From Coping to Curious: Unlearning and Reimagining Curatorial Habits of Care

Helena Reckitt

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For the roundtable conversation “Taking Care: Feminist Curatorial Pasts, Presents and Futures,” (Lloyd et al. 2016) four feminist curators and art historians, based in Scotland, England, and Sweden, shared their insights into recent curatorial projects and scholarship informed by feminism and centred on social practice and care. Of their wide-ranging discussion of feminism’s recent, and overdue, centrality to curatorial practice and thought, it was their reflections on the feminised traits of the curator that particularly compelled me. Kirsten Lloyd analysed the curator’s rise as an economic symptom, equated with the flexibility and amenability expected of neoliberal workers. Jenny Richards, meanwhile, riffing on Lloyd’s account of the collapse of subjectivity and productivity, evoked the figure of “the coping curator,” who downplays systemic problems and suppresses her own emotions. “That woman who looks great, perfect lipstick, never needs to sleep and as Arlie Hochschild says [in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*] ‘offering only the clean house (gallery) and welcoming smile’ ” (Lloyd et al. 2016, 118). Richards’s characterisation of professionalism as performance resonated with my own experience holding curatorial and programming roles and the strain I had often felt to present an image of unflappable poise. During the 20 years in which I worked in non-profit art institutions in the UK and North America, from 1990 to 2010, the contemporary art field expanded hugely. The proliferation of temporary exhibitions, biennales, art fairs, and private foundations stimulated a growth in cultural tourism and an accompanying boom in art-oriented higher education. Meanwhile, work conditions in the sector became increasingly insecure. No longer expecting to follow a stable career trajectory, most arts workers internalised the idea that they were independent agents, ‘free’ to develop projects on a succession of part-time and

short-term contracts, for which they often travelled or relocated. To compensate for austerity cuts carried out in many Western countries, public arts organisations became reliant on private funds, while the under- and unremunerated labour of employees and volunteers in effect helped to subsidise those institutions' financial operations. From exceeding their contracted hours, to devoting their private lives courting influential funders and patrons, and producing projects on "just in time" schedules, cultural workers performed the precarity associated with networked capitalism (Reckitt 2016).

In my case, the pressure I felt to be hyperactive and visible, developing multiple programmes in a small team and under tight deadlines, left me little time or energy for relationships or activities outside work. From keeping up with the art world's itinerant calendar, usually on my own time and out of my own pocket, to socialising with well-connected patrons, and attending local art events, it often felt as if my whole life was on institutional loan. My knowledge of contemporary art, my relationships with artists, gallerists, and collectors, all were treated as commodities, to which board members and high-level members of the galley were offered access. To some artists, I seemed to also represent a useful resource, someone to befriend if they were to be recommended for exhibitions and awards and included in the itineraries for studio visits of visiting critics and curators. An emerging local artist whose work I had featured in a group show once called me at the gallery to ask when I planned to visit his new exhibition. A week later, when I had still not found the time to go, he left me a voice mail: he had checked with gallery staff, and they confirmed that I had still not attended. All these experiences made me feel like a commodity to be instrumentalised. Friendships were transactional and fleeting, to be dropped once someone else occupied my role.

As well as maintaining a constant level of activity, while suppressing my own needs for non-professional relationships and responsibilities, as well as relaxation and rest, I felt obliged to maintain a public image that reflected the gallery's vanguard brand. As my director explained, urging me to set up meetings with influential artists and curators during the Venice Biennale opening, regardless of whether or not we planned to work with them, "It's all about the optics." My consciousness of the need to convey an image of

polished professionalism and subtle glamour preceded my working at the gallery. Having fractured my elbow in a cycling accident days before my job interview, I removed the cast and dosed up on painkillers before leaving home.

Once I joined the institutional staff, at the same time as my personal life and affects were being instrumentalised, I started to be criticised by management for being "overly emotional" on the job. In a classic instance of the political implications of disciplining the self, analysed by Michel Foucault (1988), it seemed that the only feelings I was entitled to display were those that could be put to institutional use. The result was that I experienced a form of emotional compartmentalisation and splitting, similar to the tendency Richards observes in herself and other curators to "push the messy, difficult, and desirable work into the background, in order to leave a cleansed version of that role in the public" (Lloyd et al. 2016).

Yet, although meeting the required levels of presenteeism, productivity, and visibility took a physical and emotional toll, I hesitated to voice my concerns. 'Good jobs' in the arts were scarce to find in that city. Having relocated with my partner, who had secured a tenure-track academic job, I had spent a year job-hunting before being hired. Wondering what to do if I failed to find work in my field only reinforced how deeply intertwined my identity was with my professional persona. In a manner to which female cultural workers are especially prone, as Angela McRobbie argues, I had internalised the idea that I carried out "passionate work," more a vocation than a job (McRobbie 2015). Indeed, working to the point of burn out was almost a badge of honour amongst myself and other gallery colleagues. As the director of a small US art centre where I had previously worked liked to claim, "we punch way above our weight."

Overwork was also often matched by underpay, a legacy of arts jobs historically being the domain of the wealthy, extensions of their love for and ownership of valuable objects, more a privilege than a profession. Low pay and unstable terms also corresponded with the pattern described by Cristina Morini (2007) as the feminisation of labour, whereby the influx of the female workforce from the late 1960s into the arts, education,

and care and customer service led to a deflation of those fields, in terms of both wages and prestige. Ironically, the lowered status of female-dominated sectors was partly an outcome of women's demands for the flexibility needed to balance waged work with unpaid domestic and caring labour, demands that the capitalist system exploited. Even had I made my discomfort public, I feared doing so would damage my reputation, brand me as a whiner, lacking the resilience to perform under pressure, thus jeopardising my future employment prospects. Close to exhaustion, battling insomnia, I nonetheless continued to project the persona of the coping curator.

Selfie Care and Feminised Labour

Isabelle Graw diagnoses my inhibition to voice dissent as a symptom of 'semiocapitalism': the commodification of subjective expression and affects. Cultural workers feel compelled to maintain good relations with people they might one day collaborate with or work for, creating a culture in which cooperation takes precedence over agonism and critique. Contacts are currency as "contact capital" is accumulated. "The more contacts we collect, the better for our personal value" (2008, 76). Lane Relyea makes a similar point in *Your Everyday Art World* (2013). Discussing the networked activities of arts scenes, invested in patterns of mutual validation, branding, and prestige by association, he characterises how they operate within relational economies of geographically and socially dispersed 'weak ties.' By contrast, "strong ties," such as those often found in impoverished communities, are geographically and socially bounded, driven by bonds of mutual dependence and support (Relyea 2013, 54).

"Selfie care" is the term coined by Lauren Fournier (2018) to define the promotion of a personal or professional persona.[1] In the ceaseless search for the dopamine pull of likes and engagement in today's attention economy, arts workers' cultivation of a public persona reflects the broader emergence of social media celebrities and influencers. Selfie care, often taking precedence over genuine forms of self and collective nurturing, can encompass the promotion of a glamorous, networked, and sought-after image, along the lines I felt compelled to present as an institutional curator. It can also include the sharing of

images of individuals holding books of fashionable criticism, an auto-theoretical trait detected by Fournier in the feeds of certain post-internet artists (and a tendency to which I too have been prone). In contrast to this now-familiar trend, Fournier shows how selfie care can also trade in the sharing of painful, taboo, and shame-inducing emotions. As an example she cites Melissa Broder's blog and subsequent book *So Sad Today* (2016), documenting the author's exhausting search for attention and affirmation resulting from her profound anxiety and depression. While it is important to differentiate between problematic practices of oversharing and the soft brag and the potential activist and community-building tactics of amplifying stigmatised issues and traumatic experiences, as Fournier takes pains to do, both tendencies nonetheless reflect the impetus to perform under the gaze of virtual others.

Curatorial scholar Nanne Buurman characterises curators' propensity to over-identify with institutions they work for as "Stockholm syndrome" (Buurman 2021, 22). Remarking on women's dominance in the curatorial field, she notes:

> [C]omplementary to stereotypical associations of artistry with masculinity, structural analogies can be discerned between traditional scripts of femininity and widespread curatorial codes of conduct: beyond the shared etymology of care work and curating in the Latin curare (to care), the practices of curators and care workers are generally associated with an emphasis on modesty, restraint, and a negation of productivity or creativity of authorship. Moreover, their subject positions have in common an emancipatory trajectory from invisible agents/stagehands behind the scenes of (representational) economies to the role of protagonists that take center stage.
>
> (2021, 21)

Recalling curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's characterisation of the white cube as a "space of emancipation," Buurman wonders if her dOCUMENTA (13) constitutes "a neoliberal *smooth space* in which the benevolent curatorial smile conveys the impression of freedom from domination through the use of barely noticeable *soft power*?" (2021, 30).

Disidentification and Care of the Self

Once I stopped working as an institutional curator and started to derive my living as a university lecturer, I used the self-critical space of academia to interrogate my former professional habitus. I began to see that, by romanticising my work and believing that the prestige of artists and intellectuals I worked with rubbed off on me, I had contributed to maintaining exploitative and unsustainable work conditions.[2] With art historian Danielle Child and Jenny Richards (whose description of the 'coping curator' so resonated with me) I wrote the article "Labours of Love" (2017), in which we pooled our experiences of the many ways we had prioritised professional obligations and relationships above those without instrumental value. We looked to the roots of these behaviours in our social conditioning, as daughters of neoliberal parents, employees in service industries, and precarious workers. I continued analysing art world habits of care (and lack therein) through leading various workshops with cultural and education workers in Toronto (Blackwood Gallery, 2017), Sheffield (SITE Gallery, 2018), London (Studio Voltaire, 2018), Helsinki (in-waves, 2018), and Paris (Ferme du Buisson, 2019), as well as with MFA Curating students at Goldsmiths.

Working alone and with others to identify the systemic nature of exploitative work conditions gave me some distance on my previous work behaviour. The effort to denaturalise internalised norms has resonance with the, albeit far more systematic and long-term, feminist practice of consciousness raising. Such self-reflexivity also finds parallels with Foucault's writing on the care of the self (Foucault et al. 1987), a process of retreat that involves reflecting on the nuances and textures of everyday life. In contrast to the solipsism of selfie care, care of the self is ultimately a collective act, as insights an individual gains into their own condition are amplified when shared with others through teaching, mentorship, and other ethical forms of relation.[3]

Foucault's concern with quotidian experience, personal reflection, and narrative also connects to literary scholar Jane Gallop's exploration of anecdote and feminist storytelling. Erupting into scenes of academia, anecdote has the effect of

> refiguring inherited modes of scholarly authority and vocality, leaving us a little unsure as to when and where we have become too personal, and when and where it is precisely this grounding in the personal that is making our political scholarship, our theory, possible,

as Natalie Loveless observes (2019, 65–66).

Unlearning Habits of Care

Within the cultural field, high status typically accrues to activities linked to artworks and artists (especially if they are critically or commercially validated), while low status adheres to tasks involving 'uninitiated' groups, such as children and non-art world audiences, and with the work of maintaining mundane and ephemeral objects. This conceptual split between prestigious and menial labour and value has little to do with material differences and everything to do with symbolic associations. Identifying the nineteenth- century-origins of the division between 'spiritual' care and nurturance associated with white bourgeois women, and 'menial' dirty work associated with racialised women, Mara Marin shows how this distinction continues "to justify the contradictory tendencies to sentimentalize care while materially undervaluing it" (Woodly et al. 2021). Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who memorably declared "Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)," (1969) dramatised the hierarchies of museological care in her 1974 gallery intervention *Transfer (The Maintenance of the Art Object)*. Her performance included exchanging the specialised materials with which the conservator preserved an Egyptian mummy with the rags used by the janitor to mop the museum floor.

Over the past 15 years, care and maintenance have become the focus for various curatorial research projects. One example whose conceptual complexity and political urgency makes me return to it regularly is the *Grand Domestic Revolution* (GDR), which started at CASCO in Utrecht in 2009, taking different forms and orientations when it opened at non-profit arts organisations in London, Derry/Londonderry, Ljubljana, Stockholm, and Malmo. Exploring conditions and possibilities of hosting, living, and working together, this multi-part programme focused on the labour of social reproduction,

of building and sustaining life. Especially pertinent to my focus on denaturalising hierarchies of value and care are the 'Unlearning' exercises developed by artist Annette Krauss with the CASCO team. Recognising that their individual and collective investments in being constantly 'busy' contributed to a culture of hyper production and stress, the exercises ranged from moving around the gallery furniture to hosting weekly reading sessions and carrying out group cleaning and maintenance labour, all efforts to make visible, share, and redistribute previously neglected aspects of art institutional housework.

Similarly invested in practices of institutional analysis, Bergen-based curator Eva Rowson highlights the undervalued cultural labour typically carried out by members of feminised, racialised, and classed groups. Growing out of her project "How Do We Keep It Going?" Rowson (2018) seeks to reject working practices that undermine participants' well-being, instead valuing intimacy and experimentation:

> If we imagine our programmes becoming less about always being visible and more about protecting space for ourselves and others to test things, take risks, learn, fail, and relearn as we go along, then we need to shift institutions and funders away from the need to have clear outcomes in order to prove what they're doing is "productive."

At the Kunsthall in Bergen, Rowson developed a programme informed by the question 'Who's Doing the Washing Up?' All employees were invited to programming meetings, including those not usually involved in core curatorial decisions such as "ticket sellers, poster hangers, operations teams, cleaners" (Rowson 2020). As a consequence, exhibition credits subsequently acknowledged the labour of maintenance staff alongside the curatorial and administrative team. That Rowson acknowledges questioning whether the art centre's cleaner would feel 'shame' in being publicly acknowledged for his work suggests how deeply entrenched these prejudices against such labour continues to be. The process also stimulated awareness about how certain goals of inclusivity, such as 50/50 gender balance in music line-ups, had been reached, while other glaring oversights, like the

dysfunctional non- gendered, accessible toilet, were ignored. Emerging from a 2018 intervention led by artist Jordi Ferreiro, access to the previously unavailable toilet was eventually enabled.

Giving It Time

The art institutional devaluation and disavowal of caring and maintenance activities contrast starkly with the way in which 'high profile' curators and institutional leaders are fetishized and celebrated, their 'charismatic' traits accruing the glamour and mythic status of hyper-individualised artists. The expectation for curators and directors to perform visionary capabilities is built into the application and interview process, which is premised on the idea that candidates know what is needed, before they have even been offered the job. Even if the opportunity to speak with a staff member in advance of an interview is now often offered,[4] the need to provide long-term programming and fundraising plans assumes an unrealistic and problematically 'god-like' level of foresight. The arrogant, top-down approach taken by many organisational leaders therefore follows this expectation.

So it was notable that when Cecilia Widenheim took over directorship of Stockholm's Tensta Konsthall in 2019, she resisted the oedipal narrative of succession and overthrow, instead acknowledging the work of her predecessor, Maria Lind, and her wish to develop, rather than archive and deem obsolete, her achievements (Antaya 2018). Also refusing to glorify institutional work, when discussing their co-directorship of another Swedish art institution, Konsthall C, Richards and her co-director emphasise their mundane and relational roles: "janitor/chef/cleaner/therapist/friend/organiser/builder/teacher/administrator/artist" (Lloyd et al. 2016, 118). Similarly, of the various positions she has held, including curator, institutional director, and head of an art school, Brussels-based Laurence Rassel refuses to merge the personal with the professional. "I never use 'I am a director,'" she explains, "It is not an identity, I act as or I am occupying the position of etc."[5] Unwilling to privilege an organisation's outward-facing aspects above its overall health, Rassel builds on tenets of institutional psychology that "if you wanted to take care of a person, you have to take care

of the institution, that if the institution is sick, the people who are patients there will be as sick as the institution is." Psychiatric patients joined staff members to participate in their own care and healing. "Everything counts," from the design and care of the garden, to who does the cooking and cleaning, and how, a collaborative approach that values all members' agency and creativity (Sollfrank 2019).

Such refusals of mastery and arrogance find echoes in contemporary calls to reduce the pace of expansion and production and devote the same care to art organisations' internal workings as to their public-facing outputs. Responding to curator Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez's invitation to 'slow down' and take a more holistic approach to the deployment of art institutional resources and capacities, Alba Colomo and Lucy Lopez, co-founders of La Sala, an emerging intersectional feminist space in Nottingham, envisage an organisation that is nurturing rather than extractive, built around the table and in relation to the food grown in their adjacent allotment. Their inaugural series "Fermenting Institutions, Thinking Beans" shed light on lengthy, organic processes that are generative, sensitive to locality, and responsive to conditions of burn out, both planetary and personal (La Sala 2019). La Sala builds on Isabelle Stengers's concept of "slow science," cited by Petrešin-Bachelez, where paying attention entails more-than-human entanglements, and the transformative power of participants thinking together resembles "the slow knowledge of a gardener" rather than "the fast one of so-called rational industrial agriculture" (Petrešin-Bachelez 2017)

A commitment to working across time, rather than according to the short- term schedules endemic to gallery programming, is also a hallmark of Alex Martinis Roe's artistic research, for which she creates long-term support structures. Martinis Roe emphasises the importance of working through, rather than suppressing, difference and friction when it emerges in group situations, to stimulate the kind of feminist dynamics that can engender safe space.

> Rather than saying "I'm not going to say this, I'm not going to say that," and go silent because you're worried you might say the wrong thing, I think it would be better to just be committed to the group and the project. Thinking instead, I'm not going to

> leave when it gets difficult. Or I'm not going to abandon somebody if I have made a mistake and hurt them, rather than constantly trying to prevent yourself from making mistakes.
>
> (Martinis Roe and Reckitt 2021, 109)

Rethinking whose knowledge and experience are valued, and for that recognition to make a difference to who is given institutional agency and power, is another cornerstone of the various social justice-oriented initiatives that I consider. At the Wellcome Collection in London, the need to think beyond conventional professional knowledge led the curatorial team for *Being Human*, a permanent display inspired by the Social Model of Disability, to hold long-term consultations with advisers and specialists, from disabled individuals and members of disability organisations to academics and research scientists. Exhibition staff took on board the insights that emerged from these discussions to challenge implicit distinctions between supposed 'able-bodied' museum professionals and 'disabled' outsiders. Vitrines in the exhibition displayed 'prosthetics' donated by Wellcome employees, which included spectacles, a hearing aid, and a prosthetic knee and breast, accompanied by written accounts of owners' mixed emotions about them. Having learnt how disabled museum visitors often felt marginalised or excluded, staff devised a gallery floor plan which accommodated visitors viewing work from a wheelchair or standing, featuring plenty of seating, and a prominent entrance for wheelchair users to avoid them entering "by the back door" (Barlow 2020).

From Coping to Curiosity

These examples point to the need for cultural workers to adopt more open- ended approaches to devising projects in which they see themselves as part of a relational network rather than as figures of authority and control. When approaching curatorial research as a starting point for questions and experiments, rather than demonstrations of competence and knowledge, ignorance can be treated as a spur to learn rather than a source of frustration or shame. "We aren't here to learn what we already know," the title of an article by Kyla Wazana Tompkins, derived from methodologies she developed teaching

intersectional feminisms, proposes just such a curious and questioning stance (Tompkins 2016). Curiosity is also central to Loveless's definition of research creation, in which "You can't be curious about something you already know, but you need to know something about it in order to be curious" (2019, 48).

In the curatorial and research projects I have developed since I stopped working as a full-time institutional curator, I have started to devise more dynamic, reciprocal, and unstable relationship with my collaborators, using them as opportunities to think and experiment with others, from artists, thinkers, and activists to audience members and fellow organisers. For the 2014 exhibition *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, at OCADU Gallery in Toronto, for instance, I invited the participating artists to suggest ways in which I could reflect the exhibition's exploration of instrumentalised subjectivity on a curatorial level rather than simply presenting their work as illustrations of my theme. Responses included one collective contributing to the exhibition design, one artist proposing a workshop on DIY artist survival techniques, and a collaborative duo wanting to invest the entire project budget on the stock market. By performing the conditions of its existence, the exhibition exceeded conventional representational curatorial strategies to test its own functions, according to scholar Emma Brasó (2021).

This embrace of uncertainty also informs my approach to the Feminist Duration Reading Group (FDRG), a monthly meeting exploring under-represented feminisms, which I have coordinated since 2015. Sessions are proposed and led by various members of the Working Group and Support Group, as well as former participants and friends. Fostering divergent views and approaches results in a programme that is far more polyvocal, in theme and aesthetic approach, than it would be had I kept a tight grip of the curatorial reins. The FDRG's longevity also results from its open-ended character, as sessions are shaped according to the interests and curiosities of a shifting group. Efforts to make sessions accessible, without 'dumbing down' content, include adopting a format of reading out loud together, one person and one paragraph at a time. Remarking on the intimacy of a session she attended, a newcomer recently remarked that she had long searched for a

reading group like this that takes as much care with the quality of the exchange as it does with *what* is read.

Becoming and Caring Differently

Changing ingrained institutional behaviours of the kind I have described in the cultural sector is a complex process. It can't be carried out single- handedly, especially given the instability of many cultural workers' livelihoods and their financial and emotional dependence on institutions and must occur within the context of a broader commitment to organisational change. It is especially challenging to change systemic habits in sectors like the arts that are enmeshed in ideologies of vocation and love and which encourage romanticisation and over-identification. Transforming what Katie Barclay calls an institution's "feeling rules" requires a deeply held commitment by its members to think about their emotional selves in new ways and to "become something different" (2021, 2).

Just such a commitment can be seen in some of the examples of curatorial and institutional work I have given. *The Grand Domestic Revolution* took place when CASCO was moving to a new building and redefining its mission as working for the commons. *Being Human* was developed in the run-up to the Wellcome Collection's initiative to centre transformational and institutional justice, which included forging a plan on anti-Blackness and racism and committing £1 million to a three-year access, inclusion, and diversity strategy. The process also entailed interrogating the Wellcome's extractavist colonial origins and commissioning a study of the potential carbon footprint for an exhibition on magic, which identified visitor travel to the exhibition as its most environmentally damaging dimension. Learning from the Collection's long-term engagement with issues of access and disability, for a series of artist commissions developed during the COVID- 19 pandemic, curator Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz implemented 'crip time.' Three artists, Sop, the vacuum cleaner, and Khairani Barokka, were invited to respond to the UK government's campaign 'Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives,' and its disproportionate impact on certain communities and individuals. To enable flexibility, commissions were offered without any fixed plans for public visibility. The three works eventually entered the

institution's COVID-19 collection, and Sop's piece featured in the 2021 exhibition *Rooted Beings*.[6]

Akin to how I have described my efforts to distance myself from naturalised forms of cultural subjectivity and labour, Barclay explores how some contemporary academics are involved in a process of 'cooling off' from the vocational self that academia calls for and the power systems it reproduces. She argues that such a cooling, accompanied by "learning to sit in discomfort," can be an important step in efforts to build more ethical institutions (Barclay 2021, 53). Signs of 'cooling' are also visible in the today's cultural sector. Arts workers are more regularly voicing their discomfort with perpetuating a system in which notions of care are often spoken, but care rarely extends beyond a limited, privileged few. In tactics that echo Foucault's writing on care of the self, over the past couple of years UK-based arts workers have used social media alongside more conventional publishing formats to amplify their experiences of toxic workplace conventions, from bullying to racism, tokenism, precarity, and ableism.[7] These more-frequently voiced grievances are also accompanied by current initiatives in the UK cultural sector that attempt to centre and value care: from the London arts organisation Furtherfield's residency for carers, to the Scottish arts agency Arika's childcare and phone data fund, and the founding of Mother House studios in South London, which welcomes artists' children and includes childcare provision. The growing institutional adoption of live captioning and writ- ten image descriptions reflects another attempt to respond to participants' different access needs.

Most of the work involved in devising new protocols of care, and pressuring institutions to adopt them in ways that go beyond tokenistic or one-off gestures, is carried out by artists and poorly paid cultural workers. Having experienced a deficit of institutional care first hand, they recognise the need to work together and care for one another. Artist and writer Johanna Hedva is one such figure. As part of their efforts to build intimacy, care, and relationality with organisations with whom they work, Hedva has made public the disability access rider they send before accepting institutional invitations (Hedva 2019). The rider details her needs, from travel, diet, and accommodation, to seating and rest, gender-neutral toilets and inclusive documentation and mediation. Written to avoid the

labour of repeatedly articulating their needs as someone with long-term chronic illness, the rider represents a concerted effort to get institutions to shape their programmes in response to people's individual needs and not force them to adhere to rigid formats. Hedva's document ends with the hope that protocols adopted to support their participation will become part of the institution's commitment to care better in the future.

Jamila Prowse, an arts worker and writer inspired by Hedva, who has written about her own encounters with toxic work environments, describes the need for an "intrinsically flexible, human centred approach" that is "less focused on a specific outcome, and more focused on the time and investment you put into thinking, collaborating, creating, facilitating discussion and nurturing relationships." Such a change in orientation holds the potential to foster working environments "where our mind is free to roam, to imagine alternative potentialities" (Prowse 2020).

The problems I encountered working for non-profit arts organisations, especially in my last curatorial post, are hardly exceptional. I draw on these experiences not to incite sympathy or surprise but to underline their all-too familiar and systemic nature. I also want to attempt to hold myself accountable, to understand why I did so little to improve my situation, and why I chose to quit instead of battling it out. I want, moreover, to gain insight into why I failed to build solidarity with my co-workers, in the absence of a trades union or other collective bargaining platform. Perhaps, bonds between colleagues discouraged them from letting others down, for failing the institution whose mission they so valued. Perhaps, they had internalised the idea that they were disposable and easily replaced should they speak out.

I also don't want to exaggerate the difficulties I faced. In many ways I was lucky. I lived with my partner, who had a full-time academic post. In the knowledge that I had my family's support, I resigned from my gallery position without having another job lined up. Refusing to sit through a meeting at which my boss began reading from a long list detailing my shortcomings gave me perverse satisfaction. The list began with my failure to make him look good in public and in the presence of visiting luminaries; after all "it's all about the optics." That someone with my privileges – white, middle class, university-educated, cis-

gendered, able-bodied – experienced such profound discomfort, such conviction that I was not up to the job, only highlights the stress experienced by members of marginalised groups who do not meet the norms to which I conformed, who are so often made to feel inadequate and out of place.

One of the pleasures of teaching, singled out by Barclay as providing sources of meaning and passion that offer some compensation for academics whose ardour for university culture has cooled (2021, 38), is contributing to the development of emerging practitioners. It can be especially rewarding to support students who are not prepared to accept the art world's status quo but who commit to doing things otherwise. It is the efforts of arts practitioners to develop more equitable, joyful, caring, and curious ways of working that encourage me to "keep it going," in Rowson's phrase. Refusing to surrender all their vitality to institutions that would suck the very life out of them, they try to make worlds in which they might truly want to live.

Notes

1 Thanks to Erica Scourti for introducing me to Fournier's notion of selfie care.

2 See my earlier reflections on the dangers of burnout and exhaustion for cultural workers in conditions of precarity and emotional splitting in (Reckitt 2016).

3 See Liz Kinnamon (2016) on the political importance of care of the self, the dangers of self-neglect, and overestimation of collectivity and togetherness in producing joy.

4 Thanks to Persilia Caton, who has interviewed for curatorial jobs more recently than I have, for this insight, and for her careful and insightful reading of an early version of this text.

5 Laurence Rassel, email to the author, March 15, 2021.

6 Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, email to the author, June 6, 2022.

7 See, for example, recent accounts at weareparable.com, 2020, www.weareparable. com/hypocrisy-fake-solidarity-and-glass-ceilings-my-perspective-working-at-the- william-morris-allery/?preview=true&fbclid=IwAR0ivcAAd5EoCpOSwrR-Cd0 F5gZxVzT-

aSzhSiMRdxnJ2DfadKwISTTqB34; *Arts Professional*, June 24, 2020, www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/we-need-collectivity-against- structural-and-institutional-racism-cultural-sector?fbclid=IwAR0lwrTL1mRmG2 F83673mENmA7AiNhRzCeGHBRFfEme-MUyrtHuui187QJ4*;* https://heystacks. com/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us–by-jemma-desai;"*Disability Arts,* Online, April 2020; and The White Pube's regular pointed art world critiques, https:// thewhitepube.co.uk/

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