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Writings between: taking time: part one 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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#58 SHIFTING HOSTS, ORBITAL MOONS - LETTERS - SEPTEMBER 2020

WRITINGS BETWEEN

Taking Time: Part one of a series of correspondences between Caroline Gausden and Jen Clarke on the politics of hosting and hospitality



Juliane Foronda, 'Method', 2019

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.

8 APRIL 2020

Dear Jen,

I hope this finds you well after our phone call last week—it feels like a long while ago now but I think that is because quarantine is doing something to my sense of time. I found the call really useful—having someone outside the project to look at both the concepts and the practicalities and see them in a new light. What I know is guests can be radical—they bring different perspectives, against received (and stale?) wisdom that isn't always conscious of itself. Having to share something about yourself to someone new brings things up into consciousness.

What I want to write to you about is how the lockdown situation we're facing raises new questions about hosting and more particularly, how we came to the Instagram 'show'. In the first few days of adjusting Kirsty, Juli, Tako and I felt there was a rush for Museums and galleries to move online, flooding the internet with content. The intention of this is to support audiences at home and to continue to give artists a platform. Nevertheless I felt worried about this as many, if not all, of the works were context specific, and they also dealt in senses that weren't only visual. I felt a tension that I was trying to deliver something for our hosts

in Aberdeen that the artists and artworks might be resistant to. I was reminded of a book that first came up in conversation with you, called *On Hospitality*, including a poetic response from Anne Dufourmantelle, that acknowledges the latent hostility within the word Hospitality. Sometimes hosts ask too much of guests—for them to give up their identities in order to integrate. Guests can also feel hostility to their carers, reminding them that they are not independent but in need of support. The difference between these positions is in terms of power—carers are not usually holders of authority—they host by looking after rather than asking things of guests—but the line is blurry.

Kirsty offered the observation that the rush of content from Museums in cyberspace was, at worst, a kind of colonising process. She wanted to think instead about what other kinds of careful actions might be needed now—like looking after vulnerable people by making phone calls (which we did a lot of at GWL within our volunteer community) or getting shopping. This kind of work to imagine how support can be refigured in our consciousness is typical of Kirsty's practice which often operates in places of care. In this case I saw it as a kind of quiet refusal that very much framed our online response.

She wanted to register a change of pace brought about by the virus entering our lives and economies. Hyper productivity and visibility online does not take into account the time needed to think through ideas and make work, particularly from this different uncertain place. I was reminded of a LUX Scotland screening Kirsty curated called *Working in the Pauses* [2]. In relation to the films, she explained the title recognises the work of listening that takes place to support someone trying to articulate new things. This chimed with discussions we've had at GWL on how to be mindful of this work that supports production. We've discussed Adriene Maree Brown who writes about visioning new organisational models through natural forms. In this case I thought the idea of hibernation or the slowing that takes place in Autumn was relevant. To say it's ok for us to not continuously be showing growth.

In the exhibition there was a tension to navigate between my desire to make visible this careful work around hosting and Kirsty's expression of

resistance. In this we also considered how we wanted to host an online audience. In the first days of our new isolated lives, with the online world looming large, we registered screen fatigue. Between us we asked—what do we need? We decided that we could design an approach that would be minimal and distant (Tako’s phrasing)—releasing a few key images of work—not all at once but over time. Alongside this we created a shared reading space. Again we didn’t want to fill this with texts in a way that might be overwhelming but make it something that could build slowly and allow for participation.

The images we chose for the first post were about this ambivalence. For me they express our fears around thresholds—the boundaries we need between things to feel safe—which we are feeling intensely now. They are also about the complexities involved in resisting. The virus is really an unwelcome guest that has turned things upside down. We had spoken about support and care—to me integral parts of a hosting practice as involving a kind of closeness—whereas now we have to learn to express care through distance. I had also thought about hosting as a kind of distancing that works by making the host invisible, always withdrawing so guests feel that they are getting along without support, just like some care involves self-sacrifice. In relation to feminist practice I felt that there shouldn’t be any self-sacrifice—the library, where this work first germinated—is after all a gesture of resistance to all the disregard that has been paid to women’s histories including, but not exclusively, this knowledge of hosting. I felt we should find a way to show care and make resistance visible side by side, first foregrounding resistance.

We know how to declare our independence but what about our interdependencies?

I hope you’re still keeping well with the little one—sending lots of love

Caroline x

26 APRIL 2020

Dear Caroline,

It has only been a few weeks since your last letter, but in that time, leaves on the trees on the street outside my window have emerged: no longer the tight buds that only suggest the promise of sun, but unfurling greens, yellows, reds. This, a common symbol for transition from winter to spring, just two weeks ago made me feel hopeful, but at the moment the pace feels a little... *inexorable*. I wish I had a better metaphor, but this is what I am sitting looking at, just beyond my immediate view (a row of plants, mostly cacti that, like me, look a little neglected right now—and this would make a much worse metaphor!). I guess I am tired and the pile of To-Dos seems to increase all the time; these are mostly maintenance works, really, if not work-work. There is just much more to *keep going* now, more happening in one place. The repetition of usually more hidden labours (of love?): hidden because rushed through, or because journeys to other places lend some other *air* to the process. Domestic life is what provides me with a degree of routine, now—especially with a baby! Cooking, cleaning, laundry *and* work shape my days (as well as his increased sleeping, our constant breastfeeding, my juggling all of these, alongside a surge in computer-facing-time). My pre-coronavirus sense of time, that rush, has gone into hiding, somewhere; the future time, where anxious, heavy, it's waiting.

In the time between your letter, and, today, I have been experiencing time with different intensities, but mostly as a sense of it *not* passing 'properly'. There is a sense of *enduring*, something that I've written about before, about my work in Japan, that has a peculiar quality. I'm reminded that how much I have control over this experience is a question I have to leave hanging, for now. There may be routine, but there are always interruptions, too. Today is relatively quiet, it's Sunday, but I need to acknowledge the constant interruption of the sound of my child's voice (is he happy? Is he hurt? Does he need me?). The undercurrent of my written thoughts include this constant, low level decision making—is this something I have to pause my reading-thinking-writing for?

I'm glad you agreed to the letter form! I didn't realise when I proposed it, that it resonated so well with Juliane Foronda's evocative writing [3] that is now part of the online 'minimal, distant' show. I realise how central time is to what we're talking about: the necessity of pauses. You also

mentioned hibernation, and ‘the time for care and respect’ as you put it in your letter. I shall try to remember this!

I have been thinking, reading, making work, around proximity and distance, too: specifically, the ‘recalibration of distance’ that is ongoing in post-Fukushima Daiichi disaster Japan. One important root/route, now, is the possibility of care at a distance; what does that look like? What is actually happening, now?

What questions does the lockdown we’re in raise for us, especially when it’s without known end? The heart of it is time–time marks the difference between welcome and unwelcome. (Guests can be like fish, as my friend Alana once reminded me: after 3 days, they usually ‘go off’ 😊) So I completely agree with your description of the virus as an unwelcome guest; this is certainly much better than the hollow-sounding metaphors of war that are raging around, now. I hate them: as if we can negotiate with it, as if it’s strategizing, as if it’s calculating casualties, judging (if not determining) innocence, life. Viruses, we now should all know, can’t exist without us: we are the host, so death is mutual.

In your letter, you reminded me that I had introduced you to the idea of hospitality from Jacques Derrida—who attends to the ‘hostility’ within hospitality, inherent in host-guest relations. So who are we hostile to? The institutions that make assumptions about what ‘socially engaged’ (or whatever) art is? Should be? Is there hostility within the relations, something sensed in the archives, you’ve explored with the artists? The tensions of enforced domesticity? How does this translate to the ways any of this work can be... hosted? Who are your audiences? If there is hostility, who is the foreigner, the stranger? The ‘Other’ in all this, the Other that makes us us? Aren’t we all out of place, now? My suspicion is that there is more to being estranged than being geographically/physically dis-located. What do guests have to ‘give up’ to be a guest? Where is the line between maker, participant, ‘audience’, viewer? How can we evoke the physical proximity necessary for the host-guest relation (and for the tiring of the roles...)?

I want to go back to what you said about the *time to care*. The notion of

care, and carer, is really important (the book *Matters of Care* by Maria Puglia de la Bellacasa is amazing, do you know it?) but I've thought about this in different contexts. The other day, I finally got around to repairing some broken ceramics, doing a bit of *kintsugi*, a Japanese method of repairing broken things—usually ceramics—with 'gold' (or in my case, and more often, mica), transforming something broken into something *even more* beautiful because of the care taken over it. And taking the time to sit and do this, I was reminded of the Japanese notion *nao su* (治す) which can translate to repair, or fix, or heal, that I learnt about from the Japanese artist Fumiaki Aono; interesting because it can also mean to transform, to convert something into a different, new, state. I suppose all forms of healing, curing, do that.

So it's all about time, for me, all this thinking about time and my/our varied experiences of it, now seem mostly negative (delay, frustration, waiting, glitches) the concomitant question becomes are we more or less in control of our time? Perhaps we have passed the immediate moment of emergency—worryingly, as people are starting to acknowledge burn out—perhaps one of the things that made my experience of lockdown positive at the start was because things that seemed less 'urgent' could be temporarily shelved; we could focus on those who needed to be cared for (including ourselves!) But what, now? How to hold on to that shift, if that brought something good? How to stay transformed, cared for?

I want to retain the time to care. Take time to read, reflect, breathe differently—there are lots of questions about the impact of all this, but I want to focus on the affective impact now—physically and emotionally; how we register the impact of others, those we care for, our bodily experiences. What happens to feeling, to *non-verbal* communication? To us, if we lose touch? In the absence of these, what happens to our capacity for responsibility, as Donna Haraway (and others) describe the entanglements of being, caring, responsibilities to others? How can we cultivate ourselves, together? How might we take the time to care, to render each other capable?

Enough for now! It's late, and during the writing of this letter I have made

and eaten lunch, breastfed, played, tidied, cooked dinner, all the while listening to the interruptions: it's time to go!

Big hugs to Guyatri!

Jen

For me, change often stems from my passions as they are often what drives, stimulates, motivates and fuels me. As exciting and intense as the extremes of change can be, they're often also confusing, exhausting and disorienting. It's because of that that I often struggle to set boundaries with my passions, but I'm learning that perhaps it's not so much about limits or boundaries, but about balance. It's impossible to do or be everything entirely all the time. I've come to realise that alongside our deepest passions also exists the possibility of toxicity - an over-indulgence or over-stimulation that stems from deep care and desire, but perhaps falls short in perspective. I find it necessary to acknowledge the need to pause as much as we're often driven to push, remaining mindful that change unravels in its own time.

Juliane Foronda, 'compress(ed memory foam)', 2019

[1] The 'A Spoon is the Safest Vessel' instagram 'show' unfolded in four posts for Look Again Festival, Aberdeen: [First post](#), [Second post](#), [Third post](#) and [Final post](#).

[2] More information about 'Working in the Pauses' can be found [here](#).

[3] Juliane Foronda's letter series can be found [here](#).

The 'A Spoon is the Safest Vessel' shared reading drive can be accessed [here](#).

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*

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