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Writings between: bodies of knowledge: part two of a series of correspondences between Caroline Gausden and Jen Clarke on the politics of hosting and hospitality.

GAUSDEN, C. and CLARKE, J.

2020

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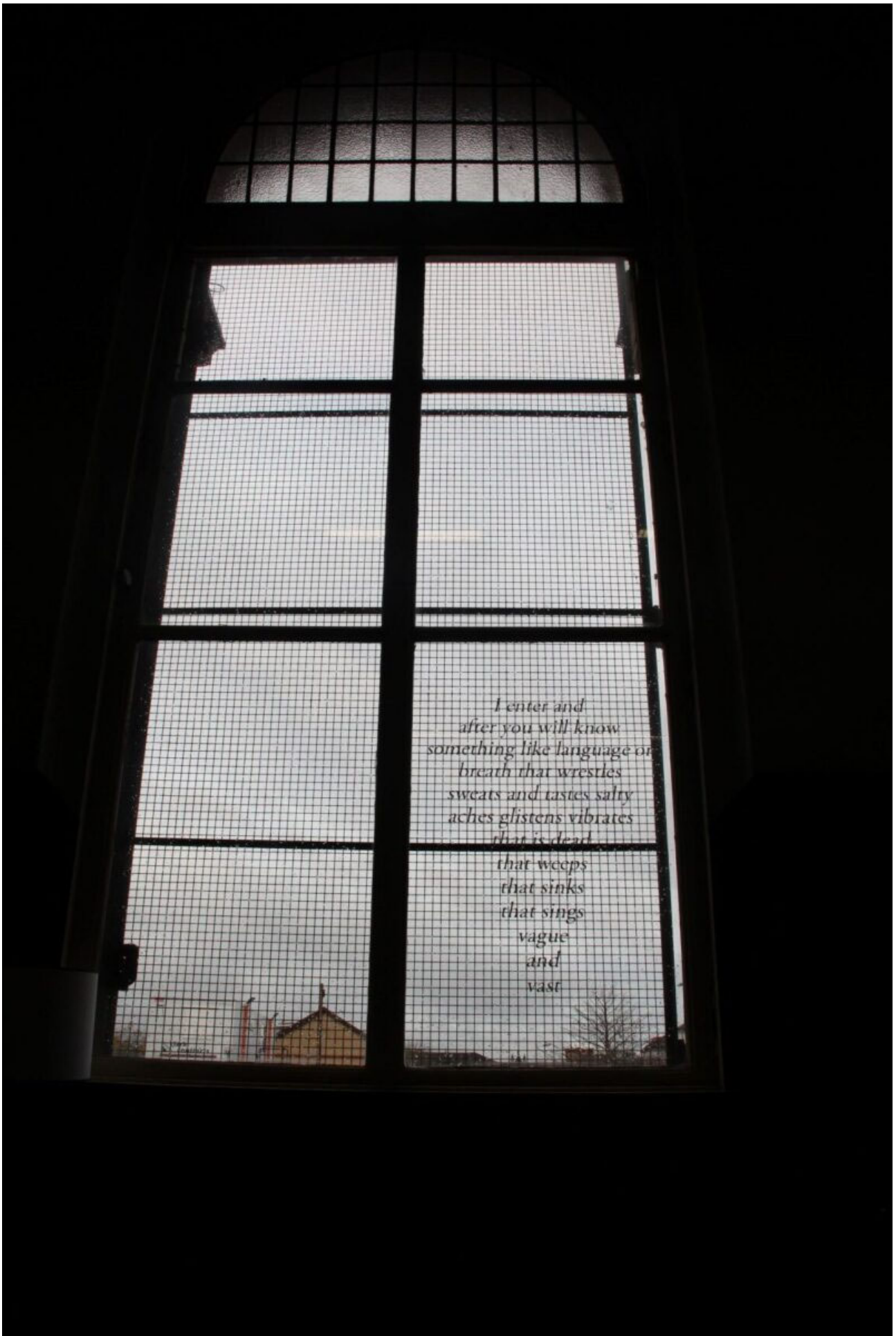
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#58 SHIFTING HOSTS, ORBITAL MOONS - LETTERS - SEPTEMBER 2020

WRITINGS BETWEEN

Bodies of Knowledge: Part two of a series of correspondences between Caroline Gausden and Jen Clarke on the politics of hosting and hospitality



Tako Taal, 'A Body', 2019. Photo: Juliane Foronda

In Spring, Caroline and Jen planned to produce and publish a short dialogue for an exhibition by artists Juliane Foronda, Kirsty Russell and Tako Taal, *A Spoon is the Safest Vessel*, hosted by the Look Again Project space in Aberdeen. Working with Caroline, a Development worker for Programming and Curating at Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), the artists had made new work in response to GWL's archive, and the Domestic Science School in the Art and Heritage collection at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen; taking into consideration the hosting practices of both GWL and Look Again. In response to COVID 19 and the lockdown, the work changed form, finding a place online [1]. The dialogue with Jen, a lecturer at Gray's School of Art, became an expanded series of letters, that cross formal and informal borders, 'writings between' us, and things, marking a moment that has forced us to rethink what it means to be 'at home' with one another and in the world.

5 MAY 2020

Dear Jen,

Your descriptions of experiencing time are relevant—how it feels different—there is a weight to both this kind of relentless, domestic time but also to the rushing, I haven't enough time, waiting in the wings. We're all guests in the sense of not knowing (I like the idea that to be a guest means to enter into an unknown territory) what the space will be between these. We are interrupted—sometimes digitally we glitch, or we hop between tasks distracted by worlds coming together and competing—but also we are interrupted from our lives.

Lisa Baraitser talks about this other time you reference in *Touching time: maintenance, endurance and care* [1]. She plots a history of time as something growing increasingly scarce for the hyperproductive demands we feel, and writes about what she calls 'maintenance time': enduring, inexorable. Her call is to try and share maintenance time—to stay with it rather than look away because it reminds us that we need to be maintained, as you have done in sharing your personal life. Can we

imagine a situation where we all share that time more fully, instead of some people living it while others rush by?

Time is at the heart of Juliane's practice. She talks about hidden durations involved in making things like preserves, and the pun on the word 'preserve' again linking back to maintaining but also archiving. She wanted different chutneys and jams to be shared with the GWL volunteers, who are generally involved in 'preservation' with us here, as well as on display for the exhibition. I have to say these were so good! In Aberdeen she had planned to make sour-dough, which is a time balancing occupation. I think the newsletters Juliane wrote were about time too. She set up this condition, to release one every week, and that put a strain on her. The idea came from the GWL archive, which features a lot of newsletters, that are personal and public in unexpected ways [2].

To answer your question: who are we hostile to? Tako mentioned her residency at the Institute for Hospitality in the Gambia and how bizarre it was to see Africans being trained in high end (lots of different knives and forks) European hospitality methods, making it hard to see an end to colonialism. Instead there was just a change of forms with some people still trained to serve others. I think we're aware of these things but it's those everyday moments when you can touch it that I think come across in Tako's work. She made films out of that residency and it was these that made me get in contact with her. I was interested in people exploring objects from another culture and learning through these objects. Juliane was researching in our archive at GWL and she spoke to me about the idiosyncratic descriptions and handmade objects that women had made to pass on hosting practices. We spoke about spoons, which are used in the Philippines much more than here. I discovered Juliane's own poetry (which is abundant in the newsletters) and she said something like '*spoons are the safest vessels*', meaning food is less likely to fall off a spoon on the way to our mouths. I loved the care in this. It also made me think of phrases like 'spoon-fed' but not as a criticism or a belittling of the importance of getting nourishment. I haven't read *Matters of Care* but I will look it up.

So, we were all thinking on what knowledges are valuable and how they

are passed on. These ideas made up the Instagram post with objects from GWL's archive and the 'Do' school (pronounced 'dough') that used to be part of Robert Gordon University [3]. We didn't want to romanticise the history of the Do school, as essentially it was a finishing school for wives. Yet, I wanted to hold onto and maintain a respect for the skill involved, which is a body of knowledge, in the way we hold the idiosyncratic invites, guest and recipe books in our archive. And to think about the differences.

Tako had recommended a book that we have at GWL called *Imperial Leather* [4]. In it Anne McClintock makes a strong connection between histories of domestic servitude in the UK and colonialism and of how cleansing rituals were used historically to assert hierarchy as the world opened up to a multitude of differences. She maps the history of advertising through soap, which was one of the first products to be marketed on mass scale. The narrative in these adverts was all about 'grand Britannia' cleaning up the colonies. It's interesting to see this racism at the beginnings of what is essentially global capitalism resurfacing, now that we feel once again unsure of our boundaries and identities.

What are our other hostilities? You said: 'institutions that make assumptions on what socially engaged art should be'. I think there is still a lack of recognition of feminist histories in the way social art is approached critically and in education. Helena Reckitt wrote a nice article on this called *Forgotten Relations: Feminist artist and relational aesthetics* [5]. Juliane saw in the GWL archives at least one knowledge system that lacks formal recognition. Out of that she made badges that encase pressed wild flowers, to preserve things that thrive without formal acknowledgement [6]. Artists have to host so much now, developing a combination of fine-tuned listening and performance skills. Maybe the true heir to the Do school is not the archive but art school? Perhaps teaching hosting there, with criticality, could help us to recognise how to honour and when to refuse its embedded violences.

Maybe the virus is providing us with the strike we could never deliver, interrupting many of the economic processes that have those histories of

violence? This is a careless metaphor because the same bodies are still on the line. But I'm grasping at it in response to your last point about healing—that to repair or fix is not the same as to heal—there is change, maintenance involved. What I'm hoping for is a way to recognise different relations as we mend, to be slow and considered in getting entangled again, and to see what should be outlined in gold and valued differently.

I'm going to go make dinner now here's hoping you and the family are as safe as spoons

x

*

*I enter and
after you will know
something like language or
breath that wrestles
sweats and tastes salty
aches glistens vibrates
that is dead
that weeps
that sinks
that sings
vague
and
vast*

Tako Taal, 'A Body', text produced for Instagram, 2020

28 MAY 2020

Ah, Caroline,

It's now almost the end of May, and I write today in haste, in quiet moments, in the constraint of having no time. But in a good way, these letters between us have fallen into the category of something done in quiet time, snatched moments when my son and partner are sleeping, or somewhere else. I enjoyed reading your letter, with the work of the three artists, that together made up the *Spoon is the Safest Vessel*. I especially enjoyed learning about the origins of the title! With a little 18

month person, I am familiar with this (and spoons vs forks, dangers of knives, spoons too big for little mouths) I appreciate also this element of criticality, in the phrase 'spoon-fed'. I hadn't thought of it, but it gets at the heart of things.

Before I start responding *about* the work, I really want to know how you define and express criticality in your own curatorial practice: you have talked about balancing 'criticality' and hospitality, pairing them, in your own projects. For me, criticality rather than Big-C Criticism is fundamental. After all, I'm neither an art historian, nor a 'Critic'. For me, what's important is *creating*, not presuming, *an equality*: between art and its criticisms; artists and critics; curators and others...

To be as clear about *why* I might want to avoid *judgemental* criticism: it's not that this draws on moral language (good and bad); that's surely something that always happens in the experience of things, used as shorthand: did it work, did it trigger something? Was there a sense of... recognition? (Of some part of yourself, made manifest in a work, or something 'other', 'alien', meaningful, too). I'm thinking about what *embodied* criticality might be like, by attending to the *embodied dimension* of experiencing art, in that space of encounter. Of course judgements always happen. But I'm hoping for something *more*, a *living through*. Irit Rogoff (the curator and theorist), sets out an interesting way of thinking about exactly this, in an essay with British art theorist Simon Harvey and Turkish video artist Ergin Cavusoglu. They prefer what they call *criticality*, to criticism, even though it's 'a contingent and not entirely satisfactory term':

'[I]f *Criticism* [is] a form of finding fault and of exercising judgment... the point of criticality is *not to find an answer* but rather a.... '*living things out*', which has a hugely transformative power as opposed to pronouncing on them....' (2006:2). [7]

In brief for them, criticism, or critical 'analysis' is the shallowest mode, about 'illuminating flaws', or 'allocating blame'. I.e. I recognise the *tone*, the presumption of authority, what is good, what has failed... and who should be blamed! *Criticality* is almost the opposite of this: it's about

operating from uncertain ground, about recognising our own limitations.

Your last letter called out acts of racism now, in the narratives about the virus, for example, connecting them to ideas about cleanliness and colonialism (I didn't know the book *Imperial Leather and* looking it up led me to so many important works, histories, questions: thank you). Anyway, this morning I listened to Tako Taal talk on vimeo about her work, *Compound* [8]. Alongside, I read that as a Welsh-Gambian artist, her work, this work, is about tracing a personal narrative 'in a search to embody welcome gestures'. I love the poetics of that and how 'trying to reimagine a place' is a kind of storytelling, which she does in the juxtaposition of words, translations, and images—a process I'm familiar with in my own practice. It was so interesting to hear her reflect on how her work evolved towards something *more subjective* than she had planned, and the difficulties of that.

Her work directly depicts some of the skills of *European* hospitality. Recently I learned that the practice of eating from individual plates is something that only emerged in Europe in the 19th Century. Before that, things were shared. Individual plates were an indicator of wealth, and of service—servitude—as a household had to have enough servants to be able to serve individual plates. That changes how we might look at cooking, home cooking, family meals. Tako's work deals with things I am also thinking-feeling about, from the visceral nature of things to anthropological issues like matrilineal relations, and of course questions about how we record, save, share, archive, relate, place, *things*. I was struck by her choice of text for the instagram post (the vinyl text of 'A Body') and, right after, *spit*. Yes! This way of holding, making space, makes clear how looking is so personal, so in our face; this spit, usually associated with aggression (like the people spitting in the faces of police, now considered a different type of crime, with coronavirus) or desire, or sex (or, I now think, cleanliness—I use my spit to clean my son's face).

Kirsty Russell's work I know better, as I know her a little, and how important the collective explorations of supporting and supportive work are for her. I am thinking of the way she has brought people together in her own domestic space, as well as all the work she did at the Anatomy

Rooms curating and creating events. Her work speaks to Baraitser's object relations, which I'll perhaps say more about later. The images Kirsty chose for the *Spoons...* instagram, of her sculptural works including *Buffer* from a show called 'Common Positions' curated in 2019 by Sean Elder for the Jerwood Artspace [9], were really telling. I read that this show was about a German community's struggle against the privatisation of public space. Kirsty's work, a hand tufted rug, was tuned toward: '...moments of communal imagination, action, rest and thought'. The programme said the rug was available for use during the event, and hosted a group reading of 'Reprint: Notes on Friendship', by Celine Condorelli [10]. I think Condorelli's words are a good way to end, to start an ending, for now:

'Friendship is a fundamental aspect of personal support, a condition for doing things together; I'd like to address it as a specific model of relationship in the large question of how to live and work together—and autonomously—towards change, as a way to act in the world. Friendship, like support, is considered here as an essentially political relationship, one of allegiance and responsibility.'

More soon, I hope

J

[1] This text appears in the shared reading drive [**here**](#)

[2] Juliane's newsletters can be found [**here**](#)

[3] An archival image of the 'Do' school can be found on the Instagram post [**here**](#)

[4] This text can be accessed [**here**](#) and can also be found in the shared drive [**here**](#)

[5] Helena Reckitt, 'Forgotten relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics', in 'Politics in a Glass Case' eds. Angela Dimitrakaki and Perry (2013), accessible [**here**](#)

[6] An image of the badges can be found [**here**](#)

[7] ‘Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality’ in ‘Irit Rogoff: From Criticism to Critique to Criticality’ (2006). The text can be found [**here**](#)

[8] A video of Tako Taal speaking about her work ‘Compound’ can be found [**here**](#)

[9] More information about the exhibition can be found [**here**](#)

[10] Celine Condorelli, ‘Reprint: Notes on Friendship’ was originally published in *Mousse* 32, (February 2012) and can be accessed [**here**](#)

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Thanks to the artists Juliane Foronda, Kirsty Russell and Tako Taal as well as staff at Glasgow Women’s Library and Look Again, Aberdeen. This work was kindly supported by Aberdeen City Council’s Creative Fund.

*

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LETTERS

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