

Curating as sticky care

tags

temporality

waste matter

materiality

stickyness

Excerpts from “performing (as) waste – sticky care in feminist materialist performance and curation”, Phd submitted at University of Roehampton 15.3.2021

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I would like to propose the notion of **curating as sticky care**, speculating on a practice that attends to sticky matters in nonlinear, thick, suspended temporality. These are matters, beings, things, which are leaking, sticking around, dissolving or building agglomerations, matters that are hard to grasp, but unescapable. I have developed this understanding in close engagement with artistic practices that seek long durational intimacy, proximity and entanglement with the wasted and the discarded and with feminist discourses on care and materiality. I have considered the material knowledge these artists develop while engaging with sticky, leaky waste matters, and have followed their practice curatorially by caring for the remains, failures, left overs, gaps or breaks of artistic processes.

I am especially inspired by artist **Mierle Laderman Ukeles**, who has spent decades as artist in residence in the New York City Department of Sanitation and engaged in continuity with (human and non-human) waste workers, processes, infrastructures and matters. Her *Manifesto of Maintenance Art* written in 1969 famously declared maintenance and care processes as art and demanded respective curatorial gestures. What is less well known, is that it was inspired by the intense material engagement with two earlier work series – *Bindings* and *Air Art* – and the eventual ‘failure’ of these sculptural forms’ membranes or skins to separate, to contain, to hold together. In short, these works – undetermined stuffed shapes and air-filled inflatables - kept on leaking or exploding. In both cases the

uncontrollably leaking matter posited an obstacle, it disturbed her intentions, demanded her care and eventually, after giving up on her attempt to mend the leaking and to generate sculptural form, inspired her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (Ukeles, 1974: 40). The manifesto declared repetitive, embodied acts of care and touch, rather than the wilful creation of sealed (sculptural) form, as art. This move - while resonating with other artistic experiments at the time, opening towards processual¹ labour - was unique in its specific approach towards materiality. It did not only foreground the invisible but excessively material labour processes involved in maintaining the home, the city, the museum or the allegedly immaterial processual art (Jackson, 2011), but was also informed by and called for an understanding of materiality, that considers the life of materials beyond human intentions and beyond closed loops. She has continued to engage with such materiality for decades, most explicitly through her epic engagement with landfills – those (often toxic) sites of oblivion and forgetting, which are supposedly to discard and contain waste forever. Her understanding of materiality resonates with many waste scholars, who have described waste materiality as sticky, as escaping clear cut definition, as being in between fluid and dry, hard and soft, closed-off form or dissolution (Lewe, Othold, Oxen, 2016: 9-10). Waste escapes containment, it leaks, sticks around, it builds unexpected agglomerations and is far from being containable and controllable (Hird, 2013b). Also, materialist philosophy has focussed on waste materiality or more generally on

a host of messy states and processes “intermediate” between subjects and object, or better put, not readily assimilable to either prefabricated container. There is dust, soot, flower, steam, mist, fog, a vague premonition, a pile of trash, cloud, drizzle, green mold, placenta, a lava flow, a wetland, a flood zone [...] rotting flesh [...] viscuous fluids, porous membranes [...] (Connolly, 2011: 72).

These zones of indiscernibility, Connolly states, fundamentally question human mastery over a world of solids. Such non-solid, sticky (waste) substances are also often the focus of care-work, sticky substances that escape and question the solid form, object, or body, such

¹ For a detailed contextualisation of Ukeles’ *Manifesto of Maintenance Art* in the context of conceptual and feminist art see Jackson (2011) and Phillips (2016).

as blood, shit, pus, snot, pee, sweat, mold, sewage, refuse, garbage, leachate, humus. While the notion of care might lend itself to projects of purification, I suggest that care-work most of all inhabits this interstitial world, unable to mend the leaking, clean the mess, rather being exposed to, attending to, and experiencing repetitive dissolutions of closed-off form. María Puig de la Bellacasa has elaborated – in close resonance with many other feminist authors – a rich, material, 'impure' understanding of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 201, 207). She understands care as a “living terrain” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 8), a messy, impure, troubled or even toxic ground, that we live in and depend on. She stresses that care is “a-subjective” - collective and collaborative but not necessarily symmetric, traversing or happening in between, and thereby extending beyond the (human) subject. She also outlines the haptic dimension of care work, involving a slowed down perception, sensitive for otherwise neglected detail in encounter. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) Stickiness -while not in the foreground of her reflection – is indirectly alluded to as the dependence on ordinary, messy daily labours of many human and more than human collectives. The notion of stickiness can also be applied to the specific temporalities of care-work. Care time is uneventful, non-linear, dispersed and durational. Studies of care-work in various fields point towards its repetitive, often cyclical character, but also its temporal indeterminacy and multiplicity requiring to combine and balance multiple temporal demands, urgencies, interruptions, extensions.² Lisa Baraitser has proposed a detailed reflection on the multiple ways time seems to be suspended in care, which she calls ‘unbecoming time’ and which involves for instance staying, maintaining, repeating, delaying, enduring, remaining (Baraitser, 2017: 4-5). María Puig de la Bellacasa uses the metaphor of a thickening of time, elaborating that care time “suspends the future and distends the present, thickening it with myriad multilateral demands” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 207). For her, care happens “as a plane of ‘continuous experience’” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 166).

It is this experienced continuity or duration and its inherent multiplicity that can also be described as sticky, as Adrian Heathfield has proposed in his reflection on durational time in the context of performative aesthetic practices. He elaborates with Henri Bergson the distinction between regulated, measured “clock time” and experienced duration, the latter

² For a reflection of the complex temporal patterns of migrant domestic workers see Anderson, Shutes (2014); about (ir)regularity, repetition, reiteration in care work see Mol (2008) and Mol, Moser, Pols (2010).

dealing “in the confusion of temporal distinctions”, and being felt “as a force and product of relational and inter-subjective exchange” (Heathfield, 2009: 22). He argues that it is this entanglement which makes experienced duration sticky.³

What does all of this imply for curating? While the notion of care is frequently referenced in curatorial discourse,⁴ not least due to the etymological root of curating stemming from Latin *curare*, to take care, an explicit and in-depth reflection on curatorial care is rather rare and only emerging recently (see for instance Krasny, 2015b; Reckitt, 2016). This has several reasons. There is on the one hand a strand of curatorial thought which understands the contemporary curator mostly as the antithesis of the early incarnation of the role as a (hidden) caretaker of a museum collection. Caring as a practice associated with invisibility and low status, with repetitive ordinariness and with durational obligation seems an anathema to the contemporary profile of the curator as a highly visible, creative, flexible, mobile professional akin to the artist, whose core practice seems to entail the facilitation of (access to) visibility (see for instance Smith, 2012: 41, 43). On the other hand, there are a number of authors and practitioners who articulate a critical reservation against a too close association of curating with caring due to the hierarchical and asymmetrical dimension inherent in care practices as well as in curating (Fowle, 2007: 17). This aspect can also be traced in the etymology of the term curating, with the Latin root word *curare* building the base for both, *curates* - the one who has a cure - and *custos* - the one who guards and controls (Bismarck, 2010: 50; Schneider, 2010: 64-65). Some authors and practitioners have therefore chosen to conceptualize the relational dimension of curating rather in terms of hospitality, as hosting artists, art works and exhibitions (see Bismarck & Meyer-Krahmer, 2016). Hospitality has of course many resonances to care, but also differs from it. To highlight here only one of the most obvious points of divergence: while hospitality is tied to a transient moment of encounter, with audiences, art works, artists, participants understood as temporary guests, the notion of care rather invokes modes of shared lives, of

³ Heathfield references art historian Mieke Bal’s notion of sticky images, images and works that “stick around - they persist in time - and stick to their spectators, conditioning a tactile attentiveness” (Heathfield, 2009: 22).

⁴ See for instance the many statements in the *Curating Live Arts Reader*, which entail short references to care. (Davida et al., 2019)

living together and depending on each other, and implies to understand the encounter as a form of co- or inhabitation.⁵

Drawing on non-idealising feminist discussions of care-work by Puig de la Bellacasa and many others, as well as on Ukeles' Maintenance Art I argue to not give up the ethically important notion of care while acknowledging its ambiguity, impurity, and complexity.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "art of continuing", of sticking around for decades in the Department of Sanitation and on landfills, of proposing countless impossible projects in "excessive patience", her attention to the leakages and to the stickiness of waste matters, inspires me to the notion of sticky curating. If something is sticky, it stays on, one can't get rid of it easily or fully. Processing sticky matters takes time, it is slow. Sticky matters are no solid objects, bodies, things – they are rather no-things. They question human mastery over a dry and solid object world (Connolly, 2011: 72), but they are also not immaterial or in constant flux. Rather they settle, remain or agglomerate.

Curating creates interfaces, contact zones, temporary dwellings, constellations. What if these would not be smooth, so as to enable frictionless entry and exit, or easily scalable, so that projects or works can circulate frictionless, but rather sticky? A sticky interface, a sticky dwelling, a sticky project - that connects, leaves stains, smears, pollutes, remains, or in the words of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "continues again, continues again, continues again". (Ukeles, 1974) What if the focus of curating would shift from overviewing, surveying or categorising, to attending to lateral, peripheral, transitional relations? Such curatorial modality would resist detecting and delineating (trends, tendencies or a defined body of work) but rather attend to leaking, muddy, sticky form at the threshold of its continuous unforming. This would involve taking account of, enabling, responding to, staying with the continuities of experimental artistic creation, its ongoingness across gaps and breaks, beyond the formed, finished, contained art work. It rather considers the emergent forming and unforming of no-bodies and no-things in no-spaces, rather than assembling seemingly determined bodies, subjects, objects and artefacts in a given space. It also implies decentring the role of the curator as the only active agent, operating somewhat freely and

⁵ This resonates with feminist concepts such as "co-dependant curating" (Krasny, 2016a: 103) or "curatorial fidelity" (Džuverović & Revell, 2016: 140).

detached. Curating as sticky care most of all implies to make artistic experimentation not only visible but possible and therefore to speculate on its possibilisation in continuity.

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