

Love, Loss and Legacy

Tracy Mackenna, 2023

Written to accompany the book *Super, Special, Normal* by Anette Lundebye, an artist's book that combines embroidery and episodic storytelling of love and loss and tells the story of a brother who defied yet never escaped the ableist gaze, published by Lundebye Press, 2023.

When Anette invited me to write a foreword, or perhaps an afterword, these two points that are a beginning and an end conflated in me, as is often the visceral conspiracy that my body and brain enact.

Silently absorbing her voice, breath and intonation, my state of being was incrementally, and irredeemably altered the day that Anette told her story, the tale of how she and her brother Alexander were, *together* and *apart*.

There is nothing more valuable than time. And health. This is what I continue to learn, having been born to a parent whose death was always present, imminent, heightening my awareness of the different speeds with which time passes, and how time passes, and making my guilt palpable; I am healthy, he is not. And then, my own young heart faltered with the birth of my youngest sibling, my father's condition passed silently and unseeingly to her.

Sibling states, and sibling ways of being.

As the first born, we are hopefully indulged, swaddled in love and brought into the world as our carers learn how to handle us, introduce us and prepare our environment for our unique needs. When, shortly afterwards, our sibling enters our family, our bespoke world is changed, modified for ever. When that sibling is *differently able*, or *disabled*, one's sense of self is irrevocably defined by our untrained parents' heightened attention, by the daily state of alert that was in Anette's case induced by Alexander's life threatening heart condition and skeletal abnormalities.

Like Anette, as an artist I managed my state of mind and the un-asked for contract of entwinement with my father and sibling by looking, listening and bringing the indescribable into being; by making art. Fear, and its unpleasant perfume lead me to present in exhibitions the certainty of million year old geological structures as the very most delicate, fragile and powdery red chalk lines. My companion, dread, and my strongest of emotions were audio recorded by medics as they coursed through my veins, every breath one that sounded and smelled of anticipatory grief, the audio composition later suffusing the architectural fabric of a gallery.

And Anette has reached quietly towards material that is held close to the body, the cotton of the embroiderer's thread stretching from field to fabric, her fingers' energy calming the mind. Repetition, in the time-stitch that is embroidery, enables the drawing-in of thoughts and ideas, here offered out as a coherent set of marks that form images to fix down and set fast Alexander's ways of being. In the word embroidery nestles the term *broderie* - embellishment - and in this careful, unhurried hand-done act of love Anette brings Alexander's beauty to us, offering new imaginings by telling us about what is past.

It does not matter if the memory plays tricks, but what does matter is what Donna Haraway says about mattering when reminding us that we are part of a compost society of companion species, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties."*

What should matter to us is how Anette has managed, how she has worked alongside her grief, through acts of sustained attention, allowing herself to receive what art-making possibly gives: an ability to mediate our psychological limitations and soothe our anxieties about imperfection. What has been happening while we are getting on with our lives and Anette has been thinking through Alexander, is, as Shari Tishman puts it, 'slow looking'. Yet with this deceleration comes power and enrichment and renewal because "Slow looking is simply the art of learning through observation"***

And what else should matter to us is what we can learn from Anette's ability to welcome in loss, and how she is teaching herself to grieve. Loss is an inevitable part of the human process of being, but what matters is how we find ways to deal with it, and to make a place for its partner, grieving. The assumptions that we make about how we build our lives have to be reconsidered after loss, and the messages we give ourselves about how we might deal with them are important for our wellbeing, and by extension for those who are around us. In making this work, Anette is doing what adults find difficult: she is *re-learning* her life, how she relates to herself and how she can connect anew to others in our world.

That re-learning has given us this book that is a book and more; it is an artist's book. Never intended as a high-volume product for a mass market, it is instead a space that a small number of us is invited to share. Its physical qualities and the experience of holding and handling it create a connection with the properties of a book that – while always able to be social – is in this case individual and personal; it has been made with you in mind. Artist's publishing offers space *differently*, it holds space *differently*, it plays with time *differently*, and why Anette has made Super Special Normal for us, is to create a legacy *differently*; and that is the long-lasting impact of Alexander's life on Anette's.

This gift is not a hermetic object, but one that is at home with other personal and global stories woven with painful narratives that are made powerful in their expressive, delicate rendering.

Anette is inviting the world to see, through her eyes and her hands.

* Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016

** Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*, Routledge, 2017