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15 Care for Caregivers

Curating Against the Care Crisis

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Economy of the Invisible Hands

Historically defined as "one of the most exploitative, flexible and invisible forms of labour performed by women" (Akbulut 2017), care-work until today is upheld by deep-seated unequal and contradictory structures, which the COVID-19 pandemic has made painfully clear. Due to the closing of schools and childcare centres as part of the lockdown measures – while parents were expected to continue their waged labour – societies worldwide experienced a central contradiction within the capitalist system, which has been voiced by Marxist feminists since the 1970s: without social reproduction, no workforce; without workforce, no commodities; without commodities, no accumulation of capital. Prominent figures of the discourse such as the feminist scholars and activists Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser have argued that housework and social reproduction lay the groundwork for capitalist value creation, although usually they are, paradoxically, unpaid:

Unwaged social reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value, and the functioning of capitalism as such. None of those things could exist in the absence of housework, child-raising, schooling, and affective care, and a host of other activities that serve to reproduce new generations of workers. . . . Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production in capitalist society.

(Fraser 2017, 23)

The official economy therefore depends on social reproduction whose value it disavows (Fraser 2017, 23). In this light, Adam Smith's suggested "invisible hand of the market" rather appears to be billions of "invisibilised women's hands" (Praetorius and Grünenfelder 2020, 4), whose labour would have produced 10.9 trillion US dollars in value if their work had been paid with minimum wages, according to figures released by Oxfam for the year 2018 (Wezerek and Ghodsee 2020). That is more than the total earnings of the world's largest corporations, according to the Fortune Global 500

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list, to which Walmart, Apple, and Amazon belong (Wezerek and Ghodsee 2020). This labour, however, does not appear in any GDP calculation worldwide even though no economy is sustainable without it.

Despite the pandemic's seeming heightened recognition and valorizing of care-work (e.g. through the much-contested nightly clapping for care-workers), this labour remains *systemically devalued* as an economic principle: "where there is no productivity differential, employment will not be perceived as worthwhile unless wages are higher than the average paid to carers" (Himmelweit 2005, 16). At the same time, care is morally charged, easily romanticized, and associated with joy and devotion, "conflating care with affection and nurture" (Murphy 2015, 732). This conflictual field of care-work is therefore marked by various forces that systemically devalue it, keep it invisible as a gendered and racialized background activity, within an economy that capitalizes on "free-rides" of social reproduction and natural resources (Fraser 2017, 23). In short, "neoliberalism is uncaring by design" (The Care Collective 2020, Introduction), particularly leaving caregivers utterly uncared for.

Emma Dowling therefore advocates for feminist approaches to confront the neoliberal contradictions around the prevailing care crisis by strengthening democratic processes that centre politics and ethics of care:

Care cannot be considered in isolation from the broader social, cultural and economic organisation of society, but must be part of a more radical transformation linking care and democracy through which people can regain a sense of control over their lives and livelihoods in ways that are both socially and ecologically just.

(Dowling 2018, 339)

Against this background, this chapter asks in which ways a feminist curatorial practice – with its dedication to social transformation, rooted within ethics of care – can form part of these democratizing processes that hold the potential to shift the discourses and practices around care-work. After providing an overview of the contested coupling of curating and care, I present an example of my own curatorial practice as Artistic Director (2019–2020) of M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, in which I addressed questions of care through participatory curatorial formats.

Contested Terrain: Curatorial Care

Curatorial practice – due to the etymological origin of the verb to curate (Latin root *curare* = to take care, to look after) – is continuously tied to the politics of care and thus invited to redefine its democratic agency between artistic production and social urgencies. However, the associated meanings between curating and care remain a contested terrain, having undergone considerable shifts in the past. In the beginning of the twentieth century,

the gendered connotations of curating were in alignment with the feminized and romanticized codes of conduct for care-work, with a shared sense of "modesty, restraint, and the negation of authorship," as Nanne Buurman argues (2016, 146). The author compares curatorial care for artworks and collections to housekeeping, which historically has been predominantly performed by women in a self-negating manner. Both function as

backstage agencies that had few public merits but adhered to a separation of spheres, in which the authority and autonomy of artists and men was secured by the invisible care labours performed by curators and women respectively.

(Buurman 2016, 146)

However, over the course of the twentieth century, this understanding of a curator-as-carer shifted towards the curator-as-author (Krasny 2017, 3). The birth of the curator as an independent exhibition-maker – in analogy with the traditional conception of (male) solo artist as genius - marked the trend of a "masculinization of curating" (Buurman 2016, 146; Richter 2013). In this light, one cannot neglect the hierarchical and discriminatory connotation that is implicated in curating's etymological root. Kate Fowle notes that, in the English language curator refers to guardian or overseer, implying that "a curator is someone who presides over something - suggesting an inherent relationship between care and control" (Fowle 2007, 10). In the case of Harald Szeemann during documenta 5, his "view focused entirely on himself as author, and he considered the exhibition to be an image of one single worldview" as Dorothee Richter concludes in her analysis of his self-understanding and self-positioning as a curator vis- à-vis the invited artists (Richter 2013, 46). In such instances, the supposedly cared for, the artworks and artists, run the risk of losing their voice to the curatoras-author. The ambiguous association between curating with care therefore oscillates between the promise of protection, support and affection, and the risk of losing voice and/or agency of the artists and artefacts taken care of.

While the beginnings of curating appeared to be disinterested from politics and social movements, curatorial practice is inevitably part of "(critically addressing) the politics of how art and culture are produced, shown, mediated, analyzed, and made public" (Krasny 2015, 54). Elke Krasny not only regards questions of politics and social change as part of feminist thought but also considers "curating and curatorial thought as always already profoundly entangled with political and social questions" (Krasny 2015, 54). The recollection of the etymological root of curating as care has sparked an upsurge in curatorial initiatives that emphasize care as a radical act of feminist and anti-racist practices. Despite its contested notions, the ambiguities of the association between curating and care contain an activist potential to challenge the modus operandi of society and the ways in which artistic and curatorial practices operate, produce visibility, and articulate

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counter-protocols of relationality. I argue that this unveiling, this making transparent of the contradictions of the curatorial field, is what defines curating's sociopolitical dimension. Hence, curators are asked not only to critically reflect upon their practice in the context of feminist and decolonizing theories but also to regard their work as already deeply implicated in transformative sociopolitical processes. From this standpoint, feminist curating aims at carving out alternatives "to traditional (patriarchal) models of authorship, production and community," and thereby actively uncovers and challenges deeply entrenched societal patterns (Richter 2019, 184). Maura Reilly's proposition for a curatorial activism also seeks to establish a "curatorial corrective" as a way to combat the "moral emergency in the art world" (Reilly 2017). She demands a heightened representation of marginalized social groups; thereby addressing ongoing discrimination in gallery representation, auction-price differentials, and inclusion in collections and exhibitions (Reilly 2017). Building on the trajectory of curatorial activism, Elke Krasny proposes the concept of caring activism, an interweaving of curating with feminist care theory, to render frequently invisible codependencies legible - thereby offering resistance to the concept of the curator as independent author (Krasny 2017, 3). This approach explicitly intends to counter the suppression of curating's relationship to care, to counter the insinuation that "care as invisibilized and feminized labour does not vield aesthetic and intellectually relevant production" (Krasny 2017, 3).

Within the arts – an already highly precarious field of labour – these feminized notions of care are amplified and form the basis of devaluation and mechanisms of exclusions for curators, artists, and cultural producers who aim to both care and create. Marcia Breuer, visual artist and photographer based in Hamburg, Germany, in her manifesto "Mehr Mütter für die Kunst" [More Mothers in the Arts] describes the ways in which caring responsibilities within the arts are a central career-hindering factor for mothers:

If a working woman has children, this usually has relevant consequences for her further professional life in general and for her further professional career in particular, despite all protestations and according to all studies. If a woman artist has children, this leads her into a situation that makes the continuation of her artistic career almost completely impossible.

(Breuer 2019)1

A study by the Berlin-based artist union BBK [Berufsverband Bildender Künstler*innen Berlin e.V.] highlighted that in the second largest artist city after New York, women artists earn 28% less than their male colleagues (BBK Berlin 2018). The gendered gap is therefore 7% wider than in the overall economy. The lack of income is moreover closely tied to a lack of representation in solo and group shows in museums and galleries. Many artist positions, art historical research and discourse suggest that

motherhood - not so much fatherhood - in the arts is still one of the last taboos (Buhr 2019). In an art world in which women have historically served as (nude) muses, as de-sexualized Madonna figures, as objects of art making, rather than as agents of autonomous artistic practices, women artists today are still confronted with the binary choice of "art or children" (Nochlin 1971: Judah 2020).

It comes as no surprise that the art world is thus facing a void of mothers as recognized artistic agents, and consequently, children are commonly not depicted within contemporary artistic works - let alone integrated into the process of art making. As art critic Elke Buhr states in the art magazine monopol, "Sex, death, politics: art can show everything today. But children? They are not a theme. Especially for their mothers, they are considered killers of an artist's career" (Buhr 2019, 43). In light of the capitalist contradictions around care and its alarming manifestations within the art world, it seemed imperative to create a curatorial programme that would not only address these conditions but also actively counter them through a caring curatorial activism.

Care for Caregivers: Curatorial Platform for Care at M.1 Hohenlockstedt

As part of the artist workshop series Care for Caregivers, I invited the Israeli-American artist and activist Shira Richter to direct the workshop Care Counts: On Value and Visibility of Caregiving. The two-day workshop formed part of an 18-month participatory curatorial programming at M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung in rural Northern Germany, where I served as Artistic Director in 2019-2020. For this particular workshop, the invitation card showed the photographic work Push (2005) by Shira Richter, where the hand of one of her twins almost forcefully grabs the flesh of her overstretched postpartum belly. The card asked in bold lettering, "what is the value of my work if it is invisible and unpaid?" The workshop thus urged the participants right from the beginning to engage with the question of what their daily, often invisible, unpaid, mental, or physical care-work looks like and what an appropriate recognition for this labour could or should be. While incorporating her photographic and filmic artistic works, Shira Richter and the participants questioned societal models that produce invisibilities of (motherly) care-work while promoting competitive modes of thought instead of cooperation and solidarity. In collaborative exercises, the participants were encouraged to explore strategies of solidarity in everyday life - how cooperation not competition could be implemented and lived as a form of collective care.

Shira Richter's workshop was one amongst six artist-led workshops at M.1 that brought together local caregivers and invited them to dedicate themselves to questions of mutual trust, role expectations in motherhood, collective self-care, and strategies against isolation, which had already been

an urgent matter even before the COVID-19 pandemic's social distancing became the new norm.² The curatorial, participatory programme originated from the question, "who cares for the ones who care for others?" and thus centred the lived realities of caregivers, in which structural inequalities manifest themselves in gaps of gendered, economic, and political participation.

Located in Hohenlockstedt within rural Northern Germany, the curatorial formats set the local as the point of departure for arts-based democratic processes. This situated approach is in alignment with Meghan Johnston's understanding of *slow curating* as a process, which "includes a meaningful and deep understanding of one's immediate context, working with local experts to learn the cultural politics, the poetics of place, and to investigate issues conscious and unconscious that affect everyday lives" (Johnston 2014, 26). It was therefore important to me that the programme would speak to the people – above all to those who were performing care-work in a wide variety of forms – and that their themes be heard; that the questions not be far removed from their day-to-day lives, finding instead their origin therein. To let the programme emerge from the community rather than imposing it from the outside, I moved to Hohenlockstedt for four months - with my then-three-year-old son and with my almost 80-year-old grandfather as support - to investigate: "what does care mean in Hohenlockstedt, who looks after whom and in what form?"

As a newcomer to Hohenlockstedt, I learnt through multiple conversations that this place – unlike the other surrounding villages – doesn't have a town hall and is in need of meeting spaces, where the community would be able to come together informally. It was therefore important to me to explore the possible depths of curating as a *relational practice* that attempts to create non-hierarchical spaces for encounter in Hohenlockstedt and to strengthen and expand local support networks. Through almost two years' collaboration with artists, activists, and residents from Hohenlockstedt and its surroundings, a participatory programme took shape, striving for collective care, solidarity, and community building on local and regional levels and beyond. Even if the conception and organization of the events were designed institutionally, the programme lived from togetherness: exchange, assembly, and participation were central from the beginning; hence, without the participants' constant attendance, without their contributions in action and thought, the programme would have missed its mark.

The opening event, in spring 2019, fully embraced these curatorial ethics of care towards the community, as over 100 people had come together in moderated roundtables to form temporary collectives of exchange. The first *Social Muscle Club* had come to Hohenlockstedt: Jill Emerson, artist and co-founder of this initiative, introduced the event as a playful invitation to train one's "social muscles" by practising giving and taking. Participants wrote their wishes, as well as what they were able and willing to give, on slips of paper – thereby offering and accepting a range of gestures and objects. A micro-social network was created which transcended the spaces



Figure 15.1 Over 100 people joined the first Social Muscle Club in Schleswig-Holstein. Source: photo credit: Bettina Winkler-Marxen.

of the art institution as participants made arrangements for the near future – to take walks together, to mow someone else's lawn or practice Spanish together. Some months after the *Social Muscle Club*, I was delighted to encounter two older women again, who had been at the same roundtable. They explained to me that they had become friends at the *Social Muscle Club* and now took walks together regularly. To my pleasure, this invitation to strengthen small actions of solidarity in everyday life on a local level had fostered new caring encounters.

The workshop *Everyday Strategies Against Isolation* (July 2019) – as part of the series *Care for Caregivers* – also focused on the question of how participants, based on their everyday lives, could strengthen and expand their own care networks. The artist and researcher Manuela Zechner facilitated a mapping exercise, which aimed at more closely analysing and then drawing one's own interpersonal relationships according to different categories (bodily care, financial support, emotional connection, etc.). Through the multilayered quality of the exercise, the 20 participants, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to mid-eighties, became conscious of what kinds of support already existed and where there were still gaps.

What united the workshops of the series was their dedication not only to honest dialogue and artistic experimentation but also to raising and responding to questions that resonated with everyday caregivers. However,

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to *question* was not only an artistic method applied throughout the various formats but had also emerged as a key curatorial strategy for community engagement. The invitation cards for the workshops did not focus on promoting the arrival of an international artist to the rural community, but each showed a central question around the theme of the workshop: the workshop on trust by the Paris-based dancer and performance artist Myriam Lefkowitz asked, "what are the conditions for mutual trust?"; the workshop on collective self-care by the intercultural art collective Grand Beauty on Tour asked, "what kind of relationship do I maintain with myself?"; and the visual artist Julieta Aranda asked in her workshop on time, "what kind of future is dormant within in us?". Hence each one of the invitation cards gave space for a critical question(ing) – thereby establishing a connection between the content of the workshop and the lived experience of caregivers who encountered the leaflets across the public sphere of the region. Over the course of the series, I came to understand this approach as a curatorial method that enabled a tender linkage between more abstract academic discourses on the one hand and locally situated care-practices on the other.

With such relational curatorial formats I had aimed at establishing a participatory platform at M.1 to foster visibility and alliances for and between caregivers in the region through artistic and socially engaged methods. I sought to particularly create a curatorial counter-model to the dominant forms of cultural production, asking myself in which ways I could use my position of power to promote questions of care not only at the level of the visible (i.e. in exhibitions, film screenings) but also in terms of the structural framework (which oftentimes is invisibilized itself). How could I focus on care as a theme for participatory engagement and artistic and discursive production and representation while also fostering support structures that would enable artists and participants with caring responsibility to join the public programming?

Caring Infrastructures: Towards Care as Method

Like care-work, support structures – or what we have been referring to as "caring infrastructures"³ – tend to be invisibilized and underacknowledged. This notion resonates in Doina Petrescu's understanding of support as that which is

behind, below, and underneath, hidden.... It is the invisible that makes possible, the visible, the absent which allows things to be present, the transient which make things lasting, the impossible that carry on the condition of possibility.

(Condorelli and Wade 2009, 13)

In a curatorial effort to centre both care-work and the invisible infrastructures that support not only cultural organizations but also social life itself,

the programme regarded the creation of such "caring infrastructures" as a central element. Over the course of the programme, this increased the urgency to go beyond questions of visibility and to shift focus towards creating and altering existing social and physical (infra)structures through the lens of care. In this regard, I join Nora Sternfeld's proposition of postrepresentational curating, in which curating is not so much concerned with "the mere representation of social relations, but which lays the ground for intervening in them – an intellectual practice that understands itself as involved, dissensual, and situated in solidarity with existing social movements" (Palladini and Sternfeld 2014, 1-2).

For the workshop series Care for Caregivers, this meant countering the lack of representation of women and mother artists within the arts and building "caring infrastructures" to enable their contribution. I had thus invited only women artists, some of whom had previously worked explicitly on care, others more implicitly. In the preparatory conversations for the workshops, it became apparent that each of the artists was performing carework alongside their artistic practice. Some were single-parenting; some were pregnant at the moment when our conversations began and arrived to facilitate the workshop with an infant. In the context of our collaboration, their caring responsibilities were not seen as a lack of flexibility but rather as a matter of expertise, as a matter of credibility to address the politics of care through their artmaking as a form of "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988). Children and possible partners of artist facilitators and of participants were explicitly welcome to the events, and free on-site childcare was provided as a key conceptual element of the curatorial programming. A former gallery space was turned into a permanent children's room, not only dedicating budget and curatorial attention to the needs of families but also altering the physical space towards their inclusion. Free shared meals furthermore formed an integral element, where informal togetherness was enhanced while bodies were nourished through freshly made food.

These curatorial choices come with the recognition that the art world becomes sustainable only if the ones working and participating in it can reproduce their livelihoods and can be provided with a support system that includes "childcare, parental leave and provisions for people with disabilities, to fair pay and employment practices" (Reckitt 2016, 25). This frames curatorial care as a way

to extend love and care beyond the high-status objects, artists and patrons generally considered worthy of curatorial custodianship and, instead, devote attention to nurturing the reproductive labour that sustains the living processes of cultural production.

(Reckitt 2016, 25)

The curatorial decision to feature women artists, some of whom are also mothers, did not only heighten the visibility of their artistic practices but

also demanded the creation of physical, social, and financial gestures of care that could account for their needs.

My intention of constructing caring infrastructures through a relational curatorial programming was rooted in the belief that the reorganization of everyday life forms the basis for the "creation of nonexploitative social relations" and serves as the central terrain for social transformation and for the creation of new forms of solidarity (Federici 2012, 125). While existing societal patterns, habits, and norms appear rigid at first glance, they act as the invisibilized yet dynamic and relational infrastructures that order our shared realities (Berlant 2006; Star 1999) and thus carry the potential of social transformation. These relational webs between the involved artists, participants, and the wider community create a social space that makes architectural boundaries fade into the background while foregrounding human relations and interactions (Möntmann 2002). These social spaces function as partial publics which are dynamic, heterogeneous, and temporary, turning the museum walls into "porous membranes," thereby squeezing out artistic actions into the local political and cultural space (Möntmann 2002, 10). From this position, curating can be perceived as "radical relational practice" (Krasny 2017, 120) wherever the practice expands from the site of a museum, rippling out into the urban – and I may add, rural – to engage with a variety of sociopolitical urgencies. Thus, taking *care* seriously as an explicit curatorial position means not only to provide visibility for marginalized subjects but also to use curatorial practice and thought as a vehicle, as an organizational method to actively (re)construct relationships, visibilities, and caring infrastructures with the sincere dedication to the sociopolitical transformation.

In tandem with this aim to explore *care as an organizing principle* in Hohenlockstedt, my colleague Claudia Dorfmüller, the inclusion activist Antie Hachenberg, and I developed a series of storytelling cafes at M.1 as a democratic, locally rooted platform for exchange and solidarity alliances. The storytelling sessions were co-moderated by local activists, aligning with existing social initiatives and making accessible the tools and knowledges that these practices had already allocated for the specific region. The Berlinbased artist duo Polyphrenic Creatures had guided the dialogical process, intervening with artistic inserts, and ultimately creating a sound collage that hints to the multiplicity of vulnerabilities, needs, and capacities inherent to the community. After the conversation series had to shift online during the pandemic and my position as artistic director had officially come to an end, the group had not been able to get together in real life anymore. One year later, we had therefore asked the participants to come together for a forum to collectively evaluate and reflect the process. The strong necessity to come together prevailed, but the participants showed hesitation to continue the process in a self-organized manner. On the next day, one participant reached out, sharing that she was willing to organize the next meeting of the storytelling cafe - however to this day, a self-organized continuation

has not taken place, as few participants confirmed their attendance for the proposed meeting. This highlights the fragility and the multiple complexities of sustaining such relational processes after projects have come to their official ending.

Ultimately, all of these curatorial processes were ephemeral; they were neither material nor tangible but rather characterized by the experiential, not the visible. The question arose: what remains of an encounter, of a conversation, of a social space? Personal memories, emotions, and perhaps some notes? How can these fleeting moments of the curatorial project be captured – and how can the experiential also be made accessible to people who were not there?

A group of students from *Studio Experimentelles Design* at the HFBK Hamburg (Prof. Jesko Fezer's class)⁴ had taken on these questions while accompanying the curatorial programme at M.1 for over a year.⁵ As a result they developed the *Archive of Encounters*, which brought together artistic interpretations and documentary elements for each event in the form of a wooden case. The eight archival cases are meant to be mobile and participatory: through cooperation with the community library in Hohenlockstedt, the cases can be borrowed and taken home like other media. The archive invites users to investigate the traces, engaging at their own pace with the themes, impressions, and experiences and developing their own encounters with the cases' contents – thus enabling a continued engagement with the curatorial programme after it had come to a formal closing.

Conclusion Not for distribution

Against the background of the contradictions between the capitalist framework and care-work, curatorial practice is bound to address its etymological root in care and the gendered and discriminatory connotations that arise from it. Through the framing of curating as a sociopolitical practice with a dedication to ethics of care – as proposed by Elke Krasny's approach of caring activism or Maura Reilly's curatorial activism – it can contribute to shifting the power and representational matrix within the arts.

The curatorial programme on care at M.1 (Bailer 2019) discussed earlier aimed to produce such common grounds for encounter, for artistic-visual explorations, and to establish caring infrastructures that may continue to develop independently from the formalities of institutions, be it friendships, memories of belonging, small groups, new knowledges about existing local networks, food recipes, or contacts between engaged actors who might not have met otherwise. Relational curatorial formats such as the storytelling cafes, the workshop series *Care for Caregivers*, the exchange event *Social Muscle Club*, and the interactive *Archive of Encounters* countered the hostile societal and economic mechanisms that continue to marginalize care-work today. The formats rather fostered tender linkages between the scales of the personal, the local, the everyday, and political democratic

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transformative processes – and facilitated the construction of new caring infrastructures (Bailer 2020, 35).

The chapter makes a case for assuming curatorial responsibility for the overall structures and context of one's work environment; it urges curators to make full use of their agency to not only address matters of care on a representational level but also to actively alter affective, social, financial, and physical infrastructures in alignment with ethics of care. This understanding may serve as a road map for cultural practitioners to integrate care as a method into their field of work, contributing to the curatorial activist idea of challenging discriminatory art historical canons and representations, to highlighting questions of care as central to society and the overall economy while building the foundations of caring infrastructures across the cultural sphere.

Notes

- 1 This leads me to understand motherhood not as a biological but as a political and symbolic category in which social, financial, and economic conflicts unfold, amplified within the arts. With this position, I follow the writers Rumaan Alam, Kim Brooks, Jessica Friedmann, Sheila Heti, and Meaghan O'Connell in their conversation "What it Means to Write About Motherhood, Part One" (2018).
- 2 The workshop series included further artistic contributions by Julieta Aranda (artist, Berlin/New York), *Grand Beauty on Tour* (Frauke Frech, Hengameh Sadeghi intercultural collective, Leipzig), Myriam Lefkowitz (performance artist, Paris), Liz Rech and Annika Scharm (performance artists, Hamburg), and Manuela Zechner (artist/researcher, Vienna).
- 3 I want to give credit to Rosario Talevi and Gilly Karjevsky with whom I have co-curated the *New Alphabet School* edition on *Caring* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2020. In this process, we collectively exchanged ideas and advanced our thinking around the concept of caring infrastructures, which I present in this chapter.
- 4 The Archive of Encounters was conceptualized, designed, and produced by Veronica Andres, Pablo Lapettina, Laura Mahnke, and Skadi Sturm.
- 5 "Archive of Encounters", M.1, https://www.m1-hohenlockstedt.de/en/2019-2020/art/archive-of-encounters/. Last accessed December 10, 2022.

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