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# **Caring Infrastructures**

**Transforming the Arts through Feminist Curating with Care**

PhD in Practice in Curating

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in Collaboration with Zurich University of the Arts

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## Abstract

This dissertation addresses the contradiction in the arts whereby care is a recurring theme of exhibition and event series (the “caring turn”) yet uncaring conditions for art workers and audiences persist, taking the form of precarious labour conditions and inadequate support for cultural practitioners with caregiving responsibilities. Featuring a Marxist-feminist analysis of domestic and care work from medieval times until today, the study illustrates how today’s visual art sector particularly excludes cultural practitioners who are carers.

Expanding from the author’s participatory curatorial practice on care as artistic director 2019–20 at M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung in Hohenlockstedt, Germany, the dissertation establishes curating – with its etymological origin in the Latin *curare* (“to take care”) – as a radically relational, infrastructural practice of care in search of a counter-hegemonic otherwise. It proposes understanding care as a curatorial method for constructing “caring infrastructures” within the arts. Caring infrastructures emerge from a methodological sequence revolving around the building of support structures that respond to the caring needs and capacities of artists, collaborators, audiences, and team members and that foster the conditions for their presence. This transformative approach identifies eight key building blocks for curatorial practice (e.g., communication, budgets, power) and illustrates how to alter them according to feminist care ethics (Joan Tronto). When taken together, they act as caring infrastructures. The study further explores the limits of curatorial care due to group conflicts, solitary struggles, and systemic contradictions within capitalism, curating, and care. It suggests transferring Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “acting in concert” from activism to the arts, with various artistic and curatorial initiatives coming together in a counter-hegemonic effort of “caring in concert.”

Incorporating autotheory and feminist research methods (Jane Gallop, Jane Tompkins, Lauren Fournier, Sara Ahmed), the dissertation aims to amplify marginalised voices, especially those of women and queer and racialised people. The research adopts a “polydisciplinamorous” approach (Natalie Loveless), prioritising affective attachments (Audre Lorde) over traditional disciplinary boundaries and blurring the lines between theory and practice in a process of “makingthinking” (Loveless).

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## 5.2.1 Practice-led Propositions towards Building Caring Infrastructures

Building Block: Situating

### **Proposition #1: Gain a Sincere Understanding of the Context**

**When embarking on a new curatorial project, hold space and time for observation of the context and for deep listening to the community before developing public programming. This allows the project to emerge from the context rather than become an external imposition.**

At the start of my curatorial position at M.1, I asked for a three-month research phase, during which time no public programming would be held, so that I could acquaint myself with the institution, the village, its inhabitants, potential artists, and curatorial formats. This research phase, which included observation, meaningful interaction, and engaged listening, preceded the participatory curatorial programme. I used these learnings and experiences from the community as the point of departure for my curatorial undertaking. This allowed me to build *from* and *with* the community rather than impose a public programme that would operate with a logic – or urgency – foreign to the community. This phase was rooted in the sensation of what “feels right to me,” in feminist activist Audre Lorde’s sense, which also caused a feeling of vulnerability, as I was deviating from the trodden paths of institutional curating, which tends to rest upon more rigid planning and scheduling of programming.<sup>619</sup>

While many larger art institutions operate under the privileged condition of having curatorial teams dedicated to researching and conceptualising larger exhibitions for up to several years, more precarious, underfunded (independent) art spaces work under the immense pressure of having to produce visible results

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619. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Feminist Series (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 56.

quickly. In both instances, the funding structures (often a mix of private and public sources) have developed in such a way that art organisations have to justify their activities through high visitor numbers, thereby diminishing the time for the “invisible” processes of active listening and contextual immersion in new settings and topics.<sup>620</sup> Irrespective of the scale of the arts organisation, its public programme, in many instances, relies on the involvement of independent – or to borrow from Elke Krasny, *interdependent* – curators and arts practitioners, who oftentimes do not reside where they work, as they are subject to the neoliberal project logic of the cultural sphere, with its call for hyperflexibility and hypermobility. This, in many instances, makes the appointed curator of a given project a stranger to the community in which they are invited to work. Contrary to this arrangement, the curator Megan Johnston, makes a strong case that a socially engaged curatorial practice requires a meaningful understanding of one’s immediate context, which includes engaging with local experts to gain deeper knowledge about “the cultural politics, the poetics of place, and to investigate issues conscious and unconscious that affect everyday lives.”<sup>621</sup> This process includes a deeper understanding of the social structure of the place, who is in charge of what; who is included in which communal operations and who isn’t; what resources are at hand, and which ones are at stake. As this process takes time and sincere commitment, Johnston considers these elements crucial for her proposed approach of “slow curating”:

The notion of taking time is important, as is working in collaboration with a sense of place and alongside working artists and the community. It means promoting reciprocal relationships, open-ended proposals, and outcomes that can be decided by different people and at different times in the process.<sup>622</sup>

Similarly, the artist collective ruangrupa asserts that their projects begin with a “certain type of sensibility [...], a very local sensibility that grew from being in Jakarta.

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620. The pressure for curators and directors to deliver measurable results is high: “In the US, although most museums are private, many still receive government money. Funders in the public sector, mostly on the state and local level, are tuned to measurables, and attendance is a matrix. Corporate and foundation donors often want to know these numbers, as do today’s trustees, who care more about headlines and the visuals of big crowds.” See Brian Allen, “Exhibitions Are a Numbers Game, Whether We Like It or Not,” *Art Newspaper*, March 27, 2019.

621. Johnston, “Slow Curating,” 26.

622. *Ibid.*

We are interested in what is available in a certain context. The question that underlies our processes is always repeating, but the answer becomes always very different.”<sup>623</sup>

However, time is not always a given resource, and one must consciously consider the temporalities of ones’ curatorial concept – and, on occasion, negotiate these with partnering institutions. I therefore propose to intentionally carve out space, time, and adequate methods and strategies for situating oneself within the given context from the outset of a project, in order to approach the respective community from a place of genuine curiosity and care. Such an approach, in the long run, may increase visitor numbers due to a sensitive and authentic engagement with the questions and concerns of the surrounding communities or, at least, allow for a shift of thinking from quantitative to qualitative relationship-building with the audiences. Despite the tremendous effort that these processes of community engagement may entail, the relations established along the way form the social fabric from which a radically relational curatorial practice – one that is responsive and useful for the community (*Curaduría Útil*) – can unfold. Therefore, the process of deep listening and situating the curatorial concept within a given context forms the basis of a relational approach to curatorial care from which all other public formats and audiences can emerge.

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623. ruangrupa, “Interview with ruangrupa: Our Exhibitions Are an Alibi,” interview by Franz Thalmair, Platform 6 – documenta fifteen, 2020, <https://www.documenta-platform6.de/ruangrupa-our-exhibitions-are-an-alibi/>. Without being able to shortly encapsulate the extensive discourse and dispute around the curatorial work of ruangrupa at documenta fifteen, I want to add that – despite the group’s best intentions to approach Kassel with a sensitivity towards the local – the tensions arose precisely because of differences in cultural, historical, religious, political, and aesthetic understandings and approaches. For further discussion, I suggest *OnCurating*, no. 54, “documenta fifteen – Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices” (November 2022).

For a discourse analysis of the controversy, I suggest the forthcoming research on “Antisemitismus und postkoloniale Debatten am Beispiel der documenta fifteen” (Anti-Semitism and postcolonial debates using the example of documenta fifteen), more information on which is available at: Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, documenta Institut, and Frankfurt University of Applied Science, “Nach der documenta fifteen: Forschungsprojekt analysiert Antisemitismus-Kontroverse,” press release, Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, 2022, <https://www.frankfurt-university.de/de/erweiterungen/news/news-liste/news-detail/nach-der-documenta-fifteen-forschungsprojekt-analysiert-antisemitismus-kontroverse/>.



## **Proposition #2: Create the Conditions of Visibility for Underrepresented Perspectives**

**The agency of curators lies in the power to challenge canons and patterns of representation. Curating with care needs to create the conditions that bring underrepresented themes, perspectives, and social groups to the fore of public visibility and discourse, in tandem with structural changes.**

Framing curating as a sociopolitical practice with a dedication to an ethics of care can contribute to shifting the power and representational matrix within the arts.<sup>624</sup> The programming at M.1 departed from this curatorial activist take on representation, which is committed to “levelling hierarchies, challenging assumptions, countering erasure, promoting the margins over the center, the minority over the majority, inspiring intelligent debate, disseminating new knowledge, and encouraging strategies of resistance.”<sup>625</sup> The central mode through which the curatorial cycle addressed artistic production on care was the artist prizes.<sup>626</sup> The awardees, MATERNAL FANTASIES and Malu Blume, combined film, installation, and performative elements around the thematic focus of care, using an array of artistic methods to challenge a rigid reality that seems to enshrine traditional gender roles and limited ideas of community and care.<sup>627</sup>

As the curator of the open call for artist projects and the co-editor of their respective publications, it was my aim to foreground what commonly remains obscured: the domestic labour of women, the ambivalences of caregiving, the diverse conceptions of motherhood, and the queering of collective care and solidarity

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624. This line comes from my earlier publication Sascia Bailer, “Care for Caregivers: Curating against the Care Crisis,” in *Curating with Care*, ed. Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (London: Routledge, 2023), 193.

625. Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 22.

626. For details, see section 4.4.4 – “ART: Discourse & Artistic Production on Care” on page 185.

627. See appendix, section A.

alliances. Art historian and cultural theorist Johanna Schaffer reminds us that the politically charged term “representation” is derived from the Latin *repraesentare*, “to make present”: This concept of making the absent present concerns the level of representation as well as that of imagination and that of substitution.”<sup>628</sup>

While I propose to practice curatorially with heightened awareness about whom and what topics one grants centre stage and in what light these themes, social groups, or perspectives are represented, it remains to be the case that the demands for political visibility, via aesthetic representation, are contested. Schaffer stresses the importance of considering not merely *that* something becomes visible but *how* it is visibilised, as well as what it displaces via its own presence.<sup>629</sup> She argues that, all too often, positional political debates act as though there is a causal link between visibility and political power.<sup>630</sup> Feminist scholar Peggy Phelan states provocatively: “If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western Culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power.”<sup>631</sup>

This relationship further has to be seen through the analysis of feminist art historical positions, which have exposed the gendered hierarchies that structure the visual field: “‘Woman’ became an object – of the male gaze – and she thus became readily available and her image commodified. The gaze is as a rule associated with the male (subject) and the viewed or displayed with the female (object).”<sup>632</sup> This assertion of Dorothee Richter, who builds on the seminal work of art historians Sigrid Schade and Silke Wenk,<sup>633</sup> is echoed by art theorist Anja Zimmermann when she highlights the “significance of this gaze regime for the definition of gender difference

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628. Johanna Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit: Über die visuellen Strukturen der Anerkennung* (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript, 2008), 78. My translation.

629. *Ibid.*, 122. My translation.

630. *Ibid.*, 12.

631. Peggy Phelan, quoted in *ibid.*, 15.

632. Dorothee Richter, “A Brief Outline of the History of Exhibition Making,” *OnCurating*, no. 6 (2010): 29.

633. For a detailed discussion and extensive bibliography, see Sigrid Schade and Silke Wenk, “Strategien des ‘Zu-Sehen-Gebens’: Geschlechterpositionen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte,” in *Genus: Geschlechterforschung/gender studies in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften: ein Handbuch*, ed. Hadumod Bussmann and Renate Hof (Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2005), 144–85.

itself.”<sup>634</sup> Considering the gendered and racialised hierarchies that structure the visual field, these scholars argue that marginalised groups, in order to become “politically” visible, have to identify with “their” representations; they have to inscribe themselves in the images through which they are designated and made intelligible.<sup>635</sup>

The two M.1 prize awardees did not speak for groups to which they do not belong and rather departed from their own situated knowledges as a queer femme (Malu Blume) and dissident mothers (MATERNAL FANTASIES), while also producing visual aesthetics and narratives that they wanted to portray publicly. As such, I argue that their (self-)representations hold emancipatory political value and do not reproduce their societal marginalisation. This understanding seems to be echoed in the work of feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis, who sees the task of women’s cinema not so much in absenting or destroying narrative and visual pleasure but rather in constructing a different referential frame, in which the “measure of desire is no longer just the male subject. For what is finally at stake is not so much how ‘to make visible the invisible’ as how to produce the conditions of visibility for a different social subject.”<sup>636</sup>

Curators – and particularly curators who seek to curate with care – hold the responsibility to produce the *conditions of visibility* of what de Lauretis calls “different social subjects.” In this light, curators who seek to foster conditions of visibility and representation quickly arrive at a crossroads where they have to take a political stance in regard to their role in advancing structural transformations (that go beyond the conditions of visibility).

I argue that curators are confronted with three possible ways of renegotiating the relationship between feminist art, curatorial care, the conditions of visibility, and structural changes. Firstly, curators can opt to become active in fostering conditions of representation and visibility as forms of recognition of formerly invisibilised

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634. Anja Zimmermann, “*Skandalöse Bilder – Skandalöse Körper: Abject Art vom Surrealismus bis zu den Culture Wars* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2001), 119.

635. Kerstin Brandes, quoted in Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit*, 52.

636. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 8-9.

positions and in establishing an altered position towards the depicted images and subjectivities on display. Secondly, curators can become active by instituting according to feminist principles without renegotiating these topics in the symbolic realm – that is, through representational or thematic exhibitions and events that address feminist or sociopolitical urgencies. Finally, curators can, and arguably, should, aim towards both contributing to the visual representation of feminist issues through the arts and putting in place feminist institutional structures.<sup>637</sup>

From a feminist perspective, the latter option is the most appropriate pathway to enact care curatorially. Thus, curators seeking to engage with anti-hegemonic practices cannot stop at using their curatorial agency to challenge existing canons and patterns of representation, nor at critically considering the aesthetic-political questions of power relations implicated within gendered gazes, nor at carefully selecting the themes to which they intend to grant representational space. Rather, a curatorial practice of care must also *produce conditions of visibility* that go beyond hegemonic social subjectivities. To do so, I propose expanding one’s curatorial focus beyond the *what* and the *how* of aesthetic representation to include the underlying (often invisible) support structures that enable the visual-representative and political presence of different social subjects. The renegotiation of the fields of the visible must go hand in hand with the renegotiation of the invisible structures that support its public moments. In short, art institutions should not fall into the traps of care-washing, whereby they showcase care without enacting care (infra-)structurally.<sup>638</sup>

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637. For further reference, see *OnCurating*, no. 52 (2021).

638. I herewith connect to the line of thought in section 3.3 – “The Caring Turn within Arts and Research” on page 128, where I made a case to understand the caring turn as a celebratory moment only if it connects representational and structural questions.

### **Proposition #3: Provide “Care for Presence”**

**As a curator, create “conditions for presence” for a range of audiences, artists, and collaborators. Consider which curatorial choices in particular – which prerequisites – allow for the presence of whom.**

Practising a feminist curatorial ethics of care includes thinking along the boundaries of absences and presences. What are the conditions, which are created curatorially, for the absence or presence of certain audiences, team members, artists, and collaborators within a cultural project?

This line of questioning reconnects with the thoughts on a relational curatorial practice, which I have previously established.<sup>639</sup> Here, the curator is seen as an entity enmeshed within a larger relational ecosystem whose agency rests in the power to shift and alter current conditions of visibility/invisibility, presence/absence, low/high hierarchies, and so on. Returning to the metaphor of the “curatorial butterfly effect,” micro-political adaptations may lead to changes that go beyond the immediate realm and – aligning with the notion of a *Curaduría Útil* (useful curating) – enact transformative elements useful to the sociopolitical concerns of the audiences and other stakeholders.

This understanding of a relational curatorial practice highlights the interplay between physical, social, cultural, and mental delimiting or enabling factors that characterise the conditions of such presences or absences. The various intersecting infrastructures in place define how audiences consider whether or not this programming is for them. At this juncture is where oppressive structures, such as class, race, caring responsibilities, and bodily abilities, intersect in the cultural field and define whether someone will feel drawn to – and will be physically and logistically able to – participate. Hence, a curatorial politics of presence within a

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639. As I have previously outlined in section 3.2 – “Curating with Care,” see especially section 3.2.3 “Curating as a Radically Relational Practice” on page 123.

largely urban-centred, elitist, and ableist cultural scene needs to actively deconstruct these barriers and put in place elements that allow for the presences of a variety of participants, contributors, and collaborators. Within political activist discourse, such considerations are often to be found under the keywords “accessibility” and “anti-discrimination.” However, within the context of this curatorial account I consider it crucial to frame these approaches as approaches of “care,” as *care for presence* should not be understood as an additional task of curators (for example, when framed as “accessibility”) but as curating’s core essence. In the following section, I highlight possible curatorial choices that could be considered prerequisites or building blocks of a curatorial framework of caring infrastructures.

## – Prerequisite: On-site Childcare

Since a central support structure for artists, collaborators, and audience members with caring responsibilities is the provision of childcare, at M.1. we offered free on-site childcare for events. Our provision of childcare demanded physical alterations to the institutional space; therefore, a former gallery space was turned into a playroom, which remained intact for the next curatorial cycle of 2021–22.<sup>640</sup> This institutional decision to make space for the presence of children and allocate budget for on-site childcare during the artists residencies marked an exception within the German-speaking cultural landscape. Not only do institutional leaders need to understand the political necessity of allocating resources to childcare but funding bodies also need to commit to covering such costs. A survey of the Swiss visual arts association Visarte shows that only 7 percent of Swiss arts organisation offer residencies and cultural formats that are inclusive to artists with caring responsibility.<sup>641</sup> Attending to

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640. The 2021–22 curatorial cycle was under the artistic direction of Agnieszka Roguski. See Agnieszka Roguski, for M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, “kuratieren 2021/22: IN:VISIBILITIES,” M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, <https://www.m1-hohenlockstedt.de/en/kuratieren/2021-2022/>.

641. Philippe Sablonier on behalf of Visarte Schweiz (Swiss professional association of visual artists), “Bericht zur Studie “Kunstberuf und Familie.” Erkenntnisse und Handlungsanleitungen zur Vergabepraxis von Atelierstipendien,” Visarte Schweiz, June 2023, [https://visarte.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/0\\_Visarte\\_Studie-Kunstberuf-und-Familie\\_2023-07-04-def-D-mit-Illustration.pdf](https://visarte.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/0_Visarte_Studie-Kunstberuf-und-Familie_2023-07-04-def-D-mit-Illustration.pdf).

the same precarious situation, the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia, launched a pilot project that

supports artists who are parents of underage children by offering additional financial support for childcare and children's travel in order to facilitate these artists' participation in residencies or research trips. This additional funding option applies to research trips and new Pro Helvetia residency calls.<sup>642</sup>

The term "pilot project" highlights the novelty and test character of this child-friendly funding approach, which must be considered part of a growing zeitgeist that demands caring infrastructures. The grassroots international network Cultural ReProducers advocates for incorporating the needs of artist-parents into the cultural sector and provides a list of child-friendly residencies and funding around the world.<sup>643</sup> The pending widespread implementation of caring infrastructures becomes particularly apparent in the case of highly renowned residencies that continue to explicitly exclude on-site family members (let alone offer on-site childcare). For example, the German-government-funded, Los Angeles-based residencies Villa Aurora (for artists) and Thomas Mann House (for writers and researchers) do not allow family members to join the resident; visitors for up to fourteen days are permitted each quarter.<sup>644</sup>

The exclusion of people with caring responsibilities from public programming and residencies – via a lack of support structures – is consequential: if an artist residency does not permit children, it excludes artist-parents not only from that particular opportunity but prevents a chain of potentially successful outcomes from unfolding. Parent unfriendliness prevents artist and curator parents from gaining important visibility and building networks (and so from profiting from the "halo effect" of the institution); this might make it much more difficult for this parent-artist to receive invitations to group exhibitions, get offers for solo shows, or secure

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642. Pro Helvetia, "Residencies and Research Trips," accessed October 1, 2022, <https://prohelvetia.ch/en/residencies-and-research-trips/>.

643. See their manifesto: Cultural ReProducers, "Manifesto," accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.culturalreproducers.org/p/manifesto.html>.

644. VATMH e. V., "Thomas Mann Fellowship," accessed July September 22, 2022, <https://www.vatmh.org/de/thomas-mann-fellowships.html>.

representation from leading galleries.<sup>645</sup> When taking serious the infrastructural dimension of curating, this seemingly small detail clearly becomes an enabling or delimiting factor for mid- and long-term effects. I therefore propose that on-site childcare, support of childcare costs during artistic production, and general caregiver friendliness of arts programming and residencies are a central building block in making arts organisations more diverse and inclusive.

## – Prerequisite: Inclusion, Dis\*ability, Im\*mobility, Rest

I invite curatorial practitioners to approach the questions of inclusion, dis\*ability, and im\*mobility from a perspective of queer-feminist interdependence, which rejects the notion of humans as autonomous subjects without a need of support structures.<sup>646</sup> Feminist cultural theorist Merri Lisa Johnson and queer and dis\*ability studies theorist Robert McRuer reflect, in “Cripistemologies,” on women’s studies scholar Susan Wendell’s thinking that identifies the everyday world as “structured for people who have no weaknesses.”<sup>647</sup> Wendell asks the question: “Where does a person sit down to rest, if necessary, at the grocery store?”<sup>648</sup>

It is thus important to question the heteronormative and ableist standards that lead to social and physical infrastructures geared towards audiences and collaborators “with no weaknesses.” Alongside the lack of support structures for caregivers, there are a range of overlooked accessibility needs for care-receivers that configure who is able to (physically) access art institutions and their programming.

A central condition of presence is that of geographical and spatial accessibility of art institutions, particularly when situated outside urban cultural hubs, such as in the case of M.1. Apart from hosting the events within a wheelchair-accessible space,

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645. For further reference, see Judah, *How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers*.

646. As previously laid out in section 3.2.2 – “Curating towards an Ethics of Care,” on page 120.

647. Susan Wendell, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability,” *Hypatia* 4, no. 2 (1989): 104–24.

648. Susan Wendell, quoted in Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, “Cripistemologies,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 133.



these concerns required us to coordinate carpooling for regional attendees, which was primarily a support for elderly participants without cars and for whom public transport would have been too exhausting and individual taxis too costly. For guests from further away, we at times offered shuttles from and to the nearest train station and free overnight stays at the institution, if capacity allowed for it.

For the exhibition *Care as Resistance* at StadtPalais Stuttgart (May–July 2023), which I co-curated with Didem Yazıcı, it was our concern, together with the participating artists, to foster conditions of presence that would welcome a range of people with their diverse needs.<sup>649</sup> Apart from on-site childcare and sign-language interpretation on the opening day, for vision-impaired visitors we offered an audio description of the exhibition, its space, and its video works, which was produced by a cultural agency for inclusion (Image 52). Further, the programming was presented in both German and English, the exhibition texts were offered in three languages (German, English, and Turkish), and the website was made screen-reader friendly.

Within the framework of the *Care as Resistance* exhibition, the responsibility for creating these conditions for presence fell not to the institution but to us freelancing curators and artists, who had been invited to exhibit in the space of the institution. While I strongly argue that institutions should take on the conceptual, administrative, and financial responsibility for matters of inclusion, I still want to emphasise that these are central *curatorial* concerns within a framework of care – whether enacted from a position of institutional association or when freelancing.

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649. Mothers\*, Warriors, and Poets was initiated by the artists Marie Lienhard, Renate Liebel, and Anna Gohmert, who invited the artists Julia Wirsching and Anna Schiefer, Didem Yazıcı, and myself as curators to the exhibition *Mothers\*, Warriors, and Poets: Care as Resistance* at StadtPalais Stuttgart (May–July 2023). See <https://mothers-warriors-and-poets.net>.

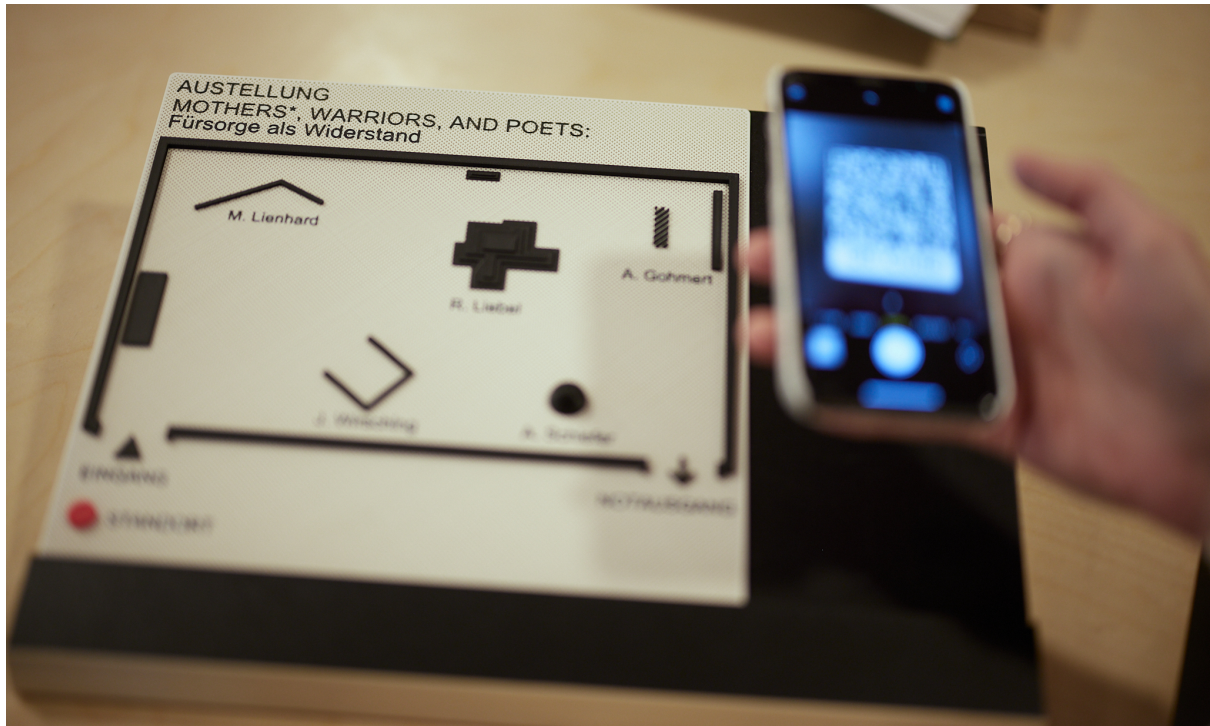


Image 51. Haptic board of the exhibition space with a QR code to access audio description of the exhibition for visually impaired visitors, specifically created for the exhibition *Mothers\*, Warriors, and Poets: Care as Resistance*, StadtPalais, Stuttgart. 2023. Photo: Julia Ochs.

Once a diverse audience has entered the institutional space, it is important to continue to provide social and physical infrastructures that allow audience members to exercise their agency – even though, or possibly precisely *because*, they might need to withdraw and pause. In line with these considerations, smaller and larger art institutions and events have begun including resting places in their spatial arrangements. The various exhibition venues at documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany, for example, included “quiet spaces” with low noise and low light for visitors to take a break. For the 2022 exhibition *Crip Time* at MMK – Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, the benches for resting were artistic contributions by Finnegan Shannon (Image 53).<sup>650</sup> Under the title *Do you want us here or not* (2020), the blue benches with white lettering were integrated into the exhibition space as useable artworks (rather than externalising rest spaces into different areas of the

650. Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, “Crip Time,” 2022, <https://www.mmk.art/de/whats-on/crip-time>.

building).<sup>651</sup>

My proposition for the construction of infrastructures of accessibility and inclusion in remote places and for a range of audiences includes the curatorial labour of attending to seemingly mundane questions of how to reach the venue, where to sit and rest, and how to see, touch, and engage with the works and their content. This curatorial care work is done as an extension of thinking-with care and with queer, feminist, and crip positions on interdependence, contingencies, empathy, and vulnerabilities.<sup>652</sup>



Image 52. Finnegan Shannon, *Do you want us here or not*, 2020, installation view in *Crip Time*, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, 2022. Photo: Museum für Moderne Kunst.

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651. Ibid. Finnegan Shannon, "Do You Want Us Here Or Not," artist's website, 2018, <https://shannonfinnegan.com/do-you-want-us-here-or-not>. Also at documenta fifteen the rest spaces seemed to have been artistically crafted or designed. However, this information ( of how, how, when) is not to be found on documenta's website, and nor did the "quiet spaces" in Kassel contain wall texts that disclosed the design credits. See documenta fifteen, "Accessibility," 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/accessibility/>.

652. Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World."

## – Prerequisite: Inclusive Communication

Within the context of a socially engaged curatorial practice, communication is rarely disengaged from the curatorial concept but rather is co-constituent. I therefore want to stress that the communication methods and linguistic choices applied within a curatorial project can be agents of care that either create or disable processes of shared presence and creation and can diminish barriers of access in regard to class, ethnic background, and dis\*abilities.

Within relational curating, strategies of communicative engagement play a central role in connecting with a range of audiences.<sup>653</sup> The crucial task lies in the curator's ability to spark interest for artistic processes within communities that might not be accustomed to regularly attending "art events." The invitation cards for the workshops at M.1 did not focus on promoting the arrival of an international artist to the rural community but rather presented a question central to the theme of the workshop. The workshop on trust, led by the Paris-based dancer and performance artist Myriam Lefkowitz, asked: "What are the conditions for mutual trust?" (Image 53). The visual artist Julieta Aranda asked in her workshop on time: "What kind of future is dormant within us?" (Image 25).

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653. The propositions of this section focus on communication between the institution or the curator with the respective communities and potential audiences of a given curatorial project. Though not spelled out, communication is also crucial in relation to the team, collaborators, board members, funding bodies, and so forth. The section therefore serves as an example of reconsidering communication strategies in the different parts of a curatorial cycle.





Image 53: Leaflet for Myriam Lefkowitz, "Workshop on Collective Self-Care," from the series "Care for Caregivers" at M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, Hohenlockstedt (2019). Photo: Moritz Kuestner, Festival Theaterformen 2017. Graphic design: Michael Pfisterer.

As a result, each invitation card 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 region's public sphere. Just like the workshops' own critical interrogation of questions of everyday caregiving, *to question* also emerged as a key curatorial strategy for community engagement. Over the course of the series, I came to understand this approach as a curatorial communication method that enables a tender linkage between more abstract academic discourses on the one hand and locally situated care practices on

the other.<sup>654</sup>

Not only communication strategies but also language itself can play a central role in fostering the presence of a diverse audience. Within the globalised art sphere, it is common to organise English-language events and to show films, performances, and other artistic works in English, whereas the main language of the site of display is not English. This turns fluency in English into a prerequisite for cultural participation, which makes it inaccessible for large portions of a potential audience (i.e., it presents a class barrier). For example, *documenta fifteen* – curated by a non-German collective – was an exhibition located in Germany that oftentimes was accessible only to English speakers, and at times only to those with Indonesian language skills. As someone fluent in English, I didn't notice this bias until an older friend of mine mentioned that she had a hard time understanding most of the works since she speaks only German.

At M.1, I engaged international artists who were not native German speakers, and so I set the intention to translate all events into German to make them inclusive for the local audience of rural Northern Germany. Due to a lack of additional funds and personnel, the translation into German mainly fell to me, yet I deemed this effort a necessary one in order to make the curatorial programming accessible beyond circles of the higher educated with a proficiency in the lingua franca. At times, programming participants translated for their peers, making it more of a collective process of intercultural communication and support. In return, because several of the artists used English as their primary language, the workshops also attracted non-German-speaking participants and, hence, this bilinguality opened the programming up to a richer audience in regard to cultural class and country of origins.

Language and communication measures are a condition for presence because they can break down barriers of access. The curatorial consideration of subtitling artistic works, commissioning audio descriptions of visual works and the exhibition at large, and providing sign-language interpretation for live events or braille for written documents constitutes forms of curatorial care. Online programmes

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654. This passage comes from my text Bailer, "Care for Caregivers: Curating against the Care Crisis."

may make automated translation into multiple languages easier than on-site events. Helena Reckitt also observes this increased institutional application of live captioning and written image descriptions, which she explains “reflects another attempt to respond to participants’ different access needs.”<sup>655</sup>

I therefore propose curators should critically examine the communication strategies within a given curatorial project and consider the enabling functions it may serve within the respective context. Further, such measures of communicative access also need to be made transparent, as it is key for potential audiences to obtain the information about support structures in *advance* of the event.<sup>656</sup>

From my own practice-based experience, I argue for an understanding of communication strategies of care as including 1) empathic questions, and an accessible language, as a way to connect with the given community; b) the use of language as a way to translate more abstract, global, or academic discourses into locally situated contexts; c) the consideration of more traditional modes of communication, as a way to stay connected with elder communities; and d) attention to the language and translation of public programming and exhibitions, as a key element of accessibility to cultural participation. While many of these considerations may seem mundane, my experienced reality of both collaborating with institutions and attending their public programming shows a continued lack of communication-related support structures, despite their central social function.

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655. Helena Reckitt, “From Coping to Curious: Unlearning and Reimagining Curatorial Habits of Care.” in *Curating with Care*, ed. Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (London: Routledge, 2023), 179.

656. Transparency still isn’t a given. It occurred to me, regarding a past instance, that my co-curator and I had provided an art institution with accessibility information as part of our exhibition text – later, we realised that this information had not been put on the website, as it had been disregarded as “internal notes.”

## – Prerequisite: Inclusive Temporalities

Regarding time, or chronopolitics, as an anti-normative structure becomes a political matter for curators concerned with feminist care ethics. Researcher and curator Hana Janečková, in reflecting on her own practice, states:

[C]urating as care needs a much longer time for preparation, feedback sessions, and communication with publics, including long-term engagement with partner institutions and artists while thinking through the distribution of cultural capital not only with the participating parties but through transversal communities.<sup>657</sup>

This line of thought connects to issues considered in Proposition #1, whereby the time dedicated to understanding the needs of the community is central. For this current proposition, I want to specifically look at the politics of time in regard to scheduling public events.

Art critic Hettie Judah, in an article for the *Guardian*, asks: “How can you attend your own show’s launch party if it clashes with children’s bath time?” as a way to kickstart a conversation on her research on how motherhood has affected the practices of the fifty artists she interviewed.<sup>658</sup> This question might sound banal, or even cynical, but the struggles and mechanisms of exclusion to which it alludes have great significance. Often the most prominent public speaker events, performances, and screenings occur in the evening, when most caregivers are occupied putting their dependents to sleep. This might make it difficult not only for caregiving artists to contribute to public programming but also for audience members with caring responsibilities to attend. Additionally, a variety of “working-class” jobs, such as in food and service, do not allow for the attendance of evening cultural events and neither do the many other fields that require shiftwork, such as elder care, nursing, and other medical professions. Therefore, temporalities matter not only for people

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657. Hana Janečková, “Crippling the Curatorial,” in *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, ed. Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Brigit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann (London: Sternberg, 2021), 89.

658. Hettie Judah, “‘Motherhood Is Taboo in the Art World – It’s as If We’ve Sold Out’: Female Artists on the Impact of Having Kids,” *Guardian*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/02/motherhood-taboo-art-world-sold-out-bourgeoisie>.



with caring responsibilities; it is also a matter of class and accessibility. This result highlights the necessity to think through the thematic and structural dedication to care in tandem.

While there exists no time slot that would allow everyone to join, it is important to be aware of the inclusive and exclusive potential of the timing of events. Judah, at a public event in Zurich, suggested that it might make sense to vary the hours of programming, so that different people can attend at different times.<sup>659</sup> Therefore, if curatorial work is community engaged, it is important to confer with the different audiences about scheduling, to try out different times, and to adjust them when needed.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it much more common to livestream and record cultural events, which allows audience members to view the material on their own schedules. Yet on “one’s own schedule” is a rather political concern, in light of excessive (domestic) care work, widespread chronic burnout within the paid workforce, and marginalised time for leisure or personal recharging, all of which compete with the ability to watch past events on one’s “own time.”

When time is considered curatorially, not only the start and end times of an event are important but so are the temporalities within the public programming itself – its density, its breaks, and its “unprogrammed” time slots that allow for informal exchange and gathering. For the workshop series at M.1, I proposed four-hour workshop slots with an hour-long shared lunch break. This temporal setup allowed enough travel time for people to arrive from larger surrounding cities with one- to two-hour commutes; it gave enough time for local families to have a relaxed morning; and it provided the artist with sufficient time to work more closely with the participants. After the workshop (usually around 4 p.m.), enough time was available for people to stay a bit longer and engage in informal conversations with the other participants or with the artist. Overall, the long break and the two intensive two-hour workshop blocks were timeframes that could be bridged for those with children by the on-site caregivers. For me, as both the curator and a single parent, it was

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659. Visarte Zürich, “Workshop with Hettie Judah at Binz39,” 2023, <https://www.visarte-zuerich.ch/news/book-launch-event-mit-hette-judah>.

important to not exhaust the day with excessive programming, as I was awaited by a child who desired my attention and also had to deal with post-workshop cleaning and reorganising of the space and materials.

I therefore propose to consider temporalities as political curatorial concerns, as doing so may lead to a questioning of normative cultural formats and the production of temporal frameworks that allow for diverse audiences and practitioners to be present – whether virtually or physically.

## – Prerequisite: Shared Meals

Food is not only a basic human need but also holds a central social function – one that many artists have explored, particularly since the 1960s, when art became more socially engaged, ephemeral, and experimental. One of the more prominent examples is how the international Fluxus collective engaged with food in the form of curated feasts, collaborative cooking experiments, and interactive and edible art multiples.<sup>660</sup> However, Fluxus was not the first artistic movement to use food as a material. In the 1930s, the Futurists used real food as an artistic medium to launch their “attack on cultural decadence, habituated ritual, and institutionalized culture.”<sup>661</sup> In the 1990s, particularly with the artistic positions of practitioners such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, food became not only an artistic material but a means to produce art-based social situations.<sup>662</sup> Through his cooking and serving of Thai curries in New York art galleries, Tiravanija aimed to create micro-utopian spaces of togetherness.<sup>663</sup> The political nature of the intersection of art and food becomes apparent in the approaches of Michael Rakowitz’s “Enemy Kitchen” workshop,<sup>664</sup> Jon

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660. Hannah Higgins, “Food: The Raw and the Fluxed,” in *Fluxus and the Essential Questions of Life*, ed. Jacquelynn Baas (Hanover, MA: Hood Museum of Art, 2011), 13.

661. Ibid.

662. Bailer, “Sozialer (T)raum? Über Das Politische Potenzial Der Kunst Von Joseph Beuys Und Rirkrit Tiravanija. Ein Kunsttheoretischer Vergleich” (bachelor thesis, Zeppelin University, 2012).

663. In my undergraduate thesis, I contrasted Rirkrit Tiravanija’s and Joseph Beuys’ concepts of art as a means of transformation: *ibid.*

664. Michael Rakowitz, “Enemy Kitchen,” artist’s website, accessed July 13, 2023, [www.michaelrakowitz.com/enemykitchen](http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/enemykitchen).

Rubin and Dawn Weleski's Conflict Kitchen restaurant,<sup>665</sup> and Daniel Fernandez Pascual and Alon Schwabe's Cooking Sections project,<sup>666</sup> to name a few.<sup>667</sup>

In the framework of the "Care for Caregivers" workshop series at M.1, it was Julieta Aranda who situated collective cooking as a political, anti-neoliberal practice of "wasting time together" by incorporating joint cooking and eating into her workshop "Vegetable Resistance."<sup>668</sup> This artistic approach allowed participants to enact alternative forms of sociality, using food as a medium.

However, food also fulfilled a range of other curatorially strategic roles within the programming cycle. All of the curatorial formats include a shared meal, which served as a key social moment for the participants to come together informally, to exchange experiences and thoughts, and to form networks. Our meals were either prepared together with the artists and participants, by the institutional team, or by a member of the community. The presence of food (be it shared lunches or simply coffee and cake) also served to create a framework of hospitality while simultaneously attending to the bodily needs of the participants.<sup>669</sup> The provision of food further needs to be seen in alignment with social reproduction theories, where care is a much more encompassing notion that includes everything needed to reproduce one's livelihood, including the nourishing of one's body.

While the provision of food, at first glance, may seem mundane to a curatorial position, I argue that food can form a strategic element of community engagement, one that enacts curatorial care and allows for alternative, non-consumerist, collective

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665. Conflict Kitchen, initiated by Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, artist website, accessed September 25, 2023, <http://www.conflict-kitchen.org/about/>. In 2014, as the first graduate student fellow for art and social justice at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in New York, I organised a student event with Conflict Kitchen.

666. Cooking Sections, initiated by the artists Daniel Fernandez Pascual and Alon Schwabe, artist website, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://cooking-sections.com>.

667. For further references, see Dani Burrows and Aaron Cezar, eds. *Politics of Food* (London: Sternberg, 2019).

668. M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, "A Workshop on Time with Julieta Aranda: Vegetable Resistance – What are We Seeds for?," 2019, <https://www.m1-hohenlockstedt.de/en/kalender/2019/11/23/ein-workshop-zum-thema-zeit/>.

669. For a critical reflection on hospitality within curatorial practice, see Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, eds., *Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions* (London: Sternberg, 2016).

forms of being-with. It further lowers classist barriers of participation, as providing communal meals attracts a range of community members and builds an opportunity to engage them in an artistic process. This process can be further aided when the food is sourced locally, from other collectives, shops, or cooks within the area, as it builds a trusting relationship that might inspire others connected to those communities to join the event.

Building on the long-standing social function of food within the arts, I propose that curators should consider shared meals as an integral part of the politics of presence, as communal nourishment fulfils a multitude of roles within the construction of caring infrastructures.

## **Proposition #4: Foster Networks and Alliances**

**Curatorial care recognises the relational quality of its practice, actively connects and acknowledges existing social webs, and integrates itself into the social fabric of its site to foster alliances between art and non-art or community practices.**

Part of relational curating is recognising the myriad interconnections and alliances within a community, seeking out those relations, and strengthening them further. Megan Johnston, in the context of socially engaged curatorial practices, argues that it is an “intentional process of collaboration, context, and engaging within communities – working with artists who employ social practice methods as well as with artists who have more of a traditional studio practice.”<sup>670</sup> This process fosters a web of relations that transcends the traditional boundaries of the art field and its institutions, engaging with extra-institutional and self-organised spaces and forming temporary alliances and collaborations with many non-art actors and communities. This understanding of curating as a radically relational practice grants importance to existing relational webs, which cultural practitioners may connect with, allowing for increased trust in new curatorial undertakings that otherwise might not have organically emerged from the community (e.g., through an appointed curator who may be foreign to the region).<sup>671</sup>

Particularly during the “Holo Miteinander” storytelling cafés, the team at M.1 and I strategically connected with existing local networks, grassroots initiatives, and self-organised clubs. In this context, the invited locals were regarded as experts who could analyse and address the changes needed in regard to housing, food, working, leisure, and other such topics. For example, during the storytelling café on “Mobility,”

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670. Johnston, “Slow Curating,” 24.

671. For the establishment of the notion of curating as a radically relational practice, see section 3.2.3 “Curating as a Radically Relational Practice,” on page 123, and section 5.1.2 – “Relational Curating as an Infrastructural Practice towards Care,” on page 221.

the grassroots shuttle-bus initiative for rural connectivity Bürgerbus Kellinghusen was present and shared information about the initiative's origins, operations, and volunteer engagement strategies. This created an interesting dialogue between the different parties and provided an informed basis about the realities but also the potentials for solidarity practices within the rural area. During the "Social Muscle Club" exchange event, a range of social initiatives also contributed to the programming, food, and social support of the event, while the programming itself contributed to strengthening the sense of community. While each group received a fee for its role, the collaborations were also meant to initiate prolonged working relations throughout the course of the curatorial programme. In a way, the actors formed part of a relational web of objects, spaces, people, and practices that, in alignment with AbdouMalik Simone's proposition of "people as infrastructure," turned into a "platform providing for and reproducing life in the city."<sup>672</sup> In the case of Hohenlockstedt, this meant upholding and reproducing the town's sociality. By establishing such spaces of encounter between the bodies of diverse communities creates the conditions for political acts, according to Judith Butler:

No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only "between" bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the "between."<sup>673</sup>

Part of a relational curatorial practice is to intentionally carve out such "spaces of the in-between," which allow collective political action, solidarity, and synergy to emerge. Anti-racist and feminist practices have long recognised the importance of alliances – a practice that relational curators can learn from, thereby emphasising the central linkage between a critical curatorial practice and wider social justice movements. I therefore propose regarding a curatorial practice of care not as isolated from existing social webs but as thinking and practising in alliance with existing social structures and collectively building *with* and *from* them.

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672. Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 407.

673. Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," transversal, September 2009, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0808>.

Building Block: Budgets

## **Proposition #5: Consider Curatorial Budgeting to Be Political**

**Acknowledge the capitalist framework under which art and curating are (still) subsumed and take seriously the need for fair pay for all contributors. Beware not to equate artistic production and curatorial care with the exploitative narrative of “a labour of love.” Consider a curatorial degrowth agenda: if the budget is restrained, minimise the scale of the project rather than the pay. Make your decisions to downscale transparent to inspire collective change across cultural organisations.**

“[I]t’s not us choosing to be economistic about gestation, it’s capitalism,” writes political theorist and writer Sophie Lewis in defence of the Wages for Housework movement, rejecting the prevalent critique of the movement’s effect of “economising” private social relations. I want to transfer this argument to the precarious arts sector, which continues to put cultural producers in a position of justification when demanding fair pay for artistic, curatorial, scholarly, or writerly labour. Here, exploitative labour practices dominate under the seemingly innocent disguise of “affective remuneration,” or what feminists have called “the labour of love.” So, to extend Lewis’s argument to the cultural field: *It’s not us choosing to be economistic about cultural production, it’s capitalism.* As long as cultural practitioners operate within a capitalist framework that requires a financial income to account for housing, food, education, clothing, and other means of survival, their work needs to be remunerated adequately. It is only from a position of class privilege that one can disregard questions of pay as secondary, thereby upholding expectations that people can and should perform certain labour for no or low fees. As long as we, as curators and artists, are implicated in the structural violences of neoliberal capitalism – with largely unaffordable housing, sustenance, childcare, and elder care – we need to

regard questions of pay and budgeting and its (re)distribution as of highest political concern. Meanwhile, the lived reality of cultural producers remains highly precarious: unpaid internships, self-exploitation, and low-paid, unstable working conditions very much characterise the cultural sector in Central Europe, and beyond.<sup>674</sup> Therefore, it is important to recognise the powerful and normative role of money within the arts, which defines whose needs are considered “worthy” and whose aren’t.<sup>675</sup>

As curators, we have different roles in this set of (economic) power relations: we might be directors of institutions, with a say in budgetary and human resource issues; we might be employed in poor and unstable working conditions ourselves; or we might be freelancers fighting for grants and residencies to be opened up not only to visual artists and writers but also to curators, to have a basis for subsistence. Whatever our role and agency may be, we have to recognise that our curatorial responsibility includes the co-creation of sustainable labour conditions for everyone involved – ourselves included.<sup>676</sup> Thus, practising curating with care requires breaking with the long-standing tradition of curatorial care primarily for (art) objects and (also) a centring of one’s curatorial care on the (economic) well-being of the humans involved in and impacted by the programming.<sup>677</sup>

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674. For discussion that homes in on these topics, see Anja Liersch, Friederike Evers, and Sarah Weißmann, *Spartenbericht Bildende Kunst 2021* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021), 47–48.

675. Charlotte Perka and Saskia Ackermann, “Liebe Sascia,” in *KANON. Die Experimentelle Klasse*, ed. Joke Janssen and ANna Tautfest (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2021), 195.

676. As argued previously with Reckitt, the art world can become sustainable only if the ones participating in it can reproduce their livelihoods and can be provided with a support system that includes childcare and social benefits. For more, see Helena Reckitt, “Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 5 (2016): 6–30.

677. I want to note that this perspective on equal pay is derived from working within a Central European context with a wide variety of private and public funding bodies – to pay everyone is not only a political question but also one of privilege. In many cultural contexts, (public) funding is extremely sparse or non-existent, and cultural programming heavily relies on collective organising, all of which is unpaid. It seems unlikely to bear any fruit to cry for fair pay in a context that contains no realistic basis for such claims. However, in a country such as Germany, where resources are generally available and, instead, are rather distributed unfairly across economic sectors, it does make sense to uphold, or even increase, the pressure on funding bodies, large cultural organisations, and government entities to provide a basis for fair pay within the cultural sector. Apart from financial resources, cultural organizations might have regular access to other kinds of resources that are not monetarily quantifiable but still potentially very powerful in making participatory or artistic projects happen (either as part of an organisation’s programme or in support of a community initiative). These resources range from the capacity to share physical space, having access to a range of networks and well-trained staff, being legally registered as an organisation, which provides access to funding



Hence, the way in which each curator deals (or does not deal) with questions of budgeting in general, and unpaid labour in particular, are political decisions – *political curatorial* decisions. These include decisions about who gets paid how much, for which labour, and whether anyone goes unpaid. It includes the decision to make or not make transparent the budgetary calculations.<sup>678</sup> Curators further have to consider *how* they channel their funds: Do their purchasing decisions support local businesses or transnational corporations? Are the entrance fees set too high, excluding vulnerable groups? Are parts of the budget invested in sustaining caring infrastructures that may outlive the curatorial project itself?

At M.1, it was important both for myself and my colleagues to ensure that everyone involved was paid fairly from my allocated curatorial budget, including everyone from the caregiver for the on-site childcare, to the curatorial assistant, to the artists and other collaborators. The local actors whom we engaged in the participatory programming of the storytelling cafés all received a fee for their contributions. Additional budget was allocated to artists who brought their children or partners (or both) to Hohenlockstedt, as well as to collaborators with dependents with special needs, who could not always leave them with the on-site caregiver. However, there were still limitations on our ability to compensate fairly, particularly when it came to artist fees for large collectives as well as other contributor fees within the framework of institutional collaborations – which, in retrospect, did not mirror the economic value which I would have liked to attribute to the individual contributors. It is at the intersection of the working conditions of practitioners inside (staff) and outside (freelancers) the institution that the infrastructural perspective unfolds one of its many relevant facets: it is not enough for arts organisations to centre their (curatorial) responsibility only on the labour conditions within their institutions – they also have to assume responsibility for the freelancing entities with

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processes that more informal entities oftentimes do not qualify for. Thus let us consider the various forms of capital (or: privileges) that are accessible to us and see how we can form a resourceful basis for our projects despite financial restraints.

678. For example, see the “Art/Museum Salary Transparency 2019” spreadsheet started by the curator Michelle Millar Fisher, for which she crowdsourced the salaries of art and museum workers to identify pay gaps. For more, see “Art Workers Circulate Public Spreadsheet to Promote Salary Transparency, Reveal Pay Gaps,” *Artforum*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/news/art-workers-circulate-public-spreadsheet-to-promote-salary-transparency-reveal-pay-gaps-80010>.

whom they collaborate. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the precarious status of freelancing art educators, artists, curators, and other related actors in relation to the institution.<sup>679</sup> While all these actors may at first appear to form part of the institution, their contractual details reveal their disposable status, which leaves them unprotected by the institution in times of crisis, illness, pregnancy or parenthood, and so on. Curatorial care therefore needs to establish frameworks of (economic) responsibility that extend to everyone who contributes to the institution, whether formally employed or contracted as a freelancer. The infrastructural perspective therefore highlights the need for curators and cultural leaders to think beyond the “walls of the museum,” aligning their actions with wider societal concerns – such as the labour conditions of practitioners who are not formally employed at the institution.

These labour aspects highlight the complexity of curatorial budgeting, which artists and activists Saskia Ackermann and Charlotte Perka take up in their letter exchange that expanded from my curatorial practice at M.1,<sup>680</sup> which served as a case study and to which they added their own open questions:

I often ask myself what is enough and what is the consequence that is called for: When is it better not to do something instead of doing it and reproducing the existing norms in the process? For example, when do I decide that an event cannot take place because I do not have the resources to remove certain barriers? How can I work against my internalised performance thinking that strives for high visitor numbers?<sup>681</sup>

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679. Says art educator Katja Zeidler: “Many actors found it very alarming how in the German, in the international – here especially US-American – context it became visible how important art and cultural education really is. As a first measure, several institutions have cut or even closed their education departments and thus sent their (female) employees, who are often freelancers anyway, into financial uncertainty. Due to the lockdown and the applicable sanitary regulations, the precarious working conditions for art mediators have thus enormously worsened. It has also become clear that there is a lack of safety nets, especially for self-employed art mediators, such as for loss of income, but also an independent interest group that advocates for the interests of the scene vis-à-vis the institutions.” Gila Kolb, Konstanze Schütze, Katja Zeidler, and Duygu Örs, “Kunstvermittlung im Ausnahmezustand,” *KIWit*, 2020, [https://www.kiwit.org/kultur-oeffnet-welten/positionen/position\\_16384.html](https://www.kiwit.org/kultur-oeffnet-welten/positionen/position_16384.html). My translation.

680. Perka and Ackermann, “Liebe Sascia.”

681. Both authors participated in and reflected on my curatorial programming in their public letter to me, “Dear Sascia” (ibid., 196). The original quote reads: “Dabei frage ich mich häufig, was genug ist und welche Konsequenz gefragt ist: Wann ist es besser, etwas nicht zu tun, anstatt es zu tun und dabei die bestehenden Normen zu reproduzieren? Wann entscheide ich zum Beispiel, dass eine Veranstaltung nicht stattfinden kann, weil ich nicht die Ressourcen habe, bestimmte Barrieren zu

Freelancing practitioners (with or without a coordinating role in a project) may have to ask themselves further uncomfortable questions about whether they themselves are being properly paid, whether their fee rests primarily on self-exploitation, and whether they are perpetuating a toxic work environment by continuing to engage in underpaid cultural programming. Further, they must critically ask themselves whether they have accepted unpaid “chores” (emotional labour, digital labour) according to internalised neoliberal myths of self-exploitation for the greater good.<sup>682</sup>

These questions are intricately tied to questions of class, as practitioners without family wealth to fall back onto can rarely afford to compete in the neoliberal struggle for fair wages within the arts.<sup>683</sup> The renowned Leipzig Book Fair, in their 2023 edition, hosted an event under the rubric “Making Books: Who Can Afford It? About the Cultural Precariat & Classism.”<sup>684</sup> Thinking about the curatorial agency of budgeting can thus address class in a dual manner: by contributing to fair wages that allow practitioners, independent of family wealth, to be active contributors within the arts, and by funnelling resources into the deconstruction of elitist barriers of access (which contribute to the construction of caring infrastructures).

However, the common response that I receive when speaking about the *politics of budgeting as a form of curating with care* is that this would demand enormous budgets, that such figures and demands would not be sustainable, and in fact that they are utopian.

Before I formulate my proposition, I want to return to a thought that I

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beseitigen? Wie kann ich meinen internalisierten Leistungsdenken, welches nach hohen Besucher\*innenzahlen strebt, entgegen arbeiten?”

682. For further reference on digital labour within the arts, see Sophie Lingg, “Caring Curatorial Practice in Digital Times,” in *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, ed. Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Brigit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann (London: Sternberg, 2021), 48–57.

683. The Berlin-based initiative Diversity Arts Culture hosted a series of events, videos, blog entries, and conversations about classisms in the arts. For further reference, see Nenad Čupić, and Diversity Arts Culture, “Klassismus(kritik),” October 13, 2020, <https://diversity-arts-culture.berlin/magazin/klassismuskritik>.

684. Leipziger Buchmesse, “Podiumsdiskussion: Bücher machen: wer kann sich das leisten? Über Kulturprekariat & Klassismus,” March 29, 2023, <https://www.leipziger-buchmesse.de/pco/de/buchmesse/63ecad8c95eb82a9710e1996>.

mentioned earlier: curatorial care – when conceived as a relational-ecological practice – does not exist as a layer added to a curatorial undertaking after the fact; rather every fibre of the curatorial fabric is immersed with the considerations of care.<sup>685</sup> Curatorial care is never an afterthought but the essence of the practice. With this understanding in mind, the common *modus operandi*, whereby the considerations of curatorial care are applied only at a later stage, if there should be budget enough to address them, becomes a recipe for failure (for example, where childcare is organised only because resources are freed up after a speaker cancels).

While I fully recognise the budgetary constraints that exist within the cultural field, I nonetheless want to argue for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between a given budget, institutional and peer responsibility, and the desired project outcome: do not adjust the pay of contributors to the limitations of the budget, but instead adjust the scope of the project – downscale it to the size that allows everyone to be paid fairly. I propose to call this a “curatorial degrowth agenda”: What can realistically be produced with the given budget while still doing justice to curatorial ethics of care? What scale becomes unsustainable from an ecological, social, financial, and feminist care perspective? What are the limits to one’s own capacity to sustain the curatorial process without financial and emotional self-exploitation?

In the case of my curatorial cycle at M.1, this meant producing one large opening event (“Social Muscle Club” in April 2019) and six weekend-long workshops (one per month from May to November 2019) with the given budget for the first year. At first glance, each event might seem high in cost, but this is because the invisible infrastructures of care have now been factored in, such as free on-site childcare, shared meals, travel costs for partners and children, and so on. Under this approach of curatorial degrowth, less (programming) is more (care). Within the neoliberal gig economy of the cultural sector, the silent downscaling of an institution’s public programming arguably could lead to a competitive disadvantage in relation to other arts organisations, which might keep up a fast-pace programme. It can thus be of

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685. For my previous elaboration on this point, see section 5.1.4 – “The Practice of Building Caring Infrastructures,” on page 227.

societal benefit to make the decision to downscale transparent for audiences, funding bodies, and fellow arts organisations – for example, to explicitly state that the institution will host two exhibitions less per year in order to be able to pay artists fairer exhibition fees and to conserve the team’s time and emotional resources. Such transparency can contribute to wider awareness of the economic issues at stake within the cultural sector. More specifically, it can raise awareness of the practice of conscious curatorial budgeting, forming a pathway towards collective degrowth and fair(er) pay within the arts.

## **Proposition #6: Seek Out Curatorial Agency and Redistribute Power**

**In the spirit of curatorial activism, seek out spaces of agency that allow you to “curate otherwise,” for example in alignment with feminist care ethics, by putting marginalised people in roles of expertise. To avoid misusing curatorial agency as a form of control, intentionally share power and create spaces of agency for your peers, audiences, and collaborators.**

While institutional mechanisms often seem rigid, it's common for the trodden paths of cultural production to ignite comfort and ease for the ones in charge, and the working mechanisms of the arts may seem unquestionably familiar and reassuring to some. However, I want to stress the importance of combatting the “monologue of sameness,” to speak with activist-curator Maura Reilly, and the dominant modes of operation that uphold a primarily male, white, and elitist art system.<sup>686</sup> It is within these rigid frameworks that one has to actively seek out one's own *curatorial agency* to identify wiggle room – the crack in an otherwise sealed modus operandi in order to *practise otherwise*, to find a space of agency within the given constraints.

Throughout the curatorial programme at M.1, I aimed to practice in a spirit of curatorial activism and thereby enact my curatorial agency to practise a feminist care ethics.<sup>687</sup> As my focus was on caregivers as marginalised voices not only within the arts but also within society, I crafted roles for both artists and local residents who were also caregivers to take on expert roles, in an effort counter the hegemonic construct that care is an invisible, valueless labour due to its being feminised and unpaid within society.

In the context of the workshop on motherhood, two artists who were also mothers were invited as experts. Their experiences navigating the precarious fields

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686. Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 30.

687. For an introduction to this concept, return to section 3.2.1 – “Curating as Activism,” on page 118.

of caregiving and art-making granted them credibility and provided a tangible basis of connection to these topics for the other participants. The artists, Liz Rech and Annika Scharm, practise from a situated, or embodied, knowledge, and they expanded the workshop from this position. Within the framework of the workshop on collective self-care led by GRAND BEAUTY, the presence of Hengameh Sadeghi as a workshop co-facilitator also followed this methodological approach. As an Afghan migrant woman – an often disregarded demographic in Germany, despite this group’s embodied layers of knowledges and experiences – the workshop setting allowed her to take up a position as an expert, from whom others can learn.

I also intentionally integrated caregivers into roles of expertise for the opening event of the “Social Muscle Club.” Each of the ten moderators came from Hohenlockstedt and the surrounding area and performed care work either in their professional, private, or volunteer life.<sup>688</sup> My curatorial choice to include these social actors from the region meant providing visibility and acknowledgement for these taken-for-granted caring roles that people perform within their communities. Valorising their caring activity as an expertise also equipped them well to moderate a group of strangers from a range of backgrounds.

In alignment with the notion of curatorial activism as a counter-hegemonic practice, I propose to intentionally flip dominant mechanisms of power, representation, inclusion, and systemic (dis)valuation upside down – even though such an act might occur only on a small, seemingly mundane scale. Curatorial care thus must include a proactive challenging of who gets invited, who receives which roles, and who speaks for whom, thereby counteracting dominant paradigms within the respective society, both in regard to care and in terms of racial, classed,

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688. The moderator Antje Hachenberg is an activist and a mother; one of her children has a mental disability, and she has been very active around inclusive housing projects in the area. Daniela Gervink leads the interest group Bürgerschaftliches Engagement in Steinburg, which is aiming to build a platform to connect volunteers and institutions in need of volunteers, and she also hosts “last aid courses” on how people can accompany their relatives when they are dying. Jörn Gasterstedt is the head of the local school and is known to be a very engaged headmaster; he organised a team of students, who were trained as conflict guides, to settle tensions in the classrooms and schoolyards. A micro-social network was created which transcended the space of the art institution as participants made arrangements for the near future – to take walks together, to mow someone else’s lawn, or to practise Spanish together.

religious, and gendered associations and dis\*abilities.

In the specific context of working with caregivers, this may mean not prescribing rigid sets of caring infrastructures for the participants or contributors but rather providing increased flexibility. The collaborative manifesto “How Not to Exclude Artist Parents” makes an “introductory request: Be flexible.”<sup>689</sup> Hettie Judah’s further elaborates on this point, stating that these sought-after support structures do not need to be costly:

[A] gallery that is flexible, loyal and communicative with artist mothers can make a big difference. Flexibility on the part of art institutions would include the assumption that an artist will need to bring a child with them on a residency, will need childcare while finishing work and installing an exhibition, and while being present at openings and exhibition events. If these requirements continue to be framed as a “choice,” the burden of flexibility is placed on the artist herself, together with associated costs.<sup>690</sup>

This flexibility and openness require curators to intentionally carve out spaces for conversation that allow participants to voice their needs and to hold a mindset that prioritises adapting to the needs of others rather than firmly insisting on prescribing default solutions. When I re-encountered Liz Rech years after our collaboration at M.1, she recalled that she had highly appreciated the agency to make her own choice of whether to bring her child to the event or opt for home-based care support.<sup>691</sup>

Redistributing agency and providing flexibility can come in the form of simple, genuine acts, but even these small acts are never without ambivalences. The power that allows one to change dominant narratives and protocols is the same power that provides the basis for domination, abuse of power, and the exercise of control. This line of thought returns us to the previously introduced notion of curator-as-police-commissioner by Joanna Warsza,<sup>692</sup> who during a conversation with fellow curator Nora Sternfeld, found an apt analogy for the ambivalent figure of the curator in the

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689. Artist Parents Network, “How Not to Exclude Artist Parents.”

690. Judah, “Full, Messy and Beautiful,” Unit London, 2023, <https://unitlondon.com/2023-05-31/full-messy-and-beautiful/>.

691. For a detailed account of the workshop, see appendix, section A.

692. See section 3.1.3 – “Independent Curating: The Curator-as-Author.”



image of

someone who is a policeman and an activist at the same time – who is deliberately in a conundrum of representing hegemony and needs to assume it, while often striving to be anti-hegemonic. Someone who creates forms and support structures, while introducing subversion, who embodies the electrifying impossibility of policing and being dissident at the same time.<sup>693</sup>

Caught in this ambivalent position, curatorial agency is never innocent nor uncontested. It is therefore not enough to seek out spaces of agency; rather, it becomes paramount to actively *redistribute power* by establishing spaces of agency for one's peers, colleagues, collaborators, and audience members.

This curatorial proposition thus departs from the ambivalent understanding of curatorial agency as both one of transformation and one of control, which only highlights the necessity of aligning one's curatorial practice with a feminist ethics of care. To contribute to a more just art field from a curatorial position, one must seek out liminal spaces – wiggle room – that depart from the belief that “radical care provides a roadmap for an otherwise.”<sup>694</sup> This approach aligns with the understanding that the mundane, the everyday, and small, micro-political shifts contain the potential for social transformation, such that our personal and professional practices may trigger a ripple effect into other sociopolitical spheres (that is, the curatorial butterfly effect).<sup>695</sup>

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693. Joanna Warsza, “The Elephant Is Bigger than the Room: Documenta Trouble and Curatorial Responsibility,” *Paletten*, July–August 2022, <https://paletten.net/artiklar/the-elephant-is-bigger-than-the-room>.

694. Hi'iilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese. “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times.” *Social Text* 38 (2020): 13.

695. See my earlier argument in section 5.1.3 – “Beyond the Symbolic: Radically Transforming Each Building Block,” page 223.

## **Proposition #7: Document and Archive with Sensitivity**

**Because curatorial practices of care are often relational and ephemeral, they need to show heightened sensitivity towards documentation, as it may risk creating vulnerabilities and less intimate encounters. Carefully mediated documentation and interactive archival formats, which allow for retrospective engagement with ephemeral events of the past, must be considered from the outset of a given project. This contributes to the longevity of the curatorial project after it has come to a formal close (“aftercare”).**

Many (post-representational) feminist curatorial practices, including my own, are characterised by radical relationality, ephemerality, and participatory processes.<sup>696</sup> These temporal processes do not produce tangible, material outcomes that can be easily displayed or reaccessed at a later stage. They are characterised by the experiential, not so much the visual-representational. In these particular curatorial frameworks – which are commonly limited by time-based project funding within the neoliberal gig economy – curators are confronted with the questions of what happens to these social, ephemeral processes when the funding runs out and how the processes can be archived and made accessible to others.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the visual arts have developed an almost fetish-like relationship with documentation, one that almost renders non-documented performances non-existent. Today, otherwise ephemeral blockbuster performances, such as Anne Imhof’s *Sex* at Tate Modern in London in 2019, are often live-streamed on social media and media partners’ platforms: “It’s about how can we view things beyond the museum and think about digital as well as physical space – that’s interesting to think about alongside the record or document. The global reach was extraordinary,” says Isabella Maidment, curator of contemporary British art at

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696. Which I have theoretically outlined in chapter 3 –“Contested Terrain: Curatorial Care,” on page 98.

Tate Britain.<sup>697</sup>

These historical and contemporary trajectories cause pressure for curators to document any sort of ephemeral process within the arts, including socially engaged, participatory processes, so as to obtain credit within the art system. However, many participatory processes are very intimate and a video, voice, or image recording (let alone a social media live stream) of the process may alter, and possibly limit, the audience's engagement, out of a fear of vulnerability and privacy infringement. Foregrounding this empathetic sensitivity, which values intimate processes over visibility credits, we decided not to document any of the workshops at M.1 in a traditional sense. Curatorial care in this instance meant building a safe space of encounter among the present participants, not prioritising an enthralling occasion for retrospective viewing. At most, I took snapshots during some of the exercises and informal lunchtime encounters, with consent of the participants.

While the considerations around documentation, archiving, and the creation of public moments around past events might become more pressing towards the end of a project or cycle, these questions need to be considered at its outset with as much intentionality and care as any other aspect of the programming. The way a project is to be documented and archived, along with the structures implemented to potentially lead to its self-organised and community-driven continuation, may change the overall concept of the project. If these questions are afterthoughts, it is often too late to lay the groundwork for such aspects to be properly carried out and to appear as sincere and credible conceptual columns of the project.

The notion of “conceiving the end from the beginning” becomes tangible in the example of the *Archive of Encounters* project with students from HFBK Hamburg, which was initiated at the beginning of my curatorial cycle.<sup>698</sup> The students' presence at each of the events formed the basis for their documentation and artistic interpretation of the shared experiences and, hence, created the conditions of the project's retrospective accessibility in the community library. I therefore propose that

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697. Isabella Maidment, quoted in Emily Gosling, “How Do You Present Performance Art Once It's All Over?,” *Elephant*, June 13, 2019, <https://elephant.art/present-performance-art/>.

698. Previously introduced in section 4.4.4.2 – “Archive of Encounters.”

practitioners should curate not only the documentation but also “the end” of a given project or cycle with the same level of intentionality and sensitivity given to any other element of a project and from the very beginning, thereby building the conditions for possible future engagement with or self-organised continuation of the initiated processes. I consider this proposition as a form of aftercare that prevents an abrupt ending and disjointing of the public programming and the relation between the artists and community members, instead proving a basis for future engagements with the shared experiences of the past.<sup>699</sup>

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699. The notion of “aftercare” can unfold in many different ways and can potentially include a paid period after a project is officially done, in order to allow for recovery, wrap up, administrative tasks, feedback conversations, and securing funding for future iterations of the programme. Aftercare has not yet received enough attention in curatorial thought and practice and needs to be expanded further from feminist perspectives.

## Proposition #8: Care for the Self

**Care for the self must be prioritised as much as any other relation of care within a curatorial project. The self-care of art workers is not only crucial amid precarious working conditions but also particularly relevant for curators who understand themselves as carers and tend to drain their personal resources by directing care primarily to others. Setting boundaries and initiating collective actions may lead to less exploitative labour practices as part of an enhanced framework of care for the self.**

“[W]orking to the point of burn out was almost a badge of honour amongst myself and other gallery colleagues. As the director of a small US art centre where I had previously worked liked to claim, ‘we punch way above our weight’,” shares Helena Reckitt.<sup>700</sup> Being “busy” and stressed has become a social status marker, evoking associations of importance and indispensability.<sup>701</sup> Within the cultural field, however, this highly intense level of occupational engagement does not lead to comfortable levels of income – rather, to the contrary. The arts pair enormous income insecurity with hyper-availability, impeccable professional performance, infringement of personal relationships, and chronic levels of burnout – which need to be obscured for the sake of upholding the “image of unflappable poise.”<sup>702</sup> Reckitt, who shifted from the gallery sector to academia, admits in a retrospective reflection: “Close to exhaustion, battling insomnia, I nonetheless continued to project the persona of the coping curator.”<sup>703</sup>

Audre Lorde’s much-cited formulation that we should conceive of self-care not as “self-indulgence” but as “self-preservation” highlights the political potential of this

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700. Reckitt, “From Coping to Curious,” 169.

701. Teresa Bücker, *Alle\_Zeit: Eine Frage von Macht und Freiheit. Wie eine radikal neue, sozial gerechtere Zeitkultur aussehen kann* (Berlin: Ullstein Buchverlag, 2022), 32.

702. Reckitt, “From Coping to Curious,” 169.

703. “Coping curator” is a term coined by curator and writer Jenny Richards, which Reckitt builds upon in: *ibid.*, 171.

practice. Sara Ahmed, who extends Lorde's thinking, argues: "Some have to look after themselves because the[y] are not looked after: their being is not cared for, supported, protected."<sup>704</sup> Curator and writer Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, in his essay "Every Straw Is a Straw Too Much: On the Psychological Burden of Being Racialized While Doing Art," asserts that the discussion of racism within the arts is an invisibilised subject:

The so-called art world is not a vacuum or an island. It is connected to the world and reflects exactly what happens in the world. But as a space where people expect progressive discourse, avant-garde politics, and liberal institutions, it comes as a surprise to some when racism is mentioned in the context of the art world. For this reason, racism is rarely thematized in the art world.

While Ahmed, Lorde, and Ndikung speak specifically about racism and white supremacy from their situated experiences as writers of colour, a similar structural neglect also holds true for precariously positioned cultural producers, caregivers, and those who are both – and who, additionally, encounter even more institutional violence when set in conjunction with racialised discrimination. As the art world is interested in keeping up its progressive image, such conversations are often swept under the rug, which makes it non-negotiable for marginalised social groups to prioritise their care for themselves. However, in taming and co-opting the mechanisms of profit-driven economies, Lorde claims that self-care can also serve as an obscurant that may lead away from political struggle by focusing on an individualised search for happiness.<sup>705</sup> It is from this angle that the insistence on self-care not as *self-indulgence* but as *self-preservation* is crucial: "Self-care becomes warfare. This kind of self-care is not about one's own happiness. It is about finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing."<sup>706</sup>

While mindfulness and "slow" movements of all sorts have been on the rise for several years, it is important to not use these methods as strategies to keep up with one's internalised sense of neoliberal hyperproductivity. Self-care, over and over

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704. Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," *Feminist Killjoys* (blog), August 25, 2014. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.

705. Ibid.

706. Ibid.

again, must be resituated as a political practice and removed from commercialised contexts.<sup>707</sup> Self-care is not a means to an end (e.g., productivity) but rather an end in itself.<sup>708</sup> It needs to be practised collectively, as demonstrated by GRAND BEAUTY in their contribution to the M.1 programming.<sup>709</sup>

Curators, and cultural practitioners at large, have to address self-care-as-self-preservation on two different levels: once as the ones who are subjected to hostile work environments, and once as the enactors of frameworks of practice for ourselves and others. In the first instance, curators are required to practise self-care within toxic work environments that are diminishing, having negative effects on practitioners' physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as their economic stability or growth. The second instance accounts for curators' production of work environments directed towards curatorial care for themselves and others – and which, seemingly paradoxically, leads curators to bleed out their personal resources, endangering their own capacity for self-preservation.

In regard to the first level of address, it is important to recognise the parallels between toxic personal or intimate relationships and toxic work environments, which are equally characterised by uneven power dynamics, affective or structural co-dependency, exploitative (economic) mechanisms, and a lack of truthfulness, security, and reliability. Cultural theorists Lara García Díaz and Pascal Gielen argue that the working conditions of repressive liberalism lead to precarisation on at least four levels: economic, social, mental, and political.<sup>710</sup> I want to expand on these intersecting tensions by quoting the Ghanaian curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim, who, in conversation with the journalist Christine Ajudua, makes tangible the contradictions of working within violent cultural institutional setups, particularly as a Black person:

And we talked so much [among us] about how we preserve our mental health, our physical well-being, our own selves within this work, which

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707. Ibid.

708. Sascia Bailer and Laura Mahnke, "#5 Care: See U th3re," podcast, 35:02, HFBK Hamburg, January 29, 2021, <https://mediathek.hfbk.net/l2go/-/get/v/248>.

709. M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, "A Workshop on Self-Care by GRAND BEAUTY," 2019, <https://www.m1-hohenlockstedt.de/en/kalender/2019/10/26/ein-workshop-zum-thema-selbstfuersorge/>.

710. García Díaz and Gielen, "Precarity as an Artistic Laboratory," 45.

is so taxing – not just in terms of the actual work, but also, you know, when you are going into these institutions, which are majority white and to a large extent still steeped in violence, how do you take care of yourself? How do you protect yourself?<sup>711</sup>

The path forward, at least for García Díaz and Gielen, is to call for forms of commoning, unionising, mutual solidarity, and collective action to organise in a way that is consequential in terms of legislation and politics:

In order to build an effective counter-hegemony – i.e., one that can really overturn the present neoliberal hegemony of precarization – alternative models must be distributed and, especially, shared. This is what we call the process of “commoning.” Alternative economies and forms of self-organization must demonstrate their effectiveness to others if they are to generate structural effects.<sup>712</sup>

They argue that artists and cultural practitioners can form part of this anti-hegemonic resistance to the status quo by proposing “new forms [of ideological principles] capable of inaugurating a new ‘common sense.’”<sup>713</sup> In this light, it becomes thrown into sharp relief that the commercialised, neoliberal narrative of self-care (e.g. the sort found under the hashtag #selfcaresunday, featuring spa visits, face masks, and yoga retreats) can never be a remedy for precarious working environments and much rather acts as an obscurant, as articulated by Lorde.

However, the proposed path forward of collectivised commoning actions is heavily based on unpaid labour, on tiring collective conversations in search of consensus, on emotional labour to enact conflict resolution – on top of the cultural practitioners’ paid labour. To follow Ahmed’s line of questioning:

Perhaps we need to ask: who has enough resources not to have to become resourceful? When you have less resources you might have to become more resourceful. Of course: the requirement to become more resourceful is part of the injustice of a system that distributes resources unequally.<sup>714</sup>

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711. Nana Oforiatta Ayim, “Ghanaian Curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim on Why the Future of the Museum Must Exist beyond the Art World’s Boundaries,” interview by Christine Ajudua, Artnet, July 27, 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nana-oforiatta-ayim-interview-2148667>.

712. García Díaz and Gielen, “Precarity as an Artistic Laboratory,” 53.

713. Ibid., 52.

714. Ahmed, “Selfcare as Warfare.”



This puts curators and cultural practitioners, whether freelancers or institutional employees, in a precarity double-bind. From their vulnerable position they have to formulate and demand structural changes, thereby – at least temporarily – diminishing their means of self-preservation for the sake of commoning towards caring infrastructures.

This complex set of tensions leads us to the second crucial level at which curators must practise self-care. In this instance, curators – possibly with a drive to challenge the status quo of the arts – drain their energy resources and, as a consequence, lose the basis for their own self-preservation. To listen, to engage, to host, to coordinate, to share, to hold space, to empathise, to include, to sustain, to worry, to adapt – all these tasks form a curatorial practice that centres on care. Like other forms of caring labour, the directedness towards others and the normalisation of self-less dedication to the healing, growing, and well-being of others can lead to exhaustion, anxiety, and even burnout. The preservation of others stands in competition with the preservation of the self. Different forms of care need to be recognised as mutually exclusive, including curatorial care for others and the curator’s care for the self. One might, therefore, publicly accrue the status of a “caring curator” by being sensitive to the diverse mechanisms of exclusion, by endlessly trying to establish caring infrastructures, by going the extra mile to reach alternate communities, by applying for additional funding late at night, by creating an atmosphere of hospitality for the audiences, by making seemingly small but repeated gestures of care towards artists and audience members – all while one’s own state of being long ago morphed into that of a “coping curator.”<sup>715</sup>

In such dynamics, neglecting self-preservation comes under the guise of curatorial care. Here curators may need to combat external pressures of professionalism, hypervisibility, and hyperproductivity as much as their own internalised notions of gendered care, hospitality, devotion, and people pleasing, through which they self-create conditions that require them to perpetuate the modus operandi of the “coping but oh so caring” curator. This already normalised condition

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715. Reckitt, “From Coping to Curious.”

of the coping curator must be set in conjunction not only with the care labour of their (poorly) paid position but also with the unpaid care labour of their personal lives as well as the aforementioned unpaid labour of political action towards anti-hegemonic frameworks of commoning for a more just future. Indigenous scholar Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and media scholar Tamara Kneese aptly articulate the contextual constraints of self-preservation: "care does not happen in a vacuum; rather, care of the self promised to sustain the social and personal costs of caregiving."<sup>716</sup> Self-preservation forms the basis for care for oneself, others, and sociopolitical and ecological transformation, which makes it a highly charged terrain. This field of intersecting tensions and contradictions leads curators to act as a central crux, requiring us to articulate how we can enact a curatorial practice of care while also taking care of ourselves.<sup>717</sup>

By no means do I claim to have mastered these tensions, despite my privileges of being white, university educated, able-bodied, family supported, and scholarship funded. On the contrary, the lived reality of these unreconcilable tensions enables me to point to the tender spots of a curatorial practice within the framework of a feminist care ethics: as a single parent, as an artistic director or a freelancing curator, as a doctoral researcher, and as an educator, the task of self-preservation is a risky balancing act, destined to fail. The question that arises as the most pressing is: How to exist and continue to exist in such unhealthy working conditions? This final proposition thus focuses on recognising that self-care as self-preservation needs to be recognised as just as important as any of the other needs of a curatorial project.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution or proposition, but healthy boundaries, disengagement, and refusal represent possible pathways forward. In the web of structural violences, neoliberal work ethics, and personal limitations and preferences, a shift occurs which Reckitt describes as a process of "cooling": art workers stop accepting the lip service paid to care if the art sector continues to only

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716. Hobart and Kneese, "Radical Care," 6.

717. Bailer and Mahnke, "#5 Care: See U th3re."

provide care for a limited, privileged minority.<sup>718</sup> Part of “cooling” includes a critical introspection of neoliberal notions of self-worth, work ethics, productivity, flexibility, mobility, availability, performance, and success. This examination then allows one to challenge these notions – and to spark a moment of emotional disengagement and boundary setting.

While setting boundaries does not fix structural violences at stake, it protects the given resources of a cultural worker. The internalised “fear of missing out” (a.k.a. FOMO) is tied to real consequences within the arts, where absence and invisibility led to fewer invitations and hence less income. I thus make a case that curators should not simply withdraw but rather make the withdrawing, the setting of boundaries, transparent and thereby contribute to the normalisation of limited availability. I once again turn to queer-feminist writer and musician Johanna Hedva’s letter to Joan Tronto, in which they share their personal journey of limiting their availability in light of exhaustion:

I put an auto-response on my email that said, *Sorry, I probably won’t ever respond to you*, and I left it there for two years. I said no to invitations to write or speak about illness, which meant I said no to many opportunities. Who knows the price of that refusal. I turned down book contracts with publishers I’d dreamed of working with. *We’d love to know your thoughts*, the invitation would say, but in my head, there was a vein of bitterness, of exhaustion.<sup>719</sup>

Hedva is not alone in limiting one’s personal availability, especially within the context of chronic illness and dis\*ability. Robert McRuer likewise shares how his academic career demands constant mobility and long-distance travel, which as a dis\*abled person he began to decline, as less frequent travel translates into less frequent and less intense pains: “when I slow down, redefine ‘able,’ and turn down the invitation to speak or visit[,] I am not unable to travel; I am frequently

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718. Reckitt, “From Coping to Curious,” 179. The full quote is: “Akin to how I have described my efforts to distance myself from naturalised forms of cultural subjectivity and labour, economist and historian Kate Barclay explores how some contemporary academics are involved in a process of ‘cooling off’ from the vocational self that academia calls for and the power systems it reproduces. She argues that such a cooling, accompanied by ‘learning to sit in discomfort,’ can be an important step in efforts to build more ethical institutions. Signs of ‘cooling’ are also visible in the today’s cultural sector. Arts workers are more regularly voicing their discomfort with perpetuating a system in which notions of care are often spoken, but care rarely extends beyond a limited, privileged few.”

719. Johanna Hedva, “Dear Joan,” in Bailer, Karjevsky, and Talevi, *Letters to Joan*, 68.

*unwilling.*<sup>720</sup>

McRuer's statement represents part of a culture shift in academia whereby its freelancers and employees are no longer willing to uphold the status quo. In their brilliant, collectively written article "Slow Scholarship," ten or so scholars put forth strategies for circumventing, challenging, and resisting the neoliberal pressures within academia. Among their ten strategies, which might be of equal relevance for the cultural field, they include the suggestion to send fewer emails or to turn email off all together during certain times; to learn how to say no; and to begin to work towards the minimum: "good enough is the new perfect."<sup>721</sup> Another group, the arts-based bare minimum collective, produced a manifesto that follows similar lines of thinking:

The bare minimum collective believes in doing nothing or at the very least, as little as is required of us. We work smart, not hard. We're a bunch of last minuters, a "can I copy your answers?," "let's share notes" and "did you do the reading?" kind of collective.<sup>722</sup>

This tendency to perform the bare minimum at work has also recently received attention on social media under the rubric of "quiet quitting."<sup>723</sup> Quiet quitting is not quitting one's job as such but rather "quitting the idea of going above and beyond," states the TikTok influencer Zaiad Khan.<sup>724</sup> Khan elaborates, "You are still performing your duties, but you are no longer subscribing to the hustle culture mentally that work has to be our life." The term sparked a global outburst on social media regarding work ethics, internalised employer expectations, and work-life balance, highlighting the absurdity that "simply doing your job" is considered to resemble quitting – once more making clear how necessary it is to set healthy boundaries and continually question internalised neoliberal expectations around

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720. Johnson and McRuer, "Cripistemologies," 136. My emphasis.

721. Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winifred Curran, "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *Acme* 14 (2015): 1,253.

722. The Bare Minimum Collective, "The Bare Minimum Manifesto," Medium, 2020, <https://medium.com/@bareminimum/the-bare-minimum-manifesto-bfedbbc9dd71>.

723. Alyson Krueger, "Who Is Quiet Quitting For?," *New York Times*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/23/style/quiet-quitting-tiktok.html>.

724. Ibid.

labour.

The above examples from scholars, writers, and activists show how, in Western, capitalist societies at least, our sense of self-care and one's self-given permission to slow down and take time off are relationally constructed. To initiate a change in a culture of work relations, we need to become the many – those who choose to act differently, who co-construct caring support structures for one another, and who make their boundaries transparent.<sup>725</sup> The making transparent of boundaries helps to manage internal and external expectations, including of peers, colleagues, collaborators, bosses, clients, family, and friends.

In light of structural violences, setting out-of-office responses and writing cautioning email signatures may seem like a laughable path forward. However, such micro-political acts could be considered in alignment with Ahmed:

Even if it's system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does not change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present, you have to manage; to cope. Your choices are compromised when a world is compromised.

I therefore advocate for realistic, incremental, micro-acts of agency that do not solemnly rely on multi-year collaborative activism for structural transformation (even if utterly desirable). Put another way: until the revolution takes place, we have to get by somehow. At times, curatorial care (with healthy boundaries) might contribute to constructing micro-utopian enclaves of care in an otherwise diminishing structure. Until then, I leave on this hopeful note from Ahmed: "We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters."<sup>726</sup>

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725. In this search to work and relate differently, art workers are certainly not alone; especially in the movement of "new work" many organisations have put forth alternative economic models. The German "new work" magazine *Neue Narrative* has dedicated an issue to "health in a work context" and has formulated strategies on, for example, how to communicate, incorporate, and encompass chronic diseases and menstruation in a work place. Their issues include case studies and easy tools towards organisational change. See *Neue Narrative*, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://www.neuenarrative.de>.

726. Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

## Soft Manifesto for Caring Infrastructures

The below gathers together all the propositions under each building block to provide a shortened overview or “soft manifesto” on how to enact caring infrastructures. These propositions build the foundation for an expansion of this methodology, to which further elements, in the form of additional “building blocks,” can be added.

Building Block: Situating

### **Proposition #1: Gain a Sincere Understanding of the Context**

*When embarking on a new curatorial project, hold space and time for observation of the context and for deep listening to the community before developing public programming. This allows the project to emerge from the context rather than become an external imposition.*

Building Block: Visibility & Representation

### **Proposition #2: Create the Conditions of Visibility for Underrepresented Perspectives**

*The agency of curators lies in the power to challenge canons and patterns of representation. Curating with care needs to create the conditions that bring underrepresented themes, perspectives, and social groups to the fore of public visibility and discourse, in tandem with structural changes.*

Building Block: Accessibility

### **Proposition #3: Provide “Care for Presence”**

*As a curator, create “conditions for presence” for a range of audiences, artists, and*

*collaborators. Consider which curatorial choices in particular – which prerequisites – allow for the presence of whom. Consider the following “conditions for presence”:*

- Prerequisite: On-site Childcare**
- Prerequisite: Inclusion, Dis\*ability, Im\*mobility, Rest**
- Prerequisite: Inclusive Communication**
- Prerequisite: Inclusive Temporalities**
- Prerequisite: Shared Meals**

Building Block: Networks

**Proposition #4: Foster Networks and Alliances**

*Curatorial care recognises the relational quality of its practice, actively connects and acknowledges existing social webs, and integrates itself into the social fabric of its site to foster alliances between art and non-art or community practices.*

Building Block: Budgets

**Proposition #5: Consider Curatorial Budgeting to Be Political**

*Acknowledge the capitalist framework under which art and curating are (still) subsumed and take seriously the need for fair pay for all contributors. Beware not to equate artistic production and curatorial care with the exploitative narrative of “a labour of love.” Consider a curatorial degrowth agenda: if the budget is restrained, minimise the scale of the project rather than the pay. Make your decisions to downscale transparent to inspire a collective change across cultural organisations.*

Building Block: Agency, Power, and Control

**Proposition #6: Seek Out Curatorial Agency and Redistribute Power**

*In the spirit of curatorial activism, seek out spaces of agency that allow you to “curate otherwise,” for example in alignment with feminist care ethics, by putting marginalised people in roles of expertise. To avoid misusing curatorial agency as a form of control, intentionally share power and create spaces of agency for your*

*peers, audiences, and collaborators.*

Building Block: Documentation and Archiving

**Proposition #7: Document and Archive with Sensitivity**

*Because curatorial practices of care are often relational and ephemeral, they need to show heightened sensitivity towards documentation, as it may risk creating vulnerabilities and less intimate encounters. Carefully mediated documentation and interactive archival formats, which allow for retrospective engagement with ephemeral events of the past, must be considered from the outset of a given project. This contributes to the longevity of the curatorial project after it has come to a formal close (“aftercare”).*

Building Block: Self-care

**Proposition #8: Care for the Self**

*Care for the self must be prioritised as much as any other relation of care within a curatorial project. The self-care of art workers is not only crucial amid precarious working conditions but also particularly relevant for curators who understand themselves as carers and tend to drain their personal resources by directing care primarily to others. Setting boundaries and initiating collective actions may lead to less exploitative labour practices as part of an enhanced framework of care for the self.*



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This chapter – substantial in size and dense in its arguments – embarked on a journey of conceptually grasping and renegotiating the potentials of the term “caring infrastructures.” In entering a dialogue of thinking-with Joan Tronto, I critically articulated what I aim for caring infrastructures to mean and how they differ from other concepts, such as “institution,” “system,” and “structure.” I fused these considerations with the discourse on relational curating as care and the need to establish support structures. In an effort to make curatorial practice tangible as a lived practice, not only as an ethics, I propose of thinking of not only art but also curating as practices *useful* to the wider community.

After setting up this basis, I presented my eight practice-led propositions towards building caring infrastructures, which seek to expand on the curatorial practice I undertook at M.1 and to make the derived knowledge productive for the wider community of artistic and curatorial practitioners. While these propositions aren’t all-encompassing, they formulate a methodology upon which other practitioners can expand. I also presented a shortened “soft manifesto” of the propositions, offering easy access and a succinct overview.

In the upcoming, final chapter of this dissertation, I not only shift the focus to the potentials of caring infrastructures but also scrutinise their limitations, contradictions, and inabilities.