

THE CURATORIAL

Changing Concepts of Curatorial Enquiry: Care, Ethics, and Research

CRITICAL CURATING

Henk Slager • 2/1/25

Today, there is an encroaching sense that our relationship with the world is more and more disturbed. As a result of omnipresent technological acceleration, we are now running up against psychological, political, and planetary limits. This escalation manifests itself in topical forms of precarization (self-exhaustion), the crisis of democracy (politics that are no longer responsive to citizens), and the environmental crisis (treating nature only as a resource for extraction). It seems that we have lost the very pathways and rhythmic relationships to the world as such.¹

This awareness is reinforced by the contemporary technological compulsion to transform everything into data. Through this new epistemic regime, we are no longer autonomous producers of knowledge but are forced, because of the imperative of transparency, to cede our sovereignty to processes of abstraction, quantification, digitization, calculation, and algorithmic regulation.

This whole constellation leads to alienation, which has affected many of us in various intensities as an inability to feel, sense, or hear ourselves. In addition, a large part of mankind has lost the common understanding of what a better society might look like. It even seems that our utopian energies are fully exhausted. Philosopher Boris Groys, for example, describes this current state of mind as follows: “Today no one has any idea what will happen in the future. The only hope people have is that the future doesn’t bring anything terrible. The hope is that everything remains as it is—that is the best hope that we can have.”²

Is it feasible to escape this rationalistic, instrumental, calculated, and disengaged relation to the world? Is it conceivable to overcome the current orientation toward the logic of unbridled growth and its cost to our humanity? In other words: Can we achieve a “way out” that resonates with the world and draws attention to other forms of knowledge, agency, solidarity, and community?³ Can we foster shifts in

awareness that, as Marina Garcés argues in her essay, “*Conditio Posthuma*,” could lead to a new revolution of “looking after ourselves”?⁴

In what follows, I’d like to put forward a series of artistic and/or curatorial propositions that might put us on the path to this transformation. For that purpose, the urgent question to be asked is what should be done to “maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.”⁵

Political scientist Joan Tronto introduces the concept of care as a tool to repair the connections between world, existence, and life. She does so by deploying this concept strategically: an understanding of care that goes beyond neoliberal capitalism’s calibration of individualist perspectives and preferences that emphasize self-care (a reductive appropriation of the ethical ideologies of care, focusing on lifestyle, fitness, and family). To free care from this hegemonic machine—or better to reclaim care—the concept will have to be recalibrated in its full complexity and ecology: “care shapes what we pay attention to, how we think about responsibility, what we do, how responsive we are to the world around us, and what we think of as important in life. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”⁶ From Tronto’s perspective, care is not something an inherently isolated and selfish individual needs to be forced to engage in through considerations of self-interest or duty. On the contrary, it comes naturally to us because we are all involved in and dependent on the ecology of this life-sustaining web. And with that, care is also a critical practice and concept. Starting from collective and multivocal enactments, it stands for strategies of survival, resilience, and resistance in a more-than-human world that is characterized by global inequality, climate crisis, and loss of biodiversity.

Precisely this disruptive understanding of care resonates with the field of artistic research that has played a significant role in art discourse from the beginning of this century. This relatively new form of research is characterized by intertwining creative practice, critical epistemologies, and engaged strategies of dissemination. This specific mode of inquiry enables artistic research to rehearse topical issues concerning planetary urgencies—such as the ecological crisis and social injustice—in a completely different way, namely from the transformative potential to imagine, initiate, or negotiate other ways of living together.

A striking example of this *modus operandi* is Gustafsson & Haapoja’s research project, “*Becoming. Manual for Earthly Living*.”⁷ This project departs from how the capitalist dictate of chronopolitics—that is, using time as a tool for social control in every precinct of life from work, production, and school schedules to health care to transportation—affects our Earth’s ecosystems by asking: Is it possible to live as a human being in a world that is dominated by Western models of progress that are exhausting our planet?

To find a possible answer, Gustafsson & Haapoja conducted thirty-seven video interviews to identify ways of relating to ourselves, others, and the world. They contemplated phenomena that are budding at

this very moment and that should be nurtured. In these video conversations, the specific question arises: How can art contribute to forms of subjecthood and citizenship that are no longer determined by anthropocentric frameworks that use the rhetoric of exclusivity or human exceptionalism? In this way, a future world could be built where care forms the basis of coexistence and communality; a world based on another biopolitics where the dominant perspective of the homo economicus is replaced by homo ecologicus, i.e. substituted with a perspective characterized by a polyphonic imaginary, a collective empowerment, a sustainable existence, and a more-than-human community.



Gustafsson & Haapoja, *Becoming. Manual for Earthly Living*, installation view of *Farewell to Research*, MNAC, Bucharest, 2021.

Ursula Biemann's research offers us another excellent example of this approach. Her practice emphasizes the speedy course of climate change into unknown futures that is forcing us to fundamentally rethink the relationship between humans and the Earth. For instance, the video essay *Subatlantic* juxtaposes the science of geology and climatology with human history, proposing that the fully imaginary globe that has been constructed in the disciplinary field of humanities fails to resonate with the mighty planetary grammar.⁸ Therefore, if we think from the perspective of a posthuman future, it is extremely important to develop a mode of contemporary art that brings the Earth on stage, so to speak, so that we see it as it is: an unstable living environment reconnecting us to infinite, untameable forces that animate extra-historical dimensions. "Perhaps from there, we can envision a less divided future that can harbor a post-human way of being in the world."⁹



Ursula Biemann, *Subatlantic*, installation view (right side), *Re-Imagining Futures*, OnCurating, Zurich, 2019.

A similar postcapitalist perspective is articulated in the research project “Stones Have Laws” by Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan.¹⁰ The film portrays how the Western model of linear time has played an important role in processes of colonization and exploitation, as well as in the loss of self-determination for a wide range of cultures and creatures. “Stones Have Laws” attends to the current situation of the Maroon community in the interior of Surinam and to another aspect of capitalist chronopolitics: a process that exchanges ecological time for a growth-oriented, measurable time. As a consequence, a system came into being in which nature became commodified, i.e., understood as an object for consumption. Meanwhile—and this is central to Van Brummelen & De Haan’s research project—a social protest is developing in Latin America that demands another ecology of care: a living world that requires different ways of organizing knowledge, time, and ontology that trouble the traditional direction of progress and the speed of technoscientific, productionist, future-driven interventions.



Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, *Stones Have Laws*, installation view, *Any Speculation Whatever*, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana, 14th Havana Biennale, 2022.

These projects emphasize that the urgencies of care ethics and the imagining of potential “ways out” are also high on the agenda of artistic research. María Puig de la Bellacasa's book, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* resonates with this.¹¹ She describes care as a dynamic triangulated relationship of labor, affect, and politics; and it should always have these three ontological dimensions actively present: the practical (work), the affective (engagement), and the ethico-political (involvement). Only then can care present itself as both a speculative and existential domain: open-ended, with room for possible reconfigurations.

With Puig de Bellacasa's characterization of care, we see clear similarities with a possible definition of the practice of artistic research.¹² This mode of inquiry can also be described as a dynamic triangulated relationship: between creative practice (experimentality, art-making, the potential of the sensible); artistic thinking (open-ended, speculative, associative, nonlinear, haunting, thinking differently); and dissemination strategies (curatorial formats, topical modes of political imagination, performative perspectives, transformational spaces for encounters), comprehending these different kinds of conceptual space in their mutually vibrant and coherent interrelationships.

From whatever conceptual space one departs, an artistic research practice should always signify a transversal constellation—as a creative proposition for thought in action. Yet, that mode of research should never be reduced to a method of one of the three constituents. Artistic research cannot be exactly equated with creative innovation or disciplinary knowledge production or political activism. Consequently, it seems urgent now to profoundly challenge and question the issue of how to articulate and present the condition of the intersection between creative practice, artistic thinking, and the ways they are made manifest.

What does this triangulated connectivity mean for thinking about the curatorial dimension? In the symposium, *Going to the Limits of Your Longing, Research as Another Name for Care*, organized by the Basel Academy in 2021 to honor the late curator and artist Marion von Osten, a constructive and inspiring perspective was presented.¹³ The point of departure for the symposium was Von Osten's empathetic curatorial approach to the medium of exhibition-making. This revolved around artistic research devoted to collective issues and modes of meaning-making, putting forward ideas on community, access, agency, gender, and ecology. And here we see a topical interpretation of curatorial care and responsibility: to work against repression, exclusion, and marginalization. Or to put it differently, curatorial care requires attention to other modes of being and thinking that are sensitive to difference. In this way, the curatorial also shows its political potential, i.e., making an ethics of care public in a strategic manner based on an understanding of the politics of display: how care is disseminated, how care is performed, how care is propagated, and how care ultimately resists categorical modes of thinking. Beatrice von Bismarck also describes how curating involves modifying and generating meaning in acts of assembling in public. It constitutes a coming-together for processes of negotiation, but also for proclamation, demonstration, or argumentation. In this approach, curatorial processes are essentially performative. Exhibits find themselves in new juxtapositions, entering into relations with altered spaces and social, economic, and discursive contexts. Attention focuses on the interplay of all factors, and in particular on “the transformative, but also self-transforming relational fabric of the curatorial situation, its conditions and preconditions, and the options for actions they offer.”¹⁴

In this moment of making things public, we notice a challenging task for both thinking and practicing curatorial care and artistic research. This includes investigating the disruptive potential, the triangulated condition, the topical role of speculation, the perspective of change vectors, and different modes of agency, focusing on other ways of living together as a performative exploration of possible ways out. All of this could lead to the mutual enrichment and reassessment of the concepts and ecologies of research and care, and consequently afford a more profound thinking about matters concerning all of us and imagining future scenarios.

NOTES

1. In his book *Resonance, A Sociology of our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), Hartmut Rosa looks for possibilities to restore our relationship with the world. Can we recover the phenomenological condition that makes it possible again to resonate with the world and hear its polyphony?
2. Boris Groys, *Philosophy of Care* (London/New York: Verso, 2022). See also “Philosophy of Care: A Conversation.” <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/499836/philosophy-of-care-a-conversation>.
3. The curatorial project “The Way Out” (Steirischer Herbst, Graz 2021, curators: Ekaterina Degot, David Riff) contrasts the disappointment of self-regulatory markets with a different, confrontational model of care. <https://2021.steirischerherbst.at/en/program/2293/the-way-out-of>.
4. Marina Garcés, “Conditio Posthumana,” in *The Great Regression* (Cambridge: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 7.
5. Joan Tronto, *Who Cares, How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 3.
6. Tronto, *Who Cares, How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, 8.
7. Presentation of “How to Become Human” in the context of the 9th Bucharest Biennale publication MaHKUscript, *Journal of Fine Art Research*, 5, *After the Research Turn*, 2020. See also Terike Haapoja’s presentation “Vulnerability, Animality, Community,” EARN Conference, *The Postresearch Condition*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2021. MaHKUscript: <https://mahkascript.com/5/volume/4/issue/1>. <https://www.hku.nl/en/study-at-hku/creative-transformation/pre-phd-programme/the-postresearch-condition>.
8. This work by Ursula Biemann was shown in the research presentation “Re-Imagining Futures,” *OnCurating*, Zurich, 2019. “Re-Imagining Futures,” <https://oncurating-space.org/re-imagining-futures/>.
9. Quote from Ursula Biemann, *Subatlantic*, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/123399928>.
10. The research project *Stones Have Laws* was part of the second iteration of Re-Imagining Futures, titled *Any Speculation Whatever, Futuro Y Contemporaneidad*, 14th Havana Biennial. *Stones Have Laws*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McQjpqbRjj0>.
11. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
12. First steps toward this paradigm formation were given in “Farewell to Research” (9th Bucharest Biennale, 2020-2021) and the publication *The Postresearch Condition* (Metropolis M Books: Utrecht, 2021). Farewell to Research: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/410540/farewell-to-research/>. Postresearch Condition: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/410536/metropolis-m-books-publishes-the-postresearch-condition/>.
13. Symposium *Going to the Limits of Your Longing, Research as Another Name for Care. In Memory of Marion von Osten*, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, March 17-18, 2021. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/381063/going-to-the-limits-of-your-longing-research-as-another-name-for-care-in-memory-of-marion-von-osten/>.
14. Beatrice von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022), 9. In her description of the curatorial, von Bismarck also uses the model of dynamic triangulated relationships,

consisting of the following constituents: constellation, transposition, and hospitality. “The curatorial is characterized by transpositional processes generating constellations that are determined by curatoriality and that are situatively, temporally, and dynamically shaped on the basis of the dispositif of hospitality.”(28)

Bio

Henk Slager’s focus has been on research and visual art for the last twenty years. He was a Lecturer at De Appel Curatorial Program (1995-2020), Visiting Professor of Artistic Research (Uniarts Helsinki 2010-2015, 2024-), and Dean of MaHKU Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design (HKU Utrecht 2003-2018). He is currently working for the same school on the development of a practice-based doctoral program. Henk Slager co-initiated the European Artistic Research Network (EARN), a network investigating the consequences of artistic research for current art education through symposia, expert meetings, and presentations. Departing from a similar focus on artistic research he published *The Pleasure of Research*, an overview of curatorial research projects (a.o. Shanghai Biennale, 2008; Tbilisi Triennial, 2012; Aesthetic Jam Taipei Biennial, 2014; 5th Guangzhou Triennial, 2015; Research Pavilion Venice, 2015-2019; and 9th Bucharest Biennale, 2020). A follow-up publication will be presented in 2025. Henk Slager is currently co-convening the 6th Asia Triennial Manchester (2025).