

[GROUNDINGS]

TIME TO
TAKE TIME
TO GET
GROUNDED

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

“There cannot be such thing as an irrelevant background in an ecological worldview”¹

The wavering grounds of my writing may be a place to start here. These thoughts arise from a long-term engagement with and (in) frequent visits over the years to an island in an archipelago in a small sea. The land gradually rises here, half a metre in a hundred years, as it has done since the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age. The brackish water, meanwhile, is decreasing in salinity due to the increase in rain fall. At the moment, the salt content in the archipelago sea is approximately the same as that of human tears. Whether the global sea level rise will catch up with the glacial rebound here and bring more salt with it to these estuarine waters, no data modelling can tell us yet for sure. The slowly shifting shoreline of the island, and the surrounding marine life struggling to adapt their fluid embodiment to the rapidly transforming watery world of theirs, are constant reminders of the uncertainty of the trembling grounds – of our work and ourselves, communities and ecosystems – at the time of ecological crisis.

The ongoing pandemic has forced globally many, who have the privilege to do so, to withdraw to literal and metaphorical islands. It appears now more urgent than ever to reassess the circulations that make our work in the arts, and our very existence, possible. Virtual connections have become indispensable, questioning the arts’ relatively recent addiction to cheap flights across the globe. Feet firmly on the ground again, yet our work mostly in the cloud, the question remains as to what exists in between and beyond the nodes of connections in the ever-expanding and furiously productive networks. It may be time to dig our heels and hands in the soil of our toils so as to pay closer attention to the backgrounds that used to be mere distant miniature landscapes, as viewed by

1 Puig de la Bellacasa 2015.

the all-seeing eye framed by the plane window, and which have now disappeared under or are reduced to virtual wallpapers.

The global public health crisis is the latest reminder of the more-than-human communities, which our everyday practices both impact and depend upon. In order to critically situate professional practices in the arts today, to ground our work, it may be necessary also to refocus from backgrounds to sticky entanglements and attachments within myriad communities that we and our labours are always already part of. What if the grounds upon which our work rests, are (like) soil – heterogenous communities of diverse temporalities, where nothing is simply just dead matter? How to care for these lively grounds as “communities of kin”, rather than add to the rapid depletion of the soils with extractive practices that view them merely as resources?²

While the pandemic has emphasised sealing and distancing in all of our everyday practices, it has likewise asserted the urgency to think and act away from detachment. The entwined climate and biodiversity crises have brought home the entanglement of the fates of all life forms. Yet how to embrace this ever-present viscous proximity of codependencies at the time of heightened fear of contagions? This question haunts here and now my ecological thinking together with a number of feminist and decolonial intellectual companions as well as myriad more-than-human others. The persistent “we”, which has resisted my attempts to erase it from the text, appears thus as a sticky concept that, I hope, performs its foundational heterogeneity and situatedness throughout the writing, insisting on collectivity while refusing universality.

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2 Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 168.

“Colonialism is carried by currents in a weather-and-water world of planetary circulation, where we cannot calculate a politics of location according to stable cartographies or geometries.”³

Ceaseless planetary flows between water bodies big and small connect us all as the lungs and the arteries of life on Earth. Yet some have been able to detach themselves more than others from these intimate circulations and the effects of their disruption. Rather than acting as a great leveller, the global public health emergency has accentuated the inequalities that haunt reassessments of practices of mobility in the arts. What does it mean to be mobile at the time of climate crisis and mass extinctions, when global connectedness is accelerating the spread of disease and escalating rampant exploitation of natural and human resources alike? Who may choose to be mobile at the time of enforced migrations of human populations as well as myriad endangered species of flora and fauna, in a world of reinforced borders and protectionist policies, where both open xenophobia and toxic chemicalisation has seeped uncontrollably everywhere?

Moreover, thinking about mobility today, we have to address not only water but also oil. The slick fluidity of oil is reflected in the technologically mediated existence, in what has been called “petro-subjectivity” by Brett Bloom.⁴ The culture of constant connectedness hides its colonial legacies and the underlying reality of destruction and dispossession that are the true costs of keeping the virtual clogs turning non-stop as if by magic. The inscrutability of oil, with its origins and production processes as well as myriad implications largely escaping visibility and attempts at containment, has numerous political and ecological as well as

3 Neimanis 2017, 36.

4 Bloom 2015.

aesthetic effects, as Amitav Ghosh writes.⁵ Oil has penetrated everything in our daily lives as well as all ecosystems across the globe. Microplastics, for example, can be now found in human bodies as well as in the deepest crevices of the sea bottom.

Could the pandemic really be a rupture in this ceaseless, all-pervasive flow of fossil-fuel powered linear progress towards the cliff edge of extinction – an opening for transition? Could we move away from extractive practices and the underlying modus operandi that the precarity in the arts, the project funding logic and the market, together with the technologically driven attention economy, have accelerated? Could we imagine international circulation otherwise than the standard currents and the current standards of the art world, with the help of soil and water ecosystems, where it is impossible to differentiate the ground from the various cycles of life it sustains?

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“how to inherit the layers upon layers of living and dying that infuse every place and every corridor”⁶

Everyday practices are in complex material and methodological ways implicated today in the extractive practices and legacies at the source of the depletion of the soils and the seas. Is the operating logic, economy, and business-as-usual in the international art world at all aligned with the critical content of much of the art work produced, exhibited and debated? The carbon footprint of professional activities in the arts may be small compared to some other industries, but claiming that it therefore does not matter aligns implicitly with the arguments that marginalise the arts in the bigger

5 Ghosh 2016, 74.

6 Haraway 2016, 138.

societal picture. The science is clear that every sector must aim for rapid reduction of carbon footprints within the next decade. Here the responsibility must lie on institutions, and on collective and structural efforts, while everyone should have a stake in the process.

First of all, sufficiently in-depth understanding of the complex impacts of diverse factors is needed. In support of informed decisions, it is necessary to calculate carbon footprints – such as travel, building infrastructures, energy use in technology, etc – but also to contextualise these measurements. Transition to carbon neutrality has to be tied in closely with social justice. Allocated time and resources are now urgently required for working out ecologically and socially sustainable practices and principles in every production, in each organisation, and collectively in the local as well as global professional fields.

There are no blank canvases in ecological thinking. Materials and methods alike carry their own inheritances with them, bringing varying weight of meaning to our work. Where are found objects found from, how and by whom? Have the previous lifeworlds and histories of the materials been acknowledged – whether minerals or lichen removed from their ecosystems, or synthetic materials with all their toxic legacies? Beyond ecological impacts, materials raise questions of the production processes and supply chains in all of their global inequalities. Perhaps the very idea of a found object or a blank canvas is a problematic heritage of (Western) modernity, which keeps on fostering the presumption of open access – for some – to materials, knowledges, ecosystems and communities, without much attention to the protocols for gaining that access, or for figuring out who could possibly grant it.

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“The problem is not with attachment; the problem may be that some of us, those who call themselves ‘moderns,’ confuse their attachments with universal obligations, and thus feel free to define themselves as ‘nomads,’ free to go everywhere, to enter any practical territory, to judge, deconstruct or disqualify what appears to them as illusions”⁷

Myriad attachments tie us to places, communities, ecosystems. These attachments focus our attention to particular things in particular ways. They direct and ground partial perspectives. Furthermore, attachments do not merely connect but also commit. The connections and commitments bear significance that often goes unnoticed – or that becomes apparent when these attachments are ignored, as Isabelle Stengers argues.⁸ Acknowledgement of attachments is the foundation of critically situated knowledge and practices. They also allow us to come together across disciplinary and other boundaries, to gather around shared matters of concern and care.

Cultural, professional, discursive, collegial, and numerous other attachments enmesh in all their intimate, mundane and contradictory materialities and meanings in every practice with far-reaching implications. In addition to attentiveness to attachments, Stengers calls for “cosmopolitics” that challenges us to assess the complex affects of practices. Decisions should be made in the presence of all those affected, she argues, also beyond human communities.⁹

7 Stengers 2005, 191.

8 Stengers 2005, 191.

9 Stengers 2018, 152.

The heterogeneity of communities thus invited to gather around the table shakes the grounds and bounds of linear coordinates of time and space within which the modern capitalist worldview and sense of self is fixed. This reality is measurable and standardised in a hegemonic relation between humans and nature, whereas individual self-management and self-ownership “is assumed to be the fundamental social relation”, Silvia Federici argues.¹⁰ As the climate crisis now reveals the world to be unpredictable in its changes – although certainly not without warning – the order built on standards is being undone. This is a crisis also of culture, as Ghosh writes.¹¹

How can art, whose canons and criteria of quality have been aligned with the Western bourgeois views and values, respond to the challenge the burning world presents today? As the faults and biases of this worldview are now spectacularly exposed, transformative work is necessary not only on the level of critical content but also deep in its foundations. Yet how to make sense of the temporally and spatially unequally distributed codependencies – whether in the dispersed causalities of global capitalism, or the accelerated manifold feedback loops between local ecosystems and planetary ecological transformations. To sense and to make sense of the out of order, which does not fit into the standards, demands return to fieldwork.

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“The capacity to read the elements, to discover the medical properties of plants and flowers, to gain sustenance from the earth, to live in woods and forests, to be guided by the stars and winds on the roads and the seas was and remains a source of ‘autonomy’ that had to be destroyed. The

10 Federici 2014, 143-149.

11 Ghosh 2016, 9.

development of capitalist industrial technology has been built on that loss and has amplified it.”¹²

Autonomy based on situated knowledge and embedded practices in specific environments has been replaced not only with tools offered by technology and science, but also with diverse symbolic freedoms, which I would argue include the arts’ illusory independence from ecological material boundaries. To reground practices in the arts calls for rethinking of the freedom of the arts, perhaps not so much as autonomy but as open potentiality. The singularity of the field of art may lie in its porous boundaries and capacity to inhabit gaps between knowledges in the face of the many unknowns. This draws to the fore an urgent demand for ethics to guide us on these uncertain grounds of a field-in-formation.

Could this field be approached in its materialities and meanings as the soils, never simply singular, that nurture art work? What if these soils are depleted by monocultural plantations, like the planetary agricultural lands. How to work against the depletion of our field and soils? This requires careful attentiveness to the diverse temporalities in each particular place and the complex feedback loops between places, which our practices are also part of. Being grounded or rooted does not simply equal stability. Situated knowledges and embedded practices in all their partiality can thus be foundational for planetary perspectives.¹³

“how the universalizing figure of the Anthropocene might be *grounded* by engaging specific places (...) demands a multiscalar method of telescoping between space (planet)

12 Federici 2019, 191.

13 The notions of situated knowledge and partial perspective refer indirectly to Donna Haraway’s seminal text. Haraway 1988.

and place (island) in a dialectic or “tidalectic” way to see how they mutually inform each other.”¹⁴

Writing from the critically situated perspective of postcolonial islands, Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues for the need to mediate between vastly different yet intricately interwoven scales. Zooming and diving into divergent temporal rhythms and situated knowledges challenges the universalising point of view that would erase some of them as incompatible. This multiscalar approach resonates with the demand by the Zapatista for “a world in which many worlds fit”, referenced by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, who call for a pluriverse as “a political ecology of practices”. They propose “the uncommons as the heterogenous grounds where negotiations take place toward a commons that would be a continuous achievement”.¹⁵

While virtual connections allow unprecedented capacity to share situated knowledges and form alliances across the globe, what is lost beyond the reach of the heads in the cloud? How are viewpoints framed, which senses and modes of engagement prioritised? How do communities become detached bubbles, rather than many worlds in a shared world? How can collectivity outweigh isolation? What disappears into the voids in between the nodes of connections? The lines between are, after all, literal cables cutting through the seabeds and 5G masts that promise ever more speed for the busy Global North. Meanwhile the escalating energy use and ecosystem disruptions by these infrastructures are still rarely acknowledged. The recycling of rare earth minerals essential for digital technologies mostly means cocktails of chemicals and burning mounds of e-waste in the Global South. Mining is expanding, creeping across the borders of nature reserves and indigenous territories as well as to the largely unknown ecosystems of the deep sea. The next step appears

14 DeLoughrey 2019, 2.

15 Blaser & de la Cadena 2018, 4 & 19.

to be the star wars on minerals in outer space. Yet these minerals in themselves are not merely dead matter either, but rather a part of astonishingly diverse multispecies communities and cosmologies.

How are our practices aligned with the tempo and spatial organisation of this order of things that continues the colonial practice of terra nullius? How to shift gears from looting to rooting? What is the potential already built into our practices to commit to differing temporalities and continuities, while being firmly grounded in specific contexts, communities and ecosystems?

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“Care is not one way; the cared for coforms the carer too.”¹⁶

How to make space for the heterogenous grounds and take time necessary for the continuous negotiations between worlds? Considerably closer attention needs to be paid to how divergent locally embedded practices can be brought together so as to navigate between places and the planetary. This requires longer-term commitments on all levels. Less may well be more when done slower. Yet slowing should not be understood within a linear progressive framework. More emphasis – also in budgeting and communications – on process and practices, dialogue and collaborations, research and reassessment, rather than solely on outcomes, can allow the time it takes to do things with care, rather than following predetermined productionist timelines. The role of audiences may also be developed towards different durations of collaboration and participation rather than consumerist spectatorship.

Stronger alliances and collective approaches can work against cut-throat competitiveness, while it is paramount to carefully credit

16 Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 219.

and compensate fairly for all the re/productive labour involved in the processes and supply chains of all the activities. A heterogeneity of situated knowledges should be acknowledged and their dialogue nurtured in all the operations as well as in the structures of organisations. While not doing away with exhibition and dedicated spaces for art, they could rather be opened up for differing processes and modes of engagement so as to nurture their very potential to become active civic spaces – or, even the “uncommons”. Meanwhile experimentation with all kinds of settings, sites and situations may further resonate with the plurality of situated temporalities of the natural-cultural communities in question.

When gathering around shared concerns and matters of care, it is crucial to also ask, what is the value generated and for whom? How to keep resources – human, material, intellectual – in sustainable circulation within and for the multispecies communities they are sourced from, locally and across the globe? Or, how do we work with them not so much as resources but as re/producers? As Puig de la Bellacasa writes about soil, the community not only *is* the lively soil, but it actively *makes* it. Following her argument, to begin to re/learn to collaborate with and as part of the cycles of the soil(s) “as a mode of relational involvement required by ecological care”, we could turn to permaculture, where the first step is a step back from interventions to take time for immersed observation.¹⁷

To care well, situated knowledge is necessary. Yet the interlaced planetary currents of connectedness in the present also call for recognition of a multitude of differing attachments and tempos. This is a time for reparations, not only preparations, for the future. No fleeting contacts in oil-fuelled flows will suffice here. Rather, other modes of ecologically and socially just circulation have to be re-established. In the end, no borders,

17 Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 189 & 201.

distancing measures or purification processes will work. Circulations as well as contagions are foundational for life. They only turn deadly when the balance in the mesh of relations, from the microscopic to the planetary scales, goes awry.

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Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

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