

Manual of HOW TO navigate my artistic research

My name is **Martina Petrović**, I am a Serbian artist based in Brussels. In my current artistic research that I am developing in a.pass, I focus on how we, Western and Eastern European society, deal with complex socially generated emotions such as grief and love. How do we face the inevitable loss of parts of our culture and humanity, due to displacement, the crisis of capitalism and disappearance of species and environments, abandonment and fast replacement of technologies and ways of living.

I would divide my a.pass research into 2 trajectories that went their separate ways. They are not completely two different researches, in fact they do inform each other, and use partially the same methodologies, but for the sake of clarity I will keep them apart.

I came to a.pass with the proposal of **Love**, questioning if people can fall in love through sharing artistic practices. What would it mean to engage in art collaboration with the intention to fall in love? What would it mean to work as an artist from a position of loving in collaborative processes? This trajectory was the focus of my research for the first two blocks in a.pass (there are 4 blocks in the studying structure of a.pass), and has been put on hold from that moment on.

The second trajectory emerged from my curatorial proposition **Where do we go from here?**. It came from a need to understand collective and self organized practices in Brussels. To question how they operate, which are the problems they encounter, and which are their operating tools. I designed a series of dinner events, for gathering around the table and sharing food in order to share ideas, reflections and future plans.



Endless wo/andering

How to get lost / in your practice?

In this part I am going to map out my art research, by wandering through it and by pinpointing some landmarks. As it always happens they are not only points in artistic practice, but also in my life, my internal processes, as well as external factors.

I entered a.pass with the proposition of working on deconstruction of Balkan rituals for grieving. In the beginning of a.pass I made a performative ritual for Meaning finishing the full cycle of 6 grieving stages. Which was the end of 3 year long project [The Last Straw](#). I realized that my focus had shifted, and that I was ready to take a break in the investigation of Grief .

While working on the third stage of grief, Sadness, in [ADMA](#), Antwerp, a parallel trajectory of love started to boil in my research. While creating the fifth stage, Acceptance, during the residency *Beyond the spoken*, with Barbara Raes, intuitively I came to the conclusion that after the grieving process there is a space reopened for engaging with love. Not that they exclude each other. My proposal for creating grieving rituals for loss of environments, ways of living, habits, technologies was a proposal of collectivizing grief. It was also questioning how we make time for grief, how we express it, how we share it? Undergoing this process, developing Denial, Bargaining, Sadness, Anger, Acceptance and finally Meaning-stages, I closed a cycle. And discovered that the following huge emotion that has been pressing in my mind was love.

It is no surprise that this new turn in the research comes with me moving my life once again from one city to another. With the beginning of a.pass I have moved to Brussels. Also the COVID period seemed to be calming down and coming to its slow end. All the changes have required a new way of living, relating, adapting, rethinking, listening, letting go, continuing. I felt the new boost of energy and urgency to connect, to love, to take risks, to experience the new chapter in life.

I was interested in romantic love, but as a political construct, wondering if they can at all be separated. It also seems that love is so subjective. So I started recording a series of interviews about love in order to gather the subjective stories. Which led me to the conclusion that at this stage I haven't clearly distinguished the difference between love and falling in love. Which brought a lot of confusion. The questions I was asking were not sharp, I was searching blindly just shooting in all directions. I realized how new a field this was for me. Curiosity and urgency were there, but not a side ally that would give an access to the question of WHAT is the core question of my research.

The light burden

How to engage with emotions?

In my art research I propose exploring the question: Can people fall in love through exchange of artistic practices, and further how can they implement mechanisms of love in developing meaningful relationships through collaboration. I find it is essential for our society, as well as for the artistic community to work on mechanisms for building up intimacy, developing loving practices and defending the importance of love. As Alain Badiou states in the book *In the praise of love*, "we need to rethink love and protect it, for it faces two serious dangers: safety guaranteed by an insurance policy and the comfort zone limited by regulated pleasures." It is rooted in the capitalistic approach to the world that emotional turmoil of love as well as deep experiencing of the same should be avoided.. There is no place for them in the world governed by self interest, quick replacement, and no-risk quick satisfaction culture. Love is no longer a desired state, it has become a very dangerous and uncomfortable area.

I felt the need for rebuilding, relearning and rejuvenation tools and excitement about being in love. I proposed exploring new ways of flirting, making contact, and building trust. Developing love practices seemed necessary for the preservation of love. It seems to me that the discourse on love was in need of reinvention. As Srečko Horvat states "the question of love is hidden in the margins, the attempt to speak or write about love is linked to profound difficulty."

I was investigating **Love** as a mode of engagement, as something different than an emotional commodity, love as something ungraspable but essential in relationality, love as a non-understandable emotion that is so subjective, yet a social construct very much influenced by the socio-political tides. My starting point was understanding how to access the subject. I was searching for an object or situation, or question through which to talk about love. I couldn't decide on the definition of love that I am researching, which was quite problematic since it's such a huge and vague entity there can be infinite access points, but you must know where to look.

In the beginning I went for the question Can people fall in love through sharing artistic practices? The answer came rather quickly and bluntly YES. But the following question was why would they, and is it desirable and sustainable to do so?

Designing conversations as a methodology

I developed three methods to start collective conversation and practice through match-making.

The first proposal was to randomly match a.pass researchers into pairs, threesomes or polyamorous groups in which they would interview each other by going through a list of [10 questions to fall in love](#) with each other's art research.

The second one was [love letter exchange](#) (understood in a very broad context). The a.pass researchers were matched randomly and they were asked to commit to correspondence through letters by using the language of their practice. In the end all the groups gathered and we polyamorously mixed the letters and shared them collectively.

For the third proposal I went with each of the art researchers of a.pass on a [date](#). There were 10 different date models to choose from. The dates were different intensities and they brought out unique conversations. This method made me quite excited. I am very willing to develop it further. It could be very nourishing for both parties, especially if each of the people involved would propose one date after another.

Reflections on the process

Love proved to be much more complex than grief as a subject. To confess as much as I wished to be, I wasn't ready for full commitment to it. There were different reasons for it. I realized that it is not very compatible with the bureaucratic challenges I had: housing situation, papers, looking for a job, etc... For I find that bureaucracy invokes a state of numbness.

Another reason would be that love as a mode of engagement also needs specific focus, as it takes and gives a lot of energy. If there is constant discrepancy in the levels of energy exchange it becomes problematic.

I also might have underestimated the context in which I proposed implementing a complex emotional state as love, as a collective mode of engagement. It is difficult to collaborate or to be a part of such a practice in a highly critical environment, with a high quantity of input, different possibilities of engagement, and justifiably no willingness to commit. I realized that it is quite emotionally demanding to take part in the research experiments that I proposed. They asked a lot of trust from the participants, whereas they haven't always been well rounded or developed to the stage that they offered consent-preparation and after-care.

Still I feel the urgency to continue the research after a.pass, but in a different environment. I concluded that I have to go through the exercise myself before I offer them as a tool, or make any further matchmaking of the practices. The practice of love methodologies requires commitment, duration, and enough of unfilled space in order to be developed in the state of lightness, which is not the lightness of superficial love promoted by pop culture, but radical openness and intuitive stumbling around the research.

Plans for the future: My scores will be grounded in already existing rituals of love. I intend to learn from traditional Balkan rituals, finding connections and relying on mechanisms that have survived for 100s of years. My intention is to recognize them, study them, find their impact on modern narratives, deconstruct them and search or create space for them in today's discourse about love. My goal would be to deconstruct the idea of love served by mass consumption culture, or with the words of Eva Illouz, love as an emotional commodity. I want to dive deeper into its sources, dissect it and work on designing new ways of engaging with love. I am curious if there are artistic tools that could help in imagining different ways of loving, relating, learning, practicing love, and not only being critical about it.

Effortless concentration / Rituals

How to make a ritual

Rituals are at the intersection of two trajectories of my research (Love and performative dinner events). They remain the part of my investigation of investigating and insisting on implementation of complex emotions such as grief and love to unexpected contexts.

How to be displaced

I gravitate towards connecting my artistic interests with traditions and rituals stemming from my Balkan roots through investigation of women's sacred rituals, handwork, symbols and their legacy in modern culture and common everyday practices. My sense of misplacement and need to have a strong connection with my culture is amplified with me currently residing in Belgium. I find that rituals enable us to cultivate a bond with nature, with ourselves and with our environment. As Ronald L. Grimes writes: "Ritual is the means of grounding change, establishing order, and ensuring certainty in an uncertain world..."¹ I propose looking deep into our roots, finding strength and support in the past as a way to move forward, to create new rituals and new ways of being. They might enable us to transition from fearing the future and present, from being devastated by loss to healing. And they can move us towards reconnecting and exploring different ways of forming community.



¹ Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing the rites of passage*, 2000

In a pass context I've proposed one of the rituals that I have been using in my everyday life. They were taught to me from different sources: art workshops, friends, family. I initiated a [ritual of letting go](#), a ritual of [setting intentions](#) and the ritual of [breaking of the bread](#). With rituals it is difficult for me to distinguish between art and life research, they are constantly slipping into each other. I bring the rituals from my life and propose them in the artistic context, and observe how they change, what they provoke, and if they can be modified.

[Ritual of letting go, or burning your demons](#), is usually practiced at the end of the year and the beginning of the new one. I have learned it from the pagan New Year celebrations in Vevcani, Macedonia, but it is widely practiced in many different contexts and cultures. Everyone is invited to reflect on the year that has passed, to assess where they are at, and what are the ways in which they would like to continue. Where the incisions need to be made, what needs to be released and what is too precious and needs to be nourished. What is forfeited is fed to the flames, honored for the last time, or burnt in anger, acceptance, etc. One can choose to give sacrifice to their demons, or to burn them.

[The ritual of setting intentions](#) is also connected to the new beginnings. I was introduced to this ritual by a friend who practices it for every new moon cycle. One is invited to reflect on their desires, goals, wishes. To set them clearly. Once they are there they make a note of it, so that they can come back to them. After a certain period of time has passed they can check how they relate to them, or do they at all. This type of ritual is now widespread in many self care practices, which I do find quite problematic. But on the other hand I do enjoy practicing it and it has brought me a lot of positive self reflective insights and aha-moments.

[Breaking bread](#) is a ritual that I have been practicing since I was a child. It is a custom that comes from the celebration of orthodox Christmas. My mother bakes the special celebration bread and puts a coin inside that represents happiness and prosperity for the following year. Over time we also added some extra symbols, such as almonds, branches, nuts, etc. That each symbolizes a different thing. The family and guests break the bread during the celebration. The one who gets a coin, almond or another element will have a gift that the object symbolizes for a whole year. I have taken the format but implemented some changes. The objects that are put into the bread come from my research. Once the bread is shared and the elements are revealed, I engage in reading of the bread. Which is a methodology that proposes a conversation which starts from a certain symbol. Further we (the reader and the bread holder) depart toward searching what symbol represents for both parties, trying to broaden its meaning and explore the topic that is on the table.

Reflections on the ritual practices

There is a confusion that is a result of this practice. I have found myself at a place where it is unclear what is a ritual, what is an everyday habit and what is a score. By understanding rituals as also just mundane moments that anyone can construct makes it confusing. The question is what is the role of the ritual today? By researching them during these few years I observed that they have a major role in initiating transition or the transformation, but I find that there is where their purpose stops. They can open the doors to the transformation, but the process of

The next observation is about rerooting the rituals. I was wondering if codes of one place of origin can be read in an unfamiliar context. And I found the answer is yes, but I will go further into investigating this thread. Namely the rituals proposed work even without the explanation. What makes them do so is actually the atmosphere and energy created, as well as trust bond. If these elements are there, the action proposed needs not be clear to everyone involved. Of course there is a problem of cultural appropriation.

In ritual practice I follow two principals that I engage with on a regular basis. First one is an exercise on:

It includes different forms of reading signs. I focus on recognizing and reflecting on what are the desires, urgencies, and problems in the moment of the reading. The methodology comes from the reading of tarot, and psycho magic.



Reading practices:

Opening of the book of poems by Vasko Popa. I use this book as a magic object, which pages color the way through which I go about my day. But any book can be used for this method. I chose this one as it was a present from my friend, a gift, therefore sacred to me. The poems give me space to read the content into them, and reflect on my thoughts.

So how is it actually done? I randomly open the book and invite the element of chance. I read the poem and try to find how it connects to my reality.

Collecting cards on Jeu de balle (everyday flea market next to my house). The method is similar to the previous reading. Since I live on the corner of the everyday market Jeu de balle, while passing after the closing hours I look for the left-over playing cards on the ground. I invite the chance, sometimes they are there sometimes not. Once I find the card, I collect it, compare the color and the number to the tarot card and reflect on the day through the frame provided by the card.

The second principal is:

How to believe in magic

I find that belief is a fuel for magic. Magic I define as something beyond our explanation, the weaving of threads of lives, the energy exchange, the coincidence, the intuition, etc. In my art practice, and in my life, I have started using the methodology of belief, in a sense that what one chooses to believe in makes their reality. Therefore, if I choose to believe that certain actions give me strength, relaxation, protection, over time, repetition and surenduring they should do so. It is something similar to the placebo effect.

Therefore I practice small ritualistic actions to set the mood, to bust my energy, to prepare a space, etc. These actions also help me reflect on what it is that I crave for, what I have lacked in my life and art practice, what I have more than enough and need to release, etc.

Magical thinking and doing

Putting nail polish. I have multiple nail polish colors that I use in certain situations. For example: grayish-violet is a prep for fight/conflict coming up, something similar to war paint; white one is for serious work; golden is for traveling, magic, rituals, etc.

Collecting memory stones and shells. Wherever I go I collect stones or at the seaside shells, bones and feathers. All of these objects evoke certain memories. They hold a story of my experiences and remind me of certain moods, smells, presences.

Red thread. I use red thread as a protection and a reminder of a problem, or something that is troubling. I make a ring around the wrist for protection, which holds until the problem is resolved. But I also use red thread as one of recurring elements in my artistic language. It represents a fine line that connects the dots that are not always obvious.

In the last block of a pass I made a small workshop on methodology on how [to make your own ritual](#). Which has led me to some further questions on how to continue this line of research in the future.

Rituals are traditionally used as a way of reaffirming already existing codes, but how do they function once removed from the familiar context. Through the workshop it became clear to me that even when the codes of the ritual action are unfamiliar to the ones that practice it there is still intuitive, or energetic engagement, that operates and functions in incomprehensible frequencies. Which leads me to the following questions:

Can the ritual propose a question? Can it inspire a change?

How to engage in transformative practices, where the transformation is unwelcomed?

How to go through the transformation and not fall apart?

How to navigate the discrepancy between the lightness of the action and heaviness of the sharing in the ritual.



Where Do We Go From Here?

Where Do We Go From Here? is a series of dinner encounters which aims to map and introduce four collectives from the Brussels scene to a pass participants. Collectives: Common Wallet, Helectolitre, BOSCH and JUBILEE/EMPTOR, are self-organized, or which have alternative approaches on commons, organization, finances and ways of living and working as artists.



Through a format of dinner we explored how these collectives operate, what are the politics behind the modes of being and working together, where are the difficulties and what are exciting new possibilities of working with different structures.

Sept 20th, Dinner with Hectolitre

Oct 7th: Dinner with Common Wallet

Oct 27th: Reading Room and dinner with Jubilee/Emptor

Nov 22nd: Dinner with BOSCH

April 14th Dinner in Kunsthal with Robert Mochen

The dinner table has its own politics, how one sets it influences the conversation around it, it can generate questions, introduce different ways of composing a menu, question the tools we use, it can unveil the

social structures that make the table possible, sometimes unexpected surprising flavors appear on one's plate and many other delicious subject can surface on it.

These encounters aimed to collect tools, inspiration and to learn from existing experience and structures on how to collectivize. Further to question what are the challenges, where to search for help, or what is the strength of working in these alternative ways. It would be amazing if this encounter would spark connections and give opportunity to new, unexpected ways of thinking. Maybe some of these conversations encourage propositions where to begin, which steps to take, what traps to avoid, etc. Maybe they provide inspiration to come together and merge projects or initiate art communities and support systems for each other.

<https://apass.be/where-do-we-go-from-here/>



I find that the most valuable part of the dinners for me was creating the connection between the food and the structure of the evening and the topics of the conversation. Searching for the metaphors in food and experimenting with how they steer the dialog. The setting of the table invites informality, and sharing of food opens a path to collectivity, or at least a sense of togetherness, which creates a specific point of entry for conversation to begin. It gives space to chit chat, cut in the conversations, and pass the food around as well as opinions.