

# Silent Becoming

## *Making the World out of Clay*

Description of the workshop by Jan van Boeckel, 2022

(inspired by a more basic version that was created by Antony Gormley  
at Schumacher College in September 2006)

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In “Silent Becoming”, participants are invited to imagine how forms in nature might either evolve or disintegrate over time. The workshop – which can be performed either inside or outside – lends itself to follow-up lessons in biology and natural history. The outcome is not given. Participants go through a shared process step by step, following a sequence that is outlined for them as they go along. They are encouraged to imagine how natural phenomena might grow or decay in time and they do this in a series of short sessions where they sculpt works in clay. Such a practice in art-based environmental education is arguably a form of “poor pedagogy” (Masschelein, 2010).<sup>1</sup> This educational activity is primarily and fundamentally an open-ended process. Rather than requiring an extensive methodology, its practice requires participants to surrender themselves to a process that will be unique each time it is performed. Such a practice is an expression of a view on education that is not centered on the transmission of knowledge but rather looks at attention as education and the education of attention.

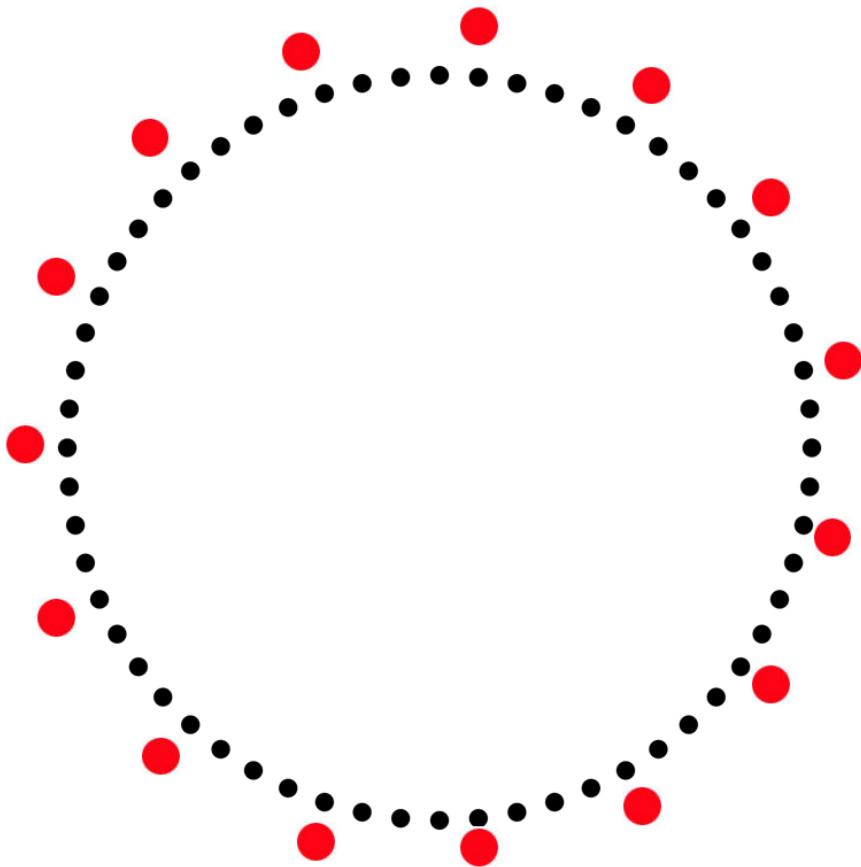
A premise in doing this workshop is that such art-based practices can also be relevant more widely in the context of sustainability education, such as on the theme of climate change. Precisely because the content of the art workshop at hand is not *prima facie* linked to it, there is an unexpected potential to take up such a tangential theme in an unusual way. Typically, participants feel invigorated to enter new territory – both spatial and mental. On a meta-level, the session can also be seen as a practice in facing complexity, uncertainty, not knowing. The assumption is that such artful educational practices have intrinsic merit if we are to equip new generations with skills to live in and endure “post-normal times”.

*Keywords: art-based, imagination, metamorphosis, open-ended, sustainability education*

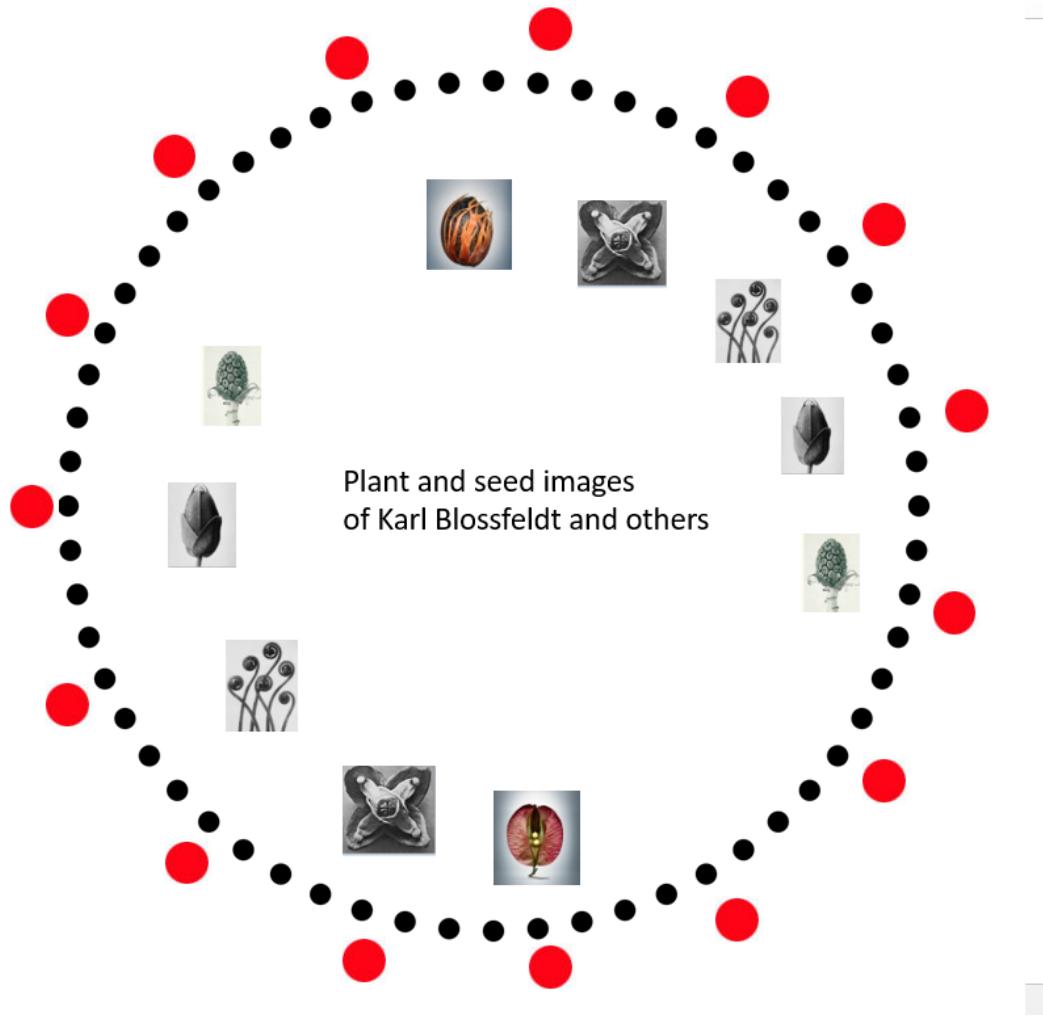
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<sup>1</sup> Masschelein, J. (2010). E-ducating the gaze: the idea of a poor pedagogy. *Ethics and Education*, 5(1), 43-53.

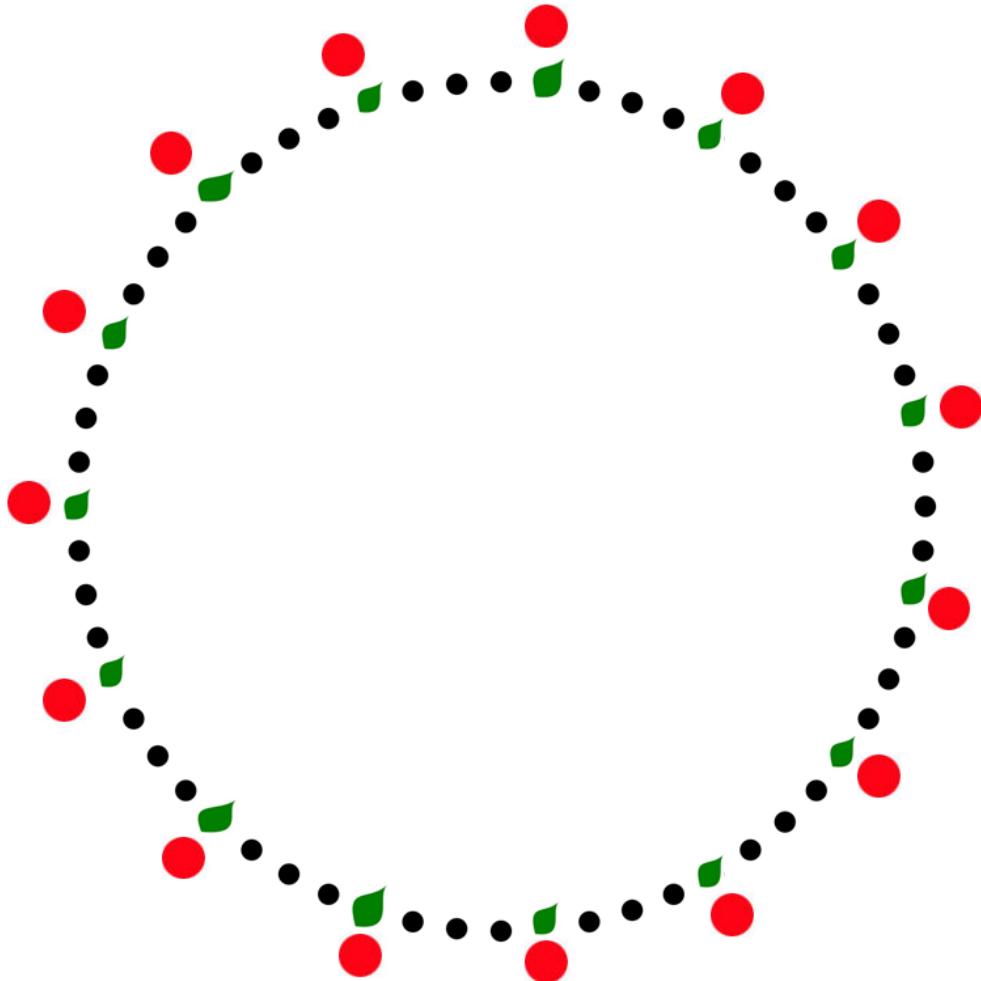




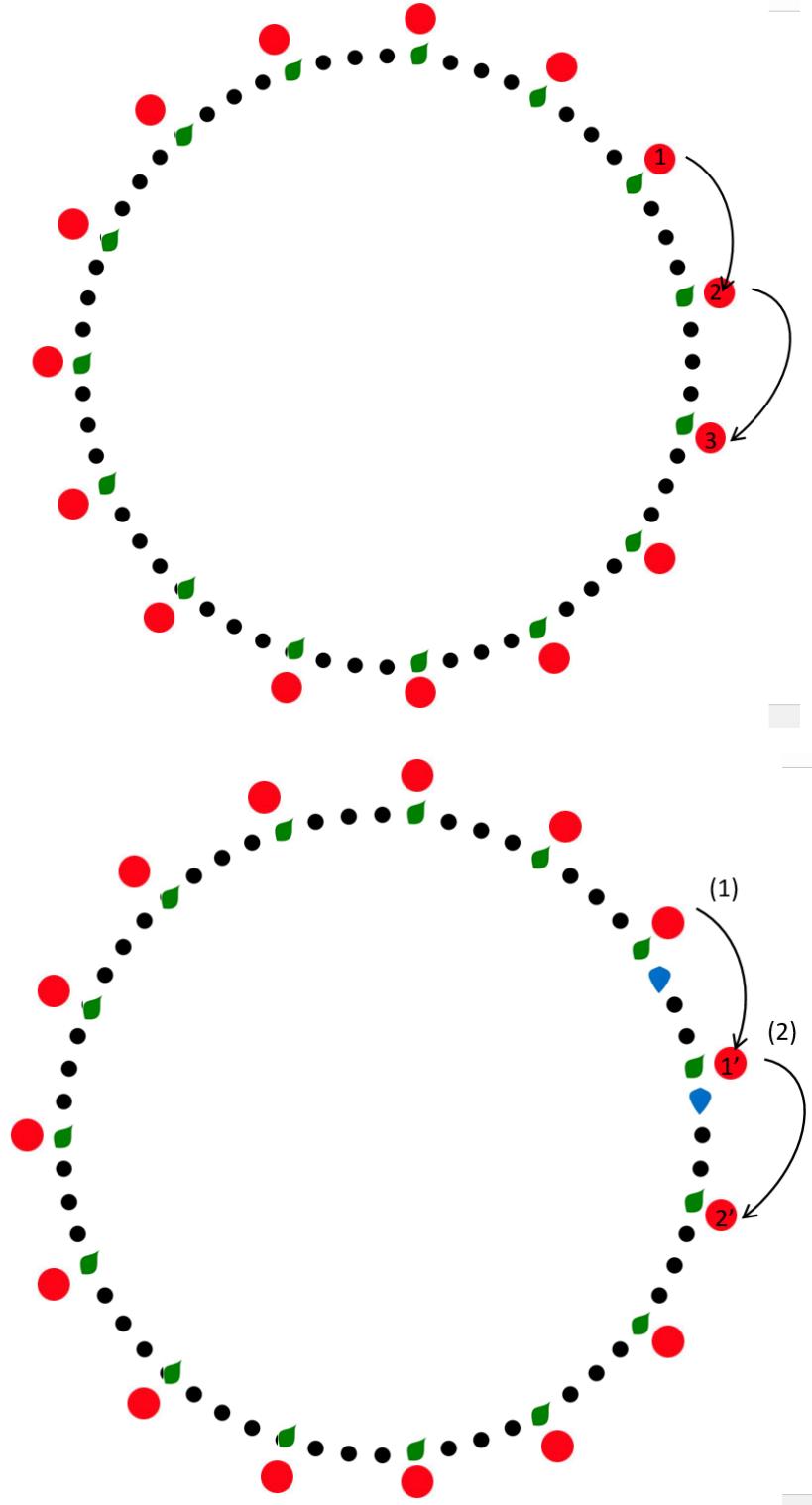
1. The activity starts by having all participants make four clay balls, the size of a big apple. Ideally, groups consist of about 8 to 15 people. In this example, the group consists of 15 people. The larger the group, the more floor or field space is necessary to form the circumference of the circle. In the example, there are 60 clay balls on the floor (15 times 4). The clay balls (represented by black dots) have about 30 cm distance between one ball and the next. The bigger red dots represent the participants. At the beginning, there should be one clay ball right in front of each participant, and three clay balls between him or her and the next person. In case more than 15 people participate, it is better to split the group in two or more subgroups, which each make their own circle, at some distance from each other.



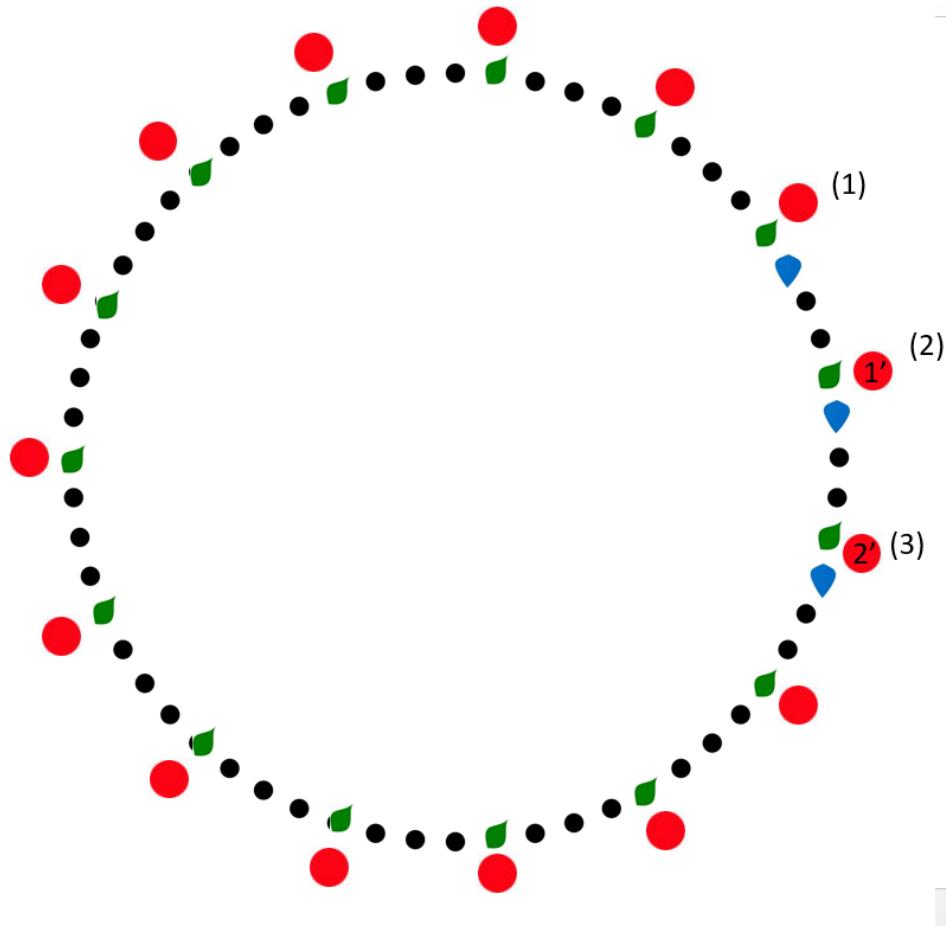
2. (This element can be included or left out.) In the inner circle, the facilitator puts printed copies of photographs made by Karl Blossfeldt in the 1920s. Several can easily be retrieved through a search on the Internet. The ideal size of the printed photographs is A5. If there is more time, the images can circulate from hand to hand, around the circle. The more different images, the better. One can also look for more contemporary images such as photographs of seeds made by Svjetlana Tepavcevic (the coloured images in the example above).



3. It is time to really set the workshop in motion. It's a guided exercise, so all participants follow the instructions of the facilitator and work simultaneously. It's important to ask participants on beforehand to work in silence during the whole session. At the invitation of the facilitator, every participant now picks up the clay ball in front of him and moulds it into an organic form. This form could be real or imaginative, as long as it somehow reminds of a form that *could* actually exist out there in nature. It can be small or big, a plant, part of a plant, fungus or bacteria, animal or insect, or reminding one of a living species. Participants spend about 5 minutes (no rigorous time constraints at this initial stage, though!) making this form while standing or sitting at the outskirts of the circle. The facilitator monitors carefully and in silence how the process is going and when most have completed a form he says something like: 'one more minute, just a few finishing touches. Even if your work is perhaps not finished completely, it will be OK as it is.' The sculpted clay forms (represented by the green leaf) are put back on the spot where they were picked up initially.

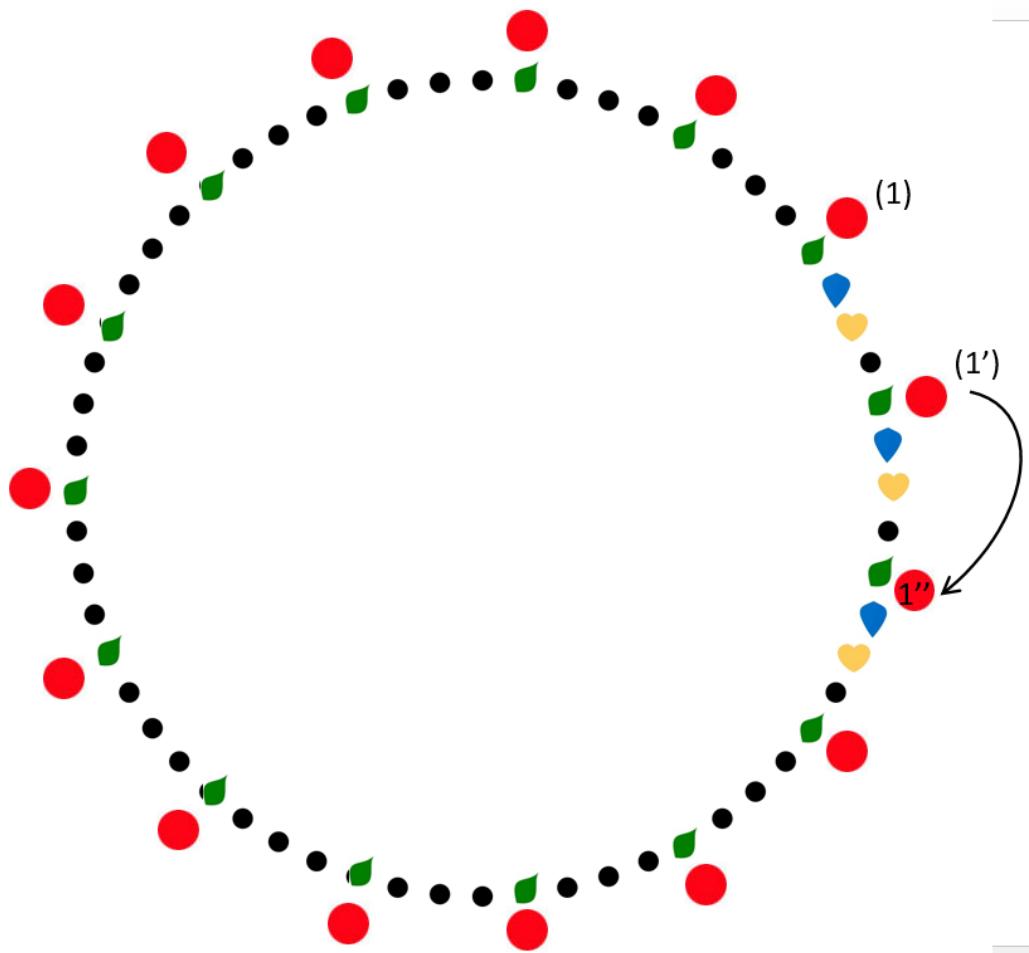


4. The first moulded organic form is finished (represented by the green leaves – in reality, each of course has its own particular and unique form). The facilitator asks the participants to all start rotating along the circumference of the circle, in clockwise movement. They should move until they come to the organic form that the person standing next to him or her has left behind a moment ago. For example, the new position of person 1 becomes 1', and the new position of person 2 becomes 2'.

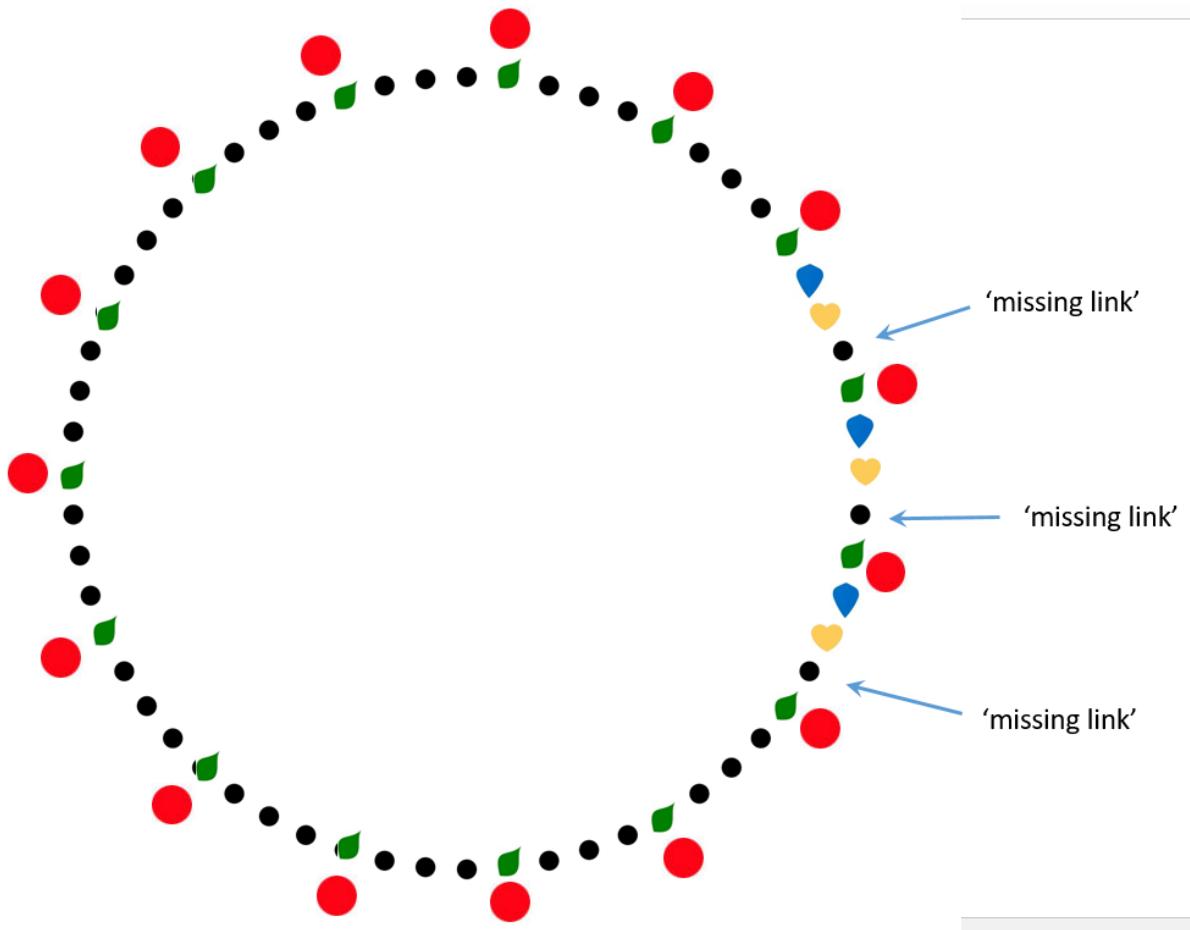


5. At their new position, the facilitator asks each participant to attend carefully to the form that was left there in front of them. They may want to pick it up, or just watch it, while sitting on their knees. However, they should not change its form in any way. After some moments, the facilitator asks the participants to imagine what shape this form in front of them might evolve into, in the course of time. It could be an hour later, a day, a week or a month. The length of the time period they can decide for themselves. How would this form develop further? Would it unfold, blossom, or in contrast, start to whither, to fall apart? They can take it in either direction: to unfolding, or to decay. All this is done without speaking. (If necessary, the facilitator points out from time to time that this activity is best carried out in complete silence, with only the facilitator speaking.) The facilitator then asks each participant to pick up the fresh ball of clay on the left of the moulded organic form that is already there. And then the invitation is to mould this new ball of clay into yet a new form that will be expressive of how the original form has developed over time. The new form is then put back on the ground on its original position (represented by the blue spades in the image).

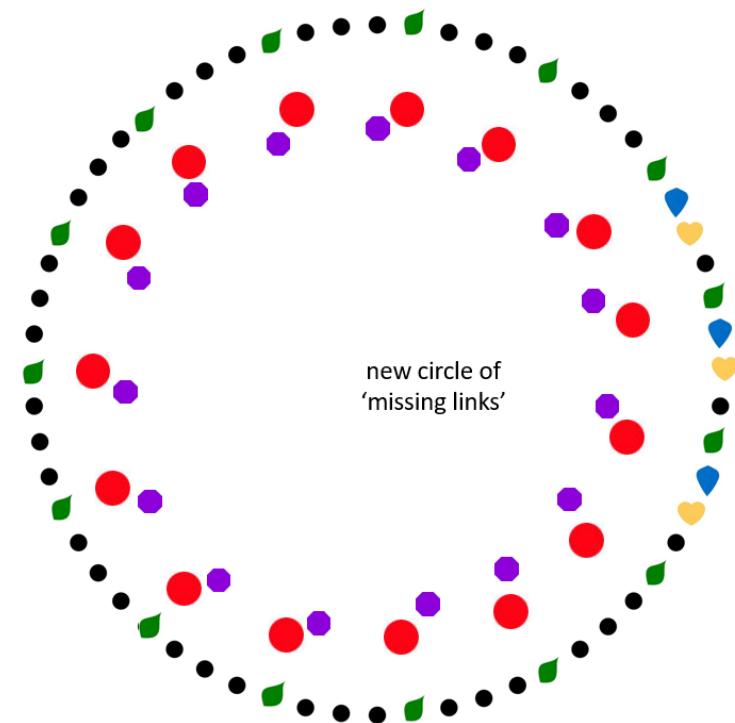
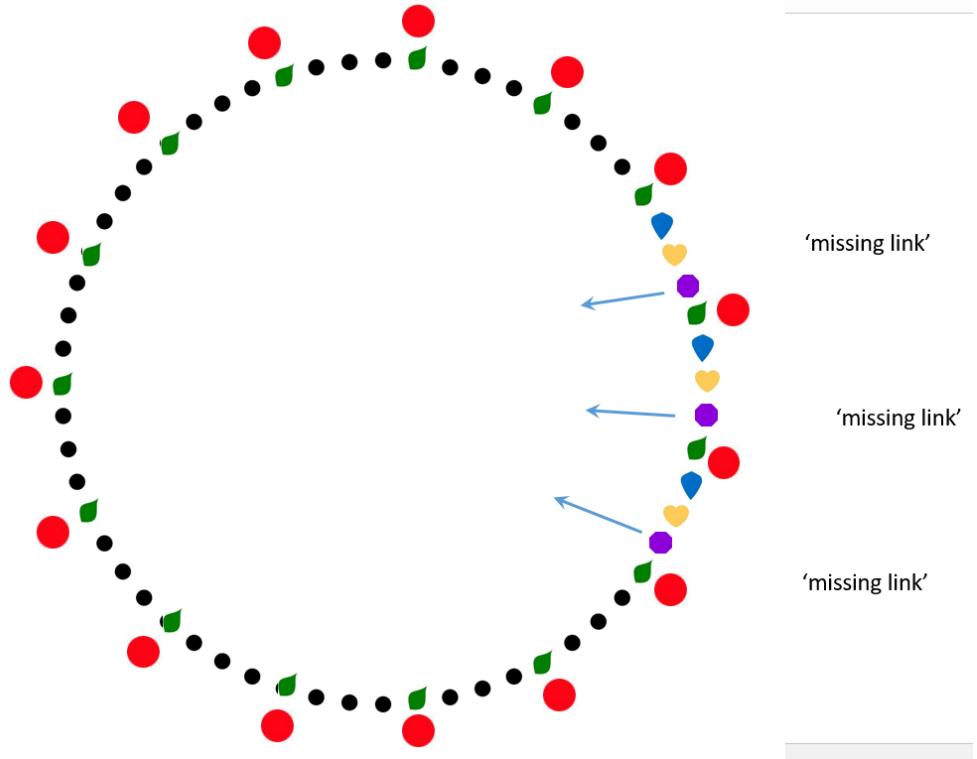
Note: for the sake of clarity, in the above and following images, the whole circumference of the circle is not dotted with newly developed organic forms, it are just a few that are highlighted on the right hand side.



6. Again, the participants are asked to all rotate in clockwise fashion, until they come to the *two* organic forms that are left behind for them by two other participants who worked here previously. Example: participant 1, after having moved to position 1' (where he made a new form taking the organic form left by participant 2 one step further in time), now move to position 1'', and attends to the forms left behind by others (in the image, the green leaf and blue spade). Participant 1, and all the others, are then asked to make a new, *third* form in which they take the developing sequence again one step further. If the first form (the green leaf) was for example a mushroom, and in the second form it looked like it started to fall apart, then the new third form (represented by the yellow heart) may be a mushroom that has collapsed totally – perhaps even some parts of the mushroom head have broken off into separate pieces.



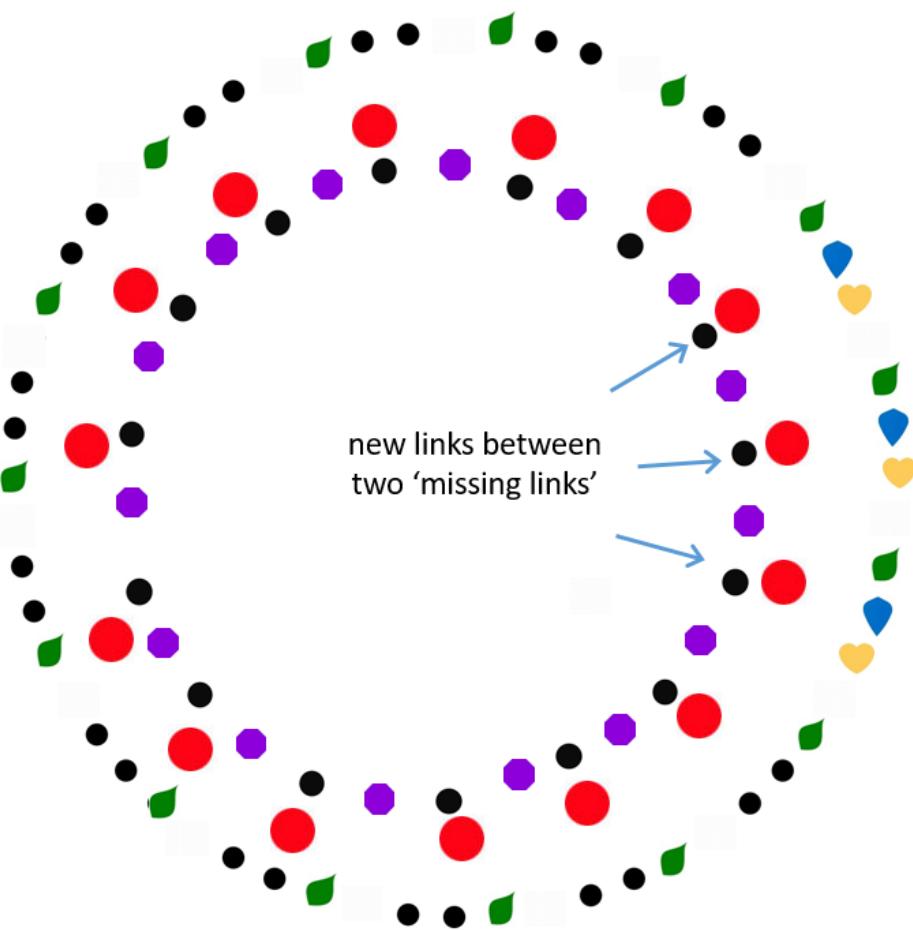
7. The facilitator asks the participants to move further, clockwise. (Here it may be beneficial if the participants are asked to *skip* one sequence of organic forms, so that they won't be looking at work made by their same neighbour all the time.) If done correctly, each participant is now in front of a remaining clay ball that is in fact *in-between* a starting sequence on the left, and a further unfolding sequence on the right (represented by a black dot in the image). The facilitator calls these remaining clay balls the (becoming) 'missing links': the participants are asked to think what kind of form could possibly forge a link or bridge between the sequence on the left and the one on the right. How could one make the 'jump'? If the two sequences are very dissimilar (e.g. a series of mushroom forms on the left and the unfolding of a flower bud on the right), then the participant has to still figure out what kind of shape could possibly be 'in-between'.



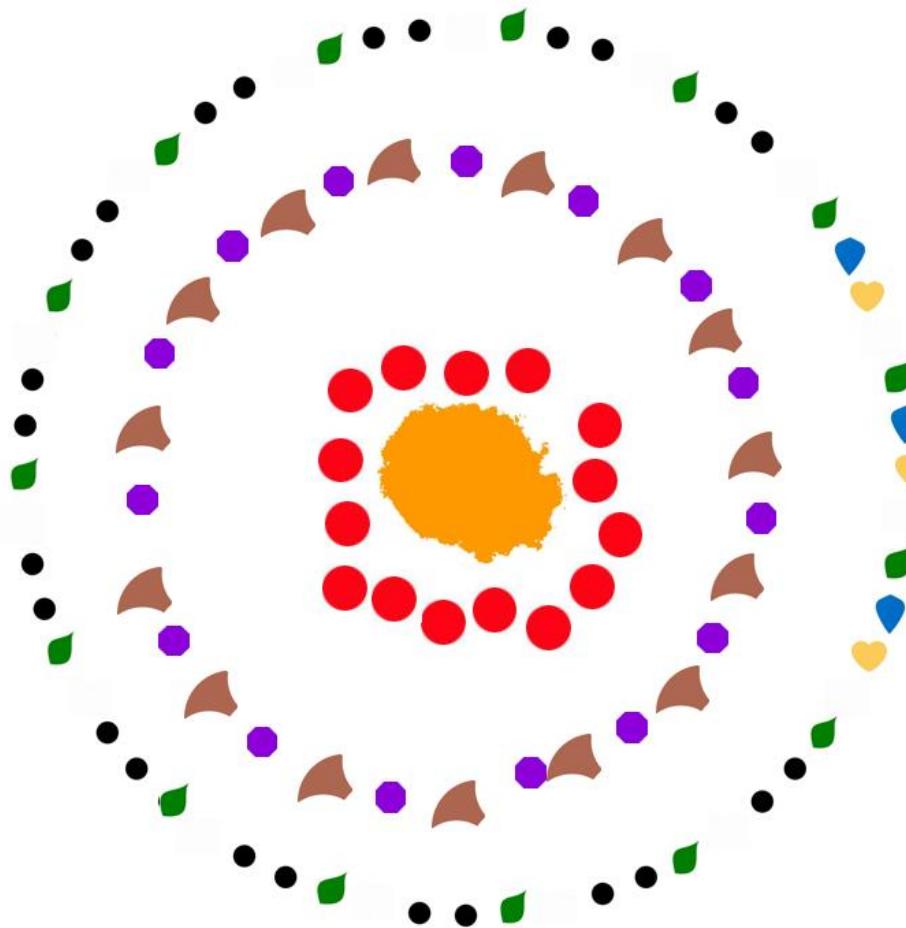
- When finished (after about 5 minutes, depending on how much time the completion of them takes), the participants are asked to stand up straight again and to start walking slowly, in clockwise direction along the outskirts of the big circle, and to pay careful attention on how each sequence expresses a process of metamorphosis and then is linked via a missing link to a new sequence of forms depicting a process of either growth

or decay. They are encouraged to identify for themselves (without speaking!) if they can see which of the forms constitute the actual 'missing links'. The participants keep moving along the circumference of the circle until they have walked full-circle and stand in front of the missing link that they completed a moment ago.

9. Now a new stage starts. Participants are asked by the facilitator to move their missing links inward, towards the *centre* of the circle, about half a meter (or a meter, depending on the size of the group) from the outer circumference. The missing links are represented in the image by the purple, slightly squarish forms). Together, they form a new circle with a lesser diameter. Again, the participants themselves are represented by red dots.

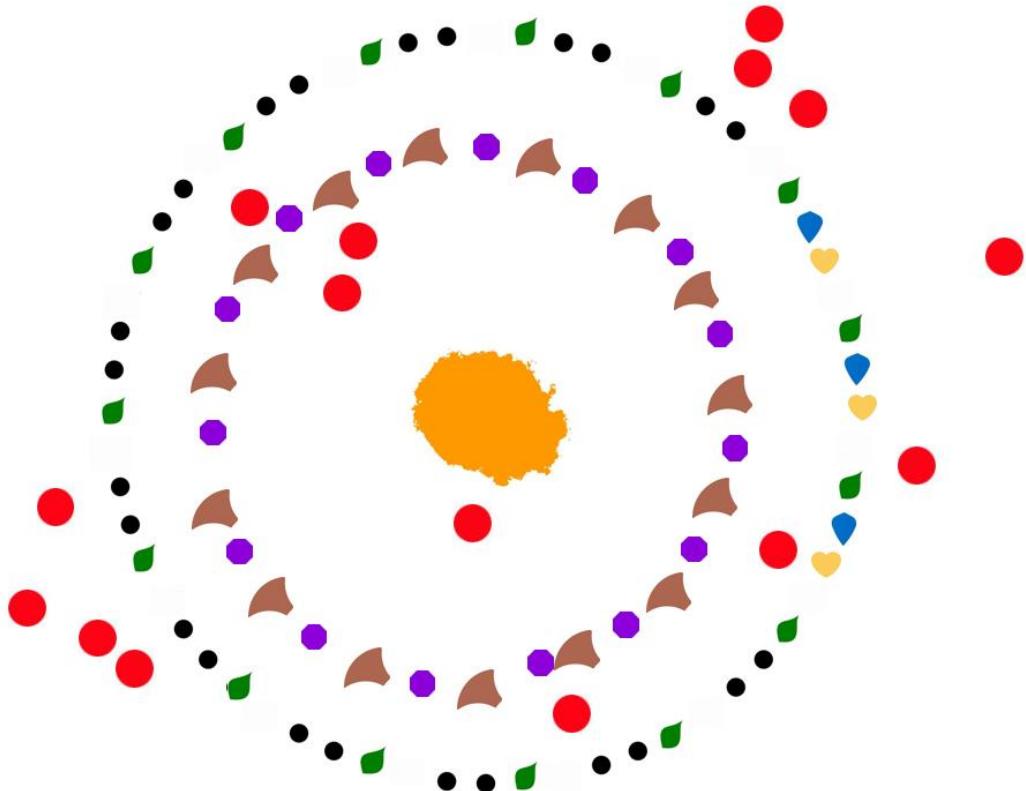


10. Participants are now invited to fetch some clay and to shape a new clay ball the size of a big apple, which they position exactly *in-between* the ‘missing links’. In the image, these are represented by black dots. Then they are asked to rotate clockwise, so that they are no longer in front of a missing link that they made themselves. When standing in front of the new clay ball that is laying in-between two missing links, they are invited to imagine a (meta)link, connecting the ‘missing link’ on their left hand side to the ‘missing link’ on their right hand side. What shape could be an expression of the middle-ground between the odd form on the left and the odd form on the right? Effectively, what you get, is new links-between-missing-links.



11. The circle smaller in diameter, now consisting of 'missing links' and 'links *between* missing links' (represented by figures that look like a brown axe head) starts to become complete. Meanwhile, the facilitator places a big lump of clay (several kilos) in the very centre of the circle (represented by the orange splash form). Finally, when all the links between the missing links are ready, the facilitator invites the participants to stand up again and to walk again, clockwise along the outskirts of this inner circle, thereby carefully giving attention to the new sequences of missing links and links-between-missing-links between them. Also this time, they walk full-circle, until they have returned to the last form they completed before standing up. Now the facilitator invites them *again* to move themselves, , within a few momenta, and this time to the *centre* of the circle. And there, still in silence, they are encouraged to collectively work on the huge lump of clay and to make together a 'social sculpture' in which they give expression to what they learned and picked up during the previous movements and the whole experience of working this way. When they mould the common clay form, they can add to the bits of clay forms that others have created in this centre, but they are not allowed to modify or re-mould them. Only extrapolating, interpreting, things further is possible.

At a certain moment, say after 10 minutes, the facilitator determines that the activity is finished.



12. The facilitator then invites all participants to move around a bit and to look carefully at all the fantastic forms that have evolved through the process (represented by the dispersed red dots). They are encouraged to ask each other questions like: 'What caused you to take the organic form that I made into this particular direction, when you made your own subsequent work?' Or: 'What do you think of the way I have interpreted what could be a conceivable next stage in the developing sequence, based on what you left behind?' This process can be done freely (which in fact is better when working with larger groups) or can be done in a focused way. Such a group conversation, looking at the works sequentially step-by-step, can be guided by the facilitator. In the latter case he or she could ask questions such as: 'How was it for you to do this?' 'Can you describe the experience of expanding on each other's forms?' 'How was it for you to work with clay in this way?' A subsequent question could be: 'What do you see in front of you, what kind of landscape of clay is this?' The conversation could move on to taking up the theme of what the possible relevance or meaning might be to do this workshop together at a conference or activity with a certain theme, such as a conference on sustainability or climate change? By unpacking such a sequence of questions, moving from very *open* and concrete ('How was it to do this?' 'What do you see?') to more *directed* ('Is there possibly a relation between performing this workshop and addressing the theme of the seminar/course we also find ourselves participating in?'), we in some way mirror the

very structure of the hands-on workshop itself, moving from a practical level to searching for bridges (missing links) between items that are in themselves highly dissimilar.



13. If possible, it is best to work with different colours of modelling clay, the different colours make it livelier. But of course it can also all be in one colour, such as terracotta. It is best to count on one 'leaf' of clay (bag of 10 kilos) per 4 participants.