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What else can a crush become: working with arts-methods to address sexual harassment in pre-teen romantic relationship cultures

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a study in which feminist new materialist and arts-based methodologies were employed to explore how three girls address their experiences of sexual harassment as part of ‘crushes’ with boys in fourth and fifth grade. The study stems from longitudinal research on how Finnish children from pre-school to pre-teen years are caught up in entanglements of power in the formation of romantic relationship cultures. Such entanglements often escape articulation and are therefore difficult to study using more traditional research methods. During the arts-based process, the girls began to negotiate consent and self-determination in new ways through collecting, crafting, and making a booklet and a YouTube video. Conceptualising the changes as minor gestures [Manning, Erin. 2016. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press] that gradually transform girls’ somatic archives [Paasonen, Susanna. 2013. “Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation.” *Somatechnics* 3 (2): 351–368. doi:10.3366/soma.2013.0102], we argue that arts-methods can empower children to relate differently to each other, refuse harassment and assert their desires.

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Introduction

‘Crushes,’ being romantically fancied and fancying others, are often an integral part of pre-teen children’s relationships to one another. However, the ways in which such relationships shape young children’s ways of relating to themselves and others as gendered, sexual beings are challenging to study, since they are often difficult matters for children to articulate and for adults to observe. Research on sexual force relations between children have shown how deeply young boys and girls can become entangled in romantic relationships with each other in ways that closely resemble sexual

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harassment. The relationships easily become a complex mixture of pain and pleasure (Huuki and Renold 2016).

Feminist research has demonstrated how heterosexual romantic cultures are experienced by the majority of children as something in which they feel pressure to participate, and over which they have little control (Blaise 2005; Cannoni and Bombi 2016; Gansen 2017; McCullough 2017; Renold 2013; Thorne 1993). Moreover, several studies have explored how different forms of coercion, control, and harassment construct and mediate boyfriend–girlfriend cultures for children and youth (Coleman 2009; Gillander Gådin 2012; Holford, Renold, and Huuki 2013; Huuki and Renold 2016; Renold 2013; Robinson and Davies 2015). Indeed, these relationalities are a part of how capacities of bodies are understood as closed or open in relation to each other through gendering (Coleman 2009, 142). As Rebecca Coleman (2009, 142) argues, ‘the girls’ bodies become gendered as girls’ bodies, and the boys’ bodies become gendered as boys’ bodies, through the affective relations they are involved in.’

To prevent and decrease sexual harassment, programmes and guides have explored ways of combating harassing behaviour among young people (Meyer and Stein 2004; Taylor, Mumford, and Stein 2015). However, these programmes are often limited in that they conceive sexual harassment as an individual, easily identifiable and articulable problem, rely mostly on oral and textual methods, and are unequipped to address experiences where pleasure and harm enmesh. Furthermore, the charged cultural figure of the ‘child at risk,’ when it comes to children’s romantic and/or sexual play, messaging, and feelings (Renold 2013), often overrides closer attention to the experiences of children themselves. Empirical studies with children show that the discourse of sexual danger and risk may at times be quite harmful itself and obscure how the sexual can also be a realm of titillation (e.g. Spisak 2019, 14–17).

This article builds on multi-year empirical research with Finnish children, but its specific focus is on the late phase of the project, namely a one-year arts-based research process with three girls who were 10–11-year-olds at the time: Isla, Olivia and Amanda (pseudonyms). The larger research project followed 40 children aged 6–11 over the course of five years, exploring the multifaceted ways that children from pre-school age to the transitional ‘tweenage years’ of middle childhood learn to engage with gendered and gendering power in the formation of peer and relationship cultures. The three girls at focus were particularly entangled in complex ‘fancying’ and abusive relationships with boys ever since pre-school. After years of not being able to address what troubled them in those relationships, the girls started to express themselves in novel ways through creative activities during the one year this article examines. Therefore, the article asks how arts-based methods and processes could empower young people to not only articulate painful experiences in their ‘crushes’ but also refuse harassment and envision ways of relating differently.

We conceptualise the process that the art-based methods enabled as a series of affirmative minor gestures that hint towards *what else* might be (Manning 2016, x). Furthermore, we propose that the minor gestural movements in the processes of making art and crafts allowed for changes in the girls’ somatic archives (Paasonen 2013), understood as temporally accumulating, corporeal-affective capacities, which enabled them to assert both desire and damage more effectively in relation to boys. Overall, we draw on feminist new materialist research and activism concerning young people’s sexual cultures

(Pihkala and Huuki 2019; Pihkala, Huuki, and Sunnari 2019; Ivinson and Renold 2021; Renold 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Strom et al. 2019). In this framework, bodies are understood as continuously becoming and transforming through their affective relations with other human and non-human entities, material objects, spaces, histories, and discourses (e.g. Coleman 2009; Renold 2018). Thereby feminist new materialist scholars have produced new, inventive, transformation-oriented approaches where abuses of power are not understood as located in or solved through individuals but emerging in complex assemblages of shifting forces (Coleman 2009, 2019; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015). Accordingly, possibilities for transformation take place and emerge through material-discursive networks where both human and non-human actors have agency (Barad 2007; Braidotti, Wong, and Chan 2018).

In the following, we introduce the case and the context in question, and further discuss recent experimental feminist new materialist work on children's sexual and romantic peer cultures, as well as the concepts of the minor gesture and somatic archives. We then outline how the arts-based research process was designed to specifically allow for safe, enabling and sustainable exploration of the possibilities for change.

The analysis is organised in three sections that capture the three phases of the process. The first section focuses on a creative activity we call the *Power Boxes* and explores how haptic and somatic work with material objects helped the girls to recognise and verbalise pain and damage, the unwanted, in their relationships with boys. In the second section, we demonstrate how refusal of unwanted behaviour begins to gesture, in minor ways, towards change as the girls created *Fishes of the Unknown* and *Empowering Stickers*, which they shared in the peer group. The third section explores the making of *Moments of Truth*, a glittered booklet and a YouTube video, where the three girls assert what they want and do not want for 'the whole world to know.'

The case and its context: a journey through five years of crushes

The context for the one-year creative process and the three girls at focus in this article consists of two interlinked research projects,¹ conducted in a school environment that includes both pre-school and primary school levels. The school is attended by 400 pupils in a white middle-class suburban residential area in a Northern Finnish city. The two projects focused on two primary school classes of roughly 40 pupils who the first author Tuija followed over the course of five school years (aged 6–11).

In the early phase, the research used ethnographic methods to study how primary school children (aged 6–9) are caught up in assemblages of gender-based violence in their peer and relationship cultures. Tuija learned to know Isla in this phase, following her and her classmates for three months when she was a six-year-old pre-schooler. Isla was very popular and already then deeply caught up in emerging heterosexual romantic cultures. Many boys fancied her, pursued her proximity, wanted to touch her and give her hugs, sometimes to the extent of irritation and discomfort (Huuki and Renold 2016).

Tuija learned to know Olivia and Amanda during the first grade of primary school (aged 7–8), when Isla's pre-school class merged with a class from another local pre-school, and the three girls became friends. When the girls were in first, second and third grade (aged 7–10), Tuija noticed subtle hints of their deepening entanglements in the emerging boy-friend–girlfriend cultures, but the girls could not articulate their experiences in informal

discussions, nor could these entanglements be traced through the researcher's observations or interviews.

Recognising the limits of traditional ethnographic methods, the latter phase of the research shifted the methodological framework into arts-based methods that could go beyond the linguistic and the textual, and address as well as potentially transform more difficult-to-reach, affective and embodied levels of desire and damage. The research now asked how these methods can enable the children – aged 10–11 at that time – to safely explore and express their entanglements in peer relationship cultures. This worked for Tuija as a prompt to 'use her ability to respond' (Barad 2007) and seek creative ways for engaging with what matters to the girls.

During the one-year time period at focus in this article, a multi-faceted team of professionals, including Tuija, a visual artist, a media producer, a drama instructor, two teachers, and a PhD candidate, designed and implemented a series of workshops for and with the 40 children. The children worked with the team one to four days weekly and in several stretches, each stretch lasting from a few weeks to two months. The workshops were integrated into the school's regular curriculum. A range of artwork, created with and by children during research encounters, included photographs, videos, paintings, drawings, stickers, sculptures, writing and an art exhibition (Huuki et al. 2017a). In addition to the artworks, the researcher had informal conversations with the children. The workshops were documented with 360° multi-modal recording system, digital camcorders, and extended field notes. Depending on the task, the children worked in pairs, individually, or in small groups in a classroom, other spaces in the school building, or in a local boat workshop space located close to the school and specifically organised for the purpose of this research.

The workshops made apparent that Isla, Olivia and Amanda's relations with popular boys continued to be a multifaceted mixture of pain and pleasure, blending with the amplification of social power and hierarchies between the girls in various forms. It seemed that working with various materials with their hands, moving their bodies, drawing, writing and speaking made it possible for the girls to recognise and articulate their experiences and name them as harassment.

For the analysis of the workshops, the second author Kata and the third author Suvi joined Tuija, drawing on ongoing project collaboration and joint writing processes that also operate with feminist new materialist theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Kyrölä and Huuki 2021; Pihkala and Huuki 2019). The analysis rendered visible how the three girls' attitudes towards their heterosexual romantic relationality shifted during the one-year arts process. Although the boys were equally participating in the research, the process and its creative activities resonated in a particular way with the girls. Therefore, we focus on how the girls expressed their thoughts and feelings about their relationships with boys, especially about uncomfortable or hurtful matters as well as things they would want or like to do instead. We call these changing relationships girl-crush-assemblages in order to emphasise the entanglement of human and non-human, material and imaginary actors.

Feminist new materialist research, minor gestures and somatic archives in studying children's sexual cultures

Approaching children's sexual and romantic cultures through arts-based methods and a new materialist feminist framework allows for examining sexual harassment in ways that

shed light on and theorise the micro-processes, the more-than-human and less-than-conscious in how change and transformation might occur (e.g. Hickey-Moody, Palmer, and Sayers 2016; Hickey-Moody et al. 2021). This approach enables recognising and working with the productive potentialities embedded in the social, cultural, and material worlds of children, including those whose experiences have been silenced or obscured. Furthermore, when sexual harassment is conceptualised as complex assemblages, such assemblages also entail possibilities for ethical modes of encounter (see Braidotti, Wong, and Chan 2018). This kind of research specifically aims to affect and rupture the status quo, the socio-political terrain of how sexual harassment infuses the lives of children as – for example – silence, denial, spectacle, pathology, and normalisation (Renold 2018). We propose that the concepts of the *minor gesture* and the *somatic archive* could productively function as theoretical-methodological companions that allow theorising, imagining and enacting change in crush-based, but sometimes literally crushing, forces in children's heterosexual relationships cultures. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor (1987), Erin Manning (2016, 1) conceptualises the minor gesture as 'the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation.' Whereas major forces organise according to the easily recognised, often normative criteria and structures, such as policies or one-size-fits-all interventions, the minor is 'a force that courses through [the major], unmooring its structural integrity, problematising its normative standards' (Manning 2016, 1). The minor, however, is also a subtle and difficult force to grasp, thus easily overlooked or unrecognised.

The workshops held as a part of this study cannot be described in terms of the major but instead, they tap into the transformative potential of the minor. The three girls at focus are by no means a 'representative' sample of how power relations play out in children's heterosexual peer relationships. Nevertheless, the arts-based research process with them enables an intimate, affective view into how subtle shifts in such relationships might happen, and how to facilitate such shifts in safer ways. The concept of the minor gesture helps in examining complicated affective relations, the felt, the ephemeral, and the difficult-to-articulate (Manning 2016, 7) as meaningful and important.

In order to dive deeper into the possibly more lasting forms of transformation, the accumulating effect of affirmative minor shifts, we make use of the concept of somatic archives. Susanna Paasonen (2013; Kyrölä and Paasonen 2016) has theorised somatic archives as affective resonances and layerings of 'personal histories, experiences, traumas, tastes and fantasies, ethical concerns and political investments' (Paasonen 2013, 364) which orient the body in relation to objects, images, acts, encounters, and other bodies. Paasonen argues that somatic archives are more-than-human although culturally, historically and personally specific, incorporating available forms of sexual knowledge, pleasure, activism and gendering practices. In the present study, the notion of somatic archives allows considering, for example, how the discourses of heterosexual romance in connection with the cumulative effects of sexual and gender-based harassment build into children's somatic archives, making it difficult to say 'no' to actions that feel bad or disturbing. Somatic archives cannot be changed on a whim, because they are cumulative, but the concept enables thinking how a longitudinal, arts-based research process may set things in motion beyond the scope of the process itself.

The creative activities aimed to experiment with ways to become-with (Manning 2016) drawing, sculpturing, talking, acting, writing, moving, feeling, sensing and crafting. The

purpose was to create da(r)ta, arts informed data (Renold 2018), to find novel ways to communicate experiences as well as to rethink more traditional data generating practices and allow for children's artistic and activist agency in the research process (Renold and Ringrose 2019).

Since the issues addressed were likely to be sensitive and the project involved vulnerable participants, the research had undergone ethical review² and ethical issues were of crucial importance while planning and executing the project. Acknowledging the seriousness and significance in the creative acts of making (Hickey-Moody 2020), the affective and material composition of the workshops were planned carefully to afford a climate of safety that would enable the children to communicate their entanglements in assemblages of gender, sexuality and power in their peer culture all the while committed to protect the children from harm, tending to their privacy and dignity (Pihkala and Huuki 2019). The children were, for example, never asked directly about sexuality, harassment, violence or bullying, but the issues addressed included things such as what feels pleasurable/nice, hurtful/unfair or confusing/ambivalent in their relations with peers. If the children wanted to choose more light-hearted approaches, withdraw from the activities altogether, just 'hang around,' or address topics that related to the theme of the workshops only loosely, they could freely do so. The multi-professional team sought ongoing consent by negotiating and making participation visible throughout the fieldwork, and frequently inquiring about children's willingness to explore a given topic or thread further.

Furthermore, the arts-based research process was informed by new materialist ethics of response-ability (Barad 2007), inviting ongoing commitment to 'use our ability to respond' in relation to that which might be rerouted, what might be shared, and what might get blocked (Renold and Ringrose 2017) from the perspective of the girls as well as the boys that were involved. In line with response-ability, these are questions that cannot always be known in advance or solved once and for all but are rather about ongoing accountability in relation to entanglements of the research process.

Surfacing haptic memories of hurt through *Power Boxes*

Early in the spring semester when the children were in the fourth grade (aged 10), a white shoe box, string and combination padlocks were given to each of the 40 children to decorate and seal. They came to be called *Power Boxes*.³ While decorating, themes such as privacy, respect, responsibility and integrity were discussed. A mail slot was then added to the decorated box, turning it into a mailbox, while a padlock with a string sealed its privacy.

In the weeks to follow, the children were asked to use the box to collect things that moved or touched them: items related to a memory of a particularly annoying, pleasurable or ambivalent place, issue, or event. Things collected in the boxes could be anything: stories, words, emojis, pictures, drawings, photographs, or material objects. For both research purposes and safeguarding, the content was regularly checked in individual conversation sessions between Tuija and the children.

As the outcomes of arts-based activities tend to be uncertain, nearly all of the 40 boxes remained more or less empty or were filled with items mostly unrelated to gendered and sexual force relations. Isla, Olivia and Amanda's boxes formed an exception: they were

filled with items pertaining to their ambivalent feelings in relation to the boys who were interested in them in a romantic sense. The items included, for example, a stick, cardboard snowballs, post-it notes with words, sentences or short accounts, photos of a candy bag, a grapefruit and a photo of a situation where Isla is dragged on a bikeway by two of her boy classmates. Instead of being just a random collection of things, these objects formed girl-crush-assemblages that were shot through with affective intensities.

Opening the boxes brought these intensities to the surface and produced a torrent of words in the three girls, sharing their experiences of oppressive treatment by the boys who fancied them. Over individual and group conversations during the following eight weeks, Tuija got to hear numerous accounts of girls' experiences of harassment and how it made them feel: how a birch branch hurts when it hits the face; how nasty it feels when snow goes in through the neckline and freezes the skin and wets the clothes; how frightening it can be to eat lunch at school and buy sweets at a store because the boys are always throwing nasty comments on body weight. The coercion and control were especially targeted at things that gave pleasure, joy, and feelings of safety and care for the girls, such as eating sweets, relaxing at home, or caring for animal friends, covering a wide range of basic building blocks of life for the girls, as the hurtful actions spread over from classrooms, lunch halls, and grocery stores to playgrounds, leisure activities, and homes.

Discussing, accumulating and fiddling with the content of the *Power Boxes* became a process where previously unarticulated memories and experiences began to surface. The material (snowballs, sticks, photos) and the sensory (haptic, visual, sonic) dimensions conjoined and worked together in a way that seemed necessary for affective (a felt sense of having been wronged) and cognitive (increased awareness) minor movements to emerge. This intra-activity of the imaginary, material and sensorial created a forcefield of tension through which the possibility of minor resistance began to loom on the horizon (Manning 2016), as the objects and the conversations began to somatically re-orient the girl-bodies. The assemblages of non-human objects in the *Power Boxes*, the girl-bodies, and the encounters and conversations with the adult researcher called forth new responses. The *Power Boxes* and their contents became material as well as affective extensions of the girls' somatic archives, when seen as 'layered recollections' which are 'animated by affective intensity' (Kyrölä and Paasonen 2016, 11). In this sense, somatic archives can be understood as retrospective – carrying personal and collective memories, sensations, encounters – and prospective, as in orienting, opening up and closing down future possibilities (Kyrölä and Paasonen 2016, 11). At this point, the somatic archives of the girl-crush-assemblage were beginning to open, even though still limited by fears about 'what if the boys get angry.'

Articulating refusal through the fishing the unknown and empowering stickers

In the autumn when Amanda, Olivia and Isla's fifth school year began, they participated, together with their peers, in yet another array of arts activities. Among the first activities was a task we named *Fishing the Unknown*. In this activity, the children were first asked to write on a piece of paper issues related to gender, power and peer relations that have thus far remained largely unknown to others. Together, we contemplated ways to express such

things and wrote suggested beginnings for sentences, such as 'I have heard that I am ...,' 'When nobody sees, I might ...,' 'I wish I could tell someone that ...,' and 'I like it when ...'

In their remarks, Isla, Olivia and Amanda raised issues that bothered them in their romantic relationships with boys. Simultaneously, they flipped through their mobile phones to recollect messages from the boys. The ambivalent communication included confessions of love such as 'Good night lovely dear Isla,' but also insults such as 'Hey sausage roll,' 'When you throw Isla in the water, she sinks.' Mobile technologies formed a key part of the girl-crush-assemblage of girls, boys, objects, and the spaces they moved through, as mobile phones extended the intensity of the relationships into times and spaces outside of in-person encounters. As in the previous spring, the girl-crush-assemblage brought to the surface experiences that the girls felt were abusive and limiting to their mobility and feeling of safety. Dozens more unpleasant experiences were quickly written down on blank pages of a notebook. In this reiteration of activities, the experiences listed in the notebook soon began to take the shape of prohibitions, such as: 'let me be alone when I want to,' 'don't stop me from doing something only boys are supposed to do,' 'don't call me a cow,' and 'don't laugh at my clothes.'

It is noteworthy that at this stage, the flood of experiences turned into imperatives of how the girls do not want to be treated, as their statements are forbidding, beginning with the word 'don't.' The prohibitions were repeated in the subsequent task where the children 'caught' a selection of the statements on cardboard pieces cut in fish-shape from a large (1.5 m x 10 m) colourful collective painting made by all the participants – the children, researchers and the artist – in one of the previous sessions.

The prohibitions thus gained more force by going public in the peer group when the fishes were pinned up on a fishing net in the ceiling for others to see and touch. A number of Isla, Olivia and Amanda's fishes were eventually hung in the fishing net, forbidding the boys from hurting their bodies, ruining their property, belittling their leisure time activities, invading their homes and controlling their eating.

The next minor movements towards change surfaced in the subsequent activity of *Empowering Stickers*. Whereas in the previous autumn and spring the girls communicated repeatedly how it was impossible for them to speak out against the boys, in the making of empowering stickers the tone had changed, as they stated things like 'I am in charge here,' and 'At some point there is a line that cannot be crossed' and 'Eat or not?' next to pictures of baked sweets. As with *Fishing the Unknown*, the empowering stickers further connected somatic archives into the larger realms of experience, as the stickers were displayed on the wall for others to see.

The process already included many minor gestural leaps (Manning 2016) towards transformation: through the creative workshops, the girls were able to articulate painful experiences in relatively safe ways. Thereafter, their quiet affective acceptance turned into pushing back and saying 'no,' followed by the possibility of affirmatively enforcing their bodily autonomy and what they would want instead. These gestural leaps, however, could not likely have happened if the romantic-oppressive assemblage of girls, boys, mobile phones, and private and public spaces had not extended into the arts-creating processes and the artworks. The extension of this girl-crush-assemblage also enabled the girls to refuse such aspects of the relationships that were limiting or 'fixing' to their capacities (cf. Coleman 2009, 142–157).

The process of arriving at the ‘no’ can be conceptualised through what Audra Simpson (2017) has termed *refusal* – different from resistance, different from seeking recognition for wrong-doing. For Simpson, refusal can be a generative rejection of the ‘ruse of consent,’ an illusion that targets of violence have ‘freedom and the free will to consent’ (Simpson 2017, 12) to their own abuse. In the community where the girls live, parents and adults at school assumed that the abuse in romantic relationships is not actual violence, as the girls’ ‘consent’ to having such relationships. However, from a feminist new materialist perspective, the more important question is how the relationships, and socio-political contexts in which they are lived, fix or expand the capacities of bodies involved in them (e.g. Ivinson and Renold 2021).

The analysis renders visible how the girl-crush-assemblage is moving towards a direction in which Olivia, Amanda and Isla’s voices gain strength. This takes place through accelerating cycles of reminiscing events as non-consensual from different angles and through different arts-based activities, eventually enabling a refusal. Drawing on Simpson’s work, Carole McGranahan (2016, 322–323) formulates four theses about refusal: that refusal can be generative (not only a stoppage or a limitation but creating something new), social (instead of anti-social), not just another word for resistance (because refusal not only resists but rewrites power relations), and hopeful. Refusal prompted the girls to creatively assert the ways they want to and do not want to be treated, but it likely could not have emerged without them being more than just one, and extending their capacities through and into the array of craft materials and artwork.

The ruse of consent in abusive-romantic relationships is difficult to tackle, since as previous research has shown (Huuki and Renold 2016; Renold 2013; Thorne 1993;), participation in romantic cultures often brings children and youth significant socio-cultural advantages, such as popularity, power, peer admiration, and opportunities to explore gender and sexuality. The physical violence, control and other abuses of power in Isla, Amanda and Olivia’s relationships with boys gnawed at them throughout the research and arts-creation process, although they did not want to refuse those relationships altogether. During the arts-process, they began to imagine together, in minor ways, other ways of being and relating which then gradually became connected into their somatic archives, embodied horizons of possibility.

***Moments of truth* – vibrant minor activism in a glittered booklet and a YouTube video**

- Isla: There’s such an insane amount of these [incidents of unwanted behavior] that we should make a book about them!
- Olivia: Yeah, let’s make a book about how we want to be treated!

Towards the end of the workshops, the children were invited to work further with a theme that had emerged in earlier sessions. Isla, Amanda and Olivia began developing the book that they had talked about in the previous spring (see the quote above). The girls worked mainly independently, while a voice recorder captured their conversations:

- Isla: What’s something that has really, actually hurt, umm, Amanda?
- Olivia: When they beat you with sticks.
- Isla: Do you remember when they beat me with a log?

- Amanda: Yes, damn!
- Isla: I'm gonna do it! I'm gonna do it!
- Amanda: And Isla, the time when they smacked us both in the face.
- Isla: Exactly! Exactly! Yeah, they just came, just like that [a slap heard on the sound recording] like that, full on. So I just ... I was just like ... [...] My face, I was just like ... am like ... Then they just ran off ... I was just like [said with force] 'you didn't come here just to hang out'.
- Isla: I'm gonna put here that I really don't like it when you hit me with a log.

When working on the contents of the book, the girls also negotiated what content was appropriate for it so as not to jeopardise their relationships with the boys: 'If you put it like that, they will never have the nerve to touch anything anymore.'

The atmosphere was peaceful yet intense, when the girls worked on the book, contemplating on the experiences that were selected for it. After five hours of intensive work, the pages of the book were nearly finished, and individual pages lay all over the floor among craft materials. Isla encouraged other girls to complete the task:

- We have to put in lots of stuff ... Girls, now we're going to do a final sprint.
- Amanda: What if the boys come in?
- Isla: It doesn't matter if they come in, they won't see this. And what if they do.

Tuija observed how Isla then worked quietly for a while, glanced at the pages and stated: 'There now, look: it's like this – no means no.' And then: 'If I say no, it is a no. All these things matter a lot. All these come with a little story.' After a while Isla came to think of something else: 'Aaaah – then everybody's gonna think we're getting bullied: I have to write here that it's not bullying.' She added the remark to the preface. In the end, Olivia asks: 'Hey, what are we gonna call this?' and Isla responds: 'Moments of Truth. Secrets out.'

The following day, the booklet received its finishing touches, becoming a 50-page presentation that contained statements about how Olivia, Amanda and Isla want boys to treat them, as well as suggestions for how their girl–boy-relations could become more respectful. Making the booklet reshaped the hundreds of unpleasant experiences – articulated, in-forming (Manning 2016, 23) and creatively processed in various ways in the previous workshops – and turned them into minor gestures towards change.

Although addressed directly to these specific boys as part of emerging intra-activity (Barad 2007; Coleman 2019) of the workshops, the process started to turn towards digital activism, when Tuija asked whether the girls would like to share the booklet on YouTube. When Tuija added that in that case the author names could be removed, Isla commented: 'It doesn't matter if they know. Let the whole world know.'

A month after the final workshop was over, Tuija and media producer Sami Hänninen returned to the school to forward the idea of a shareable video about the booklet. We started to design the video in an empty classroom. Sami suggested that an ethereal, thoughtful atmosphere might suit the subject matter well, and others responded positively to the idea. A big black fabric was picked out as background. The *Moments of Truth* booklet was laid out on the fabric-covered table, and it was agreed that the girls would take turns reading one spread at a time out loud. While rehearsing, the girls came up with the idea of spreading glitter on the fabric. Glitter of various colours was

fetched from the arts class, and the girls started sprinkling it: first a little, then more, and finally a lot more.

In Coleman's study on imagining futures through artwork with teenage girls in the UK, glitter emerged 'as a particularly significant material out of a range of other materials ... assumingly for its capacity to engage and occupy the girls working in the classroom in a way that other materials did not' (Coleman 2019). Coleman followed glitter's agency and vibrancy, as it enthused, grabbed, covered and followed participants in a very similar manner as in our arts workshop. While the amount of glitter increased and spread, the voices, movements and moods of the girls grew more exuberant. Towards the end, glitter was all around the classroom – on floors and tables, on the girls, on Tuija's and Sami's skin, hair and clothes. Indeed, being well aware of the striated discourses of girlhood, misbehaviour and material consumption, the carnival atmosphere and the glitter-covered classroom made Tuija contemplate on the consequences of what might happen, if any of the teachers entered. As Coleman (2019) discusses, glitter might be such a captivating material because of its intra-linkage with current mainstream western girl cultures of sparkle, brilliance, and playfulness, as well as activism such as 'glitter bombings.' On the other hand, acknowledging glitter's harmfulness to the environment and the conditions of its production, its use in research has also been topic of debate (Coleman and Osgood 2019). In this case, glitter was already there as a part of the school's basic arts supplies and became an unexpected participant in the girls' creative enactments of refusal, rebellion and reimagining of their relationships with boys. Glitter became a non-human, affective expansion of the girls' somatic archives, enabling them to find empowering joy in 'fighting back' (cf. Coleman 2009, 141–163).

During a two-hour session, the video camera recorded the reading of the glittered booklet with the girls' voice-over, the atmosphere being boisterous and celebratory, anything but ethereal. Afterwards, Sami and Tuija gave the video its finishing touches, and a few weeks later they visited the school where Isla, Amanda and Olivia watched the video and gave it their approval. Then it was uploaded on YouTube with the consent of the children and their legal guardians (Huuki et al. 2017b).

The video, and the research-activist process before, during and after it, can be understood as intra-activism, in EJ Renold and Ringrose's (2017) words, which purposefully crafts encounters that enable surprises and pauses as well as forward-moving change. This intra-activism imagines and envisions 'the world as if it could be otherwise' (Brown 2016, 45) on matters that matter to the girls.

Social media platforms, such as YouTube, have become key sites of feminist activism against sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment over the last few years. YouTube has played a key role in exposing sexual harassment as well as generating new forms of ironic, playful feminist and queer activism by and for children and young people (e.g. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018) as well as adults (Sundén and Paasonen 2020). Therefore, it was a natural platform to share Isla, Amanda and Olivia's video. Moreover, during the multi-year research process, public conversations around sexual and gender-based abuse shifted significantly, spurred by #MeToo, even though these conversations mostly ignored primary school children. It is not possible to evaluate the exact impact of this shift on the girls, but the cultural atmosphere as a part of the assemblage of girls' and boys' relationalities certainly enabled their experiences to be heard in a new way. By using phrases familiar from and popular in feminist activism – such as 'no means

no' in the last page of the *Moments of Truth* booklet – the girls' voices connected to such broader shifts.

The purpose with *Moments of Truth* was to echo and amplify the minor gestures of the girls, and to make it possible for anyone to see, hear and know. Thus, the significance of the video cannot be defined by the number of views or shares it gained. Rather, its significance lies within its capacity to expand the girls' experiences and desires, in their own words, through their own artistic production, for 'the whole world to know.'

Planting seeds for the future

At the end of the workshops, the girls' classmates and the research team watched the *Moments of Truth* video together in order to begin to address the surfaced harassment more broadly – a process that is impossible to dwell on further within the scope of this article. When Tuija was in contact with one of the three girls a year after the process ended, the girl told that the hurtful and unfair behaviour from the boys had ended, and equal relations between girls and boys now prevailed. The long-time consequences of any action are still hard to predict, and the major flows of harassment and everyday sexism in young people's romantic cultures do not end with one project. Nevertheless, the process planted seeds for articulation and refusal of unwanted behaviour and visions of how to do things differently for the girls. Although the boys' ways of participating in the workshops was not at the focus of this article, the study suggests that arts-based processes where children's own concerns can emerge at their own pace through creative expression – instead of more traditional perpetrator-victim scenarios, or straight-forward punishment by adults – may enable girls and boys to become more responsive to each other's desires and refusals. Therefore, as much as the girls' process offers us glimpses into what arts-methods can enable, it also reminds of the need for continuous responsiveness to other potential directions it could take.

Some of such seeds sprouted gradually during the process, some may sprout further at a later stage in life. In the spirit of intra-activism, there were many moments of unpredictability and chance in the minor transformations that emerged. For example, the creation of the *Power Boxes* brought forth that experimentation with arts-based methodologies can sometimes be like searching for a needle in a haystack, as 37 boxes remained empty. However, it is impossible to know in advance what apparently empty objects or insignificant tasks might generate later. In this case, three (Isla's, Amanda's and Olivia's) boxes out of a majority of emptiness contained seeds for something quite powerful. The arts-based process grew and transformed through the girls' creative input, offering insight into how feminist new materialist arts-based methodologies enable addressing that which is difficult or impossible to articulate – in this case, previously unarticulated experiences of how fancying intertwines with harassment. Through creative expression and expanding girl-crush-assemblages to include co-produced arts objects, such relationships may create space and time for envisioning more enabling, equitable and pleasurable alternatives.

Scholars of girl cultures have pointed out how the cultural figure of the 'empowered girl' easily focuses on celebrated, extraordinary individuals, which can obscure collective, change-oriented processes of girl activism (Brown 2016, 1–3; Edell, Brown, and Montano 2016, 697–698). Indeed, it was essential that the three key girls were connected in an

assemblage of girl-bodies, girl-voices amplifying each other; researcher-bodies listening, taking seriously, offering spaces, tools and material for creative works; the haptic objects of reminiscence in the *Power Boxes*; the art works from 'fishes' to stickers to the glitter-drenched booklet and the YouTube video. Intra-acting with myriads of other elements, these were all necessary for the process to become something that could be conceptualised as intra-activist.

We have proposed that this process be understood as a series of minor gestures (Manning 2016) that, when repeating and accumulating, become layered as somatic archives: affective, constantly changing repositories of experiences and orientations (Paasonen 2013; Kyrölä and Paasonen 2016). We have addressed the intensities in the act of arts-making, pausing with culmination points of affirmative change in the girl-crush assemblages, thus mapping how the tones in the girls' expression shifted through workshop sessions. We followed how the creative process gave new ways to express recognition and, ultimately, refusal of the oppressive forms of the girls' relationships with boys, and envision alternative relationalities. The forcefield of resonance for the changing somatic archives of the girl-crush-assemblages gained further strength, when such archives did not remain on an individual level but were shared first within the small group and the researcher, then the broader peer group and adults of the school, then in public on YouTube. This project, therefore, shows how arts-based feminist new materialist methodologies can produce minor shifts that may have lasting transformative impact.

Notes

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2. This study was approved by *The Ethics Committee of Human Sciences at the University of Oulu* (approval no. 9/2015).
3. The photographs of all the artefacts crafted during this process can be found at the website of our research collective *Fire*: <https://www.fire-collective.com/crush-article>.

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