

Care from the Underground

2021 JANUARY BY ÀNGELS MIRALDA TENA

Curator and writer Àngels Miralda Tena led a workshop as part of the alternative education programme in 2019. More details [here](#). In this text, Àngels looks at care, commitment and solidarity in relation to cultural institutions.

What measures, protocols or statements should naturally form part of cultural institutions' core values? Fashions and trends in curating and contemporary art often follow urgent necessities for reform only to become aestheticised and de-politicised by overuse while ultimately failing to be implemented. Aestheticising forms is a tool for dismantling the revolutionary potential of militancy within artist communities by placating demands with superficial victories of rhetoric rather than substantial institutional change.

Today, concerns around inclusion, diversity and holding onto a plurality of perspectives are continuously debated. Additionally, concepts of care, solidarity and support have become standard in exhibition texts and themes for biennials. However, institutions that purportedly promote such debates and concepts are themselves resistant to or remain reticent about structural change because, as a rule, institutions are themselves built on the concept of self-preservation. In the case of equality and safety for women, institutions have only slowly included feminism as a core concept and stance following several decades of struggle for equal representation and visibility. However, such institutions are still a mirror for the world everyone inhabits—one of patriarchal laws that seek to prevent the institution itself and activist groups from addressing and speaking about the lived realities within the cultural sector. In the following text, I wish not only to denounce the conservative structures of institutions that still often refuse to offer even a minimum of equal representation, but also the lack or slow implementation of infrastructures of safety from and resistance to structural abuse. This

is only compounded by a cultural industry that often draws on exploitative contracts for freelance or temporary workers. We must begin by addressing institutional drives to aestheticise, de-politicise and mute political urgencies.

‘Women were also brought to court and fined for “scolding,” while priests in their sermons thundered against their tongues. Wives especially were expected to be quiet, “obey their husband without question” and “stand in awe of them.” ... Then, in 1547, “a proclamation was issued forbidding women to meet together to babble and talk” and ordering husbands to “keep their wives in their houses.” Female friendships were one of the targets of the witch hunts, as in the course of the trials accused women were forced under torture to denounce each other, friends turning in friends, daughters turning in their mothers.’

– Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women*, 2018¹

In Federici’s account of how women’s solidarity became demonized as an illicit activity met by punishment or death, she provides historical grounds for the persistent lived reality of women. Today, in a society that considers itself progressive, women’s ‘babbling’ rumours and underground whispers remain illegal. For instance, laws against slander in Germany and the Netherlands prohibit the public distribution or posting of ‘insulting’ content and provides a sure escape for any accused.² A judicial arsenal exists to break up any self-organised group premised around the simple act of collecting and sharing information on the grounds that women speaking is tantamount to ‘libel’ or ‘defamation.’ This legally enshrined oppression of women’s voices and solidarity is itself almost impossible to resist or address because it would depend on collecting and sharing information.

Discussions of solidarity and care in institutional contexts generally refer to the aesthetic form of bodily comfort and the creation of safety. These discussions fall into neoliberal guidelines of self-help and mindfulness rather than concepts of collective care. This

institutional failure of the imagination means that the brutality of our lived environment is not addressed. Solidarity, care and support is a game full of dangers and necessary sacrifices. When we speak of solidarity and care we need to acknowledge that our safety is the institution's danger and that acts of care will always be described as 'violence' by the patriarchal orders which they threaten. Referring back to Federici's exposition of the demonization of women who speak, we can say that the speaking aloud of information which is legally meant to be suppressed is tantamount to language described as of a demonic nature such as the hex, curse or incantation.

In a climate where feminism and its various branches (such as eco-feminism or trans-feminism) have become institutionally normalised as a political value, we run into the problem of an essentialist and tokenistic idea of identity-politics replacing political determination. In museum programming, exhibitions which recover the work of women artists in the 20th century have become common-place, but at the same time they have lost their initial political edge. What began as a militant and political affront to patriarchal art history has become a routine devoid of political motivation. Fulfilling quotas of women artists doesn't necessarily mean implementing change. In the context of reflecting on current issues and representations of artists of colour, Seph Rodney recently argued that it may even be part of a strategy to keep existing power structures in place or simply arbitrary.³ A real exponent of care and solidarity can only be performed at deep institutional levels where accountability and responsibility are addressed in a meaningful political way that seeks confrontation rather than avoid awkwardness.

In 2017 I visited a retrospective exhibition of Rosemarie Castoro at the MACBA in Barcelona.⁴ Castoro was one of the women artists developing work in the New York City scene of the late 20th century who suffered from the 'wife of artist' syndrome, overshadowed by her famous husband Carl Andre. At the same time as the opening of

Castoro's exhibition feminist groups were organising around the world to protest Andre's exhibitions over the disputed death of his first wife Ana Mendieta.⁵ Castoro married Andre after the episode of potential femicide and took a strong position against feminism in defence of her husband. In the vitrines of the MACBA exhibition diary entries and letters written by Castoro railed against feminist colleagues, calling the political position 'segregation' and defending her marriage. Although her own solo exhibition at this world-renowned institution was the outcome of feminist practices in art history, did she deserve the benefit of a practice she was politically against?

In the exhibition, although her political position was not hidden, neither was it highlighted and it remained just a footnote in the annals of her career. I could not help but read this removal of politics and the omission of a clear outline of social circles and how they interacted with each other as anything other than a de-politicisation of feminist art history. A tokenistic approach to representation via essentialism uses the structure of feminist exhibition practices but without its militancy, a dressing of the work without delving into personal politics. It is important to remember that making a solo exhibition of Rosemarie Castoro gives a very different political message than programming one by Judy Chicago, Zilia Sánchez or Senga Nengudi—women artists of the New York art scene who doubly suffered from patriarchal and racist systems and actively fought against them rather than submit to their hierarchies of oppression.

In the case of Rosemarie Castoro, really doing the work of caring for fellow-women means acknowledging the fact that Castoro's position was born out of oppression. As a woman artist in the shadow of a violent man, she suffered from the patriarchal reality in which she lived.⁶ Castoro's position is one that could be interpreted as self-preservation, survival next to derived from manipulation, abuse and gaslighting by an artist with an established track-record of degradation and abuse against women; in such a situation, she was led to denounce the very people who cared for her. Would it not have been useful to contextualise this history rather than bury it and

continue the failure of addressing a history of post-modern art that was defined through violence, aggression and discrimination?

On Sunday the 4th of October 2020, I read several passages aloud on De Appel's livestream of the new publication, *Audre Lorde: Dream of Europe* (2020).⁷ The idea of 'care' that is so popular today stems in part from Lorde's political and personal philosophy of *militant combat*. The practice engages in Lorde's philosophy of acknowledging plurality and reading the words written by a black, queer, feminist is one way to embody the politics of Audre Lorde whose intransigent intersectionalism is based on an acceptance of difference, the richness of plurality and an acknowledgement of privilege. Lorde's philosophy on the acknowledgement of difference was not a segregational one but a militant activism to create space for unheard voices against the conservative notion of assimilation.

Formulations of care are deeply rooted in feminist and anti-racist struggle because women, and especially women of colour, have historically occupied the role of carers. Care for the elderly and care for children is a domestic task relegated to the unpaid female workforce as defined in the early work of Federici.⁸ Initial texts on care were outlined by Nel Noddings in a seminal but often criticised work *Caring* (1984) as a network of societal well-being based on relational identities.⁹ From this, Lorde's appropriation of care from outward-facing societal impact to inner-facing reworking is understood as a breaking of 'the master's tools.'¹⁰ Appropriation is therefore turned around and used to disrupt patriarchal society and break its cycle of oppression.

When speaking of care, it is necessary to highlight the criticism and development of this concept by black feminism and queer feminism in order understand that first, care is a necessity brought about by constant physical brutality perpetrated most harshly against POC and non-conforming female bodies and second, that feminism is not a single cohesive unit but one full of diversity and differences in experience. Therefore, care is neither a common experience nor a

common necessity, but a malleable term with many meanings and uses. Considering the long centuries when care-jobs were forced on women (especially POC and working-class) we cannot use it as an intrinsic good, but must recognise the role of care in and as oppression. The forcible work of care towards others is here weaponised as solidarity against regimes of socially-imposed violence.

‘Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.’ – Audre Lorde

Shortly after the Me Too movement in 2017, a Facebook group opened that circulated widely among cultural practitioners in Spain called *La Caja de Pandora* (Pandora’s Box). The group was centred around the court case of Spanish artist and choreographer Carmen Tomé’s allegations against curator Javier Duero for using his position as the director of a residency to watch as she changed her clothes in the laundry room before entering the room and attempting an aggression.¹¹ The group served first as a support network and later used to compile more accusations against Duero from various women who had experienced similar scenarios. Finally, with hundreds of testimonies, the group began to recount the extent of physical, psychological and emotional patriarchal violence that exists within the Spanish art world and how such violence had become normalised and silenced. This group constituted a ground-breaking moment, what in Spanish can be referred to as an *acontecimiento*, translated in the terms of continental philosophy as ‘the event.’ This breaking moment began not because of feminist discourse in the art world, but out of a lack of it and not because of the tolerance of the art system but in spite of its hyper-conservative structure.

This group embodied Silvia Federici’s arsenal of whispers. It became a place where people could speak and expect support rather than instant rebuke. It rendered apparent the fear and consequent silence that exists for women who are constantly accused of lying, embellishing or speaking only for their own benefit. This societal-

scale form of gaslighting was, in this particular instance, combatted through communal listening, believing and responding; that is, through the aggregation of individual actions of care and sacrifice.

But like all groups with the aim of seriously discussing aggressions against women, it ended with the initial case. Other cases were deemed too delicate, too vulnerable to go through legal processes and the limitations of the group became clear. At the end of the day, *La Caja de Pandora* achieved its initial goal and its eventual disappearance is not the fault of the group but rather a structural problem of these initiatives disintegrating before they can create new goals. Speaking with activists in many different cities who have been associated with groups advocating for women's freedom to speak, similar results repeat across the board: too often there is the complete dissolution of a group which lacked the resources to compete with a fully-functioning repressive legal and police system that protects the mechanisms that implement female silence. Over the years, silence has become part of our identity. But whispers can be loud when there are many of them.

And if the group was pushed back down below, it lies now within the earthy humus, where decomposing bodies create the richness which feeds the world of air.

In 2019, an anonymous group called *Soup du Jour* filled headlines ahead of Berlin's Gallery Weekend as people read and reacted to their first open letters. Examining the list of galleries and artists presented at Berlin's premier event, the group highlighted that 75% of artists showing work were white men—not a representation of Berlin's progressive, diverse and plural population.¹² Another protest called 'Whitey on the Moon' sparked a media storm in the fall of 2019 when the group directed media attention to a group exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien that drew on ideas of Afrofuturism without inviting any black artists.¹³ The group staged successful protests in both cases and raised awareness of the reality behind Berlin's

progressive face and the conservative market structure (or outdated directors) that tighten discrimination rather than helping to combat it.

Soup du Jour has been a success in its various initiatives.

International media focused on continuing racist and patriarchal patterns in culture and intense discussion was sparked. Importantly, it produced consequences rather than sticking to commentary quiet bad opinions, it took the form of visible critique and it raised the stakes for institutional curators who have yet to announce a clear stance.

The group has recently developed a strategy to combat more persistent and difficult issues within the German artworld, collaborating with government agencies including the Federal Government Commissioner and the Citizen Centred Government in the Federal Chancellery.¹⁴ The survey produced in conjunction with these government agencies is a 100% anonymous platform that gathers accounts via official channels. The result will show the extent of abuse and harassment in the cultural world but also proves that anonymity of both victim and abuser is a prerequisite for legal data management and public diffusion of information. The legal structure requires keeping the names of abusers confidential, it requires the cradling and protection of those who perpetrate constant violence.

Care is militant combat, solidarity is a dangerous commitment, support is caring for others but it also might mean emotional draining the self. Care has become a popular word in culture because it is so necessary, but it needs to be defined because of its still-contested nature and problematics that are far from solved. The care I still see embodied in institutions is the aestheticised apolitical notion of 'Care'—a sort of false-care, an opportunistic care, one that uses the word without considering its implication and philosophical roots. It can be a term with great meaning, but also fall into meaningless overuse and become a non-militant and non-political care that creates crutches for the frail despot of tradition.

During this year of great uncertainties, political regression and general stoppage, a sea-change in artistic work has been taking place.

A new dematerialisation is occurring that changes the metaphysical implications of the work of art. The future of art after 2020 is not one of institutions, biennials and fairs. It is one where the artwork is a militant confrontation towards the structures that have ideologically constrained it. It is one where plural voices, collectives and open statements will take the place of monuments. Care, solidarity and support feature here in an important way, one that combats the self-centred tradition of the individualist artist, one that creates a community where competition had previously ruled. The idea of exhibitions will mutate in form into one of real-care, real-solidarity, real-support—and most importantly, one of militant combat.

¹ Silvia Federici, 'How the demonization of "gossip" is used to break womens' solidarity,' *In These Times*, 31 January 2019. (<http://bit.ly/3qondwf>)

² 'Media Laws Netherlands Database' (<http://legaldb.freemedia.at/legal-database/netherlands/#:-:text=Defamation%20remains%20a%20criminal%20offence.of%20making%20that%20of%20public.>)

³ Seph Rodney, 'How Woke are the Fall Shows at New York's Blue-chip Art Galleries?', *Hyperallergic*, 25 September 2020. (<https://hyperallergic.com/588549/fall-at-nyc-blue-chip-art-galleries/>)

⁴ Rosemarie Castoro: *Focus at Infinity*, curated by Tanya Barson, MACBA – Museu d'art contemporani de Barcelona, 9 November 2017 – 15 April 2018.

⁵ Carolina A. Miranda, 'Why protestors at MOCA's Carl Andre show won't let the art world forget about Ana Mendieta,' *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 2017. (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-ana-mendieta-carl-andre-moca-protest-20170406-htmlstory.html>)

⁶ Helen Holmes, "Actress Ellen Barkin Accuses Artist Carl Andre of Assault in a Series of Tweets," *Observer*, 21 January 2020. (<https://observer.com/2020/01/ellen-barkin-accuses-carl-andre-assault/>)

⁷ Audre Lorde, *Dream of Europe: Selected Seminars and Interviews: 1984-1992*, Kenning Editions, 2020. The reading group is performed weekly on De Appel's live stream: <https://new.deappel.nl/nl/pages/197-droom-over-europa>

⁸ Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 1974.

(<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/femlit/04-federici.pdf>)

⁹ Nel Noddings, *Caring: a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 1984.

¹⁰ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House", 1984.

(https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf)

¹¹ Carmen Morán Breña, "El MeToo Español se llama la Caja de Pandora," *El País* 25 January 2018.

(https://elpais.com/cultura/2018/01/24/actualidad/1516819549_185849.html)

¹² Arsalan Mohammed, "Too White and Male? Not for Long," *The Art Newspaper*, 30 April 2019.

(<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/berlin-gallery-weekend>)

¹³ Will Fredo Furtado, "An Afrofuturism Show With No Black Artists: What Went Wrong at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien?" *Frieze Magazine*, 8 August 2019. (<https://www.frieze.com/article/afrofuturism-show-no-black-artists-what-went-wrong-berlins-kunstlerhaus-bethanien>)

¹⁴ Soup du Jour (<https://www.facebook.com/SdJcollective/posts/344613716878738>)