This would deny our soul, our spiritual being, which cannot be measured by outcomes, and is valuable in and for itself. It would reduce and instrumentalise the human being to a functional being, whose purpose is to produce. This attitude is not something that this research project supports. On the contrary, this project attempts to explore that dimension of our lives that confirms that we are more than machines or servants of the economy.

What seems to matter, therefore, in creating one's individual path in life, is to let our talents become an inner compass, helping us discover the appropriate orientation. In a way it is the talents themselves that help us locate our place and purpose in life, because each talent comes to life in a specific context. For example, having a talent for gardening, one needs a garden, in which to garden and to become a gardener.

Aligning a talent with an appropriate context can lead to new synergies, energy, and movement arising from the inner field of a human being.

Metaphorically, if a tree's seed is equivalent to a talent, then it would be our task to find the most suitable ground, the right outer conditions, and a context in which to plant this seed, so that it could grow effortlessly, and from its own inner force. Consequently, it would not have to be pulled, pushed, fixed, or shouted at to grow faster or slower. In fact this behaviour would be counter-productive. Also, blaming an apple tree for not producing any peaches would be ridiculous. Nor would an apple tree itself come up with the idea to grow peaches. A tree in an appropriate place and appropriate conditions grows effortlessly, because it is in its DNA and in its 'desire' or impulse to unfold. It would evolve in its own time, yet continuously, 24/7 (not nine to five while being monitored), until it dies. In this sense, the growth of a tree is a somewhat passive, although constant process.

The right conditions enable growth and development almost magically. Here growth is not intended to signify more and more, as in the capitalistic mind-set, but rather it denotes unfolding by and for itself, as well as together with others. A tree in an appropriate place, growing alongside other trees, knows how to integrate itself. It knows how to be part of the forest and of the ecosystem without intentionally harming other trees or exploiting the ground that provides its home and its nourishment.[47]

On certain levels, translating this metaphor to individuals and their talents, the principle is the same. If our talents meet the right conditions, then our environment gives us everything we need for further growth and development. At the same time, through our individual actions and social interactions, we strengthen and develop our environment. The result is a largely natural, effortless circulation and exchange of resources that is beneficial for the individual, the environment, and society.

---

47 Sacks' University of the Trees framework understands trees as our teachers. Sacks says that there is a simple yet significant difference between human beings and trees: 'a tree knows how to be a tree', incontrast to human beings which are the only one of earth's creatures that do not simply unfold according to plan. Unlike trees and other life-forms human beings first need to learn how to become 'response-able' with their 'freedom and creativity.' Lecture for the Making a Difference, Asia 2015 Forum entitled: *University of the Trees: Developing Capital for the Connective Village.* [video online] Available at: http://www.mad.asia/posts/816/MaD-Forum

In retrospect, perhaps it was my buried talent that brought me to the field of social sculpture and the Social Sculpture Research Unit. The SSRU, my academic home for almost four years, has given me the framework, support, and inspiration to undertake this study – culminating in an artistic attempt to inspire reflective and imaginative thought about what it actually is that one does best. Through my research I (re) discovered my own inner resources – the capital I could bring into circulation – and, in so doing, hopefully make a genuine contribution to new knowledge and toward a more empathic society.

Bibliography

Beuys, J. (2010) *What is money? A Discussion*. Forest Row, England: Clairview Books.

Bortoft, H. (1996) *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science.* United Kingdom: Floris Books.

Bortoft, H. (1986) *Goethe's Scientific Consciousness*. United Kingdom: The Institute for Cultural Research.

Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presse Du Reel, France.

Bunge, M. (1996) *Zwischen Intuition und Ratio : Pole des bildnerischen Denkens bei Kandinsky, Klee und Beuys*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D. & Stavros, J. (2003) *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*. Bedford Heights, OH San Francisco: Lakeshore Communications Berrett-Koehler.

De Saint-Exupery, A. (1974) *The Little Prince*. United Kingdom: London: Piccolo in association with Heinemann.

Harlan, V. and Beuys, J. H. (2004) *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. United Kingdom: Clairview Books.

Harlan, V. (2002) *Das Bild der Pflanze in Wissenschaft und Kunst: Bei Aristoteles und Goethe, der botanischen Morphologie des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts und bei den Künstlern Paul Klee und Joseph Beuys*. 2nd edn. Stuttgart: Mayer.

Harlan, V. (1986) *Was ist Kunst? Werkstattgespräch mit Beuys*. Stuttgart: Urachhaus.

Harlan, V. (1976) *Soziale Plastik: Materialien zu Joseph Beuys*. 3rd edn. Achberg: Achberger Verlag.

Hayes, C.-M. L. (2011) *Beuysian Legacies: Art, Culture and Politics in Ireland, Europe and the US*. Germany: Lit Verlag.

Hutchinson, P. and Shakespeare, W. (2013) *Romeo and Juliet*. United States: Saddleback Educational Publishing.

Kagan, S. (2011) *Art and Sustainability Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*. 1st edn. New Brunswick, U.S.A: [Distributed by] Transaction Publishers.

Kiss, E. (2005) Aesthetische Erziehung, die notwendig stets anders werdenden Primaerimpulse und das kulturelle Kapital. Denken mit Beuys. in: Anachronia, Nr.7. March 2005. 108-115.

Lindgren, A. (2010) *Pippi Longstocking*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Robinson, K. and Aronica, L. (2010) *The Element: How Finding your Passion Changes Everything*. London: Penguin Group UK.

Rowland, H. (2001) *Goethe, Chaos, and Complexity*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V.

Sacks, S. and Kurt, H. (2013) *Die rote Blume Ästhetische Praxis in Zeiten des Wandels*. 1st edn. Lassan, Vorpommern: thinkOya.

Sacks, S. and Zumdick, W. (2013) *Atlas of the Poetic Continent: Pathways in Ecological Citizenship*. United Kingdom: Temple Lodge Publishing.

Sacks, S. (2011) Geben und ökologische Bürgerschaft: Aus innerer Bewegung zur passenden Form. D. Weber, A. Massmann (eds.), *Da hilft nur Schenken: Mit Schenken und Stiften die Gesellschaft gestalten.* Frankfurt am Main: Info3-Verlag, GLS Treuhand e. V.

Sacks, S. (2002) Exchange Values: Images of Invisible lives. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Scharmer, C. O. (2007) *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*. Cambridge, MA: SoL, the Society for Organizational Learning.

Schiller, F. & Wilkinson, E. (1967). *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon P.

Schön, D. A. (1991) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. 1st edn. Aldershot: Basic Books.

Senge, P. M. (2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. United States: Crown Publishing Group.

Stüttgen, J. and Beuys, J. (1988) *Zeitstau: Im Kraftfeld des erweiterten Kunstbegriffs von Joseph Beuys: Sieben Vorträge im Todesjahr von Joseph Beuys*. Stuttgart: Urachhaus.

Tisdall, C. (1979) *Joseph Beuys*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Zumdick, W. (2013) Death Keeps Me Awake: Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner, Foundations of their Thought (1st edition). Baunach: Spurbuchverlag.

Zumdick, W. (2001) *'Der Tod hält mich wach': Joseph Beuys – Rudolf Steiner: Grundzüge ihres Denkens*. 2nd edn. Dornach: Pforte Verlag.

Zumdick, W. (1995) *Über das Denken bei Joseph Beuys und Rudolf Steiner*. Basel: Wiese.

Online Credits

Basic Income European Network (BIEN)
What is basic income? | *BIEN* (2015)
Available at: http://www.basicincome.org/basic-income/
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Business dictionary
What is synergistic effect? Definition and meaning.
Available at: http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/synergistic-effect.html
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Forbes Magazine
Adams, S. (2013) *Unhappy employees outnumber happy ones by Two to One worldwide*.
Available at: http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/10/10/unhappy-employees-outnumber-happy-ones-by-two-to-one-worldwide/
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Oxford Brookes University
Professor Sacks, Shelley. 2014. Academic profile.
Available at: http://arts.brookes.ac.uk/staff/shelleysacks.html
[Accessed 27 October 2015].

Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU)
Available at: http://www.social-sculpture.org/
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

University of the Trees (UOT)
Available at: http://www.universityofthetrees.org/
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Videos
Astrid Lindgren (2015) Directed by ARTE Programme.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSCktHGQrIY
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

BeuysTV (2011) Joseph Beuys – Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjkHYQnxZTE
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Beuys, J. (1986). Mein Dank an Lehmbruck.
Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHzPEuWoiDw
[Accessed 10 May 2015].

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (2012) *Aesthetics, community and ecology toward a culture of sustainability (radius of art)*.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgdCNrLBQxk
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Sacks, S. (2015) *University of the Trees: Developing Capital for the Connective Village.* Lecture for the Making a Difference, Asia 2015 Forum
Available at: http://www.mad.asia/posts/816/MaD-Forum/
[Accessed: 16 November 2015].

Soyuzmultfilm (2012) *Who will receive a prize* | *Soviet cartoons for children and adults*.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR49Bm3BA2c
[Accessed: 30 October 30 2015].

Picture Credits

Fig. 1: Exploring the 'Field of Transformation', September 2015, p. 9

Fig. 2: Exploring the inner and outer fields, December 2014, p. 16

Fig. 3: Certificate for winning the first award in long jump, 1984, p. 63

Fig. 4: Award ceremony, Annual Children's Sports Games, Märjamaa, Estonia, 1984, p. 64

All the Energy Trees (ET) blackboards were visualised by Maris Palmi in a process with each participant, except for:

ET No. 10: 'For Maris', created by Annelinde, p. 60

ET No. 19: 'For Li, created by Li', p. 84

ET No. 20: 'For Ellen' created by Ellen, p. 87

Photographic documentation of all blackboards – Maris Palmi.

Appendix – Substantiating raw material

Note 1 (see page 34)
Markus: 'I was wondering about the lines. People who are quite insecure about their talents or don't work with them in this way, might be a bit blocked in this process with the lines. If it becomes so manifest on the blackboard and if there is such a strong emphasis on writing poems, people might feel insecure to say that they do not want to focus on that, or don't like it. They might feel a bit forced in that direction…'

Note 2 (see page 38)
Annelinde: 'Okay, I can see all the things that are there, that I can use and I do think that I'm doing my best to create a possibility in my life to use my capacities. So if that is already somehow the case in different ways, then what is it that I need to develop and what is it that I actually want to develop? […] Looking at this list I was wondering, what about those things that would be important for me to develop, that I would want to develop? Things that are not in that list, things that haven't manifested so strongly in what I do or how people 'perceive' me.'

Note 3 (see page 38)
Shelley: 'What is interesting is that there are other elements that have been mentioned, that enable spontaneity. It seems to me that spontaneity is made up of a number of things. One is to be present, to be alive to what is going on, and to appreciate what is going on. If one is then not spontaneous, it might be because there is something else that spontaneity requires – which is confidence. It might be that a part of this potential for spontaneity is already strongly developed – the openness [and] generosity that goes out to things – and that [is] what helps us to tune in to what is going on. [But] if one is not confident enough to respond to the evidence of one's senses, then one maybe is not as spontaneous yet as one would like to be. Spontaneity requires being completely in tune with – and there are a lot of capacities that are […] about being in tune with – but maybe the confidence is missing. [And so] one still needs a lot of certainty before one acts, instead of acting on trust – being able to act on what one really experiences in the moment – because one does not yet feel enough confidence. […] I found it interesting, if we hear what you think is missing and then we rethink that capacity that you would like more of or that is not yet so strong. Maybe there is already a lot that makes up that capacity, but some aspects of it are not [manifest] yet.'

Note 4 (see page 39)
Wolfgang: 'If you look at generosity, this can also be used for bad aims; or curiosity, to build atom bombs; or even empathy.'

Note 5 (see pages 13 and 39)
Shelley: 'It starts getting into the territory you [need] to define at the beginning of the process, [about the capacity's role in being]'good for the society'. It is a bit similar to the question of social sculpture: […] as long as people carry on thinking that [what] Beuys meant by 'social sculpture' is simply that we shape our lives and shape the society, we have major problems. We can shape it as a worst [form] of anything. Therefore, I [stress that] one has to link his idea, that 'every human being is an artist', which is also dangerous, unless you say, 'what are the conditions that we have to have in the society to enable everyone to be an artist?' and only then do you get [the understanding] that everybody needs freedom and potential to become fully creative; which means, we all have to be responsible. We need economic structures, political, social, that enable everyone to be an artist. This is the only safeguard against the idea that, actually, all [we] have to do is become creative, Gestalters of our own lives and the world around us. […] what is this thing that we all become a Gestalter for? I think this is what you mean; that is what your third question is about. If we want a society in which every human being can be the artist that they really are, [then] we need things like basic income; we need more honest cooperation, we need all the good things. So it's not only about recognising that we can shape our lives and shape the society, but shape [toward] what? I always [say] 'toward a humane and ecologically just society'. There has to be some goal that shapes the shaping. So, when I wrote down 'determination', I think of Annelinde as an amazingly determined person, and I had to write down quickly that you are not just determined, you are determined to transform for the good. I had to qualify it.'

Note 6 (see page 39)
Dianne: 'What would it take to activate a desire to utilise these capacities? I may not believe I have them. [And even if] I understand I'm generous or I have this capacity for generosity, [I might] not [be] interested to use it. As a social sculpture practitioner, a part of our work is to activate this desire to utilise these capacities towards this goal, the higher good, or [a] just and humane society. How to lift this literally off the board or off the page into something that is a living, enlivened action? […] [I wonder] who is this useful for? Someone who is already active and engaged and [is] going to the next level of manifesting all these capacities? Teenagers, who are not interested, [who think] 'we can do this'?; but for me to live it, I [would] want to do something with it.'

Note 7 (see page 40)

Shelley: 'One thing is, I had a sense that when we were first stating all our capacities, I felt like Annelinde must be getting so large, not in a proud sense, but you were kind of being showered with perceptions. I think if […] I had been in such a process [as a teenager], it would have been amazing, to hear these things from others – that I was determined. [At the time] I had [not yet realised] that it was something valuable. So this giving […] a person the gift of other people's perception, I think, actually, could be [a step to the third part] […] if the third part was clearer – I had not heard this process before. If people then get [asked], 'so which one of these would you take and how in the next three months [would you work with it]? I think that […] [could be a] mobilising force. It's not like forever in your life. In the next three months, how would you use this capacity and begin to […] [work with] it? There needs to be discussion, help, or support […] [but it is] the mobilising frame. Now, how would you use it in the next three months?'