

Extending Beyond Ourselves: Invitations within Invitations

2021 JANUARY BY JUSSI KOITELA, YVONNE BILLIMORE AND VIVIANA CHECCHIA

An Invitation to Jussi Koitela, Extended to Yvonne Billimore and then to Viviana Checchia, to Explore Curatorial Relations and Collaborations of Care.

To be part of a whole does not, by default, mean to be a fraction of something. To begin with, a fraction is often expressed by two numbers having a small horizontal line between them and we are three authors, so that would not work. Furthermore, to be a fraction of something, would not correspond to our intentions: we do not wish to be separated even by a small line, we want to merge, we want to cross pollinate our ideas in space and time. Therefore we extend beyond ourselves to become parts of a whole in a text co-written and co-edited by six hands reflecting on collectivity as means of solidarity.

From a blank page we started to articulate our ‘whole’ progressively, bit by bit, by addition of ideas. Then we began to reshape one another’s words, and through doing so the parts disappeared and a contaminated whole was created.

Our departure point for this collaborative text reflects back a reading group with the *School for Civic Imagination* hosted by Viviana and Yvonne last December.¹ We read the text, *Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities* by Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis. We kept going back to it— ‘re-turning’ it.² The text ‘turns over’ practices of care, politics of citation and the (un)containable body. Rather than a close reading, the text held a space for the group to sift through questions of independence, inter-dependence and intra-dependence. Let us depart onwards from here.

For the last few years, Yvonne has been developing a project (of sorts) called *Feminist Collective Research Practices* (FCRP). In part, this project acts as a set of conditions or guidelines that most of her work falls under or is held by. In this sense it also extends to our various collaborations together including this text. One of the key principles of FCRP³ is to explore ways to map and call attention towards the fact that rarely do I-you-we-they research or practice alone, but always with, through or alongside some(body). So while there is a call to practice collectivity there is equally a call to develop deep referencing and politics of citation along the way. Rather than simply placing collectivity and individualism as dualistic or in tension, dismantling the myth of the individual—the genius, independent, self-sustaining, containable body—also requires acknowledging practices and work of inter/intra-dependency. Citing where and who knowledge comes from with more care, more generosity, and with more diversity is precisely a move towards de-centering the individual because it actively disrupts who that central figure has historically been.

This can take us to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's idea in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* where the author claims for contamination, where contamination makes diversity: 'contaminated diversity'.

'Contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of "summing up" that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units are encounter-based collaborations. Without self-contained units, it is impossible to compute costs and benefits, or functionality, to any 'one' involved. No self-contained individuals or groups assure their self-interests oblivious to the encounter. Without algorithms based on self-containment, scholars and policymakers might have to learn something about the cultural and natural histories at stake. That takes time, and too much time, perhaps, for those who dream of grasping the whole in an equation.'⁴

Contamination interests us, and this text is an attempt to embed it as a method for exploring the narratives and possibilities of thinking-with contamination, particularly as a resistance to ideas of purity, ecological or otherwise, which are strongly linked to racialised and colonial narratives. In turning to contamination it is useful to draw out the relations between sometimes seemingly disparate matters, to see them not in isolation but as enmeshed. For example, the narratives and meanings of contamination, purity, dirt (and dirtiness) are heaped together and understood through each other.

Going back to the text mentioned before, ‘re-turning’ it, *Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities* by Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis—which was interestingly developed in the context of a reading group and continues as one—is an abundantly rich site for thinking about the importance of acknowledging all the different components and contributors. In the text ‘composting’ is used as a material metaphor for telling a story about the relationship between Feminism and the field of Environmental Humanities. They trace which labours and lineages have been included/excluded, made visible or invisibilised, which have surfaced, decomposed or grown into something altogether different. Drawing from Donna Haraway, they describe composting as ‘the “dirty work”, grunt work, and care labour of cultivating “unexpected collaborations and combinations”’⁵, continuing they write:

‘composting as a practice demands that we pay attention to what goes into the compost bin. It implores that we attend to our critical metabolisms—to notice not only what is being transmogrified but also under what conditions, why, and to what effect.’⁶

Both composting and contaminating have got a rather negative connotation in our current society. Not only, as Donna Haraway suggested, they suggest something dirty or a dirty job, but they bring along some potent and irremediable consequences apparently out of human control: bugs reproducing, bacterias infesting, germs and viruses infecting.

It's interesting how these matters, metaphors and practices can extend towards other fields, for one these feel particularly potent concerns within contemporary art and curatorial work.

Picking up on an earlier thread, in response to intra-dependence Jussi has been looking to Karen Barad's notion of 'intra-action' in relation to curating.⁷ Curating is always collaboration and co-curating with 'things': humans, art works spaces, contexts, histories... What Barad suggests with the concept of intra-action is that there are relations existing before definitions and differences between 'things'. For Barad, relation is the point where subjects and objects are both separated and connected. Relation is where difference is made.

Applying Barad's thinking to practices of care within curating and cultural programming places an emphasis on care of relations over 'things' that are often defined in the art world as individual objects, art works, artists, institutions. If care is focused towards the relations between things it allows the 'actors' to move and act beyond differences and categorisations. Care becomes a tool for changing the power structures that place subjects, identities, humans and nonhumans in rigid normalised order.

This leads us away from the metaphor to the matter of 'how curators and artists can work through interdependence and solidarity to challenge individualism and competition'. It's a good point to draw attention to Viviana's work on this matter. During the debate, 'How to Stay with the Trouble? Art Institutions and the Environmental Crisis' part of the exhibition *Plasticity of the Planet* at the U-jazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, Viviana proposed that the art field must first begin to address its own 'trouble' before turning outwards to social and ecological issues, whilst acknowledging them as interdependent. Viviana pinpoints that much of the art world 'trouble' results from mirroring industrial processes of progress and production and developing a monoculture which centers artistic protagonism. Her proposal to derail hegemonic culture is for institutions to become socially engaged and to consider curatorial work in relation to wider society, which has ecological implications too. In addition, Viviana calls for arts institutions to take

up an ecology of care model: the proposition is for an alternative set of methods, tools, and considerations: for a situated model of curatorial practice. It challenges existing definitions of ‘the curatorial’, taking a multidisciplinary understanding of curatorial practice and evaluating curatorial methods in light of recent geopolitical developments. This proposal seeks models that enable local engagement in cultural production, allowing culture to flourish independent of larger hegemonies. The objective is to build a theoretical understanding of situated curatorial practices that can inform alternative approaches and would, in effect, decrease autonomous curatorial vision and power, to find modes which are anchored in local practices, methodologies and understandings.⁸

It is interesting to think what care and nurture towards relations—the intra-action of things— can mean within arts and curatorial practice. Maybe it can offer a route beyond certain rigid forms of representationalism and bureaucratic understandings of equity work within institutional practices and collaborations. Caring about relations makes it possible to focus on the potential forms artistic practice, curating and art works can take. Not specifically what these are but what they can become with each other. Artworks can be policy, instituting can become artwork and anything can become anything which does not yet have existing definition or predefined ways of practicing.

Concretely this can mean working with individuals and ‘things’ without pre-existing working roles and even with multiple roles. Care towards meaningful relations can provide safer situations which allow for the redistribution and redefinition of identities, roles, power and resources. For example, marginalised groups of people can not only gain visibility and more financial resources within normalised institutional power structures but redefine and practice their working role and life beyond arts within new justice systems.⁹

To acknowledge we are the sum of our parts, and must care for all those parts, takes us full circle. We set out to follow a process of contamination and experimentation by adding, adding, bit by bit, ontop of each other, until our different parts became a whole. As we

reach the end of this text, it seems we have been quite successful in heaping together a range of thoughts, approaches and relations to create a bit of a midden (a compost heap but also a Scottish word for a mess, a muddle, or chaos). In this act, we have thrown in some potentially conflicting ideas such as co-authorship and citation, but hopefully we have actually articulated them equally as practices of care and solidarity.

This porous and transmogrifying text may not have reached conclusions or explicitly defined practices of care and interdependence within curatorial work, but has experimented with enacting them through collaborative writing and editing. For us, this was an exercise intended to lay the foundations for another collaboration that now has further substance in which to grow.¹⁰ If we are to draw any tangible threads it would be to continue to strive towards adopting an ‘ecology of care’ model within our curatorial practices and institutions. Where, without hegemony, multiple forms of collaboration can grow and thrive, in relation to and even in tension with one another.

¹ The School for Civic Imagination was an alternative pedagogical platform based at the Centre for Contemporary Arts: Glasgow as part of the Public Engagement Programme. It was launched in September 2017 and ran until March 2020. The School represented a support structure for the further development of deeper connections between socially engaged art practice and civic life, delivered by a multitude of contributors. It was structured around different topics, including how socially engaged creative practices can be used in urban and rural contexts. It is as responsive and flexible as possible to the needs and desires of everyone taking part in the programme, as well as local issues that are brought to light over the course of the events. The School for Civic Imagination had a limited capacity and was free of charge – places on the programme were allocated through an open call, with additional events open to the public. The School welcomed 15 participants per year.

² This is a reference to Karen Barad’s concept of “re-turning” (see: Karen Barad. “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart”. *Parallax* 20:3. 2014.) which is situated as an essential practice in *Rehearsing Hospitalities Companion 2*: the second in a series of readers co-edited by Yvonne and Jussi and published in the context of *Rehearsing Hospitalities*, Frame Contemporary Art Finland’s public programme 2019-2023. (see: Yvonne Billimore and Jussi Koitela. “‘re-turning’ hospitalities”. *Rehearsing Hospitalities Companion 2*. Archive Books & Frame Contemporary Art Finland. 2020.).

³ see: fcrp.cargo.site

⁴ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. “The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins”. Princeton and Oxford UK: Princeton University Press, 2015. (pg. 33-34).

⁵ Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis. “Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities”. *Environmental Humanities* 10(2): 501-527. Duke University Press. 2018. 503.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ “The notion of *intra- action* (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the “components” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful.” Karen Barad. “Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter”. *Belief, Bodies, and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*. Deborah Orr (ed). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2006.p 815.

⁸ Viviana Checchia., 2019. *How to stay with the trouble? Art institutions and the environmental crisis* [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOTP8iwWRLw> (link accessed 29. 10. 2020)

⁹ As an extension of this thought: Dimitris Papadopoulos refers to justice as a “material, processual and practical issue before its regulation through political representation. Alter-ontology: justice engrained into cells, muscles, limbs, space, things, plants and animals. Justice is before the event of contemporary left politics; it is about

moulding alternative forms of life” Dimitris Papadopoulos. “Insurgent posthumanism: The state of things”
Ephemeral Journal 2010.

¹⁰ This collaboration is in the context of *Rehearsing Hospitalities*, Frame Contemporary Art Finland's public programme for 2019 to 2023.