

Interdependent unlearning(s) and caring for disruption

A queer-feminist collective writing session on curatorial experiences and desires for instituting otherwise

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Editors' Note

In January 2022 we, Sylvia Sadzinski and Vera Hofmann, put together some questions out of our own curatorial or artistic practice and experiences, within institutions and self-organized feminist and queer spaces. We took some months to invite a group of curators, most of whom we hadn't met before and some of them hadn't met each other either. We sent them our questions and invited them to several online co-writing sessions we hosted, based on them.

After the initial meeting, the group met three times over the course of six weeks in June and July 2022, for an hour each time and wrote together, in no particular order, cross-referencing and jumping back and forth within the text. One person could not join our meetings but joined the text at a different time and brought in another type of concentration which was very welcome. Each person could add more content outside of the collective sessions.

We'd like to acknowledge that not everyone in the collaboration has English as their first language. The text was edited very lightly and proofread after – nothing was deleted. We decided to keep the repetitive elements and all unanswered questions as key elements of our original idea. We advocate for process-based work instead of polished results. Repetition has a meaning. Unanswered questions do as well. To counter the potentially overwhelming amount of text for the reader we've inserted a clickable table of contents with all answered questions. The unanswered ones you'll find below an answered question keeping the original order.

This is the first iteration. We hope to start a broader dialogue with more practitioners from the field about curatorial (un)learning(s), wishes and desires. Feel free to use the questions in your contexts. We'd enjoy it if you share your results with us.

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PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS OF THE CONTRIBUTORS

CEV: Chris E Vargas is an artist based in the US who makes a project called Museum of Trans *Hirstory* & Art. This project asks audiences to think critically about what a visual history of transgender culture could look like. It's also a creative and critical exploration of LGBTQ archives and has taken the form of gallery exhibitions, poster graphics and broadsides, online participatory art awards, and a virtual residency. This project has curatorial aspects to it, but Chris is reluctant to call themselves a curator. They like working collaboratively with curators to realize MOTHAs exhibitions.

DJ: Dot Zhihan Jia is based in London where she lectures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her academic, curatorial, and creative work focuses on decolonial, feminist modes of storytelling and togetherness. She is a working group member of the Feminist Duration Reading Group and the editor of 'chán' magazine.

HR: Helena Reckitt works as a Reader in curating at Goldsmiths, University of London. Since the late 1980s she has held curatorial and programming posts in the UK (ICA, London), US (The Contemporary, Atlanta), and Canada (The Power Plant, Toronto). She started working as an academic editor for film and performance studies at Routledge and has edited and contributed to various books around art, feminism, curating, and activism. Recently she has experimented with her own creative and life writing. Since 2015 she has coordinated the Feminist Duration Reading Group, which foregrounds under-represented feminisms, often juxtaposing earlier with current feminist iterations.

JP: Jamila Prowse is based in London and works as an artist, writer and lecturer at University Arts London. Starting out in curating in 2019, Jamila took a step back from curatorial projects as a result of a worsening of her disability. She now brings in a curatorial praxis through collective organising, including as a member of Brent Biennial's curatorial committee 2021-22.

SyS: Sylvia Sadzinski curates, lectures, researches, and teaches. She is artistic co-director of the feminist art space alpha nova & galerie futura in Berlin, a lecturer at the Node Center for Curatorial Studies, and teaches regularly at various universities at the intersection of queer and gender studies, visual culture and curatorial practice.

TI: Taey lohe is an interdisciplinary artist with a strong background of research. Taey's current research focuses on decolonising botany, challenging the colonial entanglement of knowledge-making around nature, science, and migration through an Asian queer feminist lens. Their practice is strongly grounded within ways of collectivising and finding a slow rhythm of collective nurturing. Taey leads the Decolonising Botany Working Group and Care for Collective Curatorial and is a proud member of the Feminist Duration Reading Group and Art Asia Activism, both based in London.

VH: Vera Hofmann is based in Berlin and works as an artist-curator. V was on the board of directors at the Schwules Museum from 2016-2020, which is a volunteer's job. The Schwules Museum is currently the largest museum – a self-organized, activist run space – for LGBTQIA+. There V co-curated the year-long queer-feminist intervention *YEAR OF THE WOMEN** in 2018. V is currently archiving that project on yearofthewomen.net for which this writing session got together. Recently V has published on care and commoning.

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Curating

Why do you/why do we curate?

DJ: In order to give space, to care, to confront and to be together. I see curation as both outward and inward care. My own history of displacement and solitude has informed my curatorial thinking. It is through curating that I find a space to care, and in the same space I feel cared for.

HR: To think with others, their practices, creative and critical expressions, about questions and conundrums that I can't figure out alone. It's a way of working collaboratively, mediated through so many encounters: social, practical, material, embodied. Curating has a fannish dimension for me. It enables me to get close to and amplify creative practices that excite me, enabling me to connect with others who share my passionate interests and identifications.

CEV: I curate to highlight historically marginalised trans art and histories, to engage with institutionality, to expropriate institutional power, in other words to share the opportunities I receive with other artists.

HR: I love the concept of expropriating power and resources. It sounds like undercommoning, as defined by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Minor Compositions, 2016)*, which Vera references later.

SyS: Creating community, creating moments of community, sharing space or making space, strengthening relationships — these things are important to me. Also the attempt to fill voids, and at the same time, such, supposedly, banal things such as enabling an exchange between art and the public, between theories and practices.

JP: I very much feel resonance with Sylvia's description of curating as a way to hold space, make space and create community. Although these are the things I found to be challenging within an institutional setting, when I started curating it was with the intention of collectively thinking and making with others, using art as a tool for re-imagining and world building, but I also came to realise that this meant carrying a lot of weight during projects. When curating is done thoughtfully, care is at the centre point, just as Dot and Helena mention below. However, this can become difficult as a curator when your own needs aren't being met. I found that as I got increasingly unwell, in part due to the pressure of the roles I was undertaking, holding space carefully and thoughtfully for other people became increasingly difficult. I didn't want to half-heartedly invite people in without having the capacity to hold the intricacies of their ideas, needs and hopes, so I stepped back into more of a solitary making practice. Now curating is positioned as more of a mode of thinking for me: how to collectively think with others within and around a solo practice, how to exist in spaces, considering the different routes into engaging with artworks in a way that attempts not to lock out people. Curating has opened up a portal for considering how communities are made and disability inclusivity might be built in as an intrinsic part of creating.

HR: Jamila, how you describe the dangers of curators taking on disproportionate and unsustainable responsibility for holding everything together, often in situations of precarity and lack of funding and time, really resonates with me. I don't know if you are familiar with [Jenny Richards'](#) characterisation of "the coping curator," who downplays systemic problems and suppresses her own emotions and needs? Richards writes of "That woman who looks great, perfect lipstick, never needs to sleep and as Arlie Hochschild says in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, "offering only the clean house (gallery) and welcoming smile". This description of professionalism as performance reminds me of the pressure I often experienced to present an image of unflappable poise, when I held curatorial and programming roles.

I find it useful to apply insights from feminist social reproduction theory, of the type developed by the Wages for Housework campaign that emerged in the early 1970s, to this problematic around curatorial manual and affective labour. Just as the unpaid domestic and caring work of feminised and racialised subjects is exploited by the capitalist system, and treated as an inexhaustible supply, the emotional and physical resources of curatorial workers is routinely instrumentalised and taken for granted. What we need, instead, is a more honest conversation about the work that needs to be done, and the conditions under which it occurs, to enable more reciprocal and equitable relations and divisions of labour to emerge.

VH: Everything you all say resonates strongly with me. My process as an artist, then as an artist-curator, and then as a curator was first about doing things with others, then about sharing spaces and access, then even more so about redistributing resources and holding space not just performatively but more sustainably – which is a privilege to be able to be in such a situation. The more precise this became, the more backlash there was, because it does hit nerves, it effectively turned against hegemonic structures. It was very hard for me to even meet my own standards for care and awareness because of being on the edge myself from public shitstorms, personal verbal attacks, time pressure and overwork that comes with intervening. Thank you for the term "the coping curator" which I haven't been familiar with. I've become bored with any presentation that doesn't at least address the structures in the background and simply maintains a façade. As an artist, I might have been able to talk about my and other's emotions, wounds and exhaustion tied to a systemic analysis in these moments, but in the institution(s) I was advised over and over again not to do so because it would make me too vulnerable – which is a valid point when you are working in an environment where some people are just waiting for you to make a mistake. The times I have shown vulnerability and softness both encouraged some people in a positive way and created an open atmosphere, and encouraged others to spill more hate. So, I started editing out such elements from my speeches and statements which left me with a feeling of self-censorship and non-agency. Currently, I am circling back to act in smaller contexts, and co-build from the bottom up again, which is probably healthier. A typical feminist occurrence? At least I see shifts in the discourse – we are doing it right now here – and I have some hope for smaller scale transformations here and there instead of 'the art world,' which is deeply complicit with systems of power.

What goal(s) are you/we pursuing?

JP: To reach a point where the barriers that exist to engaging with and working in the arts are dismantled. Not as a sweeping generalisation of art being for everyone, but instead thinking through the material reality of what it means when people are given the space for creative imagining; how when that is opened up we can use art making as an expanded part of the world which helps us bring into being new ecosystems. At the core of that for me is the sense that during the pandemic access adjustments that disabled communities have long been advocating for were suddenly brought into being overnight – online, remote access, flexible working, potential for increased closed captioning etc – and now there is a common fear that all that will be lost in a return to "normal." When curating is used as a way to think about the infrastructures in place, how they operate and whether they are useful, one of the most pressing things for me becomes, how we can dismantle barriers so that everyone has the option to be involved? What does it mean to start art making and organising from the point where access needs are an integrated part of everything we do, instead of just an add-on? How does that then create flexibility and space to breathe, yes for disabled people, but also for everyone else too?

VH: Yes! I want that world!

On International Non-Binary People's Day, I'd like to add a quote by [Alok V Menon](#), who is referring to trans and GNC folx that I see is also in analogy here:

I'm nonbinary which means it's not just that I am challenging the binary between male/female, man/women but between us and them. And in your statement you said why don't I help them [addressing the cis male podcast interviewer] as if this struggle

is not your struggle, too. The reason you're not fighting for me is because you are not fighting for yourself-fully. [...] What I want is to rephrase the conversation as: 'Are you ready to heal'? And I don't think the majority of people are ready to heal and that's why they repress us [...] because they have done this violence to themselves first. [...] Instead of saying thank you for teaching me another way to live, they try to disappear us because they did that to themselves first. So, I guess I would rephrase your question to be 'can you help me get free?' not 'can you help me help you?'

JP: such a gorgeous way of articulating this!

Do you understand curating as activism?

HR: Of course curating can be a form of direct action or activism, although I personally don't consider any of my curatorial efforts in that light. At their most fruitful they enact a kind of performative or prefigurative politics, imagining and holding space for ways of being that challenge or seek to unsettle aspects of the conservative status quo.

CEV: Like Helena, I also don't personally consider my curatorial projects as activism. Perhaps I have a self-effacing or cynical view of what's possible with this work and/or a narrow view of what counts as activism, or not a clear sense of what "activism" actually is as it relates to exhibiting work in galleries and museums. Sometimes I do feel like it is an important intervention in institutional practices. Sometimes/most of the time it just feels like the institution is ticking a diversity box by inviting me and my projects in. But what I do with this opportunity can sometimes feel subversive and productively disruptive. Sometimes.

SyS: Personally, I do think that curating can be activist. But I am also wondering where activism begins if I actually get paid by an institution and/or with public money when curating. I would love to see my curatorial work as activism though, or rather, I would love my curatorial work to be sort of activist. There have been shows and exhibitions that I was happy to realise that seemed to be appreciated by some communities; exhibitions that become spaces of gathering, of exchange, of care and of celebration, where I could sense a feeling of collective hope that change within suppressive structures is at least conceivable and perceptible somewhere on the distant horizon. For me, there is often something utopian about curating.

DJ: I understand curating as making public, and that public beholds the capacity to let activism happen.

TI: Curating can absolutely be activism from my perspective. For instance, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work deals with everyday routines and labours (she calls it 'Maintenance Art'). She looks at public and private spaces and questions who cleans up the city, museum, and homes. The work itself, maybe the artists' idea, however it is supporting this work, is lifting the meaning from the action, and carving the public engagement is curatorial labour. One of her curators, Lucy Lippard, expanded the idea of how the duration and choreography of daily maintenance activities can shape the sense of space. I also see the curation of ruangrupa for Documenta 15 as a form of activism, bringing process as the core of public engagement. Instead of trying to finesse and combing the output for an aesthetic experience, they extend

their curatorial thinking into further action to enable revolutionary thinking and everyday art-making as core to today's art discussion.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (July 23, 1973), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art ©Mierle Laderman Ukeles

CEV: I love these examples! Such important and enduring work. I'm so interested in this work and its public engagement being an extension of curatorial labour.

JP: I agree with Taey that curating can certainly be activism. I think one of the dangers we have in the arts is seeing the art world as separate from the rest of the world, the idea that it is somehow more altruistic or left-wing or progressive, when in reality the art world mimics and repeats the same violent cycles that exist elsewhere (often in a far more insidious and opaque way). Just as Miya Tokumitsu and Hito Steyerl, among others, have explored, the art world operates on the illusion that it is separate from the rest of society – somehow above and untouched by the wider neoliberal structuring – and thus benefits from reduced scrutiny. Tokumitsu calls for a 'demystification' of art venues, noting that for change to occur we have 'to start viewing places where art is made and shown as workplaces.' Such is echoed by Steyerl, who states that 'a standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents politics in one way or another', as opposed to looking at 'the politics of the field of art as a place of work.' In other words, Steyerl and Tokumitsu outline how political art often avoids questioning the politics on which its own existence depends.

I completely hear and echo Helena, Chris, and Sylvia's feelings of doubt in this arena though. Particularly Sylvia's thinking around what it means to get paid by the institution, and with public money. I'm inspired by curators like [Languid Hands](#), who amongst other fantastic thinkers, have brought forward conversations on how we can make the roots of where our money comes from more transparent within the art world. Simultaneously I'm interested in the praxis put forward by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, which Helena referenced earlier, of taking resources from the institution, or that which you're trying to dismantle or challenge, and using it to support your resistance. Harney articulates it in this [interview](#): "Of course, this

is a contradiction, to draw a check from the place you want to destroy, for us as it was for the League. But as Cedric Robinson was fond of saying, the task then is to heighten the contradiction. And that is what we have tried to do, rather than worry about governance or the sharpness of our critique of the university or our complicity with it. The university has to go, and until the day it goes, I want some money out of it, and I say that as someone who has been out of a wage from the university for two years now.”

CEV: Yes to all of this! 🙌 Especially Jamila’s line about the art world, “The idea that it is somehow more altruistic or left-wing or progressive, when in reality the art world mimics and repeats the same violent cycles that exist elsewhere (often in a far more insidious and opaque way).” 🙌

When does curating become a form of activism?

VH: “At the SMU [Schwules Museum], curating is the key tool for allocating resources to political interests that directly affect the entire house and the community. Without curating, those resources wouldn’t even flow in the first place. To me, currently, curating at the SMU only makes sense if the institution, the place, and its conditions simultaneously undergo intervention – if they don’t, then the curating remains a pure representation without a place at the (decision making) table. ‘The Year of the Women*’ had so much power and sustained success because it was an inside job: we dared to pose the power question from the inside out and endure the consequences, precisely because we considered ourselves committed to the institution.” (I wrote that in: [Bosold, B. & Hofmann, V., Year of the Women*, 2021, p. 30](#)) I have to add that “the institution” is a self-organized space run by mostly volunteers that just recently started feeling and behaving like one.

HR: I very much respond to Vera’s critique of “a pure representation without a place at the (decision making) table.” This encapsulates many of the problems that I see in the current moment in the UK and elsewhere, where institutions are desperate to ‘prove’ how progressive and inclusive they are, but in ways that often feel gestural, and indeed don’t surrender their own power on any lasting or significant level.

CEV: Agreed, progressive programming and exhibitions that appear to be diverse and inclusive (of historically underrepresented groups) are simply window dressing unless structural change occurs within the institution itself. In U.S. institutions, I see a lot of this type of curating done by outside/independent/visiting/contracted curators, people who are given amazing platforms to create radical, subversive programs (exhibitions and events) but who have no job security or benefits, who are essentially freelance, most of the time underpaid, and thus precariously employed.

JP: I very much agree with Chris’ description here of programming that doesn’t extend into restructuring simply being window dressing, and often this is the difficulty with programming, it is directly used as a way of signalling a progressive politics that might not actually exist within the space itself. [Morgan Quaintance](#) has astutely written about the ways arts institutes use programming and curating as a method for obscuring their internal structures, going as far as describing this as a ‘distraction from detrimental neoliberal policies.’ Quaintance observes how the art world’s value is now ‘largely measured according to its perceived

political, moral and ethical rectitude', yet the art sector positions itself in this way to the public while simultaneously upholding the neoliberal status quo.

So, for me, the activist potential of curating is most pertinent when considering collective organising as a mode of collective action or protest which makes visible this hypocrisy. I think about the organising work of [industria](#), an anonymous artist-run network that uses working groups to 'scrutinise institutions and infrastructures in order to imagine and build towards new social universes.' Their projects include ['Artist Leaks'](#) an anonymous resource collating art workers' experiences with pay and treatment, in order to create transparency around these issues and apply pressure to institutions to properly value art workers and artists, [as well as their continued support of the artist Jade Montserrat](#) after she blew the whistle on abuse she'd experienced at the hands of Tate donor Anthony d'Offay. Here, collective organising is being used as an activist tool to support very political material concerns of how workers are paid and how they are treated. I think seeing that activist potential within curating can be a very empowering thing for art workers who are often working in solitary and isolated ways and might not have the advocacy that comes with collective support and solidarity.

VH: Jamila, do you know if 'Artist Leaks' are able to also provide financial support available for activists like Jade Montserrat? That would be a crucial element in further allowing daring activism to happen more.

JP: industria have supported artists through commissions and publications, including their [regular bookmark commission](#) which pays an artist a fee to either contribute an existing or new work to a bookmark design which is then sold to support the ongoing running costs of the network. They are a small but hardy operation, who are definitely expanding their thinking into ways to contribute financial support for artists too.

VH: Thank you, I'll have a look into their practise.

Is it possible to curate radically? And where?

HR: Anywhere, but precariously and tactically. I think of how the UK-based curator Janna Graham has described working in a parasitical relationship to the institutions that employ her. She is committed to putting mainstream art institutional resources to radical political ends, such as supporting the founding of a Black Lives Matter group in Nottingham from public programme funds at Nottingham Contemporary, or working with The People's Museum in Deptford, which explores legacies of slavery on the Thames, through her teaching BA Curating at Goldsmiths.

VH: I celebrate the shift of the public understanding of the curator from mainly picking artists and art works to being one that initiates process and contributes to real change. I think reallocating resources away from the (even "progressive") institution to grassroots organisations is quite necessary. Otherwise, if all done within the institution, it might possibly only be tokenization and mostly serve the vitae of the curators.

What does radicality mean to us? What about different forms of authorship, collectivity, new models of economy? What comes after representation and tokenization?

DJ: I often think about the idea of the curator as a quiet radical, in particular speaking from a land with heavily present censorship that contributes to a hostile environment towards women and queer communities. A quiet radical is for me, a tactic to be radical and safe at the same time. Last year I co-curated an exhibition about women and queer writings. It was hosted at Shanghai Power Station of Art which is a state-run institution, meaning the level of censorship is extremely high and multi-layered. In this context, to make the exhibition happen is already radical. The main task was to use a particular language to make the radicalness abstract so that it passes censorship, but not too abstract that the audience cannot grasp it. Radical curation thus is understood by me to be born out of the urge to talk about something that I don't know how to talk about.

HR: So interesting, Dot. In a way it seems that the focus on secret and coded women's language that was at the heart of your exhibition is one that you ended up adopting as part of your approach towards state censorship and community-building.

CEV: I like that term and strategy of being a "quiet radical." I think a lot about visibility making one vulnerable as it relates to queer and trans people. That quippy but useful quote by Foucault comes to mind, "visibility is a trap", as it relates to surveillance, discipline, and punishment of people who are most vulnerable to state repression.

JP: I always return to Angela Davis' definition of radical (as shared with me by researcher and film programmer Jemma Desai) – 'If we are not afraid to adopt a revolutionary stance—if, indeed, we wish to be radical in our quest for change—then we must get to the root of our oppression. After all, radical simply means "grasping things at the root.'" In line with this, I think that curating and collective organising that initiates a form of grasping at the root, of questioning our structures and where they come from and attempts to re-root in an equitable and generative way, can be called radical. An example of this is the Nottingham based feminist collective space [la sala](#), who I'll come on to in more detail later.

VH: I am intrigued about the 'quiet radical'. I would like to contemplate more on the intersections of that and ['Radical Softness'](#) in the future:

Radical softness is an artistic and aesthetic methodology in which vulnerability and presence become the starting point for encountering the Other. A call for a softening of that which is radical today, that a deep encounter with the Other is a revolutionary moment and a crack in a world of hardened borders. Furthermore, we suggest that a radical softness could be found in the anti-spectacular, in the spaces in-between, in that which is not staged with specific intentions, a space for emotions, a softening of roles and stable identities, the imperfect, the risking of oneself, the awkward, the stuttering of the voice, all that which does not seek to categorise. Taking one's time to dwell, to not accept the invitation of drama and conflict, grasping the complexity which rests in the space between people.

JP: I love this definition Vera. I'm taking mental notes for my own research from everyone's generative contributions.

SyS: Thank you for this wonderful text and definition, Vera <3

HR: Sharing my appreciation for these tender words.

What would be your understanding of the 'ideal' way of curating? How do we get there?

VH: I think that an ideal is a trap anyway. I like to respect our deprivileges, traumas, wounds, and vulnerabilities in each context. Situated-ness and context-sensitivity are important. Working *with* people instead of *about* them is central. Centering the most marginalized involved, and the ones we don't have capacity to think about yet (which is a challenging paradox), thinking about how to let the more-than-human world have agency. Creating safety. Building networks of care and accountability. Working towards economic stability without centering money. Finding allies and accomplices that work alongside to create safety, housing, food. Having assemblies and finding non-hierarchical modes of decision making and processes. Maybe get rid of authorship. Art cannot be done in isolation to other fields. Hm, that as a start...? Oh, and also what puts me under pressure is the current handling of time. I'd like to think about other ways to be with time, from crip time to quantum time.

HR: I agree with everything that Vera says, apart from the proposal to abolish authorship. I think that individual acts of creativity can exist alongside collective efforts, and indeed I think that there is something potentially political about the process of finding one's own voice, however multiple, ambiguous, and complex, and telling one's story. On a personal level I have gained a lot from recognising my need to 'tell my story/ies,' as I undertook an MA in Creative & Life Writing, and how that experience of drawing on my own perspectives and experiences enriched my other work in curating, teaching, cultural organising etc.

VH: I understand this need totally, I have also done personal work that feels dear and empowering to me. What is lacking to me in an individual work is the recognition of the ancestors, kin, and all influences under which the piece came to life – I mean, you can potentially name it but still, the artist /author gets the credits. Also, there are problems with appropriation. I haven't come across a quick fix for that yet and I am aware that some people are working on ideas of different ways of authorship. Maybe I am okay with individual authorship if it would not be tied to any form of capital.

SyS: I also agree with the things you say, Vera, and I like that you mention time, among other things. Working *with* people instead of *about* them also always means learning from each other, giving each other space and time. I find time extremely important and at the same time so complex in curating - somehow there is always too little time for everything and everyone and I find that very frustrating. For me, ideal curating would include thinking about time in a new and different way. A loose rhythm of time that leaves room for reading, thinking, and discussing together. Time for togetherness, time to create or strengthen friendships and relationships with each other. Time to try new things, which also includes the time and space for potentially making mistakes but learning from them. To be honest, I find the concept of a 'traditional' exhibition itself a difficult format and somehow also tiring. It has a beginning and an end in most cases, and often, for me, it creates precisely this pressure and time pressure that you also spoke about, Vera. I am a bit tired of this, yet I feel that there is often not enough time (and money) to really think of and then build different and new

structures. Sometimes curating feels like oscillating between utopia and dystopia, which is very tiring.

When is curatorial practice feminist, or what is feminist curating?

When is curatorial practice queer, or what is queer curating?

SyS: Here, I also often think about a quote by Alex Alvina Chamberland from the performance at the one-day festival [Purrrr!-Femme!-ance! - Queer Femininities in Action](#) in Vienna, curated by Julischka Stengele::

“One thing that we can do in the arts is to disturb the comforted and comfort the disturbed.”

And I wonder if curating becomes queer when we actually *do* disturb the comforted and comfort the disturbed... queer then shifts from a term describing or referring to identities to more of a method and a practice. A method and practice that is in itself fluid and always changing, never fixed, since what disturbs and what comfort depends on time and space and individual perceptions. I would always advocate understanding queer (at least when talking about curating) as neither an adjective nor a noun, but always as a verb. As something that happens, that does something, that shakes, twists, jolts.

CEV: What a useful quote and framework to operate within! I know you're using queer as a verb, but this is a great reminder, in relation to queer and feminist identities and communities (nouns), that we're not operating from the same place of access or privilege.

SyS: Thank you, Chris, it definitely is!

CEV: I just remembered how my dear friend and author Beth Pickens points out that one should not only be a feminist, but they should also act feminist. An identity based on action within shifting political contexts. So, feminism also as a verb!

SyS: I would also like to throw in a quote by artist and museum educator Kerry Downey: “Queerness at its best, lays bare the power structures that produce us, and celebrates everyday aliveness over linear progress, uncertainty over certitude, our weirdness over normalization, self-expression over self-promotion, and community over individualism.” (<http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=10740>)

And when does curatorial practice become queer-feminist?

JP: When thinking of the potential uses of a queer-feminist lens, I always return to Alison Kafer's formative study *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) in which Kafer uses feminist-queer theory to present a reading of disability or “crip theory”. With queer theory, Kafer aligns her study in relation to the ‘fluid, ever-changing horizons’ of the term queer – the sense that it is contested terrain or as Judith Butler wrote a ‘site of collective contestation’ to be ‘always and only redeployed, twisted, queered.’ The ways this opens up a support for ‘dissent and debate’ is why Kafer feels a queer framework is useful when thinking around disability (particularly in that her study reveals that disability is traditionally only presented with one fixed narrative – that of a curative one or, in other words, a future in which disability is

overcome or cured). Simultaneously, Kafer provides a considered reading of how what she defines as “compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness” intertwines with “compulsory heterosexuality” in that both present an unmarked norm, with anyone outside of that norm being termed along lines such as “defective”, “deviant” and “sick”. Therefore, what Kafer aims to do is ‘map potential points of connection among, and departure between, queer (and) disability activists.’ More widely, Kafer is ‘bringing disability identities and experiences to bear on existing feminist and queer theoretical frameworks’ both ‘arguing that disability needs to be recognized as a category of analysis alongside gender, race, class, and sexuality’ with a ‘larger goal to address how disability is figured in and through these other categories of difference.’

I’m giving an overview of much larger ideas here, but I think that final line of enquiry is certainly a useful one – the ways aligning the resistance that takes place “in the margins” (to borrow a phrase from bell hooks) opens up an expanded thinking around the ways oppressive structures serve to keep us all down. With the amount of identity politics that leaves out or overlooks disability, I find Kafer’s study so reassuring; this sense of trying to build connections and build lines of through-thought in order to strengthen our resistance.

HR: That’s such an important observation. I have a lot of respect for the work Maura Reilly has done around visual activism and the statistics that she collates showing which artists are given institutional and market validation, in terms of gender and ethnicity, very helpful and shocking. But you point to some of the limitations of identity politics and representational curating. Such approaches can seem concerned to give more people a slice of the (rotten) pie, whereas what we need is an entirely new recipe! (Not sure if that culinary metaphor works ...)

VH: Aha, so we should not (only) focus on wanting to collectively own the bakery but rather invent other tools (not the Master’s) and recipes altogether? How can the pie be composted?

HR: Thank you for helping me out of my culinary metaphor cul-de-sac, V. Composting seems like a great practice for how we might break down our rotten system, and repurpose all that ooze, stink, and waste.

JP: Very much enjoying the culinary metaphors... although now I’m craving pie.

Why is it important for us to label, or categorize and define our curatorial practice accordingly?

HR: To hold space, to make visible, to demonstrate our commitments, alliances, and the lineages upon which we build. And to hold ourselves accountable, so that we get better at making our purported values, ideals, and political goals match up with our actions.

Back in 2019 three of us from the Feminist Duration Reading Group led a session at Hypatia Trust in Penzance, on the far SW coast of England. The room was packed and some womxn who attended said it was the first time they had seen the word ‘feminist’ in an event listing during decades in Cornwall. Having been active in the dyke scene in London in the 1980s, one had kept her sexuality quiet since moving to this rural area, so our reading group felt

really validating for them. It brought home the importance to me of using words like 'feminist' or 'queer' that we might take for granted in urban settings.

JP: I really like your definition here Helena, of using this as a way to hold ourselves accountable. I also think about this a lot not just in terms of labelling or categorizing our curatorial practice accordingly, but also in terms of being transparent with who we are in holding or contributing to a conversation. I often work through an autoethnographic framework by which I use my personal history and accounts to interrogate sociological structuring (after the phenomenal work of Black feminist scholars such as Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman). Doing so is not just a living embodiment of the "personal is political" and a way of working against what Hartman terms 'the violence of abstraction', but is also a way for me to underscore my connections and also distances from a conversation. So, some of the things I want to make transparent is to say I am mixed-race of Black parentage, but light skinned and racially ambiguous. I am disabled but my disability is invisible. I come from a low-income parenthood, but a middle class family. All of this changes the ways I move through the world and public spaces, and I can often lean on and benefit from "passing", which both enables me to code switch in a way that benefits me but also can be akin to a contortion or the squashing of parts of myself. Holding myself accountable to the ways my identity shapes the way I view the world is a way of going against the anonymity of much academic scholarship and institutional structuring... the idea that who is behind the conversation is a coincidental and non-vital piece of information that has no bearing on the conversation that is being had.

What is the significance of queer curating for the curatorial field as a whole?

What is the difference between queer curating and queering curating/curation, or when and how can curatorial practice be queered?

SyS: For me, one of the exciting things about queer curating is that there is actually no fixed definition of queer curating. When teaching, I sometimes come back to Jonathan D. Katz and Anne Söll's describing queer exhibitions as exhibitions which "[...] interrogate the passive position of the viewer and demand active engagement, honest investment, and frank questioning, while also leaving room for unanswered questions, gaps, and fissures." (Katz & Söll 2018: 2), so that queer curating cannot only be defined as a mode of curating that consciously opposes heteronormative structures in museums and exhibition contexts. Curator Binghao Wong proposes the term and concept of '*queerating*' as a mode of collective care. For Wong, queer curating or '*queerating*' should focus on collaboration and strengthen queer communities and kinships as well as collectivity (<https://autoitaliasoutheast.org/blog/queerating>). What I find almost more interesting, however, is the question of queering curation - when we understand queer as a verb - , which I have already explained above, and what this means for our practice. For me, this is a practice that definitely goes beyond politics of representation. Queering curation for me therefore means questioning, dissolving, blurring structures of the curatorial and curating itself. When the process of curating not only questions itself, but is also lifted out of its normative structures, rules, and procedures. When we disrupt these and perhaps also

rededicate spaces. For me, queering curation then always includes an institutional, or better, infrastructural critique.

How can queer curating be reflected and manifested in working practices and structures?
How can these be integrated and manifested in curatorial practice?

What role do representational politics and identity politics play in defining queer curating?

JP: I've been thinking a lot in recent years about the limits of representational politics. When I started curating, representation was very much at the forefront of my thinking. I was very motivated by the idea that if we don't see ourselves reflected in the world around us, how will we know there is a place for us. But in recent years I've been challenged in this thinking, in a way that has helped me expand my motivations. I was aware of dialogues around difficulties with representational politics – such as Kobena Mercer's study of how when Black artists are positioned as the "first" or "novel" there is a burden of representation by which they are expected to speak for the whole of the Black community in a way that flattens multiplicity within Blackness. Then I came across dialogues that realigned my thinking further, in particular, [Rabz Lansiquot \(of Languid Hands\)'s thinking](#) around the ways representation should be used as a tool but not the end goal.

Our fixation on representational politics in the UK has led us to a position where Black Indigenous People of Colour are somewhat (although still marginally) more likely to be raised to senior decision making roles but there is little questioning around the limited retention within these roles, the way they burn people out, but also what happens when you maintain the same oppressive structures and therefore at a point are just raising people who check a diversity box into the role of oppressor. For those of us who try to resist and restructure, build new ecosystems, we are often met with so much resistance that we burnout or eventually stop. But then there are also those who take on those roles and maintain the status quo, while the institution pats themselves on the back for fulfilling a diversity quota. We can see this in particular now in the UK with the Conservative leadership contest, whereby a lot of the People of Colour are running and being commended for this despite holding very right-wing beliefs and voting histories. I was watching [a video on Instagram by journalist Chanté Joseph](#) where she was questioning what people think will change if we have a Black or brown Tory in head office.

I think what I'm trying to say is that institutions often use representational politics as a distraction tactic, to present progress while maintaining the norm. So, while I think representation can be a useful tool (when done so meaningfully), it isn't the end goal, and we need to maintain that criticality around whether representation always signals change.

CEV: Exactly! Representation matters but that's not the end point, it needs to lead to structural change and reparations in my opinion.

HR: Jamila's comments remind me of how Sara Ahmed's critical efforts were instrumentalised as propaganda by the very institution she critiqued. Following her research into systemic racism

as a diversity officer at Goldsmiths, Ahmed published a scathing report. Rather than take action to tackle these problems, the university held up her study as evidence of what a great job they were doing to tackle racism! (see 'Brick Walls,' in Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017)

JP: Exactly Helena! I often think about Ahmed in relation to these discussions. I think that is often the way things go in institutions...I made a podcast series in 2020 talking with art workers about our experiences of institutional harm (*Collective Imaginings*). The main workplace I referred to during the series, as having made me seriously unwell then shared the podcast noting that I used to work there and calling it "timely." That wilful ignorance of institutions continues to astound me, although it is so commonplace.

I've previously written about what those contradictions and institutional actions do to someone on a personal level [here](#).

VH: Ouch. I'm sorry, Jamila. Curious to read your text soon!

And does it have to be that way?

Is queer curating as a conceptual term and methodology maybe too narrow?

Wouldn't "intersectional curating" rather be the term of the hour, or what exactly could intersectional curating mean and signify?

Can we think 'queer beyond queer'? Should we?

What is community-centered or community-based curating and what are best practices for it but also potential pitfalls?

Curatoriality, curatorial situation, situated curating - what are some best practices we can learn from?

How does the para-curatorial relate to the post-curatorial?

How do terms and concepts like the para-curatorial and the post-curatorial relate to queer curating as a methodology?

To what extent is the para-curatorial possibly queer because it refuses to take a fixed form?

HR: Can you say what you mean by para-curatorial? I'm not sure that the term is widely understood.

SyS: When formulating the question, we had Paul O'Neill's definition of the paracuratorial in mind (<https://anagrambooks.com/the-exhibitionist-no-6>). O'Neill defines the paracuratorial as a discursive process which consists of "an always-emergent praxis" challenging the "hermetic exhibition as primary curatorial work" - e.g. practices beyond the exhibition format like publications, reading groups, performances, discussions, screenings etc. He argues for

this to be understood as part of the curation itself or as an alternative, and not (only) as some kind of extra, add-on or supplement. In other words, a movement away from the artwork and the object, towards a joint research - so definitely also things we can find in smaller self-organised initiatives and collectives as well as in the concept of this year's documenta fifteen. But I am very curious to see how you all understand the paracuratorial.

HR: That definition works for me! I think that a hierarchy still exists in museums and galleries, where exhibition-making is considered the most serious and important work, especially when it concerns artworks validated by the market, and educational and public events are seen as less prestigious extras.

DJ: Recently, I have been thinking a lot about shapeshifters in mythologies, and I think the paracuratorial holds a similar energy. A shapeshifter is able to transform its appearance under different circumstances. It is not bound by a fixated construction, which reminds me a lot of what constitutes a queer identity. I do think it's beyond form though (although a gesture is always a starting point). During the Shanghai exhibition I mentioned earlier, the part I think had the most potential for radicalness was curating the public programmes. The paracuratorial, with its intended discursive modes of interaction, can be a safe space for the public exploration of complex issues.

TI: Shapeshifters are a great analogy to explain the paracuratorial! There is something that goes beyond lineage or stories of the artistic constellations in paracuratorial practice. Including un-tameable agencies, possibly from outside the art scene to bring other voices to be heard in public spaces, excites me. When this queering is well-weaved, it does have transformative power to make the world in different ways. In 2019, I initiated CCC (Care for Collective Curatorial), an experimental learning community to explore alternative art curricula and care infrastructure outside of institutions (Current members are Arreum Moon, Eugene Hannah Park, In Young Park and myself). CCC, together, curated and produced the public program of 'Ecotone: Collective Lives' exploring the extension of collectivising solidarity amongst Asian diasporas and asked a question of 'queering knowledge'. We invited 26 contributors, also including activists, community workers, publishers as well as artists and curators to add their own voices in our digital voice libraries in the metaverse platform. Our intention of challenging fixed forms of 'knowledge collection' was realised by hearing and co-existing with different languages together. (<https://www.instagram.com/carecuratorial/>)



Library Under the Sea, Ecotone: Collective Lives (Gathertown, 2022), © Care for Collective Curatorial

And to what extent can the post-curatorial be called queer because it supposedly questions curation itself?

SyS: We have referred here to the essay "[Curators Who Don't Curate](#)" by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, who describes the practices of places like SALT Istanbul, Ashkal Alwan in Beirut and Townhouse in Cairo as post-curatorial since they replace the classical exhibition format, which, as Helena mentioned above, is understood by many institutions as the highest and most important thing. These post-curatorial places and ways of working have emerged partly because of infrastructural and precarious reasons, but are also deliberately directed against binaries like art practice and art theory, artistic and curatorial practice, author and curator, exhibition and side programme. That concept, but perhaps the paracuratorial even more so, questions these binaries, and can perhaps already be understood as a practice of queering.

Disruption/Intervention

When can artistic/curatorial practice disrupt entrenched forms, formats and infrastructures?

CEV: I want to believe that art and curatorial practices can disrupt entrenched forms of oppression and exploitation, but the ability of powerful institutions to absorb critique and diffuse disruption is big. I think a reckoning with these entrenched forms is a place to start. Highlighting and revealing the racist colonial roots of institutions is a place to start, labour, and fair and equitable compensation for all cultural workers, unionisation efforts of labour, including cultural and artistic labour. I know the question was when, but I'm answering as how.

JP: I definitely agree with Chris's answer around *how*. I think in my artistic practice I'm toying a bit with the *when* at present. I'm interested in my positioning as a light skinned mixed-race person with an invisible disability and the ways I am able to "pass" in institutional spaces. I can enact code switching (as mentioned above) which allows me to move through spaces with relative ease. This means that I've also been privy to conversations and internal structures that I might not have been if my "difference" were more readable at surface level. I'm starting to (and still in the early days of, so excuse me if this isn't articulated clearly) think about the ways "passing" could be used as a tool to disrupt entrenched forms, formats, and infrastructures. As with the scholarship put forward by Sara Ahmed around "passing" and the impacts this has on a person, I'm now starting to wonder whether there are times when my "passing" might be used as a trojan horse to sneak in disruption where it might not be expected. I'm not really sure where I'm going with that yet, but it's definitely something brewing in the back of my mind.

HR: What you say about 'passing' brings to mind Adrian Piper's calling cards, which she handed out to folk who had made racist comments that she, as a light skinned African American woman who could pass as white, found herself privy to. She also made a calling card about being sexually harassed in bars and public spaces.

(<https://adrianpiper.weebly.com/my-calling-card-1986-1990.html>)

JP: Thank you for the reference Helena, I hadn't come across Piper's calling cards but they're exactly the kind of project I'm thinking of. Again, taking note for future research...

SyS: Reading the question made me think of another quote by Kerry Downey and how they emphasize the importance of making messes, of causing chaos and disorder when talking about queerness in the museum: "Art resides not in the tidy stories of well-placed geniuses who changed the world; art is a practice, it is how we resist the stories stuck to us or stolen from us by those who know nothing about me or you. We talk back, make messes, and value each other's acts of creation no matter how small, no matter how weird."

(<http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=10740>)

Whom can it disrupt and for what and why?

CEV: People with nothing to lose, those whose socioeconomic positions are either so secure or so precarious. Artists with immense cultural power and capital or artists with none. Untouchable curators (are there any? Am I just referring to cisgender white men?) or curators who don't give an f. This is a fantastical answer. I'm not quite sure I believe any of this, but I wanted to put it out to examine it. It's also not just a singular who, it has to be many voices and actions. What and why? "What" is the concentration of power in the hands of a few. And why? Simply to disperse power.

What could radical disruption through curation mean?

Radical disruption, "revolution" vs. recognition politics and revolution of and with small steps? Is there even a gentle way?

DJ: I think gentleness is both inwards and outwards. Again, I am thinking about how to be a quiet radical which does not mean not making sounds, but listening with patience.

SyS: Dot, 'quiet radical' made me think of Ewa Majewska's concept of weak resistance. Majewska analyses how the so-called weak or alleged powerless redefined history in a way that was devoid of heroism and strength - or the normative and common social understanding of both - by referring to East Central Europe in the 1980s and its social movements against the state and by using Vaclav Havel's "power of the powerless", Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "territorialization", Walter Benjamin's "history of the weak and oppressed", Nancy Fraser's "counterpublic" and Antonio Negri's "the common."

DJ: I am so interested! Adding it to my reading list now :)

HR: Radical listening suggests an openness to process and conversation, rather than imposing a programme as if we (as curators) know what's needed before we even begin, where curiosity and care are valued over ego and performance.

TI: In some ways, 'translating' requires radical listening; as Helena suggests where curiosity and care are valued, we start to understand where the original language departed from, and when it needed to arrive somewhere, whether in a foreign language or in a different context (in art practice, perhaps arriving into public space from artists' process). Sometimes, instead of translating action, while kindly holding hands with people and leading them to the work, learning the action of un-translated languages is more revolutionary.

JP: I love this idea of the quiet radical put forward by Dot. It also reminds me of the framework of slowness put forward by [Tina Campt in this beautiful lecture](#), as not just a change in velocity but a way to pay attention, or attentiveness. I think about slowness often as a way to be gentle, both with what I give my attention to, but also with my own boundaries and access needs. For me this is also an extension of working on "crip time", which doesn't just mean extra time, but instead refers to the flexibility in time that exists within disabled communities (thank you again to Alison Kafer for this definition). Slowness, in a way, has become my only mode of moving through the world since my impairment worsened several years ago. I even think about it here, the gentleness with which I was allowed to come to this

project in my own time, which is why you might often find me on the tail end of conversations.

HR: But with such insights and grace - so worth waiting for! I am glad that you were able to articulate your needs in ways that enabled you to contribute. It's a lesson for me in how being transparent about the terms under which we are participating, and the health and other conditions we are experiencing, and collaborating with others, can help to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and support.

VH: Thank you for the acknowledgement, Jamila. I am so grateful for your contributions – as I am for each one's. I want to add my being self-conscious of often being at the start and the end of a conversation due to my role in this collaboration. While arguing with myself if sharing this here is appropriate, I am looking back at the initial question. You find me smiling.

JP: It definitely feels like a very mutually beneficial and generous way to be articulating. My brain and heart are very full from the conversation!

SyS: Even though we are close to the end of our collective writing session, I would like to add some more words about Majewska's concept: with the concept of weak resistance, she elaborates how weak resistance might lead to revolutionary changes. She also applies her concept to feminist art and institutions “arguing for transversal models which combine a non-heroic vision of (artistic) development with solidarity practices and the resistance of the weak”. The weak are therefore those who are not seen and not perceived by institutional structures. They find their resistance and their strength in solidarity and in strategic, partly reformist, but always conscious, decisions. She refers to Rosa Luxemburg describing her conscious movement between supposed contradictions of reform and revolution, determinism and autonomy, work and non-work. For Majewska, weakness also means expressing vulnerability and the experience of exploitation: “ [...] what connects us when we want to make or change institutions is the shared experience of oppression, from which we want to learn and unlearn new forms of institutionalization.”

(https://www.academia.edu/41963694/Toward_a_Feminist_Art_Institution_Counterpublics_of_the_Weak).

How should we curate if we want to disrupt common (infra)structures?

HR: I'd like to share a section from an interview with the Belgium-based cultural worker Laurence Rassel, 'Commoning the Institution - or How to Create an Alternative (Art) School When "There is no Alternative",' where she sheds light on what she has learned from Institutional Psychotherapy, and which really resonates with the question posed here:

The basic idea, in short, is that institutional psychotherapy was based on the idea that if you want to take care of a person, you have to take care of the institution, that if the institution is sick, the people who are patients there will be as sick as the institution is. And also that everything counts, that the way the garden is done, the cleaning is done, or the cooking is done affects how the people live or are, and also, this idea that the nurse, the cleaning person, the gardener have their say, their part in the care function,

or the cure function. One of the principles that is important, is that the patients are actively relating to their cure; so they participate in their cure. This idea that the people working inside the institution are active [means] to give them the agency, the power to act and not to be told what to do, how to do it, and so on and so forth. But you think that the institution is done by the people who are in it. Also basic stuff, right?

<https://www.on-curating.org/issue-43-reader/commoning-the-institution-or-how-to-creat-e-an-alternative-art-school-when-there-is-no-alternative.html#.YrWkqJPMJZ0>

VH: This sounds lovely and it reminds me of Casco, an art space in Utrecht, Netherlands, and their [Unlearning Exercises](#). Over a two-year period, bi-weekly meetings with artist Annette Krauss identified Casco's institutional habits in order to get the team ready to unlearn them. Together with the staff, "structural exercises" were developed that "became new institutional habits". As a "regular collective neglect exercise," cleaning is done together once a week. This exercise practice, developed after long processes of negotiation and experimentation in response to a complaint, makes injustices visible in terms of caring for the space. Other exercises aim to change the wage system by factoring in reproductive labour and well-being. Still others negotiate issues of intellectual property, shared education, and the management of time. The exercises are made available to the public in various artistic, curatorial, and journalistic formats. (Krauss, A. (2019): Unlearning institutional habits: an arts-based perspective on organizational unlearning. *The Learning Organization*, 26(5), S. 485-499.)

Also, I'd like to add that I am a bit wary of the sickness metaphor – not only after I've read Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* a long time ago. "Sick" institutions feel similarly wrong as the military language of "fighting the virus".

HR: The Unlearning Exercises developed by Annette Krauss and the Casco team are inspiring resources for me, too. I value how the process led the curatorial team to realise how heavily invested they were in being constantly busy and over-stretched, which contributed to the devaluation of important aspects of affective and maintenance labour that can be termed institutional housework. This loops back to what Taey said earlier about Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work around maintenance labour: in fact, the group at CASCO read her Maintenance Art Manifesto together and annotated it for their current context.

VH: I wonder what you can do when you hit the walls (Sara Ahmed). When the institution is too toxic, and people are not willing to undergo certain changes together? When there is not enough time and resources for such care processes with and for everyone? How to install something like Sociocracy, assemblies, etc., where everyone gets enough agency or receives some boundaries over their dominance? I am not sure if curating without access to the institutional matrix will change anything.

HR: When you hit a wall - organise or exit! Find solidarity with others who share your experiences of institutional violence, and combine forces to fight for change. And if the walls feel completely insurmountable, get the f' out of there and put your precious energies elsewhere.

VH: Thank you, Helena. I think I needed to hear that in this clarity! :)

JP: Putting your precious energies elsewhere is a life-giving approach, Helena. I've been thinking about this recently after co-writing a proposal and interviewing for a curating role. I was invited in by a friend and co-conspirator and the care with which she invested in the collective, as a way to support each other through those rigidities and challenges, to share the load of responsibility, opened up curating to me as a possibility again for the first time in a long time. But then when we interviewed for the role, I was struck by how worn down the organisation already was by the resistance they'd been facing. In the end we weren't successful in our application, and I actually felt quite relieved. Not that I didn't want to engage in such a considered collective project, but I've been so exhausted for the past few years because of the uphill battle, and have reverted into quietly trying to recover. I know there are reasons we resist, but doing so in spaces where you keep hitting those walls can also take away your capacity to live and experience expansiveness and joy elsewhere in your life.

Who is 'we'?

TI: To call us, 'we', we need another conversation, not one, but multiple ones. Before that, you are you, I am still me. This conversation can be not only via language, but also must create and make possible the sharing of slow space. Slowness is not about the speed of time, but more for allowing time to notice each other's need and desire, learning their transitional, transformative stories along their journey. To hold the future together, any group of people should share space and time together to find out what we want to fight for, and what kind of future descendants we want to be, collectively and individually. What holds us as a group at this moment, is a connection to art-making, meaning-making in the West? Then I could also wonder, what does it mean to occupy the art space here? Being queer-feminists is contested in a different ways, if you are surrounded by fellow QTIBIPOC, it is joyful and celebratory. If you are in the middle of unknown, anonymous keyboard warriors, it is hostile and isolated.

DJ: This state of unknown that Taey mentions has got me thinking. The past, the present and the future all feel unknown and uncertain. I am reminded of a Buddhist saying, "not knowing is the most intimate". A space of unknowing is simultaneously shifting yet materialising. How can we embody this unknown and find intimacy and attentiveness in it?

Back to the question itself, I guess I don't have an answer, but I can talk about the question itself. When using 'we', the person presumes a collective identity that stands on common ground. How can we assume a common ground when it's in fact groundless, and to refer to what Hito Steyerl talks about, a condition of free fall when there is no ground?

How does curatorial practice relate to institutional critique?

How can we practise institutional critique through curatorial practice?

When does curatorial practice become institutional critique?

What does it mean to queer the institution through curatorial practice?

Is it worthwhile to intervene in existing institutions? If yes, why, if no, why not?

JP: The thing that struck me after several years of working in existing institutions, is the ways we start to internalise and recycle certain bureaucratic models and methods which actually make very little logical sense. I don't think intervening is impossible, but I think it is very difficult to stay conscious and critical in environments which demand you abide by very rigid, immovable structures. I still work in an institution as a lecturer, but one where I feel pretty unencumbered and able to share my approaches and small resistances through co-learning and co-teaching. But presently I don't have an interest in intervening in spaces where it's a constant daily battle of hitting walls (Sara Ahmed as referenced above by Vera and Helena). I make that choice selfishly, out of a desire to have space to live and breathe.

HR: And of course, Ahmed herself left the institution to which she had devoted years of her life, creativity, and passion, after going public on the 'brick walls' she had hit.

JP: Some of the best advice I've ever received is to withdraw my labour; sometimes those fights just aren't worth it when there is such an unwillingness to change in place.

Do we want or should we (exploit or) change or abolish the institutional/institutions?

JP: I've been struck by dialogues around the ways abolition engages in an act of re-imagining, how at its core it is a hope for and active way of bringing into being new ecosystems. I still want to explore these ideas more. As the brilliant Lola Olufemi says [in this interview](#): 'I think of abolition feminism also as a principle that asks us not to reproduce the harm that we seek to end.'

I also want to default to the words of Jemma Desai in the conclusion to her paper [This Work Isn't For Us](#):

When I first sat down to write the conclusion to this paper, I was heavy with grief. It was difficult to move to the space to make 'actionable recommendations' or create an 'executive summary.

I no longer believe that is what is required of me.

I realise that between now (June 2020) and the date I originally wrote it (February 2020) that this paper doesn't advocate for reform, as I had originally thought, but rather documents the personal costs of individuals attempting institutional reform, unsupported and unrecognised in cultural institutions that replicate the indifferent harms of the state.

Between Feb 2020 and June 2020, the world has changed and so have I.

I am no longer grateful.

I no longer believe in reform.

I call for abolition.

HR: I love these definitions of abolition as routes towards bringing about new ecosystems - rather than pure dismantling. It reminds me of the notion of Human Strike, developed by Tiqqun and the readymade artist collective Claire Fontaine, which draws on 1970s Italian feminisms. When we refuse to conform to preordained scripts and stereotypes, what you see here gives way to 'let's be another possible now.' Resisting the politics of assimilation and parity, and sharing a lineage with Abolitionist action and thought, this is "a strike of gestures, dialogue, a radical scepticism in the face of all forms of oppression that are taken for granted, including the most unquestioned of emotional blackmail or social conventions [...]." (Tiqqun, *Sonogram of a Potential*, 2001, www.feministduration.com/blog/2018/12/12/tiqqun-sonogram-of-a-potential)

Should we disrupt/destroy existing structures or rather create new structures?

JP: I think I'm interested in both, but sometimes I wonder if that's because I've been committed to moving within the existing structures for so long that I can't imagine otherwise. Or else it is that daily pressure to make ends meet financially which holds me in existing structures. But I think what feels expansive and healing to me is the thought of new structures. I feel I've been engaging with this on a small level, by making alliances with people who speak and work from the same side as me, as a way of sifting out the people fighting the good fight in the service of forming some sort of "alternative art world". For me, that has been a healing practice, which works against the isolation and gaslighting I experienced in institutions for years prior.

HR: Which connects to the earlier question, 'Who is We?', and the need many of us have expressed here about feeling like we are connected to others seeking and dreaming of how things might work otherwise.

VH: I've tried to wrap my head around commoning in the arts as an alternative to the dependencies on market and state lately, which is the subject of a book that I just co-wrote with Johannes Euler, Linus Zurmühlen and Silke Helfrich. Struggles we have in the art sector need to be tied to all others, around land, resources, housing, food, ownership, understanding of individuality and autonomy, fairness, justice, etc. (I am speaking from and for my geopolitical context and as a *white* German). Singular field fights are not sustainable. We argue for a both/and approach: building new structures, groups and practices while also trying to change the existing ones, pushing the boundaries where one can. We advocate for having a clear stance on which 'side' we want to invest our energy which means withdrawing from the existing structures bit by bit. That's easier said than done of course, especially with financial and social dependencies. From my experiences now, I would like to rather focus on building new ones AND have them become socially, financially, and otherwise secure and accessible instead of constantly being exploited and hitting walls in the old ones or trying to manoeuvre between the two. We give some examples in the book about what other commoners have already come up with, like legal and organisational and financing aspects

as well.

I will visit some commoning projects soon and redirect from what I have previously been doing. Queer community is not always the sanctuary we wish it would be, so I am ready to explore what else is out there also in connection to soil, nature, land, sustainable architecture, etc. But I have to admit that I am wary that (*white*) cis het spaces or the ableist maker scene of a lot of communities are also not very safe for marginalized people. Eek.

[“You have no chance, grab it.”](#)

[Here’s our book in German.](#) The English version will be in the book section with OnCurating.org somewhat in August or September 22.

What would these structures look like?

Is a backlash with adaptation to the institutions inevitable when we work in and with them? Does the way we address things or the question determine the form of the answer?

What structures and resources are needed to avoid burnout and trauma that can arise in the context of interventionist/activist curatorial work?

HR: See above - ‘everything counts’, in ‘Commoning the Institution - or How to Create an Alternative (Art) School When “There is no Alternative”’.

TI: I have been actively collectivising groups and fostering relationships to make structural changes through social practice in the UK since 2019. A peak of racism towards SEA (Southeast and East Asian) people and a continuous loss of rights for precarious migrants, refugees, and health workers during the pandemic really highlighted the presence of structural harms and the brutal remnants and consequences of colonisation. Community workers, activists, facilitators and cultural workers have been putting a lot of effort into making space for dealing with trauma and focusing on multi-generational mental health issues. I have also been co-creating and co-delivering a long-term solidarity healing project with a collective duo named, ‘Breakwater’ with Youngsook Choi, *Becoming Forest*, which aims to create a collective safe space for precarious migrants over four seasons. I see recuperating from wounds, depression, mental health issues as deeply collective responsibilities. Combined with the wake of BLM and addressing patriarchal, capitalist, and extractive ways of working, there has been extra emotional labour put on our shoulders to explain the relics of racism, make this labour visible, and still facilitate a healing programme despite personal exhaustion and burn-out. I continue to search for the solutions to how we can hold open a space, not without burnout, but dealing with conflict and unequal realities, while not having to step away from the communities in which we felt we belonged. These are three things I learned from my experience:

- 1) Value-sharing friendship: work is always hard whether the project is meaningful or not, but when friendship is the foundation of the relationship, it is easier to confess the difficulties when you are completely burnt out. When there is no desire to be together outside events, and curatorial projects, it is harder to recover from the exhaustion.

- 2) Transparent working relationship: conflict always highlights painful emotions, and this can isolate us from the group, and that can lead to depression and frustration. Conflict also invites us to deepen and clarify and make it transparent why we want something together. I feel this is important to address and make transparent how the decision is made, whether the decision is bad or good.
- 3) Factor IRL meeting/nourishment in: I connect in better ways when I meet people in a real way - even though language can fall short and be tricky sometimes as I am a migrant. Inviting someone's body into my proximity makes me aware of, and feel how, their energy bounces off and interacts with mine. The bodily frequency connects us to think intuitively.

I can also share some resources in terms of conflict-solving, and healing practice with racial justice. (Resources are selected from; Turning Towards Each Other - Conflict Workbook by Jovida Ross & Weyam Ghadbian (2020))

- **Decision-Making**

Fist to Five decision-making tool - <https://tinyurl.com/fist2five>

Circle Forward: Consent Based Governance for Collaborative Networks - <https://circleforward.us/start-here>

- **Creative Interventions Toolkit**

- <http://www.creative-interventions.org/tools/toolkit>

Exercises and resources for community-based interventions to violence, or what some call community accountability or transformative justice, to create solutions to violence from those who are most affected by violence – survivors and victims of violence, friends, family and community. Useful for both experienced practitioners and people new to this approach.

- **Fumbling Towards Repair**

- <https://www.akpress.org/fumbling-towards-repair.html>

A workbook for facilitating community accountability processes. Not an introduction or orientation By Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan.

HR: Taey's insights are ones that I hold dear. Coming from a background of public programming and exhibition organising, I know that I can fall into habits of putting my energy into public-facing outputs, while neglecting the relational dynamics between myself and the people that I work with. I feel that I am learning, or wanting to learn, from Taey's focus on slowing down, taking time, and prioritising mutual nourishment over hyper-production. At the same time, I cherish the relationships that grow out of working with others, the recognition of other people's energies, knowledge, and experiences that can emerge from these practices of doing, and of the creative and intellectual tools for living we end up sharing.

VH: Thank you Taey for spelling that out in such an embodied way. I hear you there. And thank you for adding the tools here!

SyS: Thank you, Taey, for sharing your insights and experiences. And also for mentioning value-sharing friendships. I remember once laying a carpet with an artist at 4 o'clock in the

morning. At that time, of course, we were totally tired and went beyond the capacities which the institution provided us with and also our own, because we wanted this carpet so badly to make the space more inviting. Looking back, I think we should have listened to our bodies and not to our perfectionism and given them more time to rest and sleep. Nevertheless, at that moment, while laying this carpet, sharing and talking about very intimate moments in our lives, I realised that our friendship made this moment special. Actually that's what made the exhibition really meaningful to me. That was the point where I said, whenever I can choose, I want to work first and foremost with people who I either already call my friends or have the desire to count them among them at some point.

JP: I really resonate with Taey's articulations here. I've expanded on this more below under what structures do we need...

How can we be radically disruptive while still depending on recognition for our work?

VH: I'd like to first ask what recognition means and what it might entail. Is it the means to an end or are there other needs behind it that can be fulfilled in other ways? Community and a sense of belonging? Social, cultural, financial capital? I personally would not need to have any lines in my CV if they did not stand for the potential of a next project that might get funded, or opening doors that seem closed otherwise.

HR: Here here! I struggle with the academic and art world cultures of outputs and CV-building, which have so little to do with what really draws me to the work that I want to do.

CEV: Agreed. I want to do interesting work not use that work to leverage more grant funding and institutional support for my next project. I want to make that next project regardless! One of the aims of my project MOTH (which I introduced earlier in the text) is to highlight the community, history, and work of trans artists that I find myself among/in lineage with. I think with every project I become braver.

JP: Agreed wholeheartedly. I'm much more interested in process over output – it feels quite unnatural to build art discourses around pressure on outcome all the time – when creating is situated within process itself. This thought of being disruptive vs depending on recognition reminds me of Sara Ahmed's research around complaint once again, and how she discusses that we stand to lose the same when we complain as when we don't... health, financial stability, future employment etc. I certainly have resisted being disruptive at points because I've quite simply been too unwell, too burnt out and had too much to lose in terms of making ends meet. I think in part that's why I'm grateful for spaces of anonymous complaint such as *industria* (mentioned earlier on) and hope for more of these spaces.

How much more time do we have? How much longer should we wait? How much longer do we need?

(who is we?) –again

Instituting Otherwise

How deep and how far can we go in and with institutions?

When can/should we take institutions seriously?

CEV: Excellent question. I made a whole project that parodies the practice of institutions (MOTHA). It pokes fun at the absurdity of institutional power and also highlights and celebrates transgender artists and culture. Institutional power is serious, but I think humour, poking fun at it, could be one way to diffuse that power. Or at least to highlight the aspects of institutions and its unjust practices, that we take for granted as business as usual.

What are the formats that would take us further in an institutional critique?

SyS: Maybe we should focus rather on infrastructural critique? Changing the infrastructures, disrupting them and like this accepting the institution by working in/with it? Jamila has also mentioned it above already and it appears again and again in other places, as in the next question, for example.

I am thinking here of an exhibition at the nGbK in Berlin in 2016 - [No Play – Feminist Training Camp](#). Their curatorial introduction reads as follows: “

No play proposes a structure, a temporal, spatial and social architecture that turns the exhibition space of nGbK into a resource, a site of activity and exchange in the shape of a Feminist Training Camp.” This curatorial project conceived and defined the exhibition format in an alternative way. The curatorial group consisting of five people questioned and partly subverted the singular and genial figure of the curator by sharing this powerful position with the audience and their communities, and by producing the exhibition in and through interaction with them. They questioned the linear temporality of the exhibition and thus created physical and temporal spaces in between. These processual and radically participatory approaches understand the exhibition as a stage of collective articulation and encounter and for an emancipatory agenda that goes beyond the institution itself. They created an emotional space, an affective space, a discursive space, a fluid space of change and flux, and a space of emerging knowledge. Marina Vishmidt states that critique unfolds in a productive register: „Platforms can be built, and they can be negative, affirmative, or simply indifferent to the pressing questions that pose themselves in and through the field of art. (Vishmidt, Marina. 2017. [Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuta Towards Infrastructural Critique](#). In: Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, eds. [Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989](#). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 265-269)

I think that formats that create those platforms that are maybe not negative but affirmative or simply indifferent to the field of art – or, all of that together can help to define a queer feminist infrastructure of the curatorial that creates spaces that move in-between art, community and knowledge production - and play(fulness).

Which infrastructures and organizational forms do we want?

CEV: My friend and esteemed artist Tourmaline brought my attention to this set of questions developed by the [Freedom School](#) that might be useful. These were organised but informal,

itinerant schools that came about during the Freedom Summer in the 1960s in the American South that worked to counter the inferior education southern Black children were receiving in the intensely segregated Jim Crow era. These particular questions that I think might be useful to add here are from their section the “Citizenship Curriculum:”

1. What does the majority culture have that we want?
2. What does the majority culture have that we don't want?
3. What do we have that we want to keep?

They're broad, and potentially reformist, but useful to think about what structures and forms are useful or counter to our visions.

What structures do we need?

JP: Building upon Taey's structures and resources to avoid burnout (above) which I also think greatly applies here:

- Mutual support/sharing of responsibilities and roles (no hierarchies): this builds on Taey's value-sharing friendship, and I have also found that having a collective approach where you can share in the roles and lean on each other is really helpful. When one person is burnt out, maybe another can step in, and this also aligns with flexibilities around caring responsibilities, disability, ill health etc. This has been happening in small ways at uni for me, where my co-lecturers have held space for me when I've been signed off sick, but I'm also able to renegotiate timings and step in when they have their own time conflicts and need support.
- Transparency around people's experiences of working environments/space for complaint: Sara Ahmed has, of course, written extensively on this. One of the difficulties I've found is that there is often no space for public complaint or critique of institutions – it is so often shut down or the risk is too great. So I've found myself withdrawing my labour due to inconsistencies, barriers, pressures and oppression that have led to burn out only to discover many others had been down a similar path. I want to know how we can protect each other from entering into hostile environments which inherently lead to burn out? It is also so hard to build resistance and push against somewhere in a public forum when you are running on empty and have no fight left in you.
- Inherent flexibility and centring of access needs: some of this thinking has been done by the artists Leah Clements, Alice Hattrick and Lizzy Rose around [access riders](#) (a document which is shared to communicate a person's access needs at the beginning of a working relationship). If we begin our working relationships from a place of finding out people's access needs, other responsibilities, preferred ways of working, we can hopefully build greater transparency around what we're capable of and build clearer boundaries. This also needs a continual implementation of flexibility, through open dialogue, check-ins etc.
- Space for [access intimacy as defined by Mia Mingus](#): 'Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else “gets” your access needs, the kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met. It is not

dependent on someone having a political understanding of disability, ableism or access. Some of the people I have experienced the deepest access intimacy with (especially able-bodied people) have had no education or exposure to a political understanding of disability.'

- Working on "crip time" and through a lens of slowness (as mentioned above): both inherent flexibility and adaptability around time (Kafer), as well as slowness as a modality to pay attention, hold attentiveness (Camp).
• Paid rest time: to actually give us the space to recover from projects!

VH: YES! Thank you!! Basic income for all to rest and resist and create— oh dear.

SyS: Yay! Definitely - So important! I think it's great how concrete our claims are.

JP: Yes, to basic income! These lists also make me think of The White Pube's brilliant [Ideas for a New Art World](#). And their wonderful billboards that started it:

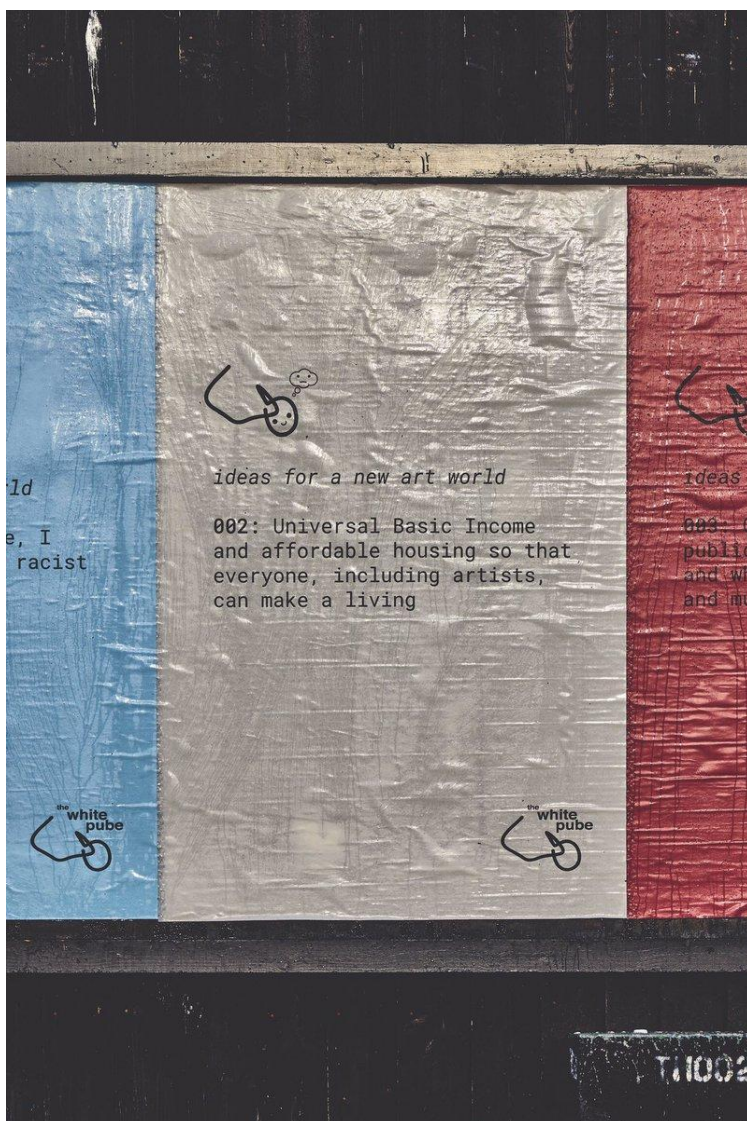


Image Source: <https://twitter.com/thewhitepube/status/1354358747154567170?lang=fa>

How much visibility do we need?

How can we build new structures without reproducing the same things and mistakes?

JP: Through listening, looking to and being aware of histories and what has come before, ecosystems that have worked that we can learn from. I think of a term Jemma Desai once told me “productive repetition”, which I think could be articulated as acknowledging that which has come before and the links and echoes between them in service of avoiding the pressure of always defining new structures as “novel” or the first of their kind.

Also building responsiveness, criticality, and flexibility into structures. Having the space to change things when they aren’t working. Accountability and being able to admit when we’ve got something wrong and change it. Rigidity and fixed structures will never work because they can’t be responsive to the ever-evolving needs of living.

Accountability as Mia Mingus defines it – as occurring in four stages – self-reflection, apology, repair, changed behaviour.

FOUR PARTS TO
ACCOUNTABILITY

SELF REFLECTION	APOLOGY
REPAIR	CHANGED BEHAVIOR

Three small potted plants icons.

“True accountability is not only apologizing, understanding the impact your actions have caused on yourself and others, making amends or reparations to the harmed parties; but most importantly, true accountability is changing your behavior so that the harm, violence, abuse does not happen again.”

MIA MINGUS

For more, visit <http://bit.ly/BAC2020>

[Image designed by Danbee Kim that reads, “Four Parts to Accountability: self reflection, apology, repair, changed behavior.” Each part is in a separate red box, with a drawing of three small potted plants underneath. A quote by Mia Mingus at the bottom reads, “True accountability is not only apologizing, understanding the impacts your actions have caused on yourself and others, making amends or reparations to the harmed parties; but most importantly, true accountability is changing your behavior so that the harm, violence, abuse does not happen again.” There is a small box at the bottom that reads, “For more, visit <http://bit.ly/BAC2020>”]

DJ: Thank you Jamila that was very inspiring! Next month I will undertake a new role, as the curator of a non-profit institution dedicated to the East and Southeast Asian communities in the UK. The institution was previously [boycotted](#) due to its failure to be accountable to its audience and communities. So as the first curator for its relaunching, I have been thinking and will continuously think a lot about institutional accountability. As to the four stages you mentioned, Jamila, it is so important that this comes before apology as without self-reflection, the apology cannot be held to account.

VH: Oh, congratulations, Dot! What a chance for the institution and quite a challenge to take this on. I wish you the best of luck and a good support structure within and outside the institution. I hope the team is willing to be transparent, accountable, and wanting to heal. Take good care of yourself!

DJ: Thank you Vera!! It feels challenging but necessary at once, and I actually feel more ready than ever after this long and sincere exchange with you all.

JP: Sending positive thoughts for the new role Dot – I think starting with self-reflection sounds like a great way in. I hope you'll find the space to protect your energies too and take the time for rest and recuperation <3

DJ: Thank you Jamila! The same to you <3

What are the demands on or visions of an institution or infrastructure that is non-violent, caring and sustainable?

JP: In thinking through this I often return to [la sala](#), a feminist collective space for biodiversity, sustainability and care based in Nottingham. Sharing from their code of practice here:

'A working code of practice for la Sala:

- *We commit to being sustainable, to the planet and also to our bodies*
- *Our internal workings are as important as our public programmes*
- *We consider care work as work*
- *We will always be transparent about budgets*
- *We value slowness over production, and interdependence over market logic*
- *Our approach to feminism is also ecological and intersectional*
- *We work around the kitchen table*
- *We will always be open to non-monetary forms of exchange and of value*
- *We are committed to joy, pleasure and non stressful environments*
- *We will always be responsive, and will be formed by those who become part of la Sala*
- *La Sala is always in reference to others, and we thank those who have laid the groundwork'*

TI: Wow. I love this code of practice so much; this is aligned with some of your vision on new structures, combining with my reflection on collective work; emphasis on transparency, joyful relationships, honouring others' groundwork etc. But I am also wondering how this can actually work within the institutions, internal and external ones? I find there are now many social practices, young people's engagement, audience-facing jobs for artists in the UK, often over several months, or a whole year, and the 'artist fee' offered is so stretched in the budget. They are barely covering research and development time, but you have to enter into the competition to get it and have to be thankful if you get that position. When we provide workshops, talks, presentations, public engagement as artists' service work, it is often a short-term relationship, and hard to spell out nuanced access needs, and factor emotional labour and care work time into the budget. The reality of creative work (artistic and curatorial) is precarious, and difficult to afford.

JP: Yes, absolutely agree with this, Taey, it's a real difficulty. And reminds me of the idea that art spaces have been tasked with filling the gap for cuts to public services under the Tory government (youth clubs, healthcare etc). I'm forgetting who has written on this, although I think Morgan Quaintance and The White Pube may have both previously...

What connects the curatorial with current discourses around care?

HR: Care in curatorial contexts is in danger of becoming a buzzword, a rhetorical gesture subject to appropriation. Although I've written about the need for care, for arts workers, artists, and in more-than-human realms, it's a slippery concept that can be hard to define. I was thinking about this question today when I was doing tutorials with MFA Curating students, who are preparing their end-of-year coursework. For the first time in the decade that I've taught there, 'care' was a guiding principle or aspiration in their curatorial projects, encompassing everything from sharing art and text references around the gender and race pain gap, to working with a nursery to commission artists to build a den and paint a mural, to hosting consciousness-raising sessions with fellow students from East and Southeast Asia. There is a shift in these young people's practices (the average age is 23) from exhibiting artworks in galleries to developing more intimate, modest, long term collaborative structures of support. There's some romanticism here, no doubt, and some naivete. One student described the show and critique group that she has devised around gendered violence as 'completely non-hierarchical.' I had to point out that it was she who selected the submissions, and she who would choose the exhibited work. But the need they express for more caring environments - based on reciprocity and collaboration, listening, and witnessing, vulnerability and flexibility - is real.

VH: I agree. Sooner or later, the art world always takes up emancipatory, activist themes. Only after the privileged have syphoned off their social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital does the actual process work begin, which then (can) have a positive effect on those in need of care (that we are all in need of some ways, sooner or later in life). Most of the privileged, however, then already move on to the next topic. Despite the fact that I see these processes in a very critical way, I can also observe that nevertheless (small) things change. Showing vulnerability is more possible than before, that's something. Speaking about needs is sort of doable (even though not much action happens after). The art community is

informally working out certain quality standards, e.g. discrimination in artworks is fortunately much less possible without public outcry, etc. More and more cultural workers also dare to say no - to unfair conditions, to bad pay, etc. What I also notice, especially in academia and the field of curating: now when some of the previously highly functional 'top performers' suffer from Long COVID and start addressing this (now personal) issue in their work and programming, suddenly there is a lot of understanding (for them) and acceptance, even change. They're working with the theory and demands of the crip movement, which has been calling for change for decades, if not centuries, but hardly anyone has been listening. That's incredibly frustrating to watch. The same goes for all other marginalised issues. The need is and always has been real and it's great that younger people start re-addressing these topics and also start building networks of care! (Do I sound old?)

I wonder when the need for a different economic and social system becomes unbearably pressing and what the institutionally bound art and academic people do then – when those topics are not trending anymore, are not funded anymore, and when things needed for system change don't fit into CVs and galleries.

DJ: Yes certainly. Curatorial practice as public making brings bodies into the public space, including the bodies of the curators. And I think this embodiedness connects curatorial practice with discourses around care. Like Helena said, I too feel that the word *care* is so abused at the moment. And a big reason for that, I think, is because of a lack of it. The dense rhetorical discussion around care has the risk of overshadowing the actual need to act.

JP: I very much agree with Helena's thoughts here that care has become a buzzword. It is also often used to signal a progressive politics in an institution which doesn't actually exist (as I brought up earlier). For me, as Vera alludes to, part of the hollowness of this term care is that it is oft divorced from the context of disability and care work in which material care is continually enacted. If I may, I'd like to defer to words I wrote at the end of last year for Riposte magazine:

Care is a word that has been prevalent in arts and culture over recent years. In 2019, I played into the rise of the new buzzword via talks and communal lunches titled "Does anyone really care?" and "Whose taking care of artists?" Simultaneously, my health was deteriorating after long-term mental health issues spiralled into a severe panic disorder. Temporarily, I managed to cling to the edges of an independent life, but at the start of 2020, after becoming increasingly bed-bound and agoraphobic, I was forced to move back into my childhood home.

Over the next year, my mum would become my carer, reinforcing the relationship we'd held at the start of my life. Care stopped being a buzzword and became intimately and inextricably bound with my daily life.

Getting better is such an overplayed trope where illness and disability are concerned. Are you feeling better? Get well soon. But for many of us, the language of better simply does not fit with our experience of sickness. When we talk about care, it is routinely divorced from the oft-invisible, unpaid labour (largely) femme people

undertake as mothers, carers and partners, as well as the intimate link between care work and disability.

To truly take care, we need to move away from care as an abstract term by firmly re-grounding the reality that we are all always one step away from disability, ill health, or having to take on care work ourselves. Being cared for renegotiates your connection to the world. There is an incomparable interdependence and trust to care work. If care work were properly valued in our society, it would reshape our relationships with one another and undermine perceptions of disability and illness as an endpoint or something to get better from. Only then could we truly begin to take care.

VH: I went to an experimental Fine Arts Master's program in the Netherlands around health, healing and sickness for two years. Some parts were really great, but incredibly enough, neither feminist theory around reproduction or care work were on the curriculum nor crip theory (other than the anti-psychiatry movement). The approach felt very neoliberal, having art students train for a socially engaged art practice that would fix the government austerity cuts at that time. We went to a mental institution, to a hospice, a hospital, a botanic garden, the zoo and so on, being encouraged to engage with the environment and the people working or living there and make work based on that or even for or with them. I tried and learned a lot but more about what I think is not working and what does not feel like care. I don't think that art can and should be done like that.

To what extent is care and the discourses around care related to institutional critique?

Learning from Queer Activism & Queer Theory: What role could allyship or complicity and kinship play in helping to think institutions and collaboration differently?

How do we need to think and institute differently or otherwise to achieve the processes and "outcomes" we want?

VH: First quick thoughts: In what we have written so far, I hear the yearning and need for friendship. I fully agree with having an atmosphere of mutuality, joy, and respect. So, how can we become, let's say, acquainted with each other? For me I don't need to call it "friendship." I need to have some sort of common ground (our humanness maybe as a start?) and some basic understanding of each of our de-/privileges in relation to each other, around conflict solving, 'expectation management' and an agreement on ways of communication. I made work with friends and that at times stretched the friendship and I made work with strangers, and we became friends. I don't need to *like* someone to be able to live or work with someone, even though I'd love to like that person (all of this is me thinking out loud here quickly—maybe delete later). So, what is that common ground we both start from and want to invest in?

Other factors: time / stability / feelings of being valued and cared for / getting a chance to care for (when do we voluntarily want to care for someone, something)?

SyS: I hear you, but I am also wondering if friendship might not be the term we can agree on, then, or if we have different definitions of it. I rather mean rather working with people I feel safe with and mutually feel the need and the capacity to create a safe or safer

environment for. I need to think about this again, though. At the same time, a sentence came into my mind that was somehow floating around at documenta fifteen and that I thought about for a long time with my close friend and artist Juli Schmidt: Make friends not art. So before we concentrate on the art, or on making/curating exhibitions and on the work in general, the focus here is on togetherness. The joy, the fun, the exchange, the closeness, the emotions, the common being as essence. These are the moments from which something emerges. Without these, art cannot come into being. It's a way beyond self-referentiality and far away from the opportunism of the market and the institutions - and maybe like this is already a small revolt.

HR: I too share this yearning for friendship and connection, the vulnerability to join with others to imagine and create otherwise. Someone who has reflected eloquently on friendship as a guiding force in cultural organising is the artist, Celine Condorelli. She proposes the "emancipatory dimension to choosing one's allies, committing to issues and deciding to take them on," which entails a congruence between friendship and solidarity: "how friendship leads to politics" (Celine Condorelli, *Too Close to See: Notes on Friendship*, 2013, pp71). She writes about "befriending issues, people, contexts."

Nonetheless, given that friendship has a tendency to connect us to people from similar social and educational backgrounds, I also want to trouble the category of friendship. As the queer feminist sociologist Sasha Roseneil wrote back in 2006, "If we are to develop a politics that is not just concerned with those within the charmed circle of love, affection, and care, we have to consider our collective obligations to the lonely, the unloved, and the uncared for." Sasha Roseneil, 'Foregrounding Friendship: Feminist Pasts, Feminist Futures,' in Kathy Davis, Mary Evans, Judith Lorber (eds) *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*, Sage, 2006.

This idea of extending friendship beyond the inner circle is such an important question for queer feminist curating. It also has implications for how we deal with differences and dischord, which are part of almost all collective efforts. Can we tolerate differences amongst friends? Or are other words like 'allyie' or 'supporter' more accurate?

In a modest, yet sustained, way, friendship is an underlying motivation for the Feminist Duration Reading Group. The group acts as a support structure for feminist texts, artworks, and collective efforts that correspond to Roseneil's description of being outside the charmed circle of love, affection, and care, due to the institutional neglect they've received. The FDRG's start was with Italian feminisms, from which we have learned a huge amount about feminist collective processes and relationships of trust and reciprocal support, but which continue to be under-known/recognized, under-translated and under-valued in Anglophone circles. Most books we started reading from together weren't available in any London libraries. When we tracked down secondhand copies they were almost always deaccessioned library books, which seemed like such a tangible demonstration of their unloved status.

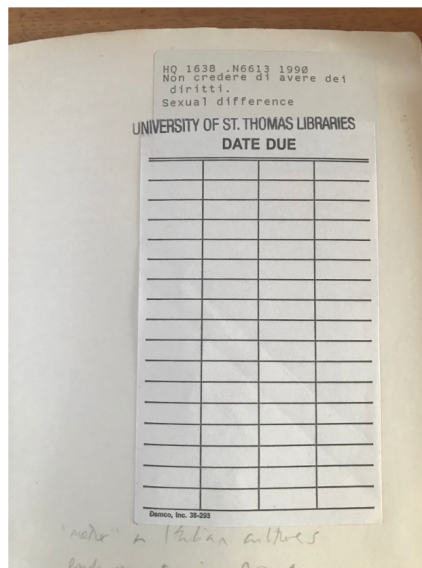
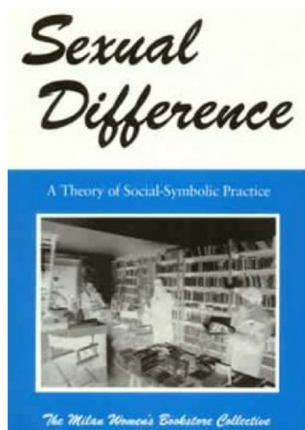


image: Cover and inside page of deaccessioned library copy of *Sexual Diference: A Theory of Social Symbolic Practice*, by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (Indiana University Press, 1986), personal collection of Helena Reckitt

VH: Thank you for the insights, Helena! Some thoughts come to mind: one is that I was thinking back to my Undercommons comment about the unconditional open doors (then also vs. the safer and the brave spaces) here elsewhere. Have you ever discussed that one somewhere? Maybe we could look at that again? Then: What is the common ground or the *undercommon* ground 'we' build on? Might it be every one's experiences of being othered, of being excluded? And: I'd love to know what you learned from the "feminist collective processes and relationships of trust and reciprocal support" and if that would be easy to share in some words. And lastly, how did you transition that knowledge from reading into action?

HR: The FDRG has returned regularly to the practice of affidamento, or entrustment, which was developed by the Milan Women's Bookshop collective, and which also drew from the insights into co-learning and reciprocal narration that emerged from the 150 Hours feminist programme run by the leading Italian feminist Lea Melandri. Affidamento encourages members of a collective project to see themselves as part of a relational structure, in which individuals draw from, and are recognised for, their particular contributions, life experiences, and subjectivities, rather than suppressing those differences in the name of consensus. It is a practice of relational politics, in which "one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference - in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between hers and the world." (Teresa de Lauretis, introduction to *Don't Believe You Have Any Rights*, 8-9).

Within the FDRG this has helped to create an environment in which people share their curiosities about under-known feminisms with the group. The starting point for this curiosity is often ignorance, rather than pre-existing knowledge. Members of the FDRG Working

Group and Support Group put their energies into supporting the desires of one another, following their research interests, co-hosting and facilitating events, as well as contributing to group fundraising efforts. This reflexive approach also characterises how we respond to proposals for sessions, or to curators and artists who want to work with us. We consider all proposals, and - if there's energy and desire to pursue them in the group - we follow the Rr&Dd trajectory that unfolds. Participants often become co-producers, whether through suggesting or hosting sessions, sharing their thoughts on cultural texts, or contributing to the various group texts and podcasts we have developed.

During sessions, by reading out loud together, and focusing on what we encounter amongst ourselves in the moment, we become familiar with one another at the same time as we learn about areas of thought and practice outside of our existing knowledge. Fostering divergent views and approaches leads to a programme that is more polyvocal, in theme and approach, than it would be if the programme were directed by one individual. We try to take as much care with the quality of the exchange as we do with *what* we explore together.

The transition from reading into action is not a one-directional process. Part of what happens is that the shifting members of the group - both those who organise and support events, and others who attend - become familiar with key tenets of feminism, such as *affidamento* and Human Strike, which I mention above. These references become shared resources which strengthen our relationships, providing a support structure that can strengthen our confidence, our curiosity, and our sense of working with others, instead of the atomised and competitive ways that the art and academic systems encourage. We often collaborate and share resources, with other groups, such as Emilia-Amalia Feminist Working Group in Toronto, and are starting a new collaboration with Something Other, in London.

Working with the group has led me to embrace forms of mentorship and resource sharing, deepening my appreciation for the role that other queer feminists have played in my life - as friends, coworkers, and teachers,; be that in person or through their creative, critical and activist efforts. Where 'reading' ends and 'action' begins is not always so clear-cut or binary.

DJ: I want to respond to Vera's question above: 'What is the common ground or the *undercommon* ground 'we' build on? Might it be each one's experiences of being othered, of being excluded?' Being a Chinese/BAME curator means I often get questions like; how do I avoid essentializing artists. And I think I never assume that a common ground is granted. Often the case is that 'we' all come together on this uncommon ground, and I think this is important to acknowledge because it shifts the discourse and the curatorial gestures. I don't think nationality is the element that binds people, it is often the experience of displacement in which I find solidarity with the other. Being part of FDRG has been an extremely inspiring and rewarding experience for commoning. Each time, the participants are mostly strangers who are brought together through a shared interest in a text, and it is through reading that we find more sharedness and build trust. I really think a common ground as a static place does not exist. It is rather commoning (as an act) that we can proceed with.

Commons/Commoning

How does curating create community?

DJ: I have been reading, and inspired by, Eloise Sweetman's book *Curatorial Feelings* and I want to quote her here:

"Art pushes me into contact with something/one I don't know. I must be gentle and hold it and try not to giggle and diffuse the power that we share. We hold each other but also lightly hold a moment of time, a breath, a tautness, a care."

How does curating create collective interdependencies?

We are seeing an appreciation of collectives and a growing interest in commons / commoning: How can we promote and celebrate collectives when resources are designed for individuals? (5 people have to share the fee by 5, etc.).

Do collectives simply replace individuals, or do they actually challenge the idea of a single authorship and ways of working (inter)dependently?

Don't we always fail at and due to the question of representation?

Can we think queer curatorial practice without tying it to politics of representation?

What would/could be seen as a real commoning process within the curatorial field?

VH: I have some preliminary questions here:

How does the understanding of the Commons relate to that of the *Undercommons* (Moten & Harney)? And how does the Commons relate to *safer spaces*? Can a Commons ever be a safer space? Should we think from a safer space outwards towards a Commons? Would that become a *brave space* then? How can we do *commoning* that does not need to claim being "inclusive", but rather is already 'there' for everyone? Is that ever possible? (A brave space being a space where certain principles are established like "controversy with civility," "owning intentions and impacts," "challenge by choice," "respect" and "no attacks" (a short description [here](#), a longer one [here](#) – it's a new concept for me too. I have no idea if that stems from people with privileges or if that is also widely accepted amongst marginalised people. But speaking from an experience of marginalization, I do have my doubts – but also the wish to find ways to be together in shared spaces). And– there is some theory around *Queer Commons* (Butt & Millner-Larsen) or *Brown Commons* (Muñoz)...Have anyone of you looked into any of these questions or texts?

A thing I chew on is this part in *The Undercommons*:

The critical academic questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. But in the undercommons it is 'no questions asked.' It is unconditional – the door swings open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction. (Moten, F. & Harney, S., The Undercommons – Fugitive Planning & Black Study, Autonomedia, 2013, p. 38)

Marquis Bey elaborates on this further, thinking about ‘what is to be done’:

And my grandmother might quip: ‘What kind of foolishness is this?! [laughter] But foolishness it is not, precisely because the only ethical call that could possibly bring about the radical, revolutionary overturning we seek is one that does not discriminate nor develop criteria for inclusion and consequently exclusion. If the door swings open without a bouncer checking names, it means that who shows up will be let in, unconditionally, without condition, which is to say, giving over to an ethical demand to be monstrously inclusive, as we might learn in the Black Radical Tradition, Black Feminisms and Trans Activism. Yes, the law might show up, talking about a noise complaint or worse and all too close to contemporary headlines, our enemy might show up and sit with us as we praise before gunning us down. But with this, too, the salvific figure might show up, or better yet, the fugitive might show up asking us to provide her refuge and a safe harbour. And we must, and this is what is to be done, we must let her in, feed her, because in the figure of the fugitive inhered the possibility of the fugitive being the one we didn’t know we were doing all this insurgent conspiratorial work for. (...) Who is and who is not on our minds and most fundamentally for whom we wish to see the world change? The doing we seek is to be committed to making a kind of world for the people we do not know need the world to be drastically different or even departing from a kind of world in as much as worldness might be predicated in the logics of normative regimes limiting our horizons. It is imperative then to commit to the work without presuming to know who the work is for, only committing to the work because it might allow for those we did not know existed to finally live.’ (Marquis Bey in: [Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, 2019](#), from around 9:25 to 12:00)

To be continued...

What is missing?

SyS: And who is missing?

DJ: Indeed, Sylvia!

Are we asking the right questions?

What would the right questions be?

What do we want to know and answer?

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