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# Writings between: vulnerability and resistance: the third and final part 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

*Vulnerability and Resistance*: the third and final part of a series of correspondences between Caroline Gausden and Jen Clarke on the politics of hosting and hospitality



Kirsty Russell, 'Buffer', 2019. Hand tufted rug. Photo: Suzanne Heffron

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. 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.

**18 AUGUST 2020**

Dear Jen,

It's the end of July, two months stretch between this and your last letter. I'm trying not to say I'm sorry for the wait—that's part of a new consciousness to address my internal work ethic. Tako is a reference for this—when we travelled together we discussed artists holding down jobs and then making work in between. Tako's reaction was incredulous, sane and yet rare—to say—but that means you're always working!

I attended a brilliant SCAN hosted session yesterday with film programmer Jemma Desai on her writing/ research 'This Work Isn't For Us'. It describes how structural racism in institutions is a kind of false hosting felt in the body, that creates a radical appearance. The writing makes clear how arts funding is tied to economic ideologies. In Chapter Two of the essay, Jemma talks about hostile hosting, deconstructing apprenticeship schemes aimed at placing minorities in white institutions. I won't try to summarise as it's complex work that digs deep and is essential reading. In her talk she

mentioned ‘burnout’ as a characteristic of how we live. I’m sure you can relate to this as an academic as well, where it felt to me, outputs and competition are fostered urgently as the only way to survive.

I think it’s now quite clear that being in a pandemic has brought intersecting issues like maintenance and inequality to the surface. For me, there has been in this last month or so a burnout in slow-motion. I’ve been sleeping so much. Weirdly, being away from GWL has triggered it. I’ve noticed that in the library there is a culture of making sure we don’t overwork, that we understand our capacities and stay within these. Even as I’m writing this I feel a creeping fear—what is that saying? Will this indicate a lack of quality in what we do? In our economy, value is equated with quantity of work but actually maybe that is an appearance rather than reality?

How do we host these value systems in our consciousness? Can we put conditions on them *there*? Asserting reasonable capacities but also thinking about what is left out when these systems monopolise our attention. I’ve started to think about what we can refuse as well as what space these refusals make for other truths.

Jemma removed herself not only from damaging institutions but into a different set of perspectives; only speaking to people of colour for her research over a year.

In terms of the criticality, Jemma’s research is ‘a living through’ that expresses how other realities are felt in our bodies and the vulnerability people experience in small moments of violence. There is another artist I’m very influenced by called Chu Chu Yuan [2], who, in her social practice, talks about knowing *with* rather than knowing about something, with the difference being about your position. Yuan talks about making your way across a river by feeling the soles of your feet on its bed. You are immersed, you must be careful as you are vulnerable, but what you know is through your body and the knowledge is maybe what I would call intimate but also detailed, a kind of digging down. It’s very different from the kind of

mapping knowledge that scans a landscape from above. Like how we ‘know’ on the internet, skimming across terrain quickly, always from outside, mediated by the windows of our screens. Maybe for me this is the difference between critique and criticality: between knowing with and knowing about.

It occurs to me that knowing *with* is also like friendship, which you brought up in relation to Kirsty’s work. To say that I have experienced Kirsty’s work as a friendship feels weird, because friendship is not work in an extractive sense, but it’s also accurate. In friendship you come to know *with* someone, in small steps over time. You move, you learn, then you pause in a moment where you feel secure before moving again. As I’m writing I’m remembering something Dunja Kukovec, an artist from a feminist collective called Redmin(e)d [3] said; that friendship was really the one relationship not mediated by capitalism. Systems like Facebook, that make money out of friendship, don’t express that sense of knowing with, over time, that this form of relation involves. I feel it in the quality of Jemma’s writing, which is threaded through with friendship in these alternative networks, and has led to the making of a different type of knowledge.

So between knowing *with* and knowing *about* I’m not trying to set up a hierarchy: there is value in knowing about a system from outside and places like GWL offer alternative ways of relating that are built on originally being an outsider voice speaking back to mainstream representations of art and museum cultures. Instead I think we should move *between* these ways of knowing. We’re out of balance, now. Knowing *about* in the art world takes the form of judgement. I think Social Art Practices do raise this, in that knowing for them often means participation over time. It’s not like stopping into an opening where you are given wine and able to leave within ten/twenty mins of being there. This is the normal way we consume art, or the way art has made itself amenable to fast paced lives. I remember MAP published a series of fictional accounts of the kind of alienated critic who lived in that world: the writing was saturated by a quality of loneliness. [4]

Juliane’s work looks at consumption too, not as you would think directly in

the making of food (which is actually about slow production) but through her letter series which is a commitment to a different way of ‘getting to know’. The honesty and vulnerability in the letters testifies to a kind of exhaustion born of the need to be everything to everyone all the time. I’m thinking this is the kind of exhaustion I might have been suffering from, that I started this letter with. It also asks for a slower kind of getting to know and a commitment. I’ve been thinking about how I’ve been crossing a river with these works. The rush of the show being cancelled and everything being cancelled in the way we normally experience it has prompted a much longer and careful being with the works. I have done this with your company—which is great! I don’t know what is next but finally sitting down to write today has been a commitment to this moment first and about finding different ways to be with art and each other.

Think that’s it from me

Caroline xx

\*



Kirsty Russell, 'Buffer' (with hand), 2019. Photo: Hydar Dewachi

## 14 SEPTEMBER 2020

Dear Caroline,

This letter has *really* been written in the in-between! But this attempt at producing something 'final' has underlined how much this writing, our work, our relationship, is in the questions; how we are in the middle of things. Which is how all my 'things' are! Except, when we started writing, there were unfurling leaves of common lime tree outside, and now its leaves are yellowing, falling and collecting dirt on the city street; brushed into piles near the bins.

One of the 'middles' I want to nod to is that now we are being hosted in a public way with MAP, and that changes things, between the us that's you and me (and the us that includes the artists whose work we talk through); amid all these questions about guests and hosts I also want to address

these generous folk, our editors and the MAP audience as our hosts.

I have mostly been stuck on the notion of ‘false hosting’ you mention, inspired by Jemma Desai’s ‘This Work isn’t For Us’. The whole thing is really tricky, now, especially, and it should be. Loads of conversations have led me to it, too, into the sometimes uncomfortableness of it. I’m engaged in *efforts* to address—to redress, to respond—to the real problem of what gets called, short-handedly, ‘diversity’, or ‘EDI’ in the arts (and education...). To be more specific: *In the arts in the north east of Scotland where there are really ‘diverse’ communities, but where we need to make more space, and listen to people who have different experiences and perspectives.*

You know this: I am British, I have a British passport, and a British bank account (and these things really matter). I do not have lived experience of racism at work, or anywhere else, directly. Maybe to some people my ‘background’ is simple, but for me it isn’t (one side is Irish and Scottish, the other a mix made in India, Scotland and Portugal, and possibly others—so altogether British, Colonial, colonised). My son has a middle-eastern element to his name, and that’s further complicated (not Persian but Azerbaijani; my partner has an Italian and an Iranian passport). It’s not just as I’m an anthropologist I’m so attuned to all this, though that’s there. As more and more people begin looking in the crevices of their family histories, at their heritage, their ‘DNA’, I wonder: how much all beginnings are really beginning in the middle of things?

Jemma writes that:

*‘when speaking back to whiteness... If you refuse to be a collaborator, refuse to be complicit in their contortions and choose instead to tell the truth but in the wrong places, where it is not received, but can only be funneled back into you, where else can it settle but in your bones, your body, the soft tissues of your hope?’*

I get this idea, this leaking, a feeling of what *lives on* in our bodies, as Sara



Ahmed says. I also get what it feels like to snap; I've worked in some of these Institutions. But that's another story.

One thing I gleaned from listening to Jemma and her interlocutors as they shared, sometimes performed, their conversations live [5] (it was described as feeling like a performance, at some point, I think) is the importance of making them public. The other thing is how important it is to listen, spend more time, to do your best to also understand where you stand.

I could write an essay—longer than this!—in response to how you present knowing *with* and knowing *about*. I won't, except to mention that the shift to 'with' happened for me acutely; I ended up arguing for 'with' as a means of sitting between disciplines, as well as with individual people with different experiences. More recently I've made another shift to a conjunction ('and') or a hyphen, to acknowledge the space in between things.

But, ah, ALL of these are so easy to reduce to cliché! Right?

Just like the arguably clichéd ideas about art and hospitality. The thing is, these tend to *require* physical proximity, intimacy even. So it's important to acknowledge again, how this whole shift to working online has or might challenge, fundamentally what is, or was, (presumed) to be 'good', in the moral sense. I mean: what forms of hospitality can we offer, or accept, now? What forms of support can be shared? Is anyone really even listening?—it can be so.... *performative*, as people sit, looking, or listening (passively?) Are the people we hoped might listen, listening? I felt it, when Jemma Desai mentioned on Twitter that she believed the people she worked with were not. Not enough.

This is important because all of this interaction and debate is online now—and moving to being online, challenged the form of your work, this work, and the *Spoons* exhibition. The artists expressed clearly their resistances to an online show, and that was really important. For me, another way of thinking about all this is in terms of intimacy and vulnerability. Vulnerability is not the opposite of resistance, like hostility is not the opposite of

hospitality. Hospitality is not benign! I am thinking partly of Judith Butler, who said: there *are other ways and means* than the ‘strengthening of paternalistic forms of power’ ...this resonates so much with all the covid lockdowns and current lack of trust in people. We need other ways to how we are living right now. What happens, Butler asks, if vulnerability is imagined as *the thing that makes resistance possible?*

I’ve been thinking about this in terms of parasites, for a while now. *Growing* a baby complicated for me the pejorative sense of parasitism (it surprised me, the animal nature of it, of growing a human in my belly, the intensity of the experience). Beyond the biological, becoming a mother, a parent, a carer, the host–parasite relation really comes to the fore. Returning to Lisa Baraitser, as we talked about her before:

*‘The complexity of a specifically maternal ethics has less to do with an unstinting commitment or caring attentiveness towards another, and more to do with the way that otherness is always at work, structuring, infecting and prompting human subjectivity.’* (Baraitser, 2009, p28)

Michel Serres also writes about how a parasite can be a mode of *interruption*. In French, parasite has this third meaning, of noise, or static, that English doesn’t have. Apart from being an excellent metaphor for host-guest relations, this other definition resonates, often, and literally, in the ways that online video conferencing is working and not working, gremlins echoing feedback, the series of interruptions and call drops in the digital...

Thinking about these together: I wrote in an earlier letter about Baraitser suggesting we look at ‘maintenance’ time, and that we should value what we give. I realise that it’s not necessary to prove my capabilities, by juggling all of this labour, *as if it’s nothing*. (But that’s what I do, as a measure of capability, capacity; breastfeeding *while* working *while* thinking *while* giving. I am reminded of a print I have of a picture Louise Bourgeois made with the words ‘I give everything away’). (Our Editors have reminded us: Breastfeeding for one year is approximately 1900 hours of work, a full time job with 28 days holiday pay is 1960) ...!

Us writing like this, making public aspects of our personal, private, interior lives *is* vulnerable, and might (at first sight?) read or feel like an inversion, of the other side(s) of things, since we often spend time hosting others. But hosting, as well as being a guest has to be that, a kind of giving of ourselves; what it takes to ‘hold’ a space, nevermind the idea of feeling through what a ‘safe’ space might be for others.

More, soon!

Jen

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[1] Jemma Desai ‘This work isn’t for us’ is available to read as a Google Doc [here](#).

[2] Chu Chu Yuan’s PhD project is available to read [here](#). More about her practice can be found [here](#).

[3] [Redmin\(e\)d](#) is a feminist curatorial collective: Danijela Dugandžić (Sarajevo), Katja Kobolt (Munich), Dunja Kukovec (Ljubljana) and Jelena Petrović (Belgrade/Vienna).

[4] Out of Office Auto-Reply: A collaborative serial fiction project following the exploits of Colin Clout—a sixteenth century persona of dissent, here reimagined as art critic. Follow the series [here](#).

[5] An event series with LUX took place across the summer: a recording of this discussion is available [here](#).

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## LETTERS

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#58 - SEPTEMBER 2020 LETTERS

### 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

#58 - SEPTEMBER 2020 LETTERS

### WRITINGS BETWEEN

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

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