

Making it easier – Leena Riethmulle at Cut Thumb

Words by Caitlin Franzmann

Do you love yourself?

It is very simple for me to ask this question and impart advice about the importance of caring for yourself and accepting who you are. It is much harder for me to embody these concepts. Although I try to be mindful of all the personal and political factors that contribute to my feelings of inadequacy, I know there are many things I am yet to feel, acknowledge, question and perhaps unlearn. Self doubt simmers.

Is this narcissistic navel gazing when there is so much turmoil and suffering in the world?

Guilt so often accompanies self doubt. But I think there is a difference between self-absorbed behaviour and sound internal self-care. Self care is about taking care of our feelings and seeking a place of well-being so that we may begin to question what media and society tell us and move through the world with greater empathy and agency. It is about valuing our own experiences and considering them as *valuable*.

Leena Riethmuller is wide awake to her experiences as valuable and she wants to be awake with others. Since 2013, Leena has been formally inviting people to experience their own bodies intimately in both a group format in *Somatic Experience Workshops* (2013) and one-on-one *Body Information Workshops* (2015-2016). In the workshops, Leena asks an individual to engage in experimental tasks with her, designed to increase attentiveness to their bodily experience, like brushing each other's teeth at the same time or silently noting down observations about each other. Within these tasks, Leena delicately highlights the oscillating flow between private internal experience and sharing, whether by conversation, written reflections or by reaching out a toothbrush and physically entering the oral cavity of another. In one task Leena asks the participant to recall a positive feeling and, with Leena, compose an audio recording of their description. The audio recordings are sensuous memories of intimate relationships and of being with nature - of *'feeling not alone'* as one participant reflects.

In *'My Positive Feeling'* the artist returns inward. I find myself listening to an audio recording of Leena sharing a *'good feeling'* with Leena. I am drawn into her personal world of sensuous experience, anxiety and reflection. I feel the words penetrate my aural cavities and I can imagine the sonority forming in Leena's belly, the vibrations rising to be expelled from her mouth, passing across her lips - words that become an unfixed articulation of her personhood. With no visual cues accompanying the audio, structures and reasonings of the seen become diffuse. Time and space collapses - to consciousness captured in a sound bite.

I feel like an imposter in this self-dialogue and begin to wonder if it was ever intended to be shared. But in choosing to expose herself, I feel a sense that Leena cares for me. She cares for what this telling reveals. It reveals to me an openness to the uncertainty of the future - an encouragement to relinquish a sense of what I should become. Leena presents no demands or expectations - just wisdom and love for Leena; for Leena on the train slowing down to reveal the undulating telegraph cables, for Leena recording a memory and for Leena receiving the embrace of her own voice saying 'I Love you'.

I begin to understand Leena's impetus for the workshops and the way she negotiates making art. I sense a desire to reflect on where self value develops. Rather than surrounding ourselves with people and things to increase our value, Leena poses a symbiotic relationship of inner value with the outside world. She presents this as an intuitive process of openness to new experiences, mindful questioning and gentle acceptance to make it - art, relationships and being in the world - easier.