

**Thinking in Public: The Affordances of Hopeless Spaces**  
**Volume 1: Essays**

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(by project)



## **Abstract**

The position of the public realm as a common resource that is genuinely open to all appears ever more circumscribed by economic pressures and politically driven regulation. A resulting sense of 'hopelessness' can constrain a community's ability to develop sustainable, mutually supportive ways to organise and inhabit space. Contemporary art practices participate in narrowing or expanding the possibilities of the public realm, whether through resistance or inadvertent or knowing collusion.

My practice-led research interrogates the capacity of artistic practices to suggest fresh ways to think about and produce the physical, social and cultural structures that support everyday life. The particular focus of the practice is on frameworks for public collaborative thinking. What constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context, what forms might it take, and what conditions are required for it to acquire agency in the world? These questions are addressed through theory, the critique of existing artworks, and the development of projects to test tactics in real situations.

Theorists who worry about public space have staked claims within a shifting field, continuously opening up and closing down spaces for artistic speculation. I look carefully at key texts, concepts and techniques developed by Hannah Arendt, Claire Bishop, David Bohm, Rosalyn Deutsche, Grant Kester, Chantal Mouffe, Bruno Latour, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler and Ben Spatz to establish the conceptual site and underpinning for my practical explorations.

I also look at the reception and afterlife of a few carefully chosen participatory art practices, which operate in and about the public realm, and generate public discussion about topics of concern to local communities. These art forms may be ephemeral, relational (Bourriaud, 2002), dialogic (Kester, 2004), or referred to as 'new genre' public art (Lacy, 1994), social practice or socially engaged art.

My projects expose underlying processes that limit the scope of the public realm, exploring tactics for enabling new forms of collective imagination and action. They take place in publicly accessible sites and explore the gap between collective formal politics and the individual. These activities challenge preconceived notions of particular situations and/or places by discovering and activating affordances, using sociality, aesthetics, objects, physicality and humour.

**Thinking in Public: The Affordances of Hopeless Spaces**  
**Volume 1: Essays**

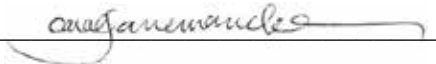
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## **Declaration**

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signed:  Date: 3 January, 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Photographs are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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## **Definitions**

All terms are defined within the body of the thesis or in footnotes.

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And most of all, thank you to Richard Spencer, whose love and support gives meaning to everything I do.



## **Note to readers**

This practice-led research is presented here through three interlinked components:

Volume 1: Essays

Volume 2: Projects

*I was there* (film, 2021)

I invite readers to engage with the thesis in the following order:

1. Volume 1 Preface and Introduction (pages 1-20)
2. Volume 2 Portfolio, Tactics and Reflections (pages 1-67)
3. *I was there* (link in Volume 2, page 53)
4. Volume 1 Cuts 1-4 and Conclusion (pages 21-172).



## **Preface**

Instructions for living a life.  
Pay attention.  
Be astonished.  
Tell about it.  
(Oliver, 2017)

Sitting at a table as I write, I see upon it three kinds of tape, a print-out of an earlier draft of this paper, a tape measure, about 25 sheets of 8 1/2 x 11 scrap paper, a small sketchbook, a mobile phone, a handbag, a Japanese sweet tin holding coloured pencils (taped shut with black gaffer tape), two boxes of washable markers, a laptop, a power supply and a flat yellow builder's pencil. I take this table for granted but, even so, it has become a driver of my project-led research and a springboard for the speculations included in this written thesis.

A table supports – things needed for fun and work. It is a space – for contemplation, conversation, collaboration, sharing food, negotiation, conviviality and argument. It is a surface – for drawing, writing and imagining. It is a thing – to stare at, touch, hold onto, pound, knock on, kick over, dance on or play footsie under. It is a place – to harbour limitless potential for individual and shared imaginative thought. At the same time, you and I might also associate a table with school, difficult meetings, job interviews, hearings or other situations where a person with power over us sits behind a table, making us feel small. And when I sit at the table, it ties me down, divides me in half, traps me and hinders my ability to think in a fully embodied way.

Karl Marx calls up the image of the spiritualist's 'turning table' to illustrate his view of what happens when something is transformed into a commodity (1887, p. 47). Spiritualists believed that a group gathered around a table could summon the spirit of the dead to commit acts in the realm of the living. An alternative reading might be that believers, gathered around a table, thought that by joining their thoughts and desires together into a collective mental activity they could generate a force that might move the table. Throughout history, collective thinking has resulted in stories and abstractions that have become autonomously powerful forces in the world. Capitalism is certainly among these. Bringing the image of the table as a material embodiment of capital to mind reminds me

how capitalism underlies many of my endeavours. It prompts me to think how the things I do, even those which are in the service of capital, hone skills that I can apply to more nourishing forms of engagement.

Hannah Arendt uses the image of a table to describe our ‘common world,’ which for her is made up of the things we humans have fabricated together plus all the immaterial things that go on among us who dwell together in our man-made world. Arendt argues that this common world both gathers us together and keeps us from falling over each other:

to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates [...] at the same time (1998, p. 52).

But for Arendt, the world only becomes a public reality when the ‘innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself’ are present at the same time.

Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear (1998, p. 57).

Thinking with Arendt, I see the table as standing in for all that humans make. And, if I imagine it to be round, and you and I as part of a gathering with others around it, then we see that our different positions allow each of us to view something placed on it from a different perspective. We will then see the same thing differently and thus bring a shared public reality – a public realm – into being.

With these ideas in mind, I make large, round tables and use them to explore possibilities of public collaborative thinking within the context of fine art practice. I have undertaken a series of public engagements where I invited others to join me in challenging preconceived

notions of particular situations or places, discovering and activating affordances using objects, physicality, humour, play, hospitality, conversation, etc. At the centre of this practice-led exploration is *a table*: both the physical object that might provide favourable conditions for collaborative thinking, and a metaphorical image both richly relational and deeply entangled with politics.

## **Introduction**

The common imagination lives even among highly compromised, commodified and co-opted ideas and institutions, and indeed lends them warmth and light. (Haiven, 2014, p. 87)

I worry that the notion of the public realm as a common resource genuinely open to all has been co-opted by political and economic forces. This worry and the sense of hopelessness it invites limits my ability to imagine and propose other ways to inhabit the world with others. Although some contemporary public art practices participate inadvertently (or knowingly) in the narrowing of the public realm, I argue that certain kinds of practice enable fresh ways to think about and produce the physical, social and cultural structures that support our everyday communal life. In this context, my practice-led, project-based research considers the potential and the consequences of public collaborative thinking as art practice.

The dominant neoliberal capitalist framework in which we construct our lives pulls us away from one another. You and I are trained by this cultural narrative to think of ourselves as individuals, whose skills, talents, hard work and episodes of luck are ours alone and independent of context and community. At the same time, there are many things that we do together which counter divisive influences – playing games, preparing and sharing meals, participating in rituals, building and making things, playing music, curating ideas, organising and protesting, to name a few. Of course, all of these can also be mobilised to make us more docile subjects.<sup>2</sup> But, as collaborative exercises, they invite us to bring our isolated individual experiences together into a more comprehensive understanding of our shared situation.<sup>3</sup>

I began my research by looking into how public space can be mobilised to activate political debate. I moved on to explore how to mobilise smaller public spaces and then to the idea of

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<sup>2</sup> Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos offers a provocative perspective on this in his book *Spatial Justice Body: Lawscape, Atmosphere* (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See Jen Harvie, *Fair Play Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* for a thorough exposition and analysis of this context.



a mobile public space in the form of a table, that is, to building Arendt's metaphorical table in real space to see how it could be activated. This led me to a focus on public collaborative thinking, and on whether collaborative thinking models explored in the context of art practice can provide us with tools; tools for bringing ideologically charged matters to the table for temperate consideration. Radical ideas are fragile and vulnerable to straight-on attack, but they can be held in peripheral vision, nurtured in the backs of minds and allowed to gather strength over time. I argue that attentive practices of public collaborative thinking in the context of art can create opportunities for fragile ideas to emerge, be evaluated, shared and take root in public discourse.

### **Research questions and contribution**

The research presented in this thesis has been practice-led and undertaken through two interactive and mutually affective strands: a series of public participatory art engagements and a speculative writing process. It responds to these overarching questions:

What constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context? What forms might it take, and what conditions are required for it to acquire agency in the world?

In addition to reflecting on how I have and might continue to explore the possibilities of, and create opportunities for, collaborative thinking in a participatory art context, I looked at how other artists have employed it and the resulting political, social and aesthetic possibilities and consequences.

Through practice, I experimented with tactics for challenging preconceived notions of situations and places, working to understand how to stimulate new forms of shared thinking, imagination and action. Through the speculative writing, I contextualised what I discovered in practice, eliciting new questions to explore in practice, and so on. My aim has been to contribute to the kind of 'sustainable and extensive' change that Grant Kester finds

possible ‘through a cumulative process of reciprocal testing that moves between practical experience and reflective insight’ (2011, p. 212). As a practitioner embedded in the world, I aim to contribute to a transformation of ways of being, thinking and doing together, not to observe or interpret.<sup>4</sup> My research contributes to the field by creating, as Kester puts it, ‘new knowledge regarding political and social transformation, and the specific role art[, particularly participatory forms,] can play in facilitating this transformation’ (2011, p. 226).

Through the practice-led research, I elucidate frameworks for scrutinizing and reflecting on participatory art practices. I identify three intersections of practice and participant reception – *disclosing*, *practising* and *re-grounding* – that can also be seen as milestones along a transformative process and used to evaluate the transformative potential of projects. I demystify public collaborative thinking, explore its political relevance, probe its possibilities and limitations within the context of art practice and propose conditions and tools for doing it. I expand the understanding of the relationship between public and private as elaborated by Arendt and Butler relative to collaborative activities including thinking. I contribute to the tool kit of participatory art activities, including tools for probing fixed ideas about situations or places and challenging them in ways that might lead to incremental shifts in local social and political relations.<sup>5</sup> Finally, my practice work contributes to local knowledge through site and situation specific public engagements.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I draw on Patti Lather’s analysis of ‘post-positivist’ approaches to knowledge. Although I have chosen to use the term *transform* here, my research approach falls under her heading *emancipatory*, a term she takes from Jurgen Habermas (Lather, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Contributing to tools developed and described by Pablo Helguera (2011), Shannon Jackson (2011), Jen Harvie (2013), Tom Finkelpearl (2013), Nato Thompson (2015), Grant Kester (2004) and (2011) Ted Purves (Purves & Aslan, 2014) among others.

## Research methodology

My practice-led research methodology resonates with what scholar of organisational studies, Anne L. Cunliffe, drawing on Tim Ingold, calls ‘research as wayfaring’ within the context of a ‘scholarship of possibilities’ (2018, pp. 6, 2). She writes:

Wayfaring [...] requires that we are alive, embedded in a landscape (physical, organizational, etc) and always becoming and learning. [...] It is the embodied experience of walking/moving along paths in our research landscapes paying attention – where attend means to wait and be open to what may unfold. [...] A wayfaring researcher asks what paths are well worn, why, do we need new ones, and what are the ways in which we may explore them (2018, p. 6).

My wayfaring research inquiry has eight key characteristics. It is *question seeking*, *performative* (Bolt, 2008), *iterative*, *material*, *purposefully collaborative*, *participatory*, *critically contextual* and *reflexive*.<sup>6</sup>

*Question seeking*: In contrast to design disciplines which generally pursue solutions to problems (or answers to questions), I understand art practice to be a question-generating activity. My inquiry develops through generating and transforming questions to illuminate alternative perspectives and enable new kinds of thinking to emerge – not to find answers. As a question seeking process, it yields outcomes that are not ‘findings’ or ‘solutions’ but ideas leading to questions for others to take up.

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to Cunliffe’s development of wayfaring as a research method (2018) and her elucidation of reflexive practices (2004), I draw on Jane Rendell’s critical spatial practice (2009) and methods for evaluating social engagement developed by Pablo Helguera (2011), Shannon Jackson (2011) and Jen Harvie (2013). The phrase ‘question seeking’ is inspired by ‘problem seeking’, a method for architectural programming developed by architects William M Peña and Steven A Parshall (Peña & Parshall, 2001).

*Performative:* I aim to make things happen in the world rather than to observe, indicate or interpret what has happened. In his seminal 1955 lectures, J. L. Austin described language acts that ‘have real effects on the world’ as ‘performatives’ (Bolt, 2008: 4).<sup>7</sup> Scholars in a variety of disciplines have moved this concept beyond the purely linguistic, notably Judith Butler who expanded the frame to include bodily acts and Gilles Deleuze who celebrated the ‘transformative and creative potential of the performative’ (Bolt, 2008: 3-4).<sup>8</sup>

*Iterative:* When possible, my projects develop through series of engagements, where each version becomes, in a sense, a rehearsal for the next. But unlike design iterations which home in on singular solutions, these iterations tack outward to embrace broadening possibilities for collaborative thinking.

*Material:* Materials participate in a variety of ways throughout the inquiry, with the table as the material component that is most consistently present and active. The table becomes a common platform brought into different situations and to which different topics are brought – operating as a kind of control.<sup>9</sup> The table is also present in the writing process as a physical support for papers, books and devices and as a conceptual support for ideas developed in the speculative texts.

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<sup>7</sup>The lectures were titled ‘How to do things with words’ and delivered at Harvard University as *The William James Lectures* 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Performative research tactics have been employed across a variety of arts and social science disciplines, for example, Douglas & Carless (2013) and research by Ger Duijzings.

<sup>9</sup> My use of the word ‘control’ here derives from the scientific definition of ‘[a] standard of comparison for [...] verifying the results of a scientific experiment’ (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2016). The table is a common element against which differences in context and responses can be registered.

*Collaborative:* This research advances through purposeful collaboration with others. It is an inquiry into collaborative thinking that acknowledges and seeks to enhance the visibility of collaboration as the foundation of human achievement.

*Participatory:* Participation is fundamental to the inquiry. Individual projects offer opportunities for various levels of engagement as well as the possibility of movement between them. I distinguish four levels of participation: *unintentional observer*, for the passer-by who looks on; *snagged unintentional*, for the passer-by who joins in; *intentional*, for the participant who set their intention to join before the engagement begins; and *collaborating*, for the intentional participant who becomes a collaborator.<sup>1011</sup>

*Critically contextual:* Each project responds to its particular social, cultural and physical context, taking advantage of opportunities offered for what Jane Rendell, drawing on Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, calls ‘critical spatial practice’. Rendell writes that this term describes ‘both everyday activities and creative practice which seek to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism’ (2009, p. 2).

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s, Suzanne Lacy diagrammed ‘degrees of engagement’ as concentric circles with ‘origination and responsibility’ in the centre and ‘audience of myth and memory’ in the sixth, outermost, ring, implying that these are impermeable realms of engagement (1995, p. 178). Pablo Helguera has proposed a four-tiered model of participation – ‘nominal’, ‘directed’, ‘creative’ and ‘collaborative participation’ – that interacts with the participants intention to participate – involuntary, nonvoluntary and voluntary (2011, pp. 14-17). I have drawn on conversations with Melanie Jordan to think about the ‘passer-by’.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Till (2005) proposes an approach to collaboration between designers, local residents and users to design the built environment, which he calls ‘transformative participation’. He maps out an inspiring alternative to how public consultation is usually handled by local authorities and/or design professionals. Till’s ideas resonate with my research, particularly his characterisation of transformative participation as ‘the negotiation of hope’. At the same time, participation in a design context is fundamentally different from participation in artwork. A full consideration of Till’s argument is, therefore, outside the scope of the inquiry presented in this thesis.

*Reflexive*: I embrace reflexivity throughout the research process by accepting, as Cunliffe writes, ‘subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of [...my] assumptions, values and actions on others’ (2004, p. 407). My public engagements are structured to encourage reflexive thinking in participants as well as myself and collaborators, allowing us all to participate in ‘recreating and remaking’ knowledge for ourselves (Freire, 1998, p. 31).

Returning to Cunliffe’s metaphor of inquiry as moving through a research landscape, my two strands of research (a series of public engagements and a speculative writing process) can be visualised as paths within my research landscape that sometimes run alongside each other, sometimes diverge and occasionally converge.

The public engagement path moved through a series of artistic projects, many of which involved one or more public *engagement*.<sup>12</sup> The form and content of each engagement grew out of a collaborative process of learning; learning about both the broad cultural, physical and social contexts, and the specifics of site and situation. Each combination of context, setting and circumstance invited a unique alignment of topic and spatial tactics as well as engagement strategies related to site, participants and materials. I discuss these in the Portfolio and Tactics sections of Volume 2 (3-63). Most of these engagements deployed a large round table as what I call a *place device* (Volume 2, 55). The table provides a physical and conceptual scaffold, which supports the collaborative creation of form, content and meaning as the engagement unfolds.

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<sup>12</sup> Parts and iterations of projects may be called events, gatherings, iterations, encounters or engagements. To keep it simple, I use the word *engagement* as a shorthand for all types. My projects are often developed and presented in collaboration with other artists and projects that I do alone rely on the work of others. For simplicity, I use the first-person singular and acknowledge all collaborators in the Portfolio section of Volume 2 (3-54).



Figure 1: *Table 18* in use at *Why Would I Lie?* (2015).

The tables perform as aesthetic and ethical platforms for experimenting with forms of gathering, conversation and collaborative thinking. In each appearance, they embrace three components: the physical table itself; the engagements hosted and their documentation; and a third element expanding outward from these, which I call an *emerging community of inquiry* (Volume 1, 61-92; Volume 2, 60). I see the table as a central pivot that, when activated through engagement, holds aesthetics and ethics together, fanning out to propel the *community of inquiry* – and the ideas it generates – into the world.

Moving to the speculative writing process path, Figure 2 illustrates its circling character. Each written speculation responded to particular bundles of concerns encountered in practice. I considered how those concerns affected me and others, and traced links to relevant texts and practices. Seeking forms that might invite a reader to the table to think with me, I employed *active* and *reflective* writing. Drawn from lived experience, the *active* writing was unapologetically subjective, whilst the *reflective* writing navigated the so-called objective territory of academic writing forms. Speculating through writing in this way allowed me to bring ideas emerging in practice into a field of speculation: to associate in different ways; to ‘play’ with each other, and to possibly present themselves to be symbolised, embodied and/or practised as artwork.<sup>13</sup>

### Presentation of the research

I have employed three techniques for presenting the research developed as described above. First is a portfolio of project documentation comprised of images, brief descriptions,

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<sup>13</sup> The texts included in this thesis, although derived from the speculative writing process, are presented in the *reflective* form. Examples of *active* can be found in the Pauses and parts of the Preface.



Figure 2: Speculative writing process diagram.

a catalogue of tactics and a discussion of general reflections. This is presented in Volume 2. The second is a collection of essays that cut across the research landscape to reveal views from four different embedded positions. These are presented in this volume (Volume 1, 21-152). Third is a film documenting the practice and its aftereffects by combining comments made by participants interviewed a few years after the events, with still and moving images of projects. The film, *I was there* (2021), is described in this volume (Volume 1, 19, 157-158) and in Volume 2 (52-53, 62-63) where a link for viewing can also be found.

To generate and present the essays, I employed a method borrowed from architectural design drawing, called *section perspective cutting*. Writing this thesis challenged me to explore how my habitual, more spatial patterns of thought, might be brought to bear on language-based ways to conceptualise, analyse and present ideas. As an architect trained before computer-aided design technologies were available, I design using two-dimensional orthogonal drawings together with diagrams, axonometric drawings, perspective sketches and physical models. I work back and forth between these in an iterative way, starting very loosely and progressing gradually to more precisely detailed versions of the same drawings and models.<sup>14</sup> In a parallel process, user, site, client, regulatory, and even budgetary requirements come together loosely at first and then in more detail. Thus, the matrix within which the building will eventually be built – and my understanding of my design proposal for it – develop in parallel within the representational space of drawings and models. Each orthogonal section cut - horizontal (plan) and vertical (section) – reveals a building project's emergent qualities, allowing me to understand it anew, and nudge it towards my simultaneously emerging vision for it.

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<sup>14</sup> With increased computing power, it is now possible to build a 3D model of a building and all its components in digital space. Such a model still begins as something abstract and amorphous and develops in increasing precision and detail.



I understand constructing and coming to see this written thesis as a similar process. The multi-dimensional matrix of literature and practice within which the thesis emerges is complex and dynamic. Each Cut I take through the material reveals another view of the emerging relations and possibilities which I can shape. An iterative process of section perspective cutting permits me to construct my argument from an embedded position within a speculative landscape of emergent ideas, positions and propositions. It allows me to be open to the possibilities offered by thinking from within, rather than observing from above or outside. And, in this way, you (my reader) and I stay within the project, enmeshed in its network and influence, and thereby implicated.

The research questions provide the overarching armature of the research through which the Cuts slice from a different direction. Each Cut (essay) exposes a different perspective into the research in relation to the research questions and introduces new questions about collaborative thinking which are informed by theory, specific examples from my own projects and relevant work by other artists. Read together, the Cuts (essays) reveal the structure of my argument as well as some of the practical and theoretical knowledge that attaches to it.

### **Overview of the submission**

As noted above, research is presented through three interlinked components:

Volume 1: Essays

Volume 2: Projects

*I was there* (film, 2021)

As I refer to and reflect on many of the projects in the Cuts (essays) and the film, I invite you, upon finishing this Overview of the submission section, to visit Volume 2: Projects

and then watch *I was there* after before returning to Volume 1: Essays to read the Theoretical framing section, Cuts 1-4 and the Conclusion. In other words, I suggest you engage with the thesis components in the following order: 1) Volume 1, pages 1-20; 2) Volume 2, all; 3) *I was there* and finally 4) Volume 1, pages 21-172.

### **Overview of Volume 1: Essays**

Volume 1 comprises four parts: this overall Introduction; the Theoretical framing; the four Cuts (essays) and the Conclusion. In the Introduction, I set out the overarching research questions, aims, contributions and methodology. In the Theoretical framing section, I position the research within a theoretical context. I observe a tendency to focus on the negotiation between aesthetics and ethics in the doing and evaluating of participatory art practices that distracts from the many other ways that these kinds of practices might be understood and evaluated. In this context, I introduce the ‘aesthetics of the encounter’, an alternative framework developed by Baptiste Morizot and Estelle Zhong Mengual, as a potentially generative lens for considering participatory practices.

A one-page ‘Pause’ precedes each Cuts. I invite you to think of these as amuse-bouches for mind and body to bring to the table at the centre of each Cut.

Using the question *How is this practice political?* as a cutting device, Cut 1 places my artworks, *Drawing for the count* (2014) and *Table 18* (2015), at its centre, tracing their relations with two public interfaces between everyday life and formal democratic politics: voting and street protest. I frame the territory between the individual/family group and the formal workings of electoral politics as a site for artwork, arguing for the generative possibilities of artistic experiments in this in-between space – especially those that involve forms of thinking together in public.

Artwork noted in Cut 1 includes works by Jonas Staal; Imani Jacqueline Brown; Forensic Architecture; Krzysztof Wodiczko; Taryn Simon; Melissa Wyman; and Artur Żmijewski. Not content to simply reflect back what they see, disrupt the status quo, or imagine other possibilities, many of these works actively engage political processes with an aim to construct new realities. Responding to their artistic tactics employed to counter the sense of hopelessness, I propose three categories of practice and argue that together these provide a useful frame for critically considering artistic experiments in the interfaces between everyday life and democratic processes.

Turning to the process of thinking together, in Cut 2, I use the question *What is collaborative thinking?* to slice through a series of my projects, particularly *The Land and Me* (2019).<sup>15</sup> I explore two texts about thinking and thought in order to understand what collaborative thinking might be, and how it might work. One is the first part of Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, published in 1971.<sup>16</sup> The second is the physicist and writer David Bohm's *Thought as a System*, published in 1992. I also explore Max Haiven's idea of 'commoning memory' (Haiven, 2014) and reflect on projects by Warren Neidich and the artist group marksearch.<sup>17</sup>

In Cut 3, drawing on my projects *Fluid Cities* (2017, 2018), *Uncaptured Land* (2017) and *Circling back – thinking through* (2017), and cutting with the question *What material form might this practice take?*, I look at a model of thinking together found in

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<sup>15</sup> I developed and presented *The Land and Me* in collaboration with California artist, writer, educator Trena Noval.

<sup>16</sup> *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt, 1977) was unfinished on Arendt's death. Of the intended three part – Thinking, Willing and Judging – she completed only the first two.

<sup>17</sup> marksearch is a California-based artist collaboration between Sue Mark and Bruce Douglas, who refer to themselves as 'conversation artists.'

architectural design processes: the *project team design meeting*.<sup>18</sup> I consider the possibilities and consequences of displacing a *speculative ensemble* – made up of the project design team meeting and my table – into the realm of public art, as a model for a practice of thinking together in public. I consider *Fluid Cities*, and projects by the artist Suzanne Lacy, and the art, architecture and urbanism practice, *transparadiso*.<sup>19</sup>

At the centre of Cut 4 is *Turning tables* (2017), an engagement I hosted in collaboration with Jiwon Chung in 2017.<sup>20</sup> With the question *How does the body participate in collaborative thinking?*, I first consider the individual body through the work of performance scholar Ben Spatz and then plural bodies through Judith Butler's ideas about bodies in public assembly and protest. In the third part, I consider additional projects by Suzanne Lacy and her collaborators. Finally, I return to the bodies at a table.

In the Conclusion, I return to apply insights and questions revealed through the Cuts to my overarching research questions and to the theoretical framing set out in the Introduction. I first point out the contributions my research makes, in particular what my practice and tables can do. Next, I propose four frameworks for analysing participatory art practices. Finally, I look to the future to sketch potential trajectories outward from my research.

## **Volume 2: Projects**

In the Projects volume, I introduce the body of practice, bringing together illustrated descriptions of twelve artworks and public engagements which I undertook as part of the

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<sup>18</sup>I developed and presented *Fluid Cities* and *Uncaptured Land* in collaboration with Trena Noval.

<sup>19</sup> *transparadiso* is a Vienna-based practice founded by artist Barbara Holub and the architect and urbanist Paul Rajakovics.

<sup>20</sup> Jiwon Chung, actor and *Theatre of the Oppressed* practitioner and educator, teaches at the Starr King School for the Ministry and the Berkeley Repertory Theater. He also develops original work through his theatre group *Kairos*.

research. This field guide to the practice path has three parts: 1) a portfolio of illustrated project descriptions; 2) a precis of tactics of engagement employed in the projects and 3) a brief discussion of general reflections that are relevant to this thesis. In contrast to Volume 1 where text is foregrounded, the portfolio places emphasis on images.

**Film: *I was there* (2021)**

In November and December 2020, I contacted approximately thirty participants and collaborators in one or more of the projects presented in this thesis, inviting them to be interviewed about their recollections of their participation. I interviewed the twenty who responded positively, using digital meeting software to record each conversation. I asked each person to talk about what they remembered, what they might have taken away from it and how they think about it now. I provided a list of possible questions in advance but allowed each person to guide the conversation themselves during the interviews.

Wanting participants to speak for themselves directly, I overlaid their voices onto still and moving images of various projects to create the film. The film communicates a sense of the experience of participating in the engagements and what they meant to, or sparked in, some participants. A further description of the film and a link for viewing are included on pages 52-53 of Volume 2. Also, I reflect on the film and introduce a few relevant comments made during the interviews that did not make it into the film in the Conclusion of this volume.

[END OF INTRODUCTION]

**Please proceed to Volume 2!**

**Thinking in Public: The Affordances of Hopeless Spaces  
Volume 2: Projects**

Carol Jane Mancke

Royal College of Art  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(by project)





**The Essays**



## Theoretical framing

The 1950s and 60s saw the emergence of hybrid art practices that incorporate social relations, rely on collaborative or participatory activities and/or deliberately seek to undermine the separation between art and everyday life. Since then, there have been many excellent studies that trace the lineage of these ways of making art.<sup>21</sup> Participatory art practices have been theorized as *new genre public art* (Lacy, 1994), *participatory art* (Ross, 1980; Bishop, 2012), *relational aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2002), *dialogic aesthetics* (Kester, 2004), *social practice* (Lind, 2012), *social art practice* and most commonly today, *socially engaged art*.<sup>22</sup> For simplicity in this thesis, I will refer to all of these kinds of practice as *participatory art*.

It is not my intent to provide another critical history of these. However, given that my research takes place within this domain of techniques, practices and relations, locating it within the web of associations and oppositions that constitute this discourse is relevant. Aimed to generate public discussion about something of concern within a particular situation or locality, the projects I undertook as part of this research were conceived within the family of participatory art.

As noted in the document overview above, I observe a tendency for the analysis of participatory art to be narrowly focussed on a perceived opposition between aesthetics and ethics. In response, my practice-led research looks for ways to conduct and evaluate participatory art practices that are critical and generative at the same time. In the following section, I survey the tension between aesthetic and ethical concerns in practising and

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<sup>21</sup> (Lacy, 1995), (Kester, 2004), (Kester, 2011), (Thompson, 2012), (Finkelpearl, 2013) are a few.

<sup>22</sup> Another branch of this family includes *arte útil* (Brugera) and *useful art* (Grizedale Arts).



analysing participatory art found in the relevant literature. I then present an alternate theoretical framing of art reception, which resonates with what I have discovered in my practice research: Baptiste Morizot and Estelle Zhong Mengual's framing of the *aesthetics of the encounter* (2017).

### *Aesthetics and ethics*

In his analysis of the critical interplay between Nicolas Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* (2002) and Claire Bishop's *relational antagonism* (2004), Jason Miller (2016) brings clarity to an ongoing tug of war between ethics and aesthetics, both in doing, and critically evaluating participatory art practices. Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* locates aesthetic content within the human relations that an artwork produces (2002). Miller asks how these relations can be categorized aesthetically (2016, p. 169). Human interactions encompass all sorts of relations: destructive exploitation and violent abuse, as well as convivial and stimulating exchange. Surely the type and character of any produced relations – for whom and with whom they are formed, and why – are also important criteria?

Bishop argues that Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* frame allows the evaluation of a work's aesthetic content to be subsumed into an 'ethicopolitical' critique of the relationships it produces (Miller, 2016, p. 170). In her words, 'the difficulty of describing the artistic value of participatory projects is resolved by resorting to ethical criteria' (Bishop, 2012, p. 19). Similarly problematic for Bishop is that this critique takes place within the art world, even though it is based on ethical criteria. Despite being active in the social arena, this kind of art is never compared to social projects originating in disciplines other than art (Bishop, 2012, p. 19). As a result, such artworks are rarely analysed properly in either artistic or social terms.

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s concept of *political antagonism*, Bishop proposes *relational antagonism* as a critical response to Bourriaud. She supports her framing with examples of participatory artworks that employ ‘aesthetic’ (as opposed to social) strategies such as ‘dissonance, subversion [and] disruption’ (Miller, 2016, p. 171).

Miller argues that Bishop’s relational antagonism applauds only a small subset of the different ways that artists respond to social ills through participatory practices. In place of a focus on building relationships, Bishop’s exemplars draw attention, within art settings, to ethically questionable activities found in the world as it is. In some cases, these even knowingly reproduce problematic practices they seek to criticize ‘as a spectacle that demands a critical reckoning’ (Miller, 2016, p. 172).<sup>23</sup> Miller’s assessment of *relational antagonism* is symmetrically analogous to Bishop’s critique of *relational aesthetics*. Whereas Bishop maintains that the *aesthetic* consequences of *relational aesthetics* should not be elided in an *ethical* judgement, Miller argues that the *ethical* consequences of *relational antagonism* should not be eclipsed by an *aesthetic* critique (2016, p. 178).

Bishop is also critical of ‘consensual’ collaborative art, which she sees as ‘less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity’ (Bishop quoted in Ryan, 2014, p.11 [emphasis removed]). In her view, the emphasis on collaborative activity ‘de-politicise[s] spaces where politics might otherwise emerge’ (Ryan, 2014, p. 11). Bishop draws on Jacques Rancière to support this argument.<sup>24</sup> For Rancière, politics is a system by which we deal with difference, and this means that dissension or *dissensus* is the political core that constitutes a community (2006, p. 6). The turn toward ethics that

<sup>23</sup> An example might be Santiago Sierra’s *8 People Paid to Be in Cardboard Boxes* which he presented in Guatemala City in 1998 wherein he paid eight people nine dollars each to sit inside a box in the gallery for four hours (Heidenreich, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Particularly his essay *The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics* (Rancière, 2006).

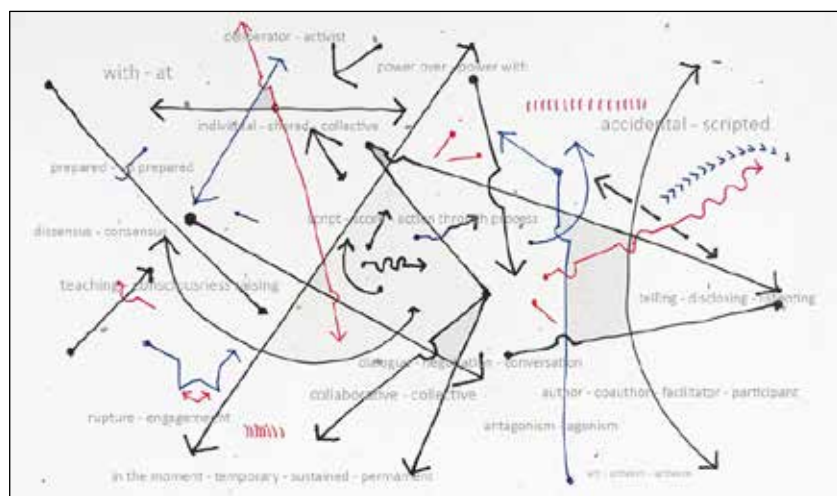


Figure 3: Matrices of associations and oppositions.

Rancière notices in contemporary culture instead neutralises this core, undermining our ability to handle difference (2006, pp. 6-8). Rancière argues that consensus, by muddling the distinction 'between what is and what ought to be' (2006, pp. 1, 5-6), drives our confrontations with difference towards two forms of evil. One such evil can be seen in what happens in a community when critical reflection is discredited such that only one opinion is echoed and allowed to develop according to its own self-centred logic. This evil refers only to itself and is self-serving and self-reproducing.<sup>25</sup> Rancière calls the second form of evil 'infinite justice'. It is the kind of evil that is 'justified' as necessary to protect a community.<sup>26</sup>

Kim Charnley argues that for Rancière there is a 'deterioration of thought around the aesthetic into an advocacy of political passivity [... such that] art becomes, despite itself, an affirmation of consensus' (Charnley, 2011, p. 43). Finding the ethical turn in politics mirrored in the arts, Rancière writes:

In the same way that politics fades away in the couplet constituted by consensus and infinite justice, arts and aesthetic reflection tend to redistribute themselves between a vision of art dedicated to the service of the social bond and another that de-dedicates it to the interminable witnessing of the catastrophe (2006, p. 10).

The opposition between relational aesthetics and relational antagonism echoes this observation – with the former undertaking to 'the service of the social bond' and the latter focussed on disclosing the catastrophe and/or heartbreak of contemporary life.

Kevin Ryan argues that Bishop's critique also aligns with Mouffe's support for art that aims to upset 'the dominant hegemony' by 'making visible' what is obscured or erased by the 'dominant consensus' (2014, p. 14). Ryan calls this kind of art 'political ophthalmology' – a

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<sup>25</sup> President Trump's White House may be an example.

<sup>26</sup> The 'war on terror' and Guantanamo Bay prison camp are examples.

method that aims ‘to correct the faulty vision of those among us who cannot see things “as they really are” nor the extent of our complicity (Ryan, 2014, p. 370). In Bishop’s formulation, then, artists use their privileged independent position to take us viewers through uncomfortable aesthetic experiences, forcing us to view and better see what is wrong with the world as it is.

Building on Antonio Gramsci’s argument that cultural and artistic production are central to the generation and dissemination of a shared understanding of reality (Mouffe, 2012, p. 3), Mouffe advocates a

pluralistic approach, according to which the critical potential of art is not constrained to strictly negative and reactionary responses, but also bears the responsibility to put forward new models of politics and new modes of collective identity (Miller, 2016, p. 174).

Here, alongside Rancière’s couplet on the limits towards which the ethical turn drives ‘arts and aesthetic reflection’, Mouffe proposes the possibility of art that both ‘witnesses the catastrophe’ *and* ‘serves social bonds’.

Grant Kester traces a movement away from a discourse focussed on aesthetics or questions of ‘visual signification’, toward one centred on the ‘generative experience of collective interaction’ (2011, p. 24). At the same time, he notes a lingering conviction in the art world that the transformative power of art primarily operates through exposure to pure aesthetic experience. He locates the roots of this paradigm in the Enlightenment idea that aesthetic experience has ‘improving’ or ‘civilizing’ effects on its viewers. In Kester’s view, this notion – which became a key concept in avant-garde/modernist thinking – lives on today in an unexamined bias against art practices that see aesthetics as just one of many possible routes to meaningful engagement with art (2011, pp. 41-2). He puts forward a variety of valuable criteria for analysing participatory art that counterbalance the effects of this

historic bias. Kester proposes *dialogic aesthetics* as a more appropriate framing for these practices. He suggests evaluating an artwork based on its capacity to generate and sustain dialogue, to encourage listening, and/or to give voice to otherwise unheard perspectives and points of view (Charnley 2011:48).

Kester's thinking offers clues about how a practice of public collaborative thinking could avoid being channelled into the narrow critique of ethical versus aesthetic efficacy. This calls to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interest in the preposition 'beside'. Unlike other prepositions that set up oppositions or narratives, *beside* conjures an open space of possibility on either side of an argument, where

a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations are possible (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 8).

Sedgwick's way of thinking resonates with my own desire to bring a broad variety of 'food' for collaborative thought – together with a diversity of 'utensils' for analysis – to my table, and then to invite you with others to join me there to share our different points of view.

In a thought-provoking move, Rancière describes *consensus* as an agreement between 'sense' and 'sense', between what I perceive (*sense*) and what it means (the *sense* of it). He defines *dissensus* as a separation between what is given to the senses and its meaning (Rancière, 2016). Rancière argues that the separation maintained by dissensus opens two potential pathways to transformation through art. First, is the prospect of changing material reality by altering how space, time and occupations are arranged in the world. Second, is the possibility of reforming the perception of the material reality. He envisages dissensus as moving between these two possibilities (2016). Charnley understands dissensus as

part of the social reality of collaborative art. Where dissensus is not viewed as the vital element of socially engaged art then even the most rigorous ethics or carefully guarded autonomy becomes an extension of consensus (2011, p. 50).

The question for me, then, is how to keep dissensus alive at the table? Is it possible to maintain a continuing movement, oscillating between changing material reality and changing perception of it, even as our shared common reality emerges?

Probing the limits of dissensus, Ryan considers how participatory art practices find positions along a continuum between *power over* and *power with*. He identifies two core principles shared by the kinds of practice that Kester promotes. Drawing first on Nato Thompson's ideas, Ryan posits that these practices understand 'social life as a living texture of relations which *has* been formed [by us] and *can* be re-formed' – in other words, as relations that we have some *power over*. His second principle is 'that this process of re-formation can be orchestrated through collaborative and participatory undertakings [...] that fuse creative practice to communicative action' (2014, p. 6) – in other words generate *power with*. By introducing power into the equation, Ryan proposes an 'art of democracy [...] practiced through the interweaving of cooperation and contestation' which together build power and agency (2014, p. 7).

On the surface at least, my practice aligns more closely with Kester's ideas than those of Bishop or Bourriaud. A number of the projects I present explore ways to give 'voice' to issues of concern, to a community, which are discovered through collaborative thinking and listening, and then made audible or visible in public by the collaborative action of participants. Whilst I understand Bishop's discomfort with practices with low political ambition, I find her alternative too narrow. In contrast, Kester's exemplars are politically ambitious, although they do not rely on aesthetic means alone to achieve those ambitions. To me, it seems possible to generate agency and power with others through collaborative

thinking practices that entwine collaboration, questioning and argument. With help from Charnley and Simon Critchley, understanding the ethical 'as a destabilizing rather than a regulative power' (Charnley, 2011, p. 45) can relax the opposition between ethics and aesthetics, opening a more flexible and nuanced discourse.

### *The aesthetics of encounter*

So far, this discussion about participation has focussed primarily on the content of artwork and the manner in which it is presented, as perceived by a theoretically objective audience or critic standing at some distance to the work. But in actuality, you, the participant, and I, the artist, are actually embedded in the work together. What is the view from our positions? Ryan, Mouffe, Kester and Rancière's ideas also prompt questions. Is it possible to maintain awareness of how perception and meaning diverge and converge dynamically? Can the play between the physical table and collaborative thinking around it be thought of as a negotiation between the poles of dissensus? Is it possible – or desirable – to revisit 'the catastrophe' and strengthen the 'social bond' at the same time?

In a 2017 essay on the 'aesthetics of encounter', Baptiste Morizot and Estelle Zhong Mengual offer a generative way of thinking about the transformative potential of participatory art. In the Cuts ahead, I will describe and reflect on a number of situations where an encounter with an artwork has changed the way I look at the world, and perhaps even the world itself. Morizot and Zhong Mengual illustrate this idea by quoting Oscar Wilde writing about London fogs:

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs, for centuries in London. [...] But no one saw them [...] They did not exist till Art had invented them' (2017, p. 389).

Wanting to understand a persistent reluctance in contemporary art circles in France to recognise the transformative power of art, the authors first identify two kinds of encounter between viewer and artwork that neutralize this power: the *false encounter* and the *non-encounter* (2017, p. 385).<sup>27</sup> In the false encounter, the artwork confirms my way of being by exactly fulfilling my expectations – how I represent myself, how I understand the world, how I act, feel, perceive, and so on. Easy to take in and ‘digest’, this art does not threaten my internal or our external structures, but provides a sense of comfort and security (2017, p. 386). The non-encounter, on the other hand, is a failed form of resistance to the false encounter. The artwork is made ‘indigestible’ by denying content, meaning and emotion (2017, p. 387).

Morizot and Zhong Mengual draw on philosopher Gilbert Simondon’s concept of the individuation of the self to propose an alternative to these failed encounters, which they call the *true encounter* (2017, pp. 387-88). For Simondon, the common Western notion that the individual is a fixed entity is a fallacy; we are actually always in the midst of a ‘process of individuation’. The ‘self’ is a ‘relational system [...] constituted through its relation to exteriority’ (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 390). What we see as fixed is actually a frozen ‘cross-section of time,’ rather than a stable entity (p. 390).

Aristotelian philosophy compares relation of the interior of the individual to the exterior world with that of a brick mould to raw clay. Inside each viewer is a mould waiting to be filled with the clay of an artwork. I receive the artwork passively, and if it is ‘good’ it will fill up my mould. But if I am neither fixed in time nor in relation, then any encounter with an artwork must be dynamic. In place of the brick/mould metaphor, Simondon proposes

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<sup>27</sup> Because these forms of encounter deprive ‘art of its vital effects’, Morizot and Zhong Mengual designate them ‘pathologies’ (2017, p. 385).



crystallisation, wherein a liquid solution, or milieu, transforms when it encounters an alien particle. The particle, a piece of ‘active information’, communicates with (or tickles) the potential for transformation inherent in the milieu. Together they build a crystal, changing themselves into something new (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 392).<sup>28</sup>

In Simondon’s scenario, every individual is made up of parts that are already ‘individuated’ or set, and parts that remain as-yet-unfixed and thus open to transformation. He calls this open state *metastable*. *Individuation* is the process, through which, like crystallisation, a particle of active information meets a metastable milieu inside me, and they transform together to make me anew. For Morizot and Zhong Mengual, ‘the individual is the very operation of individuation itself, the process of shape genesis’ (2017, p. 392).

“The true individual only exists for an instant during the operation of crystallization: it exists as long as the shaping occurs” [...] The individual is not passively transformed [...], but he *transforms himself* through contact with the exteriority’ (Simondon quoted in Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 392).

Applying the concept of the *individuating encounter* to the reception of art, the authors propose the true encounter. Art, literature and music are all ways in which active information is produced and disseminated; the transformative reception of this information depends on the character of my internal milieu. In the same way that listening to music regularly will change not only my ear for music, but also my receptivity to all sound, the authors argue, individuating encounters, wherever I meet them, will alter my capacity for future individuating encounters. ‘The content [...] becomes the living coding

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<sup>28</sup> Although this sounds like a virus, the difference is important. A virus (active information) infects a milieu and if that milieu offers the right conditions, it replicates itself until the milieu is no longer receptive. The virus is not transformed, it replicates or dies. In crystallisation the milieu and the particle transform together, both disappearing into something new.

through which we decipher the experience to come' (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 398).

The individuating encounter happens when a splinter of active information in the world catches on something in my specific interior milieu.<sup>29</sup> Whilst this is not something that an artist can plan or design in advance but, the authors argue that participatory artforms, especially if durational, expand the opportunities for such encounters to take place. They use the word *compatibility* for the relative possibility for an individuating encounter to occur. This use of the word compatibility is somewhat counter-intuitive. Unlike the congruence of clay and mould, the compatibility between a splinter and me is highest when the splinter creates a 'tension of form' within me (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 400). High compatibility occurs when the active information does not fit well: when it causes friction, irritates or is otherwise irksome.

Morizot and Zhong Mengual's ideas are compelling in relation to my research, and I will return to them in the Cuts. Their discussion highlights five aspects of participatory artwork that contribute to its capacity to generate true encounters: 1) the work's specificity develops through a process and cannot be foreseen; 2) the viewer's relation to the work evolves; 3) the viewer's focus shifts away from aesthetic experience towards the relation between themselves and the work; 4) the work catalyses a collective; and 5) the work has duration (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017).

Because in many cases, the form and content of participatory artworks are generated through processes that are specific to the place, situation and makeup of the participant

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<sup>29</sup> M Morizot and Zhong Mengual use the term 'singularity' for a unit of 'active information'. I find this term difficult to understand and have therefore opted for 'splinter' or 'seed' to indicate an aspect of an artwork that a particular viewer notices as a piece of active information that initiates the process of individuation in that individual.

group, they cannot be envisaged in advance. Participants and artists (we) take a leap of faith together away from the security and comfort of the known. This lays bare our parts that are less fixed and more open or receptive. As the work evolves, our relation to it changes dynamically. The process may draw in some of your particular preoccupations and increase your sense of ownership. As your interests combine with mine and those of other participants, the growing network of ideas, actions, values, relationships, desires, etc. increases the possibilities for splinters to work loose and get caught, for seeds to find soil, for compatibility between us and elements of the work to emerge. To the extent that we are embedded in the work by taking part in its development, we will develop sensitivity and compatibility in relation to its particular language, form and content (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017).

Participatory art forms shift the focus away from traditional aesthetic reception. Aesthetic agency is no longer seen as central to the work. Instead agency develops through the variety of relations that emerge: between the work and viewers; between artists and participants; between each person and the group; between one participant and another; and so on.<sup>30</sup> Each emergent relation offers discrete opportunities for individuating encounters to take place, thereby greatly expanding the reach of the artwork's transformative potential. Moving the focus away from purely aesthetic reception also helps to blur the art/life boundary, bringing the artwork closer to us, closer to where we live.

Morizot and Zhong Mengual argue that any work of art can act as 'a catalyst for a collective' when it 'enables the unresolved part of an entire series of individuals (viewers and artist) to communicate and [...] individuate' (2017, p. 405). This happens whether or not the

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<sup>30</sup> Morizot and Zhong Mengual argue that this is an ontological shift: the relation itself is understood as a being unto itself rather than as a 'gathering of separate ontological beings' (2017, p. 404).

disparate viewers are aware of the others in the collective (2017, p. 405). Participatory art forms offer the expansive possibility of making the shared community a visible part of the work. Interestingly, Simondon argues that the collective individuation process happens not through the parts we share with others in the collective, but rather through what is not yet individuated in each of us. Shared individuation is more likely to happen outside common functional relations. Projects that try to connect participants via their shared structures are thus less likely to provoke true encounters (2017, p. 407).<sup>31</sup>

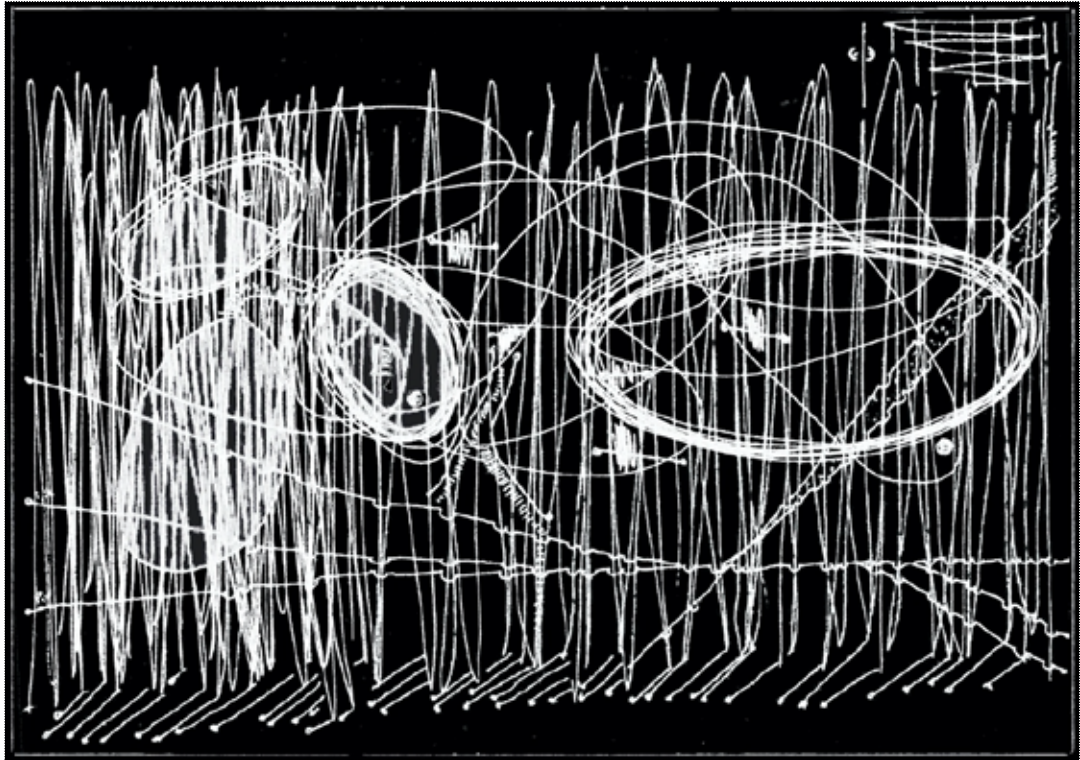
The longer we can engage with an artwork, the more opportunities for true encounters emerge. Participatory processes involve spending time. Interacting repeatedly, thinking, doing, and working things out together and these activities all expand the probabilities of compatibility developing. And these activities may well continue and generate other interactions even after a project is long since over.

[END OF THEORETICAL FRAMING]

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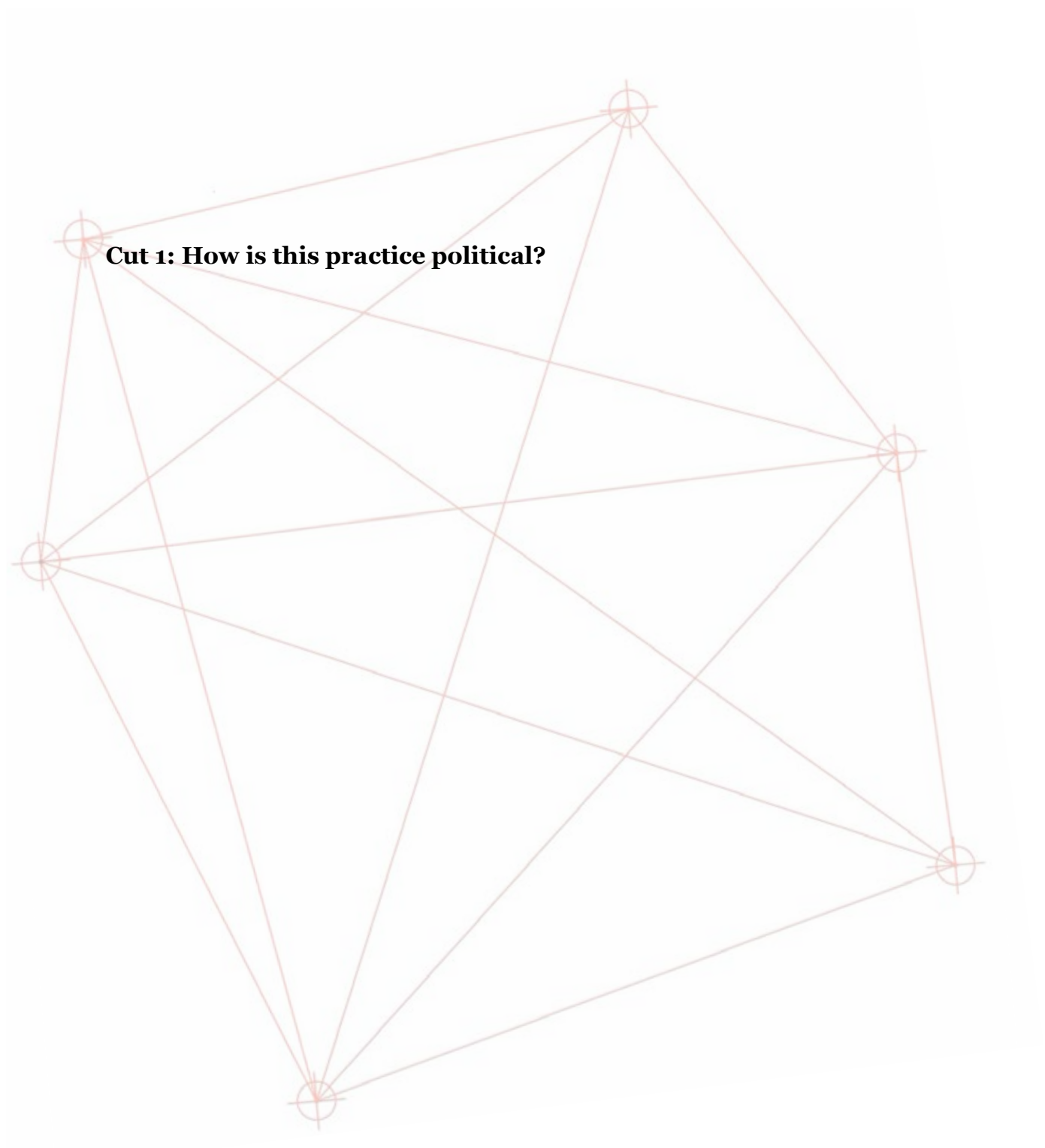
<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Richard Sennett writes that in order to sense the other, one must do the work of accepting oneself as incomplete (1977, p. 148).

*Pause: a clearing*



You step into a clearing – legs pause, eyes stretch, chest turns to the sun. Time changes. The forest stands guard behind as myriad possibilities spin and buzz ahead. Can you and I carve such a space out of our thoroughly occupied everyday world? Can we alter the flow of our ordinary lives, to shift from external time with its logical sequences to the all-important *now* of our wayward inner selves? Can we turn our attention to all the diverse prospects this place affords?





In 2015, I made two artworks that relate to connections between my everyday life and the formal apparatus of democracy. *Drawing for the count* relates to voting, and *Table 18* to public protest.<sup>32</sup> The years since then have brought striking changes in political landscapes in the US, the UK and parts of Europe, which appear to indicate a growing disenchantment with democracy. Viewed from within my everyday life, the formal apparatus of democracy appears to be on the other side of an unbridgeable canyon – despite the interfaces that link across the space between. Is it possible that democracy requires more of its citizens than we are willing, able and/or understand how to give? In this Cut, slicing with the question *How is this practice is political?* I consider the territory between the everyday and formal democracy as a site for artistic practices of public collaborative thinking.

### **Democracy and public space**

Everything humans do – including what Marx and others have argued is the fundamental feature of human existence, the making and doing of the material world – is accomplished through interaction, negotiation and cooperation (Paglen 2009). To do anything, we need space, and thus production and exchange fully entangle with social and spatial practices (Paglen 2009). The construction of our world – including democracy and its interfaces – is also conditional and never finished. It always retains the potential to change and be changed, and this lack of fixity inspires both hope and fear.

As something we produce together, democracy is spatial and social. Rosalyn Deutsche proposes that democracy calls public space into being (1996, p. 324). Democratic public space appears and begins to be used and valued, she argues, precisely when the basis for

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<sup>32</sup> Cut 1 draws on my 2019 paper, *Explorations in Interfaces* (Mancke, 2019). See descriptions and images of *Drawing for the count* and *Table 18* in Volume 2, pages 4 and 12-14.



authority becomes a conditional and contestable social entity (1996, p. 324). A monarchy, which claims to derive its right to rule from God provides a stable foundation for everyday life through a fixed hierarchical system of social relations. When this divine right to rule is removed, Deutsche argues, social relations are rendered contingent. State power must find ways to establish and maintain legitimacy within a constantly shifting social realm. This generates a need for a spaces where conflict, negotiation and deliberation can take place (1996, p. 272).

Investigating relations between democratic processes and public space in thirteen cities around the world, John R. Parkinson points to politics as a *performed* physical activity that requires physical space (2012). Contesting the digital age notion that physical space is no longer important for democracy, he argues that today more than ever *physical stages* are necessary for a democracy to function well, or even at all (2012, p. viii). Public spaces are needed to allow citizens to carry out the roles that democracy demands of them. Parkinson lists four: 1) 'articulating interests, opinions, and experiences'; 2) 'making public claims'; 3) 'deciding what [... or what not] to do, to address public claims' and ; 4) 'scrutinizing and giving account for public action and inaction' (2012, p. 36). The first role takes place before any formal decision-making can occur, often informally wherever people meet whether physically or virtually (2012, p. 39). However, capturing the whole variety of positions, which in Parkinson's view is essential to functioning democracy, does not always happen organically but needs to be helped along, and physical public spaces are needed to do this (2012, p. 31).

For example, culturally based taboos that govern what we can talk about where may have important consequences. Drawing on Cas Sunstein's research on group polarization, Parkinson notes a common taboo against talking about politics in many settings in English

speaking countries, where the dominant culture emphasises the individual and family over other social relations. As a result, political topics tend to be discussed only among family or friends who share similar opinions (2012, p. 40). Fully free informal debate happens only when we are with ‘the like-minded [...] in isolated “deliberative enclaves”’ (2012, p. 40). Parkinson points out that whilst this can help marginalized groups, research has shown that it tends to push views in each enclave to become more extreme, due to the absence of the ‘moderating influence’ of alternative perspectives (2012, p. 40).<sup>33</sup>

Parkinson’s findings indicate that places for a mix of views to be aired are needed, in order to enable the performance of the first role of deliberative democracy. But is it even possible to create public settings where narrations from all parts of a society can be elicited and heard? Can public space ever be sufficiently neutral for this to happen? What of the inevitable conflicts? And, as Deutsche asks, should democratic public space settle or sustain conflict?

Deutsche argues that our relationship with public space is laced with fear. She locates the root of this fear in the fact that, for democracy, ‘the place from which power derives is what [Claude] Lefort calls “the image of an empty place”’ (1996, p. 273). We maintain democracy by not allowing a potential tyrant to fix themselves permanently in the centre of power, but at the same time we are frightened by the deeply unsettling empty centre. We are also afraid of the difference and disorder we might encounter in public space. As powerful public and private forces behind the development and maintenance of the physical public realm work to make public space more ‘inclusive’ and ‘secure’, they exploit our fears. This

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<sup>33</sup> Consequences of this are painfully apparent in the political situations in the US, UK and other European countries after the turn of the 2010 decade.

steers us away from conflict and toward a flattening consensus. Whilst comfortable, this undermines democracy by suppressing the articulation of opinions and experiences in public, i.e., the performance of Parkinson's first role of the democratic citizen.

With others, I hope that social change and the negotiation of difference can happen relatively peacefully, with expressive protest as one of a number of ways to bring issues into public awareness. At the same time, I also want to keep working, attending school, and generally doing my thing.

At the intersection of public space as sites of protest and commercial activity, situations arise like one noted in the *The Guardian Newspaper* in March 2014. The article reports that the mayor of Madrid began to name the city's Puerta del Sol square – the site of the *indignados* and other protests – as an area where commercial activity is protected. In the Mayor's view, '[p]rotests should be held in places where they don't hurt economic activity.'<sup>34</sup> How can the plaza be called a protected area, as the secretary general of the Unión General de Trabajadores responded, 'when it's a public space that belongs to Madrid and its citizens?' (Kassam, 2014). Surely the right to use a public space for different kinds of public expression should be protected against encroaching commercial activity, rather than the other way around!

Deutsche might see this as evidence that, although most people believe that their support of 'publicness' enhances democratic culture (1996, p. 269), their different understandings of the terms *public* and *democratic culture* challenge this assumed equivalence. For some, democratic culture might mean a consensual, largely passive citizenry, whereas for others it might mean the existence of political activism. In the United States, the right to assemble

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<sup>34</sup> In 2013 alone, 391 public protest activities were held in the Puerta del Sol.

has been upheld by the Supreme Court, but with conditions. Assembly is legal only so long as ‘general comfort and convenience ... peace and good order’ are maintained (Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005, p. 800). In this context then, democratic culture includes the right to use public space for political communication through assembly and protest, but only to the extent that it does not transgress an authority’s view of what constitutes ‘peace and good order.’<sup>35</sup>

Rancière’s distinction between two sides of politics provides a useful tool for considering this dichotomy. In his formulation, the administrative and managerial side of politics, which he calls *The Police*, handles the everyday workings of local and state authority. *Politics*, on the other hand, comes into play with the emergence of situations for which there are no protocols in place. *Politics* starts when *The Police*’s rules are inadequate and new procedures are needed (Cvejic, et al., 2012, p. 75). Building on this, Bruno Latour argues that everything that already has ‘known consequences’, ‘habits of thought’ or rules and/or protocols, is ‘private’ (Cvejic, et al., 2012, p. 73). Any issue for which there is an administrative protocol in place can be handled without the engagement of a public and is therefore private. Something becomes public when no one knows what to do and we must interact with each other in the presence of others (a public) to figure it out.

In this way of thinking, the public sphere is a series of small spheres that gather around specific issues. Public sphere(s) must be constantly re-established as new *matters of concern* appear (Cvejic, et al., 2012, pp. 75, 79). In Latour’s view, matters of concern are

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<sup>35</sup> Protests in response to George Floyd’s death in 2020 highlight a paradox that whilst protests must proceed peacefully and in good order, there is no equivalent restraint placed on the way the State responds. Even when protests do proceed peacefully, they are often met with excessive violence by police and federal agents.

what bring political processes into being. As they arise and gather publics, they provoke *Politics* to deal with them. He notes that because this process is difficult, governing bodies tend to avoid it, instead trying to improve management or governance. In other words, the state tends to fiddle with the workings of *The Police* exactly when *Politics* is needed (Cvejic, et al., 2012, p. 77).

Erick Swyngedouw points out that urban design, planning and architecture are among the core tools of this managerial side of politics. As procedures deployed to allocate ‘people, things, and functions to designated places [...they] colonize and evacuate the proper spaces of the political[...].’ In the attempt to produce ‘cohesive’ cities through their deployment, governments mobilize ‘signifiers of inclusiveness (social cohesion, inclusion, emancipation, self-reliance), while reproducing in practice [...] clichés of urban doom (exclusion, danger, crisis, fear)’.<sup>36</sup> By doing this, Swyngedouw argues, the State uses *The Police* to pre-empt potential conflict in public space (2011, p. 2).

The business-as-usual model is disrupted when people take to the streets. Public protest is emblematic of citizens’ efforts to change the political structures that underpin their lives. Swyngedouw argues that durational protests also offer opportunities for protesters to practise equality, to organise and manage themselves and/or ‘re-configure public space in ways that suggest the possibility of a “new socio-spatial order”’ (2011, pp. 1-2). *Politics* can thus sometimes be mobilized to reframe the logic of *The Police* by making voices that have not been heard audible in public (2011, pp. 1-2) – by performing Parkinson’s first role of democratic citizenship.

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<sup>36</sup> Trump’s use of the word ‘carnage’ in his inaugural speech is an example of this.

In Mouffe's different use of the terms, the *political* is 'the ever-present possibility of antagonism' linked to the 'friend/enemy relation' found in all kinds of social relations (2010, pp. 248-50). The aim of *politics*, she argues, is to 'organise human coexistence under conditions that are marked by "the political" and thus always conflictual' (2010, p. 249). Public life cannot avoid antagonism because collective identities are formed through public action; a *we* can only be constituted by distinguishing a *they* (2010, p. 249). Furthermore, she argues that in order to thrive within the constant possibility of conflict, we pragmatically allow our social practices to be naturalised in ways that conceal their contingent character. Mouffe understands that 'things could always have been different and every order is established through the exclusion of other possibilities' (2010, p. 250). These naturalised practices can be dismantled through a public process, which she calls *agonistic struggle*.<sup>37</sup> Her public sphere therefore, is a battleground where 'hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility whatsoever of a final reconciliation' (2010, p. 250).

Deutsche reaches the conclusion that the task of democracy – and its corollary, public space – is to 'sustain' rather than to 'settle' conflict (1996, p. 270). '[P]ower stems from the people but belongs to nobody' (p. 273). Public space is the place where rights can be declared, and the way power is exercised can be questioned. Deutsche and Mouffe's arguments are persuasive: because these rights are multiple and not subject to consensus, public space exists as a site of irresolvable conflict. In their view, democracy moves towards authoritarianism precisely when this role for public space is denied (p. 275). A battleground is a situation where the fears and hopes of enemies coexist. Public space is

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<sup>37</sup> Mouffe distinguishes antagonism, the struggle between enemies, and agonism, the struggle between adversaries.

therefore exactly the place where one person's hopes arouse another's fears, back and forth, endlessly.

### **Explorations in interfaces**

Iris Marion Young usefully juxtaposes the position of the activist against that of the advocate of deliberative democracy. The latter believes that public deliberation is the

best and most appropriate way to conduct political action, to influence and make public decisions [... and that d]eliberative democracy differs from [...] other attitudes and practices in democratic politics in that it exhorts participants to be concerned not only with their own interests but to listen to and take account of the interests of others [...] (Young, 2001, p. 672).

The activist, on the other hand, argues that the system supporting deliberative democratic processes is structurally unjust and inherently exclusionary. Because it is not possible to address fundamental injustices from inside a skewed system, any 'good citizen' should be outside in the street, interfering and protesting (pp. 673, 675, 677). Many citizens – including myself – move between these positions. At the very least, they vote alongside advocates and sometimes they may assemble in protest with activists.

### ***Drawing for the count: voting***

Marks on paper often have public consequences. Lines drawn by colonial cartographers have resulted in the oppression of whole peoples, migration on the global scale, and huge loss of life.<sup>38</sup> By specifying how something should be made, design drawings set in motion

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<sup>38</sup> Today, Sykes and Picot's cartographers' lines on the map of the Middle East and the Radcliffe Line across the Indian subcontinent continue to irritate intractably unstable situations, steadily undermining peace where it does exist.

actions that bring new assemblages of things and environments into existence. Marks on roads, playing fields and sidewalks define lawscapes and rulescapes that control the movements of drivers and players. For the average person within the context of everyday life in California in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, marking a ballot may be their only act of drawing with public consequences of any kind.

Tim Ingold links two types of lines to particular social, spatial and conceptual consequences. Following Paul Klee, he identifies these as the *walk* and the *assembly of fragments*. The former, the 'line on a walk' (Klee, 1972, p. 17), is dynamic and freely moving. The latter, 'a series of appointments' (Ingold, 2016, p. 75), is an assembly of lines connecting a series of points, where each segment follows the shortest distance between points. Ingold relates these line types to distinct ways of being in the world. The walk corresponds to wayfaring, storytelling and hand-drawn maps based on personal experience. The assembly to 'destination-oriented transport', 'pre-composed plots' and printed route-plans (2016, p. 77). The first implies a world in which meaning is grounded in embodied experience. The second suggests one in which efficiency of communication is valued over meaning. As lines that literally appoint, my marks in *Drawing for the count* are clearly of the second type.<sup>39</sup> In our digital world, lines are defined by vectors or pixels. Although they can appear to be any kind of line, as links between or combinations of points, they also fall into Ingold's second worldview.

The verb *to vote* is derived from the Latin *votum*, a vow or wish. *Poll* once referred to the head, as in 'counting heads'. *Ballot* is from the Italian *ballota*; a small coloured ball, placed into a container to register a vote. The words have meandered away from these original

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<sup>39</sup> See description of *Drawing for the Count* in the Project Pages. The ballot paper in use in my part of California at that time required the voter to draw lines.



meanings, such that today in California, citizens go to *polling* stations to vote by making marks on a piece of paper called a *ballot*. We do not vote with heads, bodies, voices or balls. Nor do we assemble with our fellow citizens in any one place, as ancient Athenians may have done, to make our vows out loud in public. Nevertheless, voting is a point of direct engagement with electoral politics. The ballot paper is the one interface with democracy that a citizen touches and manipulates. Although, like all forms of government, democracy is both public and profoundly social, strangely our one guaranteed participatory act – voting – is carried out in isolated privacy.<sup>40</sup>

The aggregation of votes produces a social outcome, but the connection between the private act of voting and its social consequences is difficult to apprehend. Voting is disconnected from things that usually bring meaning to human action: our relations with other people; the places we inhabit; and the living and inanimate things we value in those relations and places. Although this three-fold disconnection may be necessary to protect the process of voting from tampering or intimidation, is it also possible that the distance it enforces, a distance between what is meaningful and the formal processes of politics, might chip away at our faith in democracy as a system of governance?

### ***Table 18: Public protest***

Occasionally, public spaces fill with purposeful social activity – celebration, protest, violence, etc. Many of us nurture a notion that there is a connection between public space and democracy, but what is that connection? In the ancient act of appearing in public to be counted, voting and the public display of position were one and the same. Today, as

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<sup>40</sup> One exception in the US context are the *caucuses* used in some states (not California) to establish each party's nominee in the primary election process.

established, the voting act is a private one. Public protest, however, sits at the opposite end of the private/individual–public/collective spectrum. Whilst carried out in public, its impact on political outcomes is indirect. Struggles between disparate groups—both with each other and with their governments—are continuously enacted in urban public spaces throughout the world. In many cities, certain public spaces have become associated with struggles for freedom and democracy, even though in practice they have also been sites of public violence and unforgivable abuses of state power. Some have become household names – Tahrir Square, Tiananmen Square – that have meaning even when exactly what happened there is forgotten.

When I made *Table 18*, I thought of it as a unit of protest. A gathering around it would link those present to the protest spaces inscribed on its surface, and with those that might emerge in the future.<sup>41</sup> I thought it could be a place where you and I could practise modes of being together, which would support the efforts made by vulnerable bodies in public space throughout the world.

By experimenting with the forms used in deliberative democracy, could an art practice of public collaborative thinking, begin to build bridges between the positions of activist and advocate, or between everyday life and formal democracy? In the same way that *Drawing for the count* reflects on its relationship to voting, whilst existing in a register that is outside any electoral process, a gathering around *Table 18* might re-cast public protest and/or forms of deliberation outside those contexts. Such activities would be meaningful not because they resemble political processes, but rather through the opportunities they

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<sup>41</sup> See description of *Table 18* in the Project Pages. The table's surface is inscribed with an imaginary city combining six urban spaces occupied by protests between 2011 and 2015 in the US, the UK, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine and Egypt.

might create for enacting, symbolising or rehearsing other ways of living and working together.

Turning to the work of others for concrete examples of experiments with such interfaces, three potentially useful categories of practice emerge, which I will call *practising*, *disclosing* and *re-grounding*. Each involves forms of collaborative thinking. *Practising* involves embodying, re-enacting or rehearsing alternative forms of democratic political processes such as assembly, narration, self-management, debate, negotiation, conflict etc. Another way of defining this might be practising ways to shift we/they relations (us versus them), or ways of being together more equitably. *Disclosing* includes creating representations of matters of concern in ways that gather publics around them. Unsettling normalised assumptions about how things are or should be done may be another form of disclosing and gathering publics. *Re-grounding* correlates to practices that go beyond disclosing and practising, by taking something apart and inviting viewers to put the pieces together in different ways. *Practising*, *disclosing* and *re-grounding*, are each simultaneously material, spatial and social. They are not discrete separate routes to pre-determined destinations, but rather interlaced meandering tendencies, which combine materiality, spatiality and sociality in different ways and proportions.

### **Practising**

A number of thinkers have noted how the durational protests between 2011 and 2015 in Europe, the Middle East and the US offered unprecedented opportunities for trying out alternative processes of collaborative administration and politics.<sup>42</sup> The assembly of large

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<sup>42</sup> Including: (Haiven, 2014) (Thompson, 2015) (Stravrides, 2016) (Swyngedouw, 2011).



Figure 4: Jonas Staal *New World Summit* Utrecht (2016), photograph by Nieuwe Beelden Makers [left], Jonas Staal *New World Summit* Berlin (2012), photograph by Lidia Rossner [right].

numbers of protestors in public spaces within the context of potentially explosive situations and, in some cases, extreme weather forced demonstrators to organise systems for their own day-to-day survival. In such circumstances, as Swyngedouw notes, politics appears as a public 'practice of re-organizing space' that 'transgress[es] the symbolic order and mark[s] a shift to a new situation that can no longer be thought of in terms of old symbolic framings' (2011, p. 3). This describes something resembling Mouffe's 'hegemonic shift' in action within the context of the protest space itself. Alternative forms of democratic processes were put into practice, resulting in demands on the spaces and those gathered within them that were outside the usual terms of reference of *The Police*. This generated a need for new terms to allow the demands to be managed (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 3). Although many of the demonstrations may not yet have achieved the kind of change that protestors had hoped for, it may be too early to judge the longer-term effects of these experiments on the places and the social contexts in which they took place.

Through his *New World Summit* (2016) series, Jonas Staal has orchestrated ambitious public forums where representatives of unrepresented or stateless populations and political organisations practise international politics together. The temporary physical structures he creates for the summits present a memorable aesthetic, lending the assemblies presence and gravitas commensurate with state-sanctioned forums. The assemblies provide a public stage where groups can articulate their individual claims and practise alternative forms of world building together with other groups (Staal, 2012).

Other artists work within formal urban planning processes to imagine and develop alternative procedures and systems. Imani Jacqueline Brown and her collaborators attempt to co-produce and practise alternative planning processes for housing development in New Orleans, in hopes of eliminating structural injustices that force poor



Figure 5: *Blights Out* billboard.

people of colour out of their homes. Their collective, Blights Out, 'seek[s] to demystify and democratize the system of housing development and expose the policies that lead to gentrification'. By forming a coalition of policy makers and artists and including people of all ages, races, economic situations, backgrounds and professions, the collective functions across interest groups. Rather than 'reinventing the wheel', the collective sees itself as *being the wheel* itself (Blights Out, 2015). Practising may be exactly this: becoming the wheel turning in a different and, as in the case of Blights Out, a more just way.

### **Disclosing**

Artwork that discloses relies on the existence of public settings where it can appear, and a public can gather. As long as they remain accessible, public spaces have the potential to be sites where matters of concern can be disclosed, and publics gathered around them. In bringing attention to the material qualities of voting, *Drawing for the count*, discloses an important disconnection between the act of voting and the things that really matter to the person who votes.

Of interest to my work is how public space can be mobilised through artistic practice. Latour's thinking suggests two avenues for this. The first is his argument that *things* are at the root of all political differences, arguing that the fundamental reason people assemble in a democracy is to address divisions over *concrete things* (Latour, 2005, p. 14). In his view, public debate that moves focus away from *things* in their concrete contexts and towards abstract concepts is particularly susceptible to abuse. He is especially alarmed at the use of 'matters of fact' in political deliberation. Latour gives as an example Colin Powell's use of the 'fact' of WMDs as an argument for war, to demonstrate kinds of abuses which discourse that rejects *things* in favour of facts or evidence can allow (Forensic Architecture, 2012).

He proposes *dingpolitik*<sup>43</sup> as an alternative political system which, by maintaining focus on *things*, is incapable of supporting the kind of generalising rhetoric that powers ideologically driven debate (Latour, 2005, p. 14).<sup>44</sup>

Second, Latour promotes methods for bringing all possible representations of issues to the table – in including artistic and scientific artefacts – for rounded, transparent and thorough deliberation and decision making. He understands that art presents or draws attention to matters of concern, and consequently has an important role to play in mechanisms that assemble interested parties around issues. Also, he argues, art contributes to the *reformatting* required to find appropriate ways for dealing with situations where existing protocols fail (Cvejic, et al., 2012, p. 77). His perspective challenges artists with their images, objects, performances and practices to actively participate in political processes.

The work of *Forensic Architecture* might be emblematic of a practice of disclosing.<sup>45</sup> Whilst interrogating the situations they study in rigorous detail and communicating their findings with exacting clarity and exquisite imagery, *Forensic Architecture* goes beyond simply making issues visible. They use all means possible to discover and present ‘truth’. Their choice of the name ‘forensic’, with its association with judicial processes of collecting

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<sup>43</sup> The politics of things.

<sup>44</sup> This discussion appeared in the catalogue for an exhibition that aimed to ‘rethink problems of representation in “both” scientific and political spheres’ and to take advantage of art’s ability to capture interest and provoke thought (Fox, et al 2010, p 199).

<sup>45</sup> Based at Goldsmiths, University of London, *Forensic Architecture* is a research agency that undertakes ‘investigations into cases of human rights violations, with and on behalf of communities affected by political violence, human rights organisations, international prosecutors, environmental justice groups, and media organisations’ (Forensic Architecture, 2020).

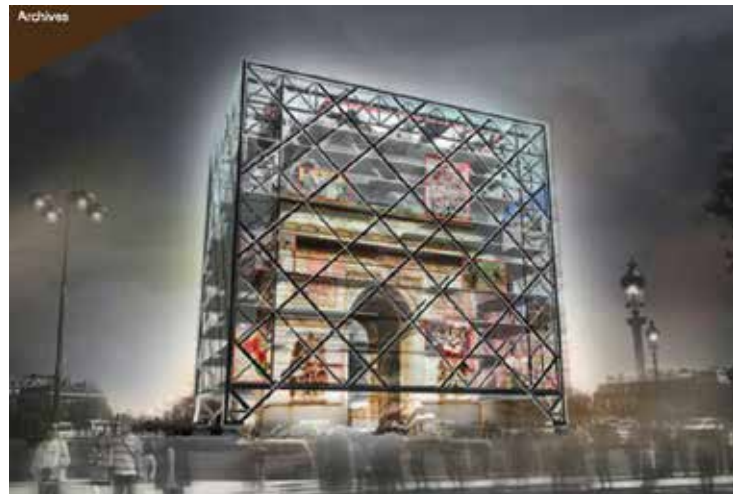


Figure 6: Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Arc de triomphe World Institute for the abolition of war* (2011).

evidence and uncovering facts, intentionally reminds us that justice systems are deeply political.

Another example of disclosing might be Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War* (2011). The project proposes to encase the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in a scaffold-like structure that would reposition the memorial to 'the bellicose past' as 'a gigantic object of research' world' (Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, 2011). The *World Institute* would 'offer an open-access invitation to all who wish to be historical witnesses, critical interlocutors and potential intellectual and activist forces toward a war-free world' (Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, 2011). If realised, the on-going research represented and activated by the structure has the potential to become a site of continuous disclosing.

Taryn Simon's *Paperwork and The Will of Capital* (2015) as shown at the Venice Biennale may be an example of a different kind of disclosing. Simon carefully examined how the signing of international trade agreements has been documented in photographs. By reconstructing and re-presenting the 'impossible' flower bouquets that adorned the tables of each signing, she drew attention to how the global economy and the agreements that underpin it distort our understanding of the real places in which we each live.<sup>46</sup>

### **Re-grounding**

Mouffe writes of the difference between 'enemies' (people who are actively opposed or hostile) and 'adversaries' (opponents in a contest, conflict or dispute). Beyond the

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<sup>46</sup> 'Impossible bouquets' are arrangements of flowers that could never be in bloom in in the same place and time in nature. The phrase also refers to 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch paintings of such bouquets.



Figure 7: Taryn Simon, *Paperwork, and The Will of Capital* (2015).

dictionary definitions, there is a sense that one can live with and even enjoy having adversaries, but having enemies could get you killed. If, as Mouffe argues, humans constantly re-defined ourselves in relation to ‘others’ as part of an us versus them binary, then it is important to also see that each issue cuts a different we/they fissure across a gathered public. For Mouffe, ‘the crucial question of democratic politics is [...] to manage to establish the we/they discrimination in a manner compatible with pluralism’ (2010, p. 249).

Thinking through Mouffe suggests that to be meaningful, interfaces with democracy must engage with the ubiquitous potential for conflict. *Table 18* was informed by Hannah Arendt’s use of the table as a metaphor for the world we build and share: a device that joins, separates and offers a surface to display things seen simultaneously from different perspectives. A round table gives each person seated around it a different view. But sitting around such a table also constructs a unity that implies an *us*, which may obscure the divisions that exist within any group. Re-grounding this practice might involve dividing and re-constituting the group so that participants can shift between antagonism, agonism and fellowship –between being enemies, adversaries, fellow wayfarers, and back again.

An example of this kind of practice might be that of California-based artist Melissa Wyman. Wyman draws on martial arts training to engage participants in combative collaborative drawing sessions. After providing a simple martial arts tutorial, she invites the gathered participant/fighters to publicly engage in an adversarial struggle for space within a ‘shared’ drawing (Wyman, 2016). Re-situated into the context of physical conflict, the act of drawing something together turns from a visual/intellectual activity into one that is fully embodied. The insights the activity can provoke are manifested in the body and, as



Figure 8: Melissa Wyman, *Association of Combative Landscapes*, drawing event (2016).



such, contribute to a recalibration of the participant's embodied understanding of human mutuality.

### **Possibilities for critique**

So far, the presentation of these three categories of practice has suggested that their methods are value-free, yet the projects presented as examples have all been – to a greater or lesser degree – those that seek more open, more inclusive, more egalitarian or ‘more democratic’ structures. In fact, any of the methods could be employed by anyone toward any world view or vision for the future. All three types of practice could be employed to generate unsafe or violent situations. Artur Żmijewski's *Them* (2007) is a case in point. The work is presented as a film documenting a series of workshops to which Żmijewski invited representatives of four ideologically opposed groups. In the first workshop, each group was asked to create a mural representing their beliefs and values. Żmijewski had these printed onto tee-shirts which group members wore in subsequent meetings. In the second gathering Żmijewski proposed a ‘game’ in which anyone could ‘correct’ anything in the room that they felt was problematic.

Over the course of the remaining workshops, the groups gradually defaced each other's murals and tee-shirts, finally burning the murals. The film is difficult to watch even though the participants maintain a veneer of politeness throughout. The progression to more and more extreme behaviour appears hopeless in its inevitability. But it is important to remember that the set-up as a game, which gave participants permission to disrespect the images made by others, invited and encouraged retaliation, driving each group to more extreme responses. Taking place inside the art world as a series of workshops may also have removed social barriers (and/or the fear of physical violence) that, in a real-world situation, might have constrained participants' behaviour.



Figure 9: Artur Żmijewski, *Them* (2007), video still.

*Them* set up and documented a process in which opposing groups retrenched into ideological stereotypes before our eyes. At the same time, there are no incidences documented in the film where participants actually practised the values they profess, nor is there any component of the game that suggests a potential for recalibration through re-grounding. If we take the film at face value, however, it illustrates and exposes one way in which social division is normalised. It can therefore be seen as an example of disclosing with a critical focus on identity and ideology (Lamont, 2012). It could also be argued, however, that in allowing and encouraging participants to alter emblems of belief made by other groups, the game appears to have been deliberately constructed to strengthen we/they divisions, stoke anger and resentment between groups, and practise destructive ways of sharing the world. A game with different rules, which activated the we/they divisions in other ways – by inviting participants to make new emblems that combine the beliefs of two groups, or to create new versions of other groups’ murals without defacing the originals, for example – may have led to different outcomes. What *Them* does expose is that ideological groups have equal propensity to engage in untempered violence when encouraged to disrespect the beliefs of others in a shared space.

### **Cut 1: Conclusions**

Returning to my overarching research questions, what does this Cut reveal about what constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context, the forms it might take, and the conditions required for it to acquire agency in the world?

One approach to defining public collaborative thinking is to examine situations where we think collaboratively in everyday life, and what happens when we do so. The discussion in this Cut highlights public protest and voting, examining deliberative processes found in informal and formal democratic politics. *Table 18* offers a place where a small group might



Figure 10: Artur Żmijewski, *Them* (2007), video still.

practise alternative modes of thinking together at a local scale, allowing a mix of views to be aired – one part of Parkinson’s first role of the citizen in a democracy. Staal’s *New World Summits* illustrate a number of possible forms. Mouffe’s ideas and Wyman’s collaborative drawing/fighting point to rituals for practising agonistic struggle.

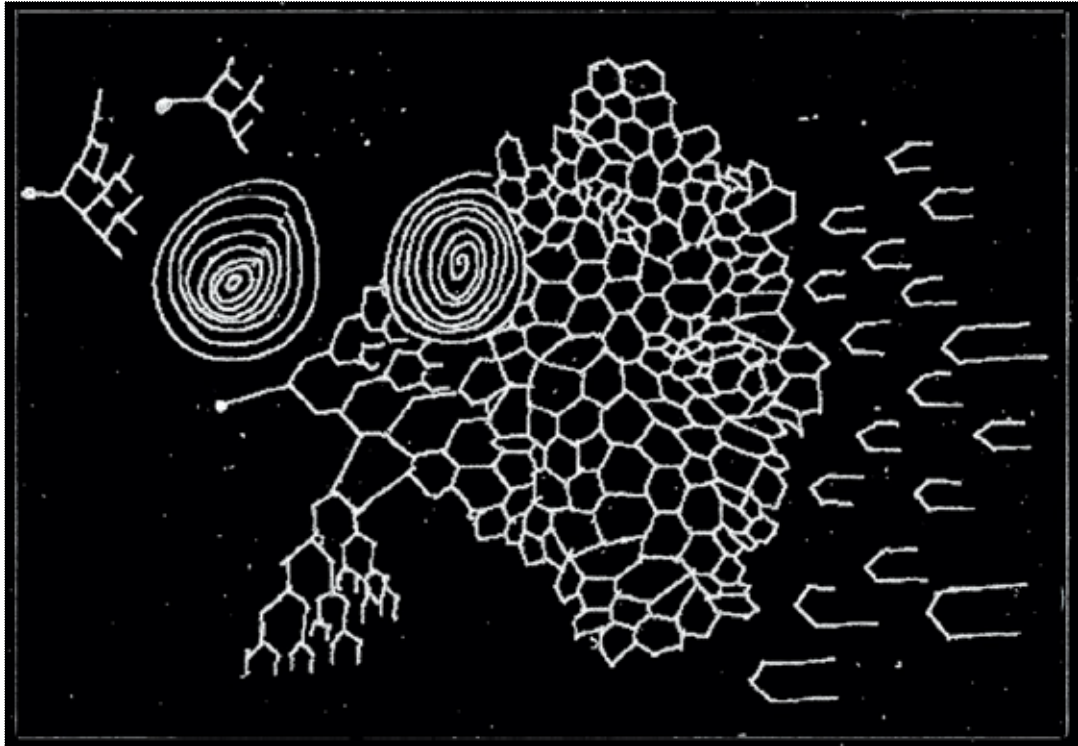
The discussion also sheds light on conditions needed for collaborative thinking. One would be maintaining a connection to what brings meaning to human interaction: relations with other people, connection to place, and to the things we value in those relations and places. Ingold argues for an understanding that meaning is grounded in embodied experience and its communication should take precedence over efficiency of transmission (2016, p. 77). In my view, Parkinson’s research argues strongly that public collaborative thinking should take place in physical public settings; it should be visible, embrace difference, and be as open and neutral as possible. Deutsche’s work indicates that it should welcome conflict. Swngedouw’s ideas argue for a setting that is flexible and easily re-configurable so it can respond to what might arise during use.

In the discussion of the three-part framework of *practising*, *disclosing* and *re-grounding* and the specific projects within it, I gave examples of how other artists have used collaborative thinking. Two seemingly contradictory ideas for my practice are suggested. The first would be to experiment and critique forms of collaborative thinking found in deliberative democracy as practised in the UK and the US. Such activities might create opportunities for enacting, symbolising or rehearsing other ways of living and working together. The second would be re-grounding through actions that playfully divide and re-constitute groups so that participants shift between antagonism, agonism and fellowship – between being enemies, adversaries and fellow wayfarers.

[END OF CUT 1]

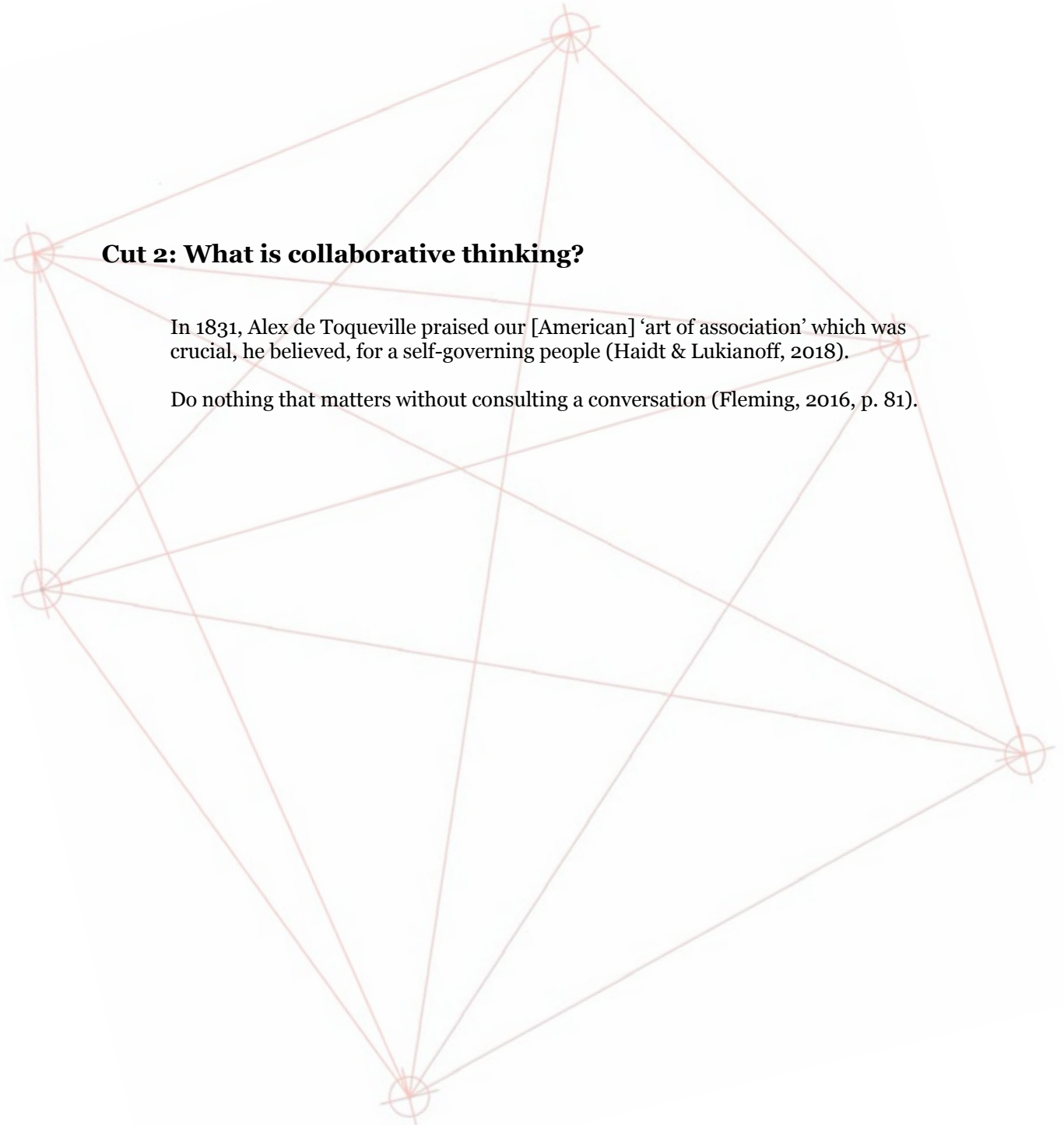


*Pause: Questioneering*



Do questions jostle for your loving attention, begging to be asked? Is there one whispering in your ear – *Ask Me, Me, ME?* Do others squirm away like worms accidentally flung into the bottom of your boat? Does one meander haphazardly upward on your contrary cursive? Or, Or, Or... is there a particularly sagacious one inking vigorously down the paper as if brushed by a Zen priest? Do your questions branch like a beautiful tree, each one leading to two others ever outward? Or do they crowd and confound, lead to shifting alignments, odd connections and folds, down rabbit holes or out through worm holes in loops and spirals?





**Cut 2: What is collaborative thinking?**

In 1831, Alex de Toqueville praised our [American] 'art of association' which was crucial, he believed, for a self-governing people (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018).

Do nothing that matters without consulting a conversation (Fleming, 2016, p. 81).

The term collaborative thinking has two parts: ‘thinking’ which is usually understood as a solitary internal activity and the labouring together of ‘collaboration’. In this Cut, I explore what it might mean to think by means of labouring together, whilst continuing to observe the interplay of the individual and the collective began in Cut 1. I first explore this by inviting Hannah Arendt and David Bohm to join me at the table for an imagined exchange of ideas. I invited these two thinkers because of their very different ways of engaging with the world. Both resonate strongly with my practice, in particular Arendt’s table metaphor and her understanding of the world as saturated with plurality (Arendt, 1998), and Bohm’s proposal of a group thinking process he calls ‘Dialogue’ (Bohm, 2014).

Next I introduce Max Haiven’s concept of ‘commoning memory’ (2014) in relation to my practice, particularly my project *The Land and Me* (2019), and draw out some of the possibilities and limitations of remembering together as a form of collaborative thinking.<sup>47</sup> Finally, I consider the implications of collaborative thinking in two profoundly different examples of practice: artist/theorist Warren Neidich’s installation *Rumor to Delusion* (2019), and *Commons Archive* (2017-2020) an ongoing project initiated by the conversation artists marksearch. My intention is to draw out questions to be explored in practice rather than to arrive at any conclusive definition of collaborative thinking.

Before moving into the body of the Cut, I will touch on how I understand the connection between conversation and collaborative thinking. My practice fits into a body of art practices that, as Kester writes, are ‘concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and conversation’ (2012, p. 154). In these practices, conversation is ‘an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond

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<sup>47</sup> See description of *The Land and Me* in Volume 2, pages 33-49)



the limits of fixed identities and official discourse' (2004, p. 8). Many of my public engagements have included exchanges of ideas across and around large tables, which might be called conversations. To my mind however, conversation and collaborative thinking, whilst mutually affective, are not the same thing.

The word 'conversation' derives from an Old French word meaning 'behaviour, life, way of life, monastic life'. Constructed from *con*, or *with*, and a form of the verb *vertere*, meaning *to turn*, the Latin word *conversari* means 'to live, dwell, live with, keep company with' – or perhaps, *to turn with* (Etymonline, n.d.). Of course, we generally use the word today to refer to the verbal exchange of information and thoughts among a small group of people. The word *collaboration*, on the other hand, has straightforward roots meaning *labouring together*. In the conversations I orchestrate as a part of my practice research, I invite a group of participants to dwell together for a time, to establish a context or ground for collaboration.<sup>48</sup> I propose that conversation functions as a pre-requisite that enables collaborative thinking to begin.<sup>49</sup>

### **Thinking and thought at the table with Arendt and Bohm**

In the following section, I present my interpretation of Arendt and Bohm's ideas about thinking and thought as if they were sitting with me at *Table 15* (2017), exchanging ideas. The text is an experiment in imagining collaborative thinking through text. I rely on Arendt's *Life of the Mind* (1977) and Bohm's *Thought as a System* (1994). These books are

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<sup>48</sup> See the Project Pages for descriptions and reflections on my engagements *Uncaptured Land* (2017), *Circling back* (2017), *Fluid Cities* (2017, 2018) and *The Land and Me* (2019).

<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, David Fleming defines conversation differently: the first definition of conversation in his *Lean Logic* is: 'Cooperative problem-solving and deliberation (Latin: *de* thoroughly + *librare* weigh), including deliberation with oneself' (2016, p. 81).

very different in content, perspective and voice. Arendt represents the solitary thinker's position and addresses *thinking*. Bohm tackles the collective activity of *thought*.<sup>50</sup>

Arendt opens *The Life of the Mind* with the following words by Martin Heidegger:

Thinking does not bring knowledge  
as do the sciences.

Thinking does not produce usable  
practical wisdom.

Thinking does not solve the riddles  
of the universe.

Thinking does not endow us directly  
with the power to act (1977, p. 1).

So, what *does* thinking do and why do we do it? Arendt grapples with these questions, as a philosopher, in order to better understand the human condition. In *Thought as a System*, Bohm mourns, as a scientist, our ongoing failure to understand how thought works and how it has led to flawed choices that put our civilisation at risk. This failure, he says, is the primary source of sorrow and conflict in the world (1994). Thinking like an engineer, Bohm wants to improve how we think:

Ordinary light waves are called 'incoherent'; they go in all directions and are not in phase with each other [...]. But the light coming from a laser is coherent, because the waves all beam in the same direction and build up great strength. Similarly, if

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<sup>50</sup> The distinction between thinking and thought calls to mind John Holloway's 'doing' vs 'the done' which I discuss later in this Cut. *Doing* is 'our capacity to change the world', *the done* is what we create through doing which in turn, shapes our doing (Haiven, 2014, p. 162). If thinking is our ability to imagine the world, then perhaps thought is what shapes and confines what we can think.

even a few people were to think together in a coherent way it would have tremendous power in [...] culture and [...] society (Bohm, 1994, pp. 226-227).

Arendt and Bohm write in very different registers. Arendt writes poetically, bringing in associations from across the spectrum of her lineage of thought. Her tone tends toward objective distance, using ‘men’ to stand in for all humans and the universalising ‘we’ as in:

Men [...can] speculate meaningfully, about the unknown and the unknowable. And although this can never directly change reality – indeed in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing – the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind (Arendt, 1977, pp. 70-71).

In contrast, Bohm’s book, an edited transcription of a seminar he held in California in 1990, has a conversational tone:

Yet, the general tacit assumption in thought is that it’s just telling you the way things are and that is not doing anything – that ‘you’ are inside there, deciding what to do with the information. But I want to say that you don’t decide what to do with the information. The information takes over. *It runs you* (Bohm, 1994, p. 5).

To introduce a flavour of these differences in voice into my text, I use the first-person plural *we* when interpreting Arendt. When presenting Bohm’s ideas, I use the second-person *you*. In my own reflections and questions, shown in italics, I use the first-person singular *I*.

Arendt begins:

We might start by considering thinking in terms of three relationships: thinking and appearance; thinking and reality; and thinking and worldliness. All living things 'mak[e] their appearance [at birth] like actors on a stage set for them' (Arendt, 1977, p. 21). Every living thing has an 'urge to appear' and to display itself. Perception and appearance are like two ends of a vector. We see and want to be seen; we hear and want to be heard; we touch and desire to be touched; and so on (1977, p. 29). Like every other living thing we 'depend[...] upon a world that solidly appears as the location for [...our] own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, and on spectators to acknowledge and recognize [...our] existence' (1977, pp. 21-22). On this stage, to be is to appear and to appear is to be perceived.

The reality of something is guaranteed only if it meets three conditions of commonness: first, all our senses perceive the same object; second, the context that gives the object meaning is shared by others together with us and third, all sentient beings agree on its identity. As an internal process that does not appear, thinking cannot achieve this 'threefold commonness' and therefore cannot be relied upon as real (Arendt, 1977, p. 50). But, what if all the things hidden inside us are there in order to enable our surface to appear (1977, pp. 27,30)? Then all the unseen material and immaterial parts of us – organs, spirit, consciousness – together make up the armature that supports our appearance. Thinking would be one part of this infrastructure.

Thinking is a process in which we de-sense perceptions we receive from our sense organs, bring them into the imagination and turn them into images that our minds can hold, manipulate and use to build thought-objects, which we may retrieve later (Arendt, 1977, pp. 13, 87). We can do this only if we cut off the flow of information from our sense organs.

We must 'withdraw from the world's being *present* to the senses' (1977, p. 75). '[T]here are no sensations corresponding to mental activities' (1977, p. 34). In order to think we must retreat from the world into our imaginations (1977, p. 76).

*This implies that thinking and physical sensation operate in separate registers. But what of my experience as a hopeless poker player whose thoughts are easily read on my face? It seems to me that thinking and physical sensation must interact.*

Bohm:

Thought and sensation do interact. Although you may experience your thoughts as neutral and yours alone, thought is actually a permeable, active and collective phenomenon (1994, p. 5). It leaves traces which acquire autonomy and agency. It is wholly entangled with perception, bodies and contexts and includes internal mental processes and external supports.<sup>51</sup> Neurophysiological, intellectual and emotional at the same time (1994, pp. 44, 56), thought is a material process that engages chemical change (1994, p. 54). Perceptions and experiences establish synapses that strengthen through use, transforming repeated patterns into unconscious reflexes (1994, p. 14). Feelings and thoughts interpenetrate each other within an extensive system of reflexes (1994, p. x), which evolve into rigid structures (1994, p. 54). Together these complex structures formulate most of your thoughts without

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<sup>51</sup> Including things like cars, buildings, musical instruments, notebooks and computers.

your knowing it, driving your actions long before you could possibly make a conscious decision (1994, pp. xii, 53).<sup>52</sup>

Even though you may sometimes feel ‘lost in thought’ and seemingly in retreat from the world, your thought process constantly superimposes images from the past onto your living now, conditioning even your passive engagement with the world (Nichol, 1994, p. x). These images and representations of things acquire layers of associations. The word ‘table’, for example, will evoke an image of a table. When you see an object resembling this image, various things you associate with tables immediately come to mind and prime you to act in certain ways (Bohm, 1994, p. 93). The word thus becomes a symbol that links layers of thought (1994, p. 94), ‘stands in for’ the actual thing (1994, pp. 97-98), and calls groups of related reflexes into play. The representations and reflexes participate in perception by waking up sensations, which you perceive and re-convey into your thoughts (1994, pp. 110-111). This recurrent dynamic in which what you see induces thought, which induces perception, which induces thought and so on, can generate dangerously deceptive illusions affecting belief and identity (1994, p. 133).

*This calls to mind the ‘deliberative enclaves’ I discussed in Cut 1. I picture a hall of mirrors, where endless reflections feed back a singular point of view as if it were a multiplicity of perspectives.*

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<sup>52</sup> This echoes Spinoza quoted in Kester: “Men are deceived because they think themselves free, [...] and the sole reason for thinking so is that they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which those actions are determined” (2011, pp. 181-2).

Bohm

Thought both influences reality and provides the context that gives it meaning. Think of the highly partitioned Western way of thinking: land is divided into uses, zones, ownership patterns, resource claims etc.; knowledge is broken into disciplines (1994, p. 4); trees are separated from insects; soil from worms; your body from your mind and your thoughts from your feelings. Even the image you have of yourself as a separate individual with your own thoughts, is itself a product of this system of thought (1994, p. 209).

*In my projects, I try out methods of engagement that I think encourage or allow participants to break through habitual patterns of thought, crack open fixed ideas and narratives, and possibly re-assemble them and/or find ways to re-ground ourselves in different kinds of thinking and acting. I wonder if it is ever actually possible to step out of the omnipresent system of thought.*

Arendt:

It is important to distinguish between *knowing* and *thinking*. *Knowing* is tied to the 'biological apparatus' that drives cognition and scientific inquiry and is thus situated in the world. In contrast, *thinking* is located in the brain. Thinking with Kant, we see that intellect, cognition and knowledge respond to a desire to grasp information received from the senses, whereas reason and thinking are driven by our wish 'to understand [... its] *meaning*' (Arendt, 1977, p. 57).<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the 'need to think' and 'the urge to

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<sup>53</sup> *Knowing* is 'a world-building activity', whilst *thinking* takes place away from the world – an idea, Arendt argues, that led thinkers like Descartes to the notion that the world is not real (1977, p. 57).

know' are interlinked (1977, p. 61). Behind every 'cognitive' question that drives us to seek answers there are seemingly idle, unanswerable ones. The moment we abandon these,

[... we] would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded (1977, p. 62).

Thinking takes place through language, taking the form of an internal dialogue of 'me with myself' which is sealed off from the world of appearance (Arendt, 1977, pp. 31, 95, 185). A rare point of tangency between thinking and the world outside is metaphor (Arendt, 1977, p. 105). '[W]ords [...] and thoughts resemble each other, thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think' (Arendt, 1977, p. 99) [emphasis removed].

*Here I see how Arendt's philosophical perspective considers thinking, although invisible itself, to be behind the scenes of everything. By grappling with unanswerable questions, thinking fuels the urge to know, which powers civilization even though, in Arendt's view, it remains with the internal dialogue between me and myself. But I wonder: if thinking emerges in a dialogue between me and myself, why couldn't there also be a form of thinking that arises in a dialogue between me and two, three, twenty or more people?*

Bohm:

Thinking does begin as an internal dialogue, but what is important is the power dynamic between those two internal voices, and particularly how it affects identity and can drive action. Your internal conversation takes place between a 'bright shining' *I* who sees, acts and does, and a limited, passive *me*, who is seen and to whom things happen (Bohm, 1994, p. 161). The powerful image of the *I* and the pain you feel when it is punctured by reality



pushes you towards action in order to protect your self-image (Bohm, 1994, pp. 165-6).<sup>54</sup> This is a problem. Treating the self as a fixed entity is as meaningless as trying to touch a rainbow. You think you see a self, but what you actually see is a process (1994, p. 173). The self, its grounding and its origin constantly appear and reappear in various forms but never resolve into fixed, knowable entities (1994, p. 173).

*This resonates with Simondon's idea that the self exists only in the moment of individuation, which happens through interaction with something outside. Re-acting to defend my identity means turning away from (rather than turning with) outside information that may alter me. Simondon argues that such action shuts down the very process of becoming that is my 'self' (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 390). Bohm's argument also draws a link between thought and action.*

Arendt:

Thinking and acting are mutually exclusive. Consider a theatre production as an analogy, with the actor undertaking action and the spectator thinking. Only the spectator, because he is not directly involved in the action, is able to see the entire production and understand the meaning of the whole. The actor, on the other hand, can understand only his own part.

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<sup>54</sup> Although, like most people, I generally keep this battle to myself, not everyone does. Bohm draws on Freud to argue that this internal conflict often overflows and can drive 'a megalomaniac [...to say] 'I must govern the world in order to show what I am'' (1994, p. 163) – something we see much of in 2020.

*But I wonder what changes if I look at theatre as a system that incorporates both acting and the watching of it. Clearly, neither is possible without the other. The action on stage affects the audience's response, which in turn affects the action. Actors and spectators collaborate to build the production together.<sup>55</sup> It seems to me that the theatre is precisely a place where meaning is sought and sometimes found through collaboration. Theatre, then, can be seen as a form of public collaborative thinking.*

*Interestingly, theatre offers many of the types of opportunities for true encounters.<sup>56</sup> Also the public collaborative thinking practices we trialled in *The Land and Me* offered forms of interaction that might trigger individual or collective individuation. But does this triggering also open possibilities for other ways of thinking and doing to come into view, and new realities to be acknowledged? Could collaborative thinking therefore be a link or step between thinking and acting?*

Bohm:

Meaningful change can happen only at the collective level (1994, p. 186), rendering the flow of meaning between individuals more important than the thought process within any one person (1994, p. xi). A group dialogue process that fosters exchanges of meaning within a group of people large enough to simulate society might generate opportunities to look around or beyond the system of thought. If you collectively pay careful attention to the flow of meaning as it moves between individuals, your group might obtain 'direct insight

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<sup>55</sup> Together with writers, set designers, props people, stagehands, lighting designers and operators, and all the other people that make a theatre production happen.

<sup>56</sup> See discussion of Morizot and Zhong Mengual's true encounter in the Introduction.

into the collective movement of thought' (1994, p. xiv), and through your awareness initiate a cultural shift towards more coherent thinking.

A first step toward thinking coherently, you should pay attention to the activity of thought in your individual brain, to see if you can, even momentarily, overcome your own internal thinker (Nichol, 1994, p. xiii).<sup>57</sup> You could then bring this skill into dialogue with others. A group of twenty to fifty people, thinking together at regular intervals, might together achieve a shared mind that holds, without judgement, all the points of view represented in your group, as state you might call 'one mind'.<sup>58</sup> Over time, 'the potential for collective intelligence inherent in such groups could lead to a new and creative art form, one which may involve significant numbers of people and beneficially affect the trajectory of our current civilization' (Nichol, 1994, p. xiv).

*Bohm's dialogue proposal resonates with my practice, but I am deeply uncomfortable with the connotations of the phrases 'one mind' and 'coherent thinking'. With Arendt, I see*

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<sup>57</sup> Bohm proposes the possibility of extending the skill of proprioception from the realm of the body into the realm of thought. In medical terms, proprioception is a feedback loop in the nervous system that continuously tells the brain the position of the body and the forces acting on it (Inverarity, 2018; Inverarity, 2018). Bohm speculates that humans may already have a similar skill for thought, but the thought system as it has developed interferes with it. Asking what if we could reclaim this ability to monitor the movement of thought running through the brain and the various forces influencing its flow at any given moment? Bohm believes that such a skill might allow us to overcome the 'thinker' every now and then.

<sup>58</sup> In Bohm's use, 'one mind' has nothing to do with having the same opinion or coming to the same conclusion.

*plurality as a basic human condition. I propose, therefore, 'plural mind' and 'plural thinking' as more accurate terms for the kind of shared thinking processes, I offer.<sup>59</sup>*

Bohm:

Nevertheless, any avenue for learning 'to share meaning together' is important to explore and there are other rewards (1994, p. 202). Group dialogue establishes bonds based on mutual participation rather than shared opinions, values or even friendship. In the midst of the challenges of a group in dialogue, afflicted as it must be with frustration, conflict and the potential for violence,<sup>60</sup> you can find an impersonal kind of fellowship (1994, pp. 205-207).<sup>61</sup>

*The idea of bonds based on participation makes me think of Simondon's idea that collective individuation happens when participants come together not out of common identity or shared values, but when their coming together creates friction (Morizot & Zhong Mengual, 2017, p. 400). In my practice, I try to incorporate forms of engagement that are qualitatively different from everyday social interactions, introducing elements*

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<sup>59</sup> Bohm's ambition for a reoccurring, leaderless and agenda-less gathering of twenty to fifty people seems impossibly utopian. Indeed, for some people, the idea of such gatherings invokes a vision of hell. At the same time, I am aware of Bohmian dialogue groups that met regularly over decades.

<sup>60</sup> Bohm writes of the problem of violence: 'Doing it together means that we're communicating, facing all these issues...persisting and sustaining the work even when it becomes difficult...The fact is we are violent...we have to stay with it...We need to perceive the real meaning of it, which is that we are bound together by this physical thing which we call "violence"' (Bohm, 1994: 226).

<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to consider Richard Sennett's summary of the problem of participation in this context. He writes: 'participation is perverted by the psychological question. In community groups [...] people feel they need to get to know each other [...] in order to act together, they get caught up in immobilizing processes of revealing themselves to each other as persons, and gradually lose the desire to act together' (Sennett, 1977, p. 11).

*that might take participants outside their comfort zones. My tables play a role in this through their unusually large size, and sometimes through a gap between the table and context as in Uncaptured Land.*

*The balance between the individual and the collective seems to be a hinge point between Bohm and Arendt.*

Arendt;

There are only two ways that thinking manifests in the world: either by means of metaphor translated through individual speech (1977, p. 31); or through individual judgement (1977, p. 193). The collective can get carried away and lose the ability to understand right and wrong. At important junctures 'when the stakes are on the table', thinking might help each of us to distinguish right from wrong and thus allow us to fight against being swept up into what might be happening around us (1977, p. 193). Only the individual thinker can see and judge appropriately.

*I wonder whether it would be possible for any individual to maintain the distance from their culture and society to think independently in the way that Arendt proposes.*

Bohm:

The individual thinker has the illusion of freedom but is actually limited by the system of thought in which they are embedded. A group is also corruptible, of course, but only by constantly striving in dialogue for a clear understanding of how thought works, can you see through or beyond the enclosing system of thought.

Arendt:

Thinking is realized and appears in the world through individual judgement. 'Judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances' (1977, p. 193).

*The words that Bohm uses to describe what can happen in dialogue like 'one mind' or 'fellowship' – as with my terms 'plural mind', 'plural thinking', 'thinking together' and 'collaborative thinking' – seem to imply an uncritical celebration of togetherness. I propose that although thinking together in this way may eschew judgement, it does not necessarily involve the suspension of criticality. Judgement is an end point, a statement and an assessment that closes off alternate possibilities What would happen if, instead of seeing thinking as a route to judgement, or judging as the means through which thinking manifests, I substitute 'question for 'judgement'? Questioning would become the 'by-product of the liberating effect of thinking' and questioning would be what allows thinking to appear in the world. In my practice the route to plural mind and plural thinking is made with questions.<sup>62</sup>*

Arendt:

Evoking Kafka's image of man as a fighter who, in hope and fear, fights the future with the help of the past and the past with the help of the future, perhaps thinking can provide us a

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<sup>62</sup> There is a relationship to be explored here with 'Jean-Luc Nancy's terms "being-with", "being-in-common" and "being-with-each-other" which accommodate difference in mutuality' (Jane Morgan paraphrased in Harvie, 2013, p. 8).

place of respite from that battle. The fighter can rest, away from world in a 'small non-time space in the very heart of time' (1977, pp. 208, 210-211).<sup>63</sup>

*In my mind's eye Bohm's system of thought has appeared as a haphazard, yet indestructible Rube Goldbergian device in which I, as a thinker, am an embedded cog.<sup>64</sup> This is profoundly different from this image of a timeless breathing space.*

Bohm:

Because human knowledge is never complete, there must be an unknown (perhaps unknowable) intelligence at work beyond your understanding (1994, p. 177). If this intelligence is like a vast and deep ocean, then our system of thought is the cause of only the tiniest ripples on its surface. By cultivating awareness and being attentive to the workings of thought, you might learn to see beyond its machinations to tap into this expansive intelligence.<sup>65</sup>

*From my perspective as an individual negotiating the sea's surface, my reality is at the mercy of the currents and tides of the socially conditioned system of reflexes operating around me. Thinking with others seems all the more important if only because of the*

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<sup>63</sup> A clearing, perhaps.

<sup>64</sup> Reuben Garrett Lucius Goldberg (1883-1970) was an American artist, writer and inventor famous for cartoons illustrating simple tasks being performed by amusingly complicated, convoluted machines.

<sup>65</sup> The image of the ever-moving sea and a potentially intelligent stillness beneath it brings to my mind the mystery of the sea in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) – a film that powerfully conveys the experience of being entangled in thought's multidimensional web and thereby completely losing the ability to confirm what is real.

*benefits afforded by perspective balance and the support it would offer. Perhaps Bohm hopes that together we can build a vessel (an ark?) with a keel sufficiently deep to allow us to move calmly through the surface turbulence.*

*I leave this conversation with unanswered questions. What are the implications of striving for the radical inclusivity implied by plural mind whilst in the context of the adversarial winner-takes-all forms of democracy practised in the US and UK (where I live)? Could collaborative thinking be a way to gather the metastable parts of participants together into a reactive milieu to instigate change? Could plural mind be a reactive milieu – a shared state of open potential? What might a practice of public collaborative thinking, which pays attention to unanswerable questions without aiming for consensus or solution, be like? And, what might it do in the world?*

*Finally, as I weave fragile tendrils of these ideas and questions into the fabric of my practice, Arendt's image of the thinker resting between the past and the future in the heart of time shimmers over my clearing in the midst of everyday life. Bohm's thinking through group dialogue lends depth of purpose to my cycles of inquiry and questioning. The concept of plural mind suggests another way of thinking about the ephemeral communities of inquiry that work like The Land and Me constructs.<sup>66</sup>*

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<sup>66</sup> See the Strategies and techniques section of the Project Pages.



## **Collaborative thinking and communing memory**

*The Land and Me* commission presented an opportunity to practise collaborative thinking in the context of remembering and/or commemorating community trauma, and thus resonates with Max Haiven's proposal for practices of 'commoning memory' (2014). Haiven argues that these can enable radically different collective imaginations to emerge. In the following section, I address the positives and negatives of collaborative remembering with *The Land and Me* and Haiven's ideas in mind.

In 2017, Hillary Mantel wrote some thoughts about the process of commemoration:

When we memorialise the dead, we are sometimes desperate for the truth, and sometimes for a comforting illusion. We remember individually, out of grief and need. We remember as a society [...] – we reach into the past for foundation myths of our tribe, our nation, and found them on glory, or [...] grievance, but [...] seldom [...] on cold facts (2017).

The word *commemoration* derives from the Latin verb *commemorare*, meaning 'to call to mind' (Etymonline, n.d.). Today the word usually refers to a call to remember through a public ceremony, or through remembering something together as a society.

Commemoration participates in marking or codifying shared memory, which is one way that memory becomes history. Max Haiven characterizes memory as a commons that is constantly enclosed by history through a collaborative process, in which we participate and can therefore intervene. He draws on John Holloway's notions of the *doing* and the *done* to discuss the relationship between memory and history:

we can understand memory as a process of doing. When we remember, we do not recall the past as it really was, but re-create it as a story in the present [...]. In contrast 'history' represents the 'done' form of memory, the solidified and objectified remnant that influences and shapes the flow of 'doing'. [...] Our

remembering of the past [...] flows between, around or against the currents of what is taken to be the authoritative narrative. (2014, p. 164)

In Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000), the protagonist suffers, as a result of an injury, from anterograde amnesia and awakens each morning with no memory of what has happened since he was injured. As the action proceeds, we watch him learn to leave himself notes, write on walls, and tattoo his body to help his future self. Eventually we see him shape these messages to stress some parts of his story and leave out others in order to control what his future self will do. In the 2008 film *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman deals with a similar phenomenon at both personal and collective scales. Folman sets out to discover why he cannot remember his own participation, as an Israeli soldier, in the 1982 Lebanon War. Through a series of reflections and conversations presented in animation, Folman gradually pieces together and presents the ways in which his memory of that war has been unconsciously and consciously distorted, and why – as well as how – this skewed narrative has played out in society as a whole over the subsequent twenty-five years.

In 2020, twelve years after *Waltz with Bashir*, deliberately skewed narratives have become commonplace in the US in the form of 'alternative facts'. Systems of power encourage selective forgetting. In capitalism, for example, we forget the labour behind the commodities we buy. 'For Marx,' Haiven writes, 'alienation and commodity fetishism are the processes whereby we forget that those things we value in life are, in actuality, the products of our own efforts' (2014, p. 189). In Haiven's view, we *can* make a better world, but not by replacing one narrative with a 'better' one. Rather, we could free our imaginations from the need to conform to *any* particular history, strive to access our cooperative potential, and begin to *remember differently* (2014, p. 177).

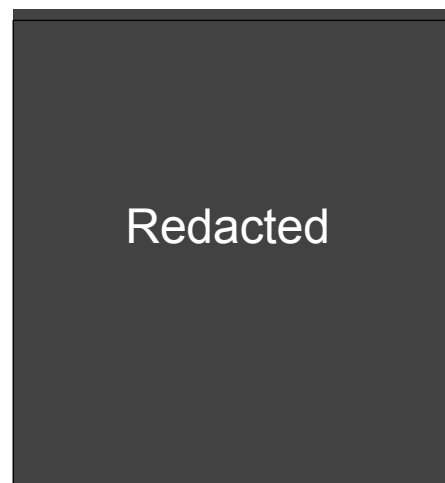


Figure 11: *Memento* (2000) film still.

Haiven sees potential in *commoning memory*, a practice of generating ‘intentional and well constructed spaces and times for remembering’, and weaving these ‘into the fabric of community practice’ (2014, p. 185). To do this, he argues, we need to learn how to share histories ‘without being didactic’, and to actively listen to and hear each other (2014, p. 185). Commoning memory is one component of a matrix of work required to alter how we produce the world. Haiven argues that we must create a supple way of living together, one that is always open to change and in which exploitation and oppression are constantly dismantled (2014, p. 166).

But what would commoning memory actually look like in practice? What forms might ‘well constructed spaces and times’ take in the physical world? Can and should a space for commoning memory make use of architecture’s capacity for ordering memory? Or does architecture limit the freedom to understand the past differently and therefore ‘do’ differently?<sup>67</sup> If this is the case, what kind of space could enable commoning memory?

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<sup>67</sup> In a well-known passage in *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates recites Cicero’s description of Simonides’ discovery that he can commit complex narratives to memory, recalling them in a particular order and in great detail. He would first form mental images of the ideas to be remembered and a series of spaces through which he could move in his mind. He then ‘stored’ the mental images in locations along a route through his imagined place. The sequence of places preserved the *order* in which the things needed to be recalled, and the images placed in those locations reminded him of the *content* – the places, like a body, and the images, like words tattooed on it (1997, p. 7). In the book *City of Bits* (1996), William Mitchell explores how humans developed information storage and retrieval technology over the ages. From the first cave painting or object created and retained to prompt recall, through to symbols and words inscribed on surfaces and eventually in books, the technologies of storage and retrieval usually took form as architecture. Mitchell illustrates how developments in the arrangement of rooms in buildings, especially in library architecture, led to contemporary digital storage and retrieval systems. These examples imply a formative relationship between memory, space in general and architecture in particular. In the ancient example, the recollecting individual uses spatial delineation to store and then retrieve memory. In the latter, architecture is both the physical repository of codified memory and a

Would it be a room, a garden or perhaps a table? What consequences might there be in exploring the idea of a commoning memory table? Thinking with Haiven, I see that many of the strategies and techniques I employed in *The Land and Me* and other engagements can be seen as explorations in commoning memory including the ways we used architecture, our techniques for building and practising a community inquiry, movement, poetry writing and performance.<sup>68</sup>

Remembering together, however, is not without hazards. Studies on what happens when we recall something together point to three basic principles: first, all memory is constructed; second, all memory has a social component (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 219)<sup>69</sup> and finally, groups of humans are instinctively motivated to create a shared reality whereby we agree about what is real in the world (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 217).<sup>70</sup>

These studies show that groups remember better than most individuals do on their own. This is achieved through the collaborative facilitation of *transactive memory*, where a group distributes the effort of recalling among its members. In a successful transactive memory system, different individual memories can sometimes be integrated ‘into shared new emergent knowledge’ (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 215). An example of this might be a team of specialists who each remember something about an engine malfunction, but the

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technological system that allows its retrieval. Architecture props up, prompts, physically stores and allows access to intergenerational memory.

<sup>68</sup> See the Strategies and technique section of the Project Pages.

<sup>69</sup> What we remember is nearly always a product of both an original ‘encoding’ and the conversations that take place subsequently.

<sup>70</sup> Also see (Sterelny, 2010; Stone, 2010; Sutton, 2010).

possible cause only becomes apparent to any one of them when all their recollections are combined (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 215).

There can also be negative effects in collaborative remembering situations. If your method of encoding is very different from others in a group, for example, listening to the recollections of others can inhibit your ability to retrieve your own. Also, because we tend to adjust what we say to our audience and situation, speakers emphasise certain memories over others. Further, retrieval of all parts of a bundle of memory can be disrupted if only one part is recalled in a group conversation. The unmentioned parts of that bundle become more difficult to recall than parts of another bundle that was not discussed at all (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, pp. 215-6). This affects both speaker and listener, and has worrying consequences in relation to the politically motivated manipulation of memory (Sutton, 2010, p. 546). It is also possible for misinformation to invade original memories via conversation (Sutton, 2010, p. 544), and for another's recollections to be accepted only so that the listener can avoid having to dissent publicly (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 210).<sup>71</sup>

The human memory system is set up to build collectively shared memories through conversation. If I put forward a memory, both my audience and I come to share it and each time I restate it, all participants 'rehearse the memory and subsequently find it more accessible' (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 218). Finally, the narrative or history that emerges tends to be simplified to accord with schemata already held by participants (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012, p. 215), with consequences for erasing or marginalising points of view that do not fit dominant cultural narratives. This resonates with many of Bohm's insights and presents a very serious challenge to practising Haiven's commoning memory proposal.

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<sup>71</sup> This relates to Sunstein's research on deliberative enclaves discussed in Cut 1.

In Haiven's view, however, commoning memory is not just a process but also a 'well constructed place' and a practice or ritual. This calls to mind a series of projects created in the Adivasi community in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, which Kester writes about (2011). Among the projects made by Mumbai-based artist Altaf Navjot - in collaboration with local Adivasi artists Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai and Gessuram Viswakarma - is a series of *Pilla Gudis* (2000), or children's temples, which they built in three villages. One of these, titled *12 + 1 = 13 (Hence it is not a Circle)* (2000) is located in Shilpi Gram, an institution created to facilitate collaboration between local and visiting artists by the Adivasi sculptor Jaidev Baghel (dialoguebistar.com, n.d.). This provides an example of a commoning memory place (Kester, 2011, pp. 84-85; dialoguebistar.com, n.d.).<sup>72</sup>

Kester describes this work as an outdoor space with circular seating arranged around a stage-like centre. Embedded in the earth below the sand floor is an inverted dome that echoes and subverts the form of a nearby temple. What is particularly interesting to me is that the circle of seating is deliberately broken, with one part 'set slightly askew'. Kester explains that 'whoever sits in this section is expected to improvise the day's activities or introduce questions for discussion among the other children' (Kester, 2011, pp. 85-86).<sup>73</sup>

Other prospects for commoning memory places are offered by theories that consider the extent of the mind, seeking answers to questions like: Is a blind person's cane part of their

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<sup>72</sup> The artists reinvented an older tradition to create this new kind of space. The *Pilla Gudis* or 'children's temples' are spaces 'where village children could congregate, play, and educate one another outside the formal schooling of the temple or classroom' (Kester, 2011, p. 84).

<sup>73</sup> The image that Kester's description conjured of a circle with a segment askew informed the question logo I developed for *Uncaptured Land* (2017) See Project Pages.

mind? Are the amnesiac's tattoos part of his memory? Does my mind include the contents of my notebooks? Some argue that although it interacts with external resources, cognition remains entirely in the head. Others see cognitive processes as fully 'distributed' or 'scaffolded', involving 'substantial [...] interactive coupling between [...] internal and external resources' (Sutton, 2010, p. 531). A key idea of the latter theory is that the routine use of external resources, such as language, writing, mathematical notation, maps, diagrams, etc., 'has internal consequences [...] for our inner representational capacities', which is to say that my use of external supports changes how my mind works. (Sterelny, 2010, p. 478).

This chimes with both my own experience and with Bohm's ideas. It also suggests how external supports might counteract potential pitfalls in collaborative remembering, allowing us to approach something like the memory commoning that Haiven envisages. Echoing Latour's ideas about the agency of things and art's role in 're-formatting' introduced in Cut 1, I propose that spaces like  $12 + 1 = 13$  (*Hence it is not a Circle*), my own tables, projects like *The Land and Me*, and other art objects and practices, can help reshape how thinking works in individuals and communities. Art practices, objects and images can re-orient thought, creating unfamiliar forms of coming together and/or new rituals of collaborative thinking that - if deployed carefully with thoughtful intention - could counteract the potential pitfalls of collaborative remembering and thinking.

### **Thinking in practice**

#### *Neuro-sculpting: sculpting the individual brain*

On entering *Rumor to Delusion* (2019), I see a screen spewing a frenetic mishmash of news footage, Twitter feed, internet images and sounds. In the foreground, a series of narrow

paper strips – marked with lines, words, stickers, images and diagrams – hang at waist height between metal poles. A three-dimensional ‘cloud’ of brightly coloured neon names, words and arrows dominates the adjacent room. A dark glass partition behind reflects the cloud back and, in the foreground, a series of linked boxes display flickering neon phrases. This installation by the artist Warren Neidich, presented by Zuecca Project in Venice in 2019, comprises: *Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion* (2018); *Scoring the Tweets* (2017-19); *Pizzagate Neon* (2017); *Glass Imposition* (2019) and *Poetry Fragment* (2019).

Neidich aims to combat *cognitive capitalism* which he defines as ‘power structures that shape the mind and seek to create consensus among individuals’ that operate in the background of everyday life (Slanar, 2014, p. 135).<sup>74</sup> Echoing Rancière, Neidich argues that by ‘redistributing the sensible’ and ‘fostering dissonance’, shifting habitual associations, and otherwise altering the ‘cultural landscape’, artists can disrupt these operations to generate alternative networks that demand different ‘neurological responses’ (Slanar, 2014, p. 147). Activating the physical and cognitive affordances in interactive and performative art, Neidich’s art aims to stimulate neural plasticity and learning (Slanar, 2014, p. 136).

For Neidich, cognitive capitalism operates through the same mechanisms by which all animals interact with their environment.<sup>75</sup> What appears to an animal is what the animal

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<sup>74</sup> Neidich defines himself as a ‘cognitive activist’ and ‘wet-conceptual’ artist. He contrasts ‘dry conceptualism’ (such as the work of Joseph Kosuth or Sol Lewitt) from which ‘beauty is drained’ in order to ‘remove its capacity for emotion and render it disinterested, to his own ‘wet conceptualism’ which deploys beauty as ‘a door through which the visitor can enter the work’ (2019, p. 9) and emotion to sustain the work’s impact.

<sup>75</sup> With reference to what he calls Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘song of the earth’, Neidich writes: ‘[they] describe our coexistence in nature with a multiplicity of animal forms that have their own eco-aesthetic niches. For example, the size of the beak and tongue of a chaffinch allows that bird to eat

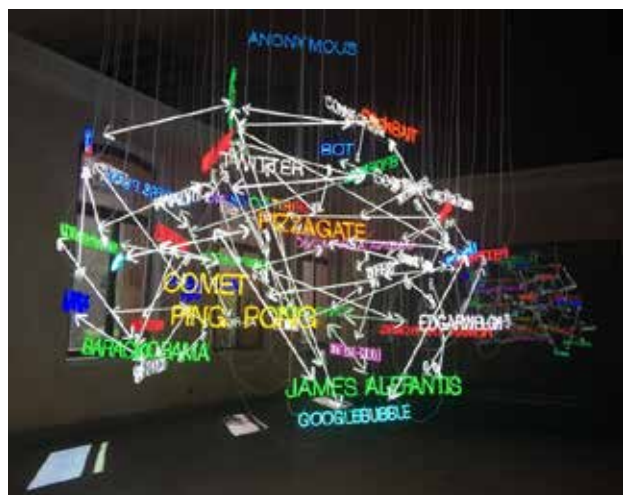


Figure 12: Warren Neidich, *Pizzagate Neon* (2019).



needs to see, and the animal evolves to better see and use the affordances that its environment offers. In our human environment, each of culture privileges different combinations of natural and artificial constancies. The web of constancies in my culture stimulates my brain, shapes my attention and ultimately influences how I think and what I think about. Neidich argues that because for humans this process functions within political and aesthetic spheres, which form us into ‘attentive consumers of ideas and products’, and because so many of the constancies in our contemporary world are put there by global corporations across cultures, contemporary cognitive capitalism eliminates diversity of thought, putting the variety of our world at risk (Neidich quoted in Slanar, 2014: 146-7).

Some of these ideas are echoed in philosopher Catherine Malabou’s work on brain plasticity.<sup>76</sup> Malabou finds a correspondence between the current understanding of the structure of the brain and how we describe our socio-economic environment.

Contemporary capitalism is seen as a dynamic, self-organised, adaptive, multipolar system which is very similar to contemporary descriptions of brain structure. Does this mean that our neoliberal capitalist brain has imposed its way of working on our economic apparatus? Or is it the other way around: Has the disruption of the global economy caused ‘a conceptual change that [...] affect[s], by contagion, our view of the way the brain functions?’ (Malabou, 2008, p. xii). Thinking through Neidich, I propose another way of

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only a certain sized seed, of which it forms an image and looks for when hungry. The size of its egg needs a certain nesting site and nest shape, requiring the finch to search for particular grasses and other materials [...]. The colour of its feathers and those of its mate determine its retinal sensitivity [...]. All together, these different colours and forms are stimuli to which this bird pays attention’ (Neidich quoted in Slanar, 2014: 146).

<sup>76</sup> Neidich himself traces the development of his ideas through the work of Romano Alquati, Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Franco Berardi, Christian Marazzi, Maurizio Lazzarato, Silvia Federici, Toni Negri, Francisco Varela and others (2019, pp. 5, 11).

seeing this: neoliberalism gives us opportunities to practise the model it puts forward. Thus, we *practise* neoliberalism, and thereby create our neoliberal brains.

Neidich believes that physical and intellectual activity, collaboration and performance generate new neural networks that can effect positive transformation. Whilst I do not use Neidich's scientific/political vocabulary, our aims for *The Land and Me* were not dissimilar to his. Noval and I wanted to create an opportunity to think differently together, and we hoped that the experience of doing it might change participants' perspectives in lasting ways. Like Neidich, we believe in the ongoing agency of 'memory traces' that remain after ephemeral performative activity.

I am also interested in Neidich's idea of creating dissonance in order to break through habits of thought.<sup>77</sup> I could not watch *Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion*, with its chaotic layering of modes of (mis-)information, perhaps because it points to the sensory bombardment to which we are all subjected but which I choose, when I can, to keep at a distance. The work gives a taste of the misguided logic that led a vigilante to drive from North Carolina to Washington D.C. to storm a pizza parlour, as happened in 2016. I am drawn to *Pizzagate Neon* by its beauty and the puzzle of its jeopardy-clue words and phrases. In combination, these two works disclose a matter of serious concern in contemporary culture, inviting the viewer to piece the story together for themselves. But the story is the story, it doesn't change as I discover it; there is no room for me to shape it, even in my imagination.

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<sup>77</sup> In contrast to the word 'disruption' which Bishop celebrates and which in California in 2020 has replaced the word 'innovation' in technology capitalism.

*Scoring the Tweets*, on the other hand, takes one aspect of the day-to-day reality of Trumpian America and translates it into an aesthetic proposition that can be practised and performed.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps going through a process of interpreting and translating the score gave performers an opportunity to practise alternative ways of responding. Maybe the performance gave the audience an opportunity to hear a variety of possible responses, and to discover new ways to receive the tweets themselves. If this is true, the project might begin to approach Neidich's ambitions for his art.

#### *Generating community networks: sculpting the community*

In 2017, the artist collective marksearch, began developing the project *Commons Archives* (2017-2020) in collaboration with the Golden Gate Library in Oakland California.<sup>79</sup> The project was inspired by a collection of community artefacts documenting African American achievements in the San Francisco Bay Area, begun by the Lasartemay Family in the 1940s. *Commons Archive* (2017-2020) is now, as marksearch puts it, 'a reservoir for neighbourhood memories' that incorporates an expanding collection of stories and other community information (marksearch, 2020). Since 2017, the *Commons Archive* community, with marksearch and the Library, have undertaken a series of events that each offered mechanisms for neighbours to contribute stories to the archive. In 2019, *Commons*

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<sup>78</sup> I was not able to see this live. Watching an edited video of the work is profoundly different from being present in the room. As such my ideas presented here about how such a performance might affect the participants and audience are speculation.

<sup>79</sup> Oakland California-based marksearch who see themselves as 'conversation artists' are creative partners Sue Mark and Bruce Douglas (marksearch, 2020). Golden Gate Library is a branch of the Oakland Public Library.



Figure 13: marksearch, *Commons Archive* (2017-2020), photographs by Dianne Jones.

*Archive* published the *Golden Gate Library Local Collection*, an eight-book series which draws on the archive and links to the African American Museum and Library at Oakland.

By making it possible for this community to decide for themselves what stories should be preserved in a public archive, and reflecting those choices back to the community, *Commons Archive* reshapes the cultural networks that structure the neighbourhood. I see in this an ambition similar to Neidich's, but operating at the level of the collective rather than the individual. It seeks to reset habits of thought about a place, its community and the networks within it. The community inquiry process, which the project instigated and supports, is changing what the community celebrates. In the same way that habitual patterns of thought create well-oiled synapses in the individual brain, habitual community power relations shape how a neighbourhood relates to itself. Projects like *Commons Archive* create new routes for communal engagement that can generate pathways to action. The Library physically anchors the project giving this commoning memory practice an 'intentional and well constructed spaces and times for remembering' (Haiven, 2014, p. 185).

## **Cut 2: Conclusions**

Returning again to my overarching questions, what light does this Cut shed on what constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context, the forms it might take and the conditions required for it to acquire agency?

Although like Arendt, many of us might see thinking as an entirely individual process, when manifesting as a dialogue between two internal voices, thinking mirrors exchanges between individuals out here in the world. Collaborative thinking emerges as a link or step between thinking and acting. For Arendt, sitting behind the cognitive drive to understand

what we perceive, thinking is part of the infrastructure that supports the knowledge constructions of civilisation. Arguing that thinking is driven by a desire for meaning, Arendt suggests that its value lies in addressing unanswerable questions. I see her insight as a guiding principle for making an art-based collaborative thinking practice meaningful.

There are hazards as Bohm argues. Thought as a system hinders our ability to think coherently, perhaps in a way similar to how scar tissue interferes with a body's ability to move smoothly. The living residues of thinking continue to operate in the world, influencing perception and future thinking. Together with the potential pitfalls revealed through research into collaborative remembering, Bohm's ideas provide a note of caution. Collaborative thinking can be dangerous if done without awareness of what can go wrong. At the same time, with Bohm, I am convinced that thinking together with care can help us dismantle distorted thought structures and patterns, opening up routes to alternative, more sustainable ways of dwelling together. Only by thinking collaboratively can we build the external resources that, like a deep-keeled ark, might carry us through coming turbulence.

Neidich proposes that I can reshape my brain by practising collaborative forms of art. The *Pilla Gudis* made by Altaf and collaborators were conceived as spaces for children to think together away from adults – to blaze new neural pathways in ways that only they can do together. *Commons Archive* aims for a similar transformation of community networks.

Many of the ideas revealed through this Cut flow through my practice particularly in *Uncaptured Land*, *Fluid Cities*, *Circling back* and *The Land and Me*. Each of these engagements created an ephemeral community of inquiry. Looking back, I see that these modest research communities were characterised by fellowship, and possibly a nascent plural mind. Their emergence points to future projects that intentionally explore the

possibilities and limits of temporary communities of inquiry: to foster shared states of open potential; and possibly effect change in neural pathways of individuals and/or in our shared cultural networks. I propose that my tables can play a part as places to try out and rehearse unfamiliar forms of coming together.

[END OF CUT 2]

*Pause: A Public Table*



Shall we proclaim a *public table* for every neighbourhood? Shall each household promise to safeguard one of its modules and declare that, when called upon, we will each gather up our piece and assemble in the place we have chosen for our shared thinking? In the park, the school ground, your driveway, my street corner, our lobby, that stair landing or this carpark?







**Cut 3: What material forms might this practice take?**

Building new worlds requires patience, compromise, and conviviality. It is a process of working in the world and with people. [...] If art is a dream, then it is a dreaming best done in – and with – the public. (Thompson, 2015, p. 164)

The phrase thinking together in public brings to mind activities like debate, negotiation, planning, weighing up, and deliberating, all of which (should) happen regularly within the formal institutions of deliberative democracy.<sup>80</sup> Thinking together also takes place in less formal situations: family conferences at the dinner table; office meetings; sweat lodges; university seminars; huddles; neighbourhood committees and choreographed group thinking forums like ‘World Café’.<sup>81</sup> There are also art practices such as those of Rirkit Tiravanija, Lucy Orta, Lois Weaver, Maggie Lawson and others, which invoke hospitality, conviviality and/or etiquette through sharing public conversations and meals. Collaborative thinking is also a fundamental component of design processes.

There are tables at the centre of many of these activities – supporting elbows, equipment and papers; displaying objects; structuring social relations; organizing space; enforcing power relations; etc. Although not often given attention, these tables allow the gatherings to function, playing a variety of roles within them. In this Cut, I attend to the material features of public collaborative thinking by examining a form of thinking together found in architectural design processes: the *project team design meeting*. I consider its potential as a model for playing with elements of deliberative democratic processes in public art contexts. I will explore the potential of the *speculative ensemble* of a project team design meeting and a *public table*, by reflecting on strategies and techniques I employed to activate public tables in *Fluid Cities* (2017, 2018) and *Uncaptured Land* (2017), and on

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<sup>80</sup> This Cut draws my paper Design Process as Political Possibility (Mancke, 2016).

<sup>81</sup> World Café is a structured conversation process used to facilitate large group conversations at conferences and other large gatherings. See [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).

those used in the projects *The Missing Things* (transparadiso, 2014) and *Storying Rape* (Suzanne Lacy et al, 2012).<sup>82</sup>

### **Project team design meeting as model**

*Project team design meetings* are settings where hands-on social, spatial and material interactions support prospects for collaborative thinking.<sup>83</sup> The project design team usually consists of a number of contractually linked consulting entities (companies or individuals) and the client body, with each attendee having expertise and/or responsibility for part of a project, bringing a specific perspective developed through hands-on involvement. The meetings are most effective when informal and non-hierarchical so that attendees feel able to contribute whenever their knowledge is relevant.

In the course of a design process the team will gather regularly to work through aspects of a project. The issue under discussion can be anything from a technical design problem, budgetary issues to political strategy. As such, the focus of a particular meeting may be extremely broad and conceptual or very narrowly technical. These meetings often mark milestones in an iterative process.

Participants do not arrive empty handed. Arguably, the most important thing they bring is a commitment and readiness to think collaboratively. Each representative also brings representations of the issue under discussion, developed from their professional perspective. These studies will be in a variety of forms, and may be physically laid out on a

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<sup>82</sup> See descriptions of *Uncaptured Land* and *Fluid Cities* in Volume 2, pages 22-25 and 28-32.

<sup>83</sup> For this Cut, I draw on my experience in architectural design of large public projects between 1984 and 2004.

table and/or pinned to surrounding walls. Ideally, all the work that has been done relating to the issue at hand is made visible for the duration of the meeting.

Also, in attendance at these meetings are a great number of *material participants* including the table -- of course -- the walls and the floor; prints; push pins and tape; models; sketches; notebooks; computers; lights; mechanical equipment; etc. In other words, all the *things*, which allow the meeting to take place and/or which function as extensions of the assembled thinking brains.

Attributes of a project team design meeting include:

1. The individual participants are not necessarily experts a priori but rather because they are responsible for an aspect of the issue at hand.
2. The material placed on the table includes representations in a variety of media and in a variety of physical and time scales. It is speculative rather than evidentiary, that is, made for the purpose of discovering issues and problems rather than proving anything.
3. The issues under discussion are made visible and public in the meeting, allowing conflicts, gaps or incongruities to be noted, if not resolved.
4. The issues under discussion are seen simultaneously from different perspectives.
5. The participants engage in thinking collaboratively in real time. The goal is not to reach a consensus, but rather to think flexibly together and identify next steps.
6. Because the various representations are distributed in space, thinking is spatialised and carried out performatively. Moving around the space facilitates the development of shared understanding of the issues.

7. Ideally, the meeting is non-hierarchical.
8. Such meetings can generate a collective feeling, a sense of being partners in a shared endeavour, that serves to motivate participants to collaborate and becomes an intrinsic reward for working together well.<sup>84</sup>

### **Problems of dis-placement**

I propose to take the project team design meeting out of the design studio and into the public realm of art. This dis-placement results in four thought-provoking points of divergence between the two contexts. First, the project team design meeting is a private meeting and, as such, is not dissimilar from the deliberative enclaves discussed in Cut 1. In contrast, the art context into which I would dis-place it offers varying degrees of publicness where, in theory at least, a wide variety of viewpoints are welcomed and presented.

Second, architectural design processes rely on belief in the possibility of technical solutions, and their application presupposes the existence of at least one solution. The whole point of iterative project team design meetings is to resolve conflicts within a design project. In contrast, meaningful, collaborative thinking in the public realm of art confronts topics that are political, and therefore can be negotiated but never definitively solved.<sup>85</sup>

Third, architectural design processes privilege a cartesian understanding of space as objective reality, which can be manipulated using technology while maintaining a

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<sup>84</sup> This collective feeling, although it may not make tables turn, does sometimes quite literally contribute to the moving of mountains.

<sup>85</sup> Here I am thinking of politics as defined in the 'the often internally conflicting interrelationships among people in a society' (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2016). Also in Cut 1, thinking through Deutsche, Rancière, Latour and Mouffe, I see public space as the place where never fully resolved negotiations take place and where conflicts are expressed, witnessed and reckoned with.



Figure 14: Project team design meeting San Francisco Airport 2016.

dispassionate god's-eye point of view. In contrast, the public realm of art offers no overview of the environment. You and I can only understand the space we inhabit subjectively from our embedded and entangled positions. Dis-placing the design team meeting and its table from the studio to this realm means placing my speculative ensemble into a stickier, more subjective space.

Finally, attendees of the project team design meeting are contractually bound to participate. Participants within my speculative ensemble, however, will never be obligated to attend or participate; they do so out of interest and choice.

How does this discussion relate to ideas opened in the earlier Cuts? How might the speculative ensemble participate in Arendt's *vita activa*? Does the dis-placed speculative ensemble offer a model for real places where conflict can arise safely, and narrations be elicited from all parts of a society? Is it possible to host disagreement and be completely inclusive at the same time? What role does the material table play? How does its physical presence and persistence participate? I turn now to consider these questions in the light shed by the ideas of Arendt, Rancière and Latour.

## Theoretical possibilities

### *Vita activa*

How might the speculative ensemble participate in the *vita activa*?

Arendt designates three basic human activities in the *vita activa*; *labour*, *work* and *action*. Each corresponds to a fundamental condition of life on earth given to humans: *life itself*, *worldliness* and *plurality*. Corresponding to *life itself*, *labour* is unceasing and without lasting product. It encompasses all the activities that support our biological processes. *Work* corresponds to the human condition of being part of a world we create that is in excess of the vital processes of life itself. Work is what we do knowingly together, transforming matter into enduring artefacts – trees and earth into tables, walls, cities, parks, or technological gadgets.

You and I build our common world together and are therefore *worldly*. *Action*, the only thing humans do directly with each other ‘without the intermediary of things or matter’, is the means by which we disclose our unique selves. *Action* corresponds to the human condition of *plurality* which, Arendt asserts, is the situation of all political life (1998, pp. 7, 136). Humans are all the same, she writes, ‘in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live’ (1998, p. 8). We are the same in our inexhaustible diversity. *Plurality* is the causative condition of political life.

Human life also conditions and is conditioned by our understanding of the environment around us, including all the things we happen upon *as well as* those we make. As Arendt writes:

[H]uman existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence (Arendt, 1998, p. 9).

In Arendt's scenario, the enduring products of our work provide the stable platform and support we need to participate in public life through action. This suggests that I progress into the full political life of the *vita activa* by passing through a cumulative sequence: labour, then work and finally action. I see a parallel movement from the intensely private internal domain of labour through the collaborative space of work to the fully public realm of action.

In Cut 2, I introduced Arendt's ideas about thinking, as discussed in her exploration of the activities of the mind. For Arendt, thinking is an invisible internal activity that lies behind all other endeavours. Unlike labour, work and action, thinking does not appear in the world, but underpins everything that does. I propose a practice of collaborative thinking that is both part of and constitutive of the world – thinking as a worldly, public activity. Thinking is work, or – more precisely – as something that takes us from work into action.

As a model for public collaborative thinking, the speculative ensemble contributes a method for making thinking visible, pulling collaborative thinking into the world of appearance. I propose that the public table, as a material metaphor for our common world can support and symbolise plurality, and provide the stable support needed to allow those gathered around it to engage in action. The speculative ensemble offers tools for practising or rehearsing the *vita activa* in art contexts through playful re-enactments of political processes.

When you and I come to a table to think together playfully, we may sometimes confront misunderstanding and discord. We may need to negotiate ways to deal with our differences



and maybe invent and test new protocols. At the same time, our proximity provides the possibility for us to see different perspectives in action, and to learn to mobilise differences to make things together in better ways. The push-and-pull of discordant collaboration is a manifestation of the ever-shifting divisions among humans – *Us* versus *Them*; building things together versus tearing things down; my hopes versus your fears; your hopes versus my fears – within the never-ending battleground of public space.

### **Dissensus**

Is it possible to host disagreement and be inclusive at the same time?

Rancière's thinking sheds light on the intersection of art and politics. Thinking through his concept of dissensus compels me to consider carefully what becomes visible and what might be obscured within or by my speculative ensemble. Rancière argues that dissensus, (in his words a gap between what is sensed and its meaning) divides the political sphere.<sup>86</sup> It is not a dispute 'over which solutions to apply to a situation, but a conflict over the situation itself', a conflict about what should be visible within the political domain (2004, p. 6).

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time (Rancière quoted in Birrell, 2008).

For Rancière, paying attention to how this 'partitioning' curates what can be perceived reveals that aesthetics plays an all-important role in politics.

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<sup>86</sup> See Cut 1.

Artists, he writes, wrest ‘percepts and affects from the perceptions and affections that make up the fabric of ordinary experience’, and so re-weave that fabric in different ways (Rancière, 2006, pp. 55-56). Through this process, ‘aesthetic experience has a political effect’ that is different from rhetorical inducement.

It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are “equipped” to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. [...] It allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation’ (Rancière, 2011, p. 72).

Thus, as we saw in Cut 1, Rancière sees art as able to change what is perceived and/or how it is perceived. This resonates with Morizot and Zhong Mengual’s example of Oscar Wilde’s fogs as well as Latour’s notion of art’s role in the reformatting needed to deal with political differences.

Although perhaps less poetic in character, project team design meetings also multiply ‘connections and disconnections that reframe relations’ between the actors in the space of the meeting as well as within the part of the world that will be affected by the design under consideration. Quite literally, the endeavours of architecture and engineering redistribute what is visible in the material environment.

Let us imagine the public table as an active scaffold linking the (extended) minds of those present, a surface reflecting light onto those gathered around it, and a stage to which matters under contention can be brought and displayed. Theoretically at least, the displaced speculative ensemble of table and meeting might function as a device for better attending to who and what can be thought, seen and heard and why. Perhaps it can also provide tools for grappling with gaps between perception and meaning.

At this juncture, it is crucial to remember that design processes aim to resolve conflicting demands and find solutions. The words ‘resolve’ and ‘solution’ suggest something closer to consensus than dissensus. If, as Rancière argues, consensus obscures the ‘contestatory nature’ of common life, and if dealing with internally conflicting interrelationships among people in a society (politics) demands that we embrace disagreement, then my speculative ensemble would need to abandon technocratic goals. Instead, it would need to refocus on other ways to bring together all the relevant subjects and objects and their discordances, including those that have been previously left out (Rancière, 2004, p. 7). This is one reason why non-resolution is one of the principles of my practice.

Rancière’s notion of dissensus thus brings two important challenges to my speculative ensemble. First is the question of inclusion and exclusion – of who places what stakes on the table and who can and cannot perceive those stakes. Second is the need for public space – and its analogue, the table – to be a place where conflict is sustained rather than settled. A *public table* should be inclusive, yet also a place of unsettling.

### **The active life of things**

How does the material presence and persistence of the table participate in the dis-placed design team project meeting?

Latour argues in favour of paying attention to how objects participate in social interactions and to the networks they generate and support. If everything in the world – animate and inanimate, sentient and insentient, subjective and objective – is continuously participating in shifting relationships, as Latour suggests, then the table must be recognised as an actor with agency within the dis-placed meeting. But, how exactly might objects and other non-human things ‘act’ in this context? Objects can make me do things, of course. I may sit if

there is a chair at a table. And if I sit, I may relax. If I relax, my mind may make an important connection, which I may communicate to others at the table. Although it is easy to see that the table and chair play a role in this simple scenario, Latour's concept of the non-human actor radically challenges how I think about social interaction. I begin to see, as Latour argues, that any undertaking is rarely made up of 'human-to-human connections [...] or object-object connections' alone, but always of combinations of these with human-to-object connections (2005, p. 75).

The concept of the non-human actor pushes me to recognise a separation between 'human intentionality' and 'the idea of action' (Bennett, 2010, p. 103). Lots of action in the world happens without the involvement of human intentionality and in many scenarios human intentionality sets off unexpected chains of action, which do not always benefit us.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps one of the roles a *public table* would play is to remind you and me of the inherent limitations of human intentionality and of the agency of things.

### **A public stage**

Does the dis-placed speculative ensemble offer a model for real places where conflict can arise safely, and narrations be elicited from all parts of a society?

Returning to the Latour's *dingpolitik* discussed in Cut 1, we recall his view that *things* are what divide us, becoming matters of concern which constantly appear, gather publics around them and provoke politics to deal with them.<sup>88</sup> For Latour, matters of concern

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<sup>87</sup> This is brilliantly argued by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and experienced at the moment of writing by every single person in the world threatened by the COVID 19 pandemic.

<sup>88</sup> A parable that illustrates how things might divide us is the story of Richard Serra's sculpture *Tilted Arc*, excellently told by Deutsche (1992). The *Black Lives Matter* movement may seem to offer a challenge to Latour's ideas. Is it a division of things? I think it is. On one side of the division seems to

become fully apparent when multiple forms of representation – scientific, political and artistic – are deployed at the same time. Art is therefore one of the range of ways to represent matters of concern and disclose them in public. Latour also argues that art contributes to the reformatting required to find new appropriate protocols for dealing with new situations (Cvejic, et al., 2012, p. 77). As a *material metaphor* for the *common world*, perhaps my round *public table* can provide a setting and platform for assembling and displaying enough variety of representations of matters of concern to allow different perspectives to be disclosed and thus contribute to Latour’s reformatting.<sup>89</sup>

As discussed in Cut 1, Latour argues that something becomes public only when it is contested and thus generates a demand for politics. Parkinson argues for physical public space as an essential component of a functioning of democracy – specifically places where conflict can arise safely, and narrations can be elicited from all parts of a society. If political life emerges along an arc from labour, through collaboration and work, to speech and action, and into the *vita activa* then; the public table – as a setting for collaborative thinking where ideas can be generated and communicated – facilitates movement along that arc. By providing a setting where you and I can progress toward speech and action, a public table might offer basic conditions for re-enacting, or even carrying out informal political processes. If art brings issues of concern to public notice and contributes to the reformatting needed to develop and practise new protocols when old ones fail, then

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be the abstract notion of ‘law and order’. On the other are the actual material conditions of Black lives in the US.

<sup>89</sup> See my discussion about *disclosing* in Cut 1.

collaborative thinking engagements in the public art realm offer occasions for these practices to take place.<sup>90</sup>

In Cut 1, I located my practice and research in an intermediate zone between the intimate and the public, between the family and the political party or between voting and public protest. I believe that art has particular agency in this in-between space. It is therefore where my speculative ensemble should be trialled.<sup>91</sup>

### **Public tables in action**

Between the Spring of 2015 and early 2020, *Table 18* and *Table 15* hosted twenty events in nine locations.<sup>92</sup> Two of these projects in particular, *Fluid Cities* (2017, 2018) and *Uncaptured Land* (2017), experimented with bringing the speculative ensemble of public table and design team meeting into public settings. As noted in the Project Pages, each engagement invited participants to develop alternative narratives of place or proposals for

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<sup>90</sup> A form of assembly which I do not explicitly address here, but bears mentioning, is the reconciliation or healing circle practised in some societies. The public table might be seen as a Western version with the table standing in for a fire or arrangement of objects that focus attention and activate the desired process. In this scenario, the table acquires agency as mediator. See <https://fambultok.org/about> on such circles were used in the Truth and Reconciliation process in Sierra Leone.

<sup>91</sup> It is also a territory that is arguably undernourished in neo-liberal capitalist societies. Margaret Thatcher's words illustrate the gap: 'There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first... There is no such thing as society. There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and [how much]each of us [is]prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate' (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1987).

<sup>92</sup> See Project Pages for detailed list.

new kinds of human relations in response to challenges we set and evidence discovered on site. Each incorporated activities drawn from design processes.

Keeping *Fluid Cities* and *Uncaptured Land* in mind, I now turn to two projects, one by the collective *transparadiso* and another the artists Suzanne Lacy and Corry Madden. Both projects use ‘public tables’, incorporate other aspects of the project team design meeting, and suggest possibilities for bringing the speculative ensemble into public art contexts.

### ***The Missing Things***

In June 2014, Vienna-based *transparadiso* presented *The First World Congress of the Missing Things* in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>93</sup> *transparadiso* practices what they call ‘direct urbanism’ – a form of ‘direct action [... that involves] the incorporation of artistic strategies and art projects into socially and societally inclusive, long-term urban planning processes’ (Holub & Hohenbücher, 2015, p. 21).

*The Congress* took place in a rundown area of downtown Baltimore, which was slated for redevelopment. Very early in their research for the project, Holub and Rajakovics found that the needs of local residents were not being properly considered in decisions affecting them. Because of endemic poverty, local residents were seen and treated as ‘problems’ by the local government rather than as fellow citizens whose needs and aspirations should be heard and taken into account (*transparadiso*, 2016).

The aim of the project was to create opportunities for the concerns of these residents to be voiced and heard in public. *The Congress* itself was the culminating event in a series of

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<sup>93</sup> *transparadiso* founders are artist Barbara Holub and architect and urbanist Paul Rajakovics. *The Missing Things* was commissioned by the European Union National Institute for Culture with the Bromo Arts and Entertainment District in Baltimore Maryland. See <http://www.missingthings.org>

engagements that took place over one year. It began with a call out, collecting the concerns of local residents in the form of things that they found to be missing in their community:

The First World Congress of the Missing Things asks the public – YOU – to submit whatever you consider “missing” in your daily private or public life. Your submissions will become topics for discussion [...] at this unconventional congress directed by you— the people of Baltimore. [...] the Congress emphasizes the democratic right of participating in public decision-making and in shaping our society. ‘[M]issing things’ are up to your interpretation – no matter how personal or public, poetic, desperate or utopian they might be (transparadiso, 2016).

The community submitted over sixty missing things and transparadiso integrated creative responses for each into *The Congress* programme. *The Congress* was open to all and held in a local public space, using a system of modular tables arranged in a way that the designers believed would foster ‘non-hierarchical dialogue’.<sup>94</sup> The tables were made of thick white rectangular boards supported on light-weight metal frames. The aesthetic and materiality of the table design communicated provisionality and flexibility. Angled ends of some boards allowed an arrangement of long snaking tables intermixed with three-pronged stars, to weave through the existing architecture of the site. With seating for at least six people at each table, the arrangement was inviting and encouraged conversation with organisers and other participants. *The Congress* ended with a ceremony where a ‘Charter of the Missing Things’ was presented to the Mayor of Baltimore.

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<sup>94</sup> transparadiso called this arrangement a ‘rhizome’ setting. They have also used ‘soothing tables’ in earlier work: ‘The growing structures and adaptable dimensions of the soothing table occupy territory on a temporary base and enable non-hierarchical communication. The soothing table challenges profit-driven regeneration processes, confronts situations of conflict and accompanies urban interventions by offering unexpected pleasure and new visions’ (transparadiso, 2008).



Figure 15: transparadiso, *The Missing Things* (2014), the rhizome setting (transparadiso, 2016).



# Missing Things

walking around for candies	1 # 48	unmediated experience
time keeping	2 # 49	generosity and simplicity
redistribution of wealth	3 # 50	help as a disabled citizen in America
peace is a need	4 # 51	a good Tex Mex restaurant
good taste	5 # 52	benefits made available for the displaced / missing people
(un)balance	6 # 53	a not over-regulated public space
spaces free of fear	7 # 54	La Vida (life)
children playing on their own	8 # 55	replace prevalent surveillance practices with affirmative, dialogic communicative practices
legalize access to vacant space	9 #	
tax breaks for local and small businesses	10 # 56	free access to the high quality education
allow DIY venues to continue DIY	11 # 57	tutors for children
Americans daring to be political	12 # 58	wind and solar energy for our house
swimmable Inner Harbor	13 # 59	more God
jobs for adolescents to prevent them from creating violence	14 # 60	honest politicians
affordable housing and living wages	15 #	
„site“-lines to history (sightlines)	16 #	
vibrant public life	17 #	
non-athletic public venue for aggression, unrelated to productivity	18 #	
celebrating in public space	19 #	
appreciation of manual work	20 #	
empathy, compassion, friendliness	21 #	
transparency in government	22 #	
homes for the homeless, food for the hungry	23 #	
a state's attorney who will prosecute killer cops	24 #	
recreation centers for the youth	25 #	
equal opportunity	26 #	
a government that's not for sale	27 #	
the 28th Amendment	28 #	
a subway that goes somewhere	29 #	
unbiased journalism	30 #	
green spaces, solar energy, good tasting city water	31 #	
tourist attractions that average people can afford to go to	32 #	
an overall plan	33 #	
olfactory perception	34 #	
functioning, contemporary & user-friendly infrastructure	35 #	
move jobs for ex-offenders	36 #	
programs for the ex-convicts and housing	37 #	
housing for the homeless	38 #	
fixing of the housing neighborhood	39 #	
better lighting on the streets of Baltimore	40 #	
safety awareness for the public	41 #	
honesty	42 #	
food system that links people to local, seasonal produce	43 #	
stop police brutality	44 #	
functioning, contemporary & user-friendly infrastructure	45 #	
prescription drugs	46 #	
respect for the merchants	47 #	

Figure 16: transparadiso, The Missing Things (2014).

## Storying Rape

The film *Storying Rape* (2012) by Suzanne Lacy and Corey Madden was shown at the 2012 Liverpool Biennial.<sup>95</sup> The artists also curated a series of conversations about rape and domestic violence in locations around Liverpool between young people, politicians, and community leaders, and published a newspaper insert advocating policy change (Lacy, 2020). The film documents a performed conversation that took place as part of *Three Weeks in January* (2012), a project focused on the anti-rape movement in Los Angeles that revisited Lacy's seminal 1977 project about rape.<sup>96</sup> *Three Weeks in January* incorporated fifty events and a social media campaign. As in the 1977 project, the word RAPE was stamped on a map of the city at each location where a rape was reported during the three weeks of the event. The map was installed outside the police department (Frieling, et al., 2019).

The conversation shown in the film explored a variety of 'narratives on rape in an effort to abate the crime' (Lacy, 2020). It was performed by seven women and two men seated around a small table, filmed primarily from standing eyelevel with occasional close-ups. One man was a uniformed police officer. The others were victims, activists, journalists, politicians and scholars. A passive audience sat in the dark fringes of the image space.

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<sup>95</sup> Suzanne Lacy is an artist, writer and educator who operates at the nexus of activism, performance, social engagement and public space. Her work is grounded in a feminist perspective and was profoundly influenced by Allan Kaprow's ideas about blurring the boundaries between art and life.

<sup>96</sup> *Three Weeks in May* (1977). Lacy and collaborators collected daily reports of rape from the LA Police and recorded them on a map of the city displayed in public. They held over thirty other events as part of the project.



Figure 17: Suzanne Lacy & Corey Madden, *Storying Rape* (2012), photograph by Kelly Akashi.

The table used in *Storying Rape* was a rather small, simple white square.<sup>97</sup> Its surface supported nine microphones in stands, nine water bottles, nine name cards, and notes on sheets of white and yellow paper. A round hole in the centre allowed the wires to make an aesthetically pleasing wiggly star as they disappeared under the table. The surface was lit, creating a 'circle' of light that illuminated the faces of the participants grouped closely around it.

## Reflections

Although very different in content, form and political implications, these artworks both involve gatherings around tables, incorporate some of the attributes of a project team design meeting, and have commonalities with *Fluid Cities* and *Uncaptured Land*. *The Missing Things* created a stage where local narratives could be publicly heard and fed into the formal political processes. *transparadiso* created a physical space where open conversations about the impacts of public decisions on a particular community could be carried out in public, and by presenting the *Charter of the Missing Things* to the Mayor, they connected the voiced concerns to the formal decision-making process. The project put into practice one of Parkinson's schemas for how public space participates in democracy,

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<sup>97</sup> Lacy has often used arrangements of tables in large-scale performances. Tables also figure in unseen layers of her projects like domestic dinner parties, pot-luck gatherings and community gatherings. In *Crystal Quilt* (1987) and *Silver Action* (2013) a grid of tables fixes an orderly geometry in the image, drawing the eye away from differences of movement, position or posture among individual participants. In *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind* (1983-4), the juxtaposition of the domestic elegance of white-clothed tables with the wildness of the surf and rocks is arresting; it communicates the fragility of human culture within nature. The tables give the image scale and structure the setting as a human space.

i.e., as a setting for informal public discourse that must happen before formal processes can begin.

[W]hat precedes all the formal steps of decision-making is the generation of narratives in the informal public sphere, narratives about [...] the impacts of public decisions [...] it is right to insist on fairly strict democratic criteria at the decision-making moment; but in the early stages, what is needed is [...] much wilder, looser, informal discourse generation. The key is then to ensure that there are formal agenda-setting processes that capture the variety of narratives circulating on particular topics and feed them into the formal decision-making processes (Parkinson, 2012, p. 29).

Along these lines, *The Missing Things* functioned in the gap between the individual and formal collective political processes, sharing attributes with the project team design meeting. Given their authentic and detailed knowledge of life in their own community, each individual participated as an expert. By framing the matters of concern as missing things, and not prescribing how they should be represented, the project encouraged a wide variety of points of view to be brought to the table. *The Congress* event encouraged thinking collaboratively in real time through performance and dialogue. The thinking was spatialised and carried out performatively with others. Finally, the goal was not to arrive at a decision, consensus or solution, but rather to air differences and possibly nurture a community of inquiry that would feed into future policy decisions.

transparadiso is often commissioned by local governments to support planning processes by eliciting and collecting narratives, making them audible/visible in public, and feeding them into decision-making processes.<sup>98</sup> Suzanne Lacy also works with local governments.

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<sup>98</sup> Among these is *Paradise Enterprise* (2013-14) where they were invited by the town of Judenburg to try to understand and ultimately deal with the problem of rural flight (Holub & Hohenbücher, 2015). See <http://www.transparadiso.com/> (transparadiso, 2016).

For example, *Three Weeks in January* was created in partnership with the Los Angeles Mayor's Office (among others).<sup>99</sup> In contrast to *The Missing Things*, however, nearly everything in Lacy's *Storying Rape* was fixed in advance. Although focussed on one predetermined topic, the project was aimed at a very broad public. It intersects with *The Missing Things* and my speculative ensemble model in that it specifically presented a range of perspectives and assembled people who were experts because of their particular experiences. But, as a performed conversation presented via film, it was radically different from the kind of spatialised participatory collaborative thinking practised in *The Missing Things*, *Fluid Cities* and *Uncaptured Land*. Through its social media components and presentation in an art festival setting, *Storying Rape* aimed to re-disclose the problem of rape and to project the performative conversation outward in the hope of triggering informal narrations in other public settings.

*Uncaptured Land* began with an open invitation to respond through art to a highly unusual setting. Noval and I were invited to present something like it at Stanford University because of a perceived potential for the methods we had developed to provide a model for thinking across disciplines, particularly within planning and design processes in the service of building more human cities. During *Fluid Cities*, participants produced a rich array of design propositions, spanning diverse disciplines and scales.<sup>100</sup> Sitting in a tech

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<sup>99</sup> According to Lacy's website: it was 'commissioned for the Getty's *Pacific Standard Time Performance Festival*, produced by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), with sound installation by Bruno Louchouarn. Created in partnership with student and art groups, the Los Angeles Mayor's Office, Code Pink, Peace Over Violence and The Rape Treatment Center' (Lacy, 2020).

<sup>100</sup> These ranged from ideas for small-scale social exchanges like a post card exchange or a shared public refrigerator all the way to ideas for alternative ways of growing food and configuring cities. See (Chan, et al., 2021).

hothouse in the heart of Silicon Valley, it seemed natural to think of these propositions as products or solutions. Yet, as noted in the Project Pages, a fundamental principle of the project was to maintain an open, collaborative thinking process that deliberately eschewed problem solving, solutions or products. This all begs questions. Is it possible to think collaboratively without heading for an answer? And if it is, what would be the value and meaning?

These questions turn on the frame through which a project is viewed, considered in terms of scale. *The Congress of the Missing Things* did not aim to not solve anything in and of itself, but if we were able to zoom out in space and time, we might see how its effects rippled through the local and broader communities and possibly affected decision-making along the way. Similarly, as just one element of discourse released along a trajectory launched by Lacy in 1977, *Storying Rape* itself may not be aimed at a solution. But considered in its entirety, the arc of the trajectory clearly indicates Lacy's desire for solutions, however unreachable they may be in each iteration of work.

Instead of thinking narrowly and intently about the problem at hand in the way that a project team design meeting does, by keeping goals and aims out of focus, the speculative ensemble can approach problem solving from an entirely different direction. A direction which attends more to processes rather than to outcomes.

### **Table agency**

Lacy and *transparadiso* work collaboratively in ways that involve thinking with others. Both projects asked a group of 'experts' to give voice to their different perspectives around a matter of concern, calling for politics to emerge. Both participated in the staging a

possible form of informal deliberative democracy in a public space, and both deploy tactics that are found in project team design meetings.

In each of these situations, tables were active participants that anchored settings for conversation and narration. In the case of *The Missing Things*, the tables staked out a space, created the image, called attention to the event, presented an invitation for participation, and stimulated eddies of attraction and activity that spread outward through space. In *Storying Rape*, the table drew the action in, organising wires, microphones, papers, chairs, light, as well as bodies and words. It cemented the scene and established a lasting image.

I am often asked: why think and write about the table, if all that really matters is who is seated at it? My response is usually another question: doesn't the physical form of a gathering affect who can be seen and heard, as well as what can be viewed, said, heard or felt? The architecture of any situation directly affects the kinds of relations that can be imagined and formed and, by extension, the possibilities and limitations for collaboration in that space.

My tables are round in order to circumvent intrinsic hierarchy. But is it truly possible to escape hierarchy? In his analysis of the artist collective Park Fiction's work in Hamburg's waterfront district, Kester reminds me that simply being round is not enough to eliminate uneven power distribution at a table.<sup>101</sup> Working closely with resident activists, Park Fiction created a public planning process, central to which was a round table installed near the project site where meetings with city officials took place. Interestingly, although these

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<sup>101</sup> Park Fiction is an artist collective based in Hamburg, Germany. The project referred to here is a public park in Hamburg's waterfront district that opened in 2007.

meetings successfully brought about the project, Park Fiction's Christoph Schäfer wrote later that '[r]ound tables are a dangerous thing. [...] as their name suggests an equal power balance that conceals the unequal status of the participants. [...] Speaking with bureaucrats means to half-accept their dominant way of thinking and negotiating' (Kester, 2011, p. 209). Nevertheless, the process that Park Fiction instigated resulted in a new public space, and a new cultural and political positioning of a place. Their round table was a material participant in the project's successes as well as in its shortfalls.

### **Cut 3: Conclusions**

Returning once again to my research questions, what does this Cut expose of what constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context, the forms it might take and the conditions required for it to acquire agency?

Whilst *Storying Rape* and *The Missing Things* are quite distinct as artworks, they share an intention to mobilise public conversation in the service of disclosing issues, inviting attention to practices that might address those issues. They both incorporate forms of public collaborative thinking. Revisiting *Fluid Cities* and *Uncaptured Land* – in relation to the analysis of *The Missing Things*, *Storying Rape* and the project team design meeting – raises insights and questions about what collaborative thinking might entail.

First, is collaborative thinking something that happens in the space between individual thinkers? Is it a property of space or a connective tissue? If I maintain focus on the table as an extension of the minds of those present, then the table is a connective tissue that facilitates who and what can be thought, seen and heard.

Second, if developed as a place where conflict can arise safely and narrations be elicited from all parts of a society, a table participates in the emergence of political life.



Third, if art brings issues of concern to public notice – and contributes to the re-formatting needed to develop and practise new protocols when old ones fail – then collaborative thinking engagements in the public art realm offer occasions for broad participation in this process. Use of a public table demands awareness of who places what stakes upon the table, and who can and cannot perceive and/or speak to them.

Highlighting the potency of metaphor that a table can bring to settings, this Cut also suggests avenues to be explored in practice. The speculative ensemble construct hints at ways to rehearse the *vita activa* in playful re-enactments of political processes. It suggests possibilities in the material re-staging of components of deliberative democracy in art contexts. Perhaps moving into ground opened by Żmijewski's *Them*, the shifting divisions among humans within the battleground of public space – I imagine discordant collaborations between different configurations of *Us* versus *Them*.

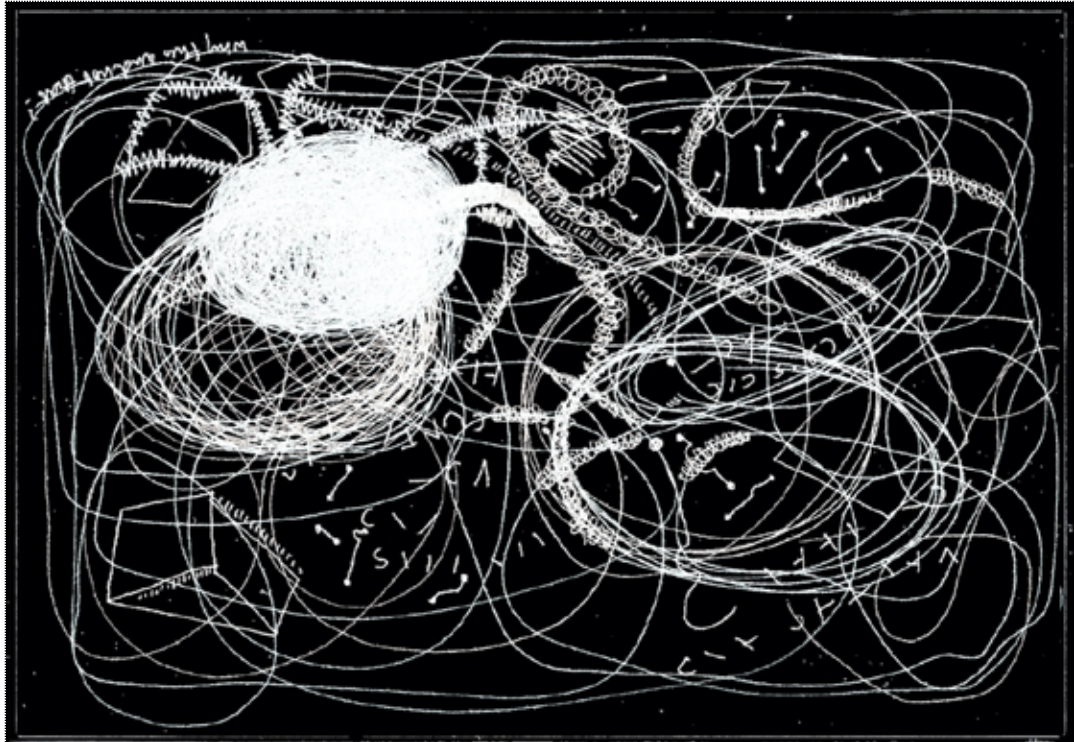
Another area of exploration is the search for ways to discard goals, and so bring subjects objects and their discordances together as Rancière argues (2004, p. 7). This Cut also reveals possibilities for more performative practices of collaborative thinking. Here I use performative in two ways. One in the sense of a recurrent or iterative practice that brings what is practised into being (Bolt, 2008, p. 4). The second in the sense of an activity that is scripted and performed for an audience. The former echoes practising and the latter disclosing.

Finally, this Cut placed focus on the table itself. By holding a space, a public table proposes that conversation – and the collaborative thinking that might ensue – are possible. It beckons us to make conversation happen. As a material metaphor for our common world, my round public table might provide a platform for assembling and displaying a sufficient variety of representations of the issues at hand. This would allow different perspectives to

be disclosed and thus contribute to Latour's reformatting. At the same time, by providing a setting for experimenting with forms of gathering, conversation and collaborative thinking, the public table offers possibilities for how the internally conflicting relations that politics deals with might be negotiated.

[END OF CUT 3]

*Pause: Turning Tables*



The table turns and speaks: Let my line bear across your body/mind. Go ahead. Pretend you don't use my shadowy below to hold hands, pass notes, bribes and squeezes. That you don't fill my bright above with your false visions. Go ahead. Use my broad circle to keep your place and hold your temper. Dance on me, beat my chest! But remember, I know your tricks. We are made of the same star dust – the same ground, air and light. We are entangled, – embroiling the living world without which we are nothing. Why don't we rehearse the world we want to see? After all, we turn together or not at all.





#### **Cut 4: How does the body participate in collaborative thinking?**

I'm not interested in becoming a better, more efficient citizen under the Anthropocene. I want my physical practice to better equip me to experience trouble and better sit and chew on that trouble. A body that embraces failure and inefficiency. I didn't become a movement teacher to guide bodies to become more efficient or to align effortlessly into this capitalistic world. (Anderson, 2020)

### **Neglected bodies: *Seek***

In 1970, Nicholas Negroponte and MIT's Architecture Machine Group with the Urban Systems Lab created the installation *Seek*.<sup>102</sup> *Seek* featured a group of Mongolian desert gerbils inside a transparent enclosure containing an environment of mirrored Perspex blocks that were continuously rearranged by a robotic arm. The idea was that the computer controlling the arm would learn the gerbils' living preferences through interaction and feedback, to eventually create and maintain an ideal environment, balanced between machine and gerbil – a 'homeostatically maintained' stable state (Halpern, 2016).

Negroponte argued that design should be a conversation between 'two intelligent species': humans and machines. His "[a]rchitecture as a machine" posed design as a process to network humans and machines into new assemblages' (Halpern, 2016). *Seek* was an early actualization of this thinking albeit with gerbils instead of humans. Unfortunately, the gerbils confused the computer and – constantly disturbed by the moving environment – became stressed and aggressive to the point of attacking each other.

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<sup>102</sup> The exhibition, *Software information technology: its new meaning for art*, was held at the Jewish Museum of New York (Halpern, 2016). The Architecture Machine Group, started by Negroponte, is precursor to the MIT Media Lab.

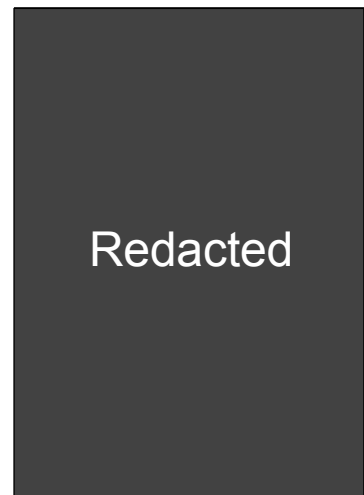


Figure 18: *Seek* catalogue cover.

I am not sure what can be said about improvements in rodent/machine interfaces since 1970, but human/machine interfaces work smoothly and seductively today – perhaps moving ever closer Negroponte’s vision of homeostasis. To my mind, calling on the ‘market’ to ‘learn’ from aggregated individual decisions (interaction and feedback) how to satisfy all our needs and desires efficiently, seems not dissimilar to the premise of *Seek*’s failed experiment. Like *Seek*, the neo-liberal experiment in which I find myself fails to take full account of my living body, or its interdependency with the other living and inanimate bodies that make up the environments we all share.

In the previous Cuts, I speculated from *Table 18* as a thing I use and abuse, without considering my body in relation to it. I moved from the table’s inscribed surface and the public spaces represented there to explore protest as an interface with democracy in the abstract, without reckoning with the exposure of vulnerable bodies in public. I proposed the public table as potential infrastructure, providing support and opportunity for individual and shared imaginative thought. I considered tables as things with agency, without paying much attention to the materiality of the people seated around them.

In this Cut, I bring the focus to the bodies at the table and their interactions and affects. At the centre of this Cut is *Turning Tables*.<sup>103</sup> I speculate on the body in collaborative thinking; first by considering the individual body through the work of performance scholar Ben Spatz and then plural bodies through Judith Butler’s ideas about public protest. I then consider projects by Suzanne Lacy and her collaborators, before returning to bodies at the table.

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<sup>103</sup> See description *Turning Tables* in Volume 2, pages 19-21.

## **Bodily thinking**

Like Arendt and Bohm, I often experience thinking as an internal dialogue between two voices – the active *I* and the passive *me* (whom I sometimes call *you* when especially disappointed). I am also sometimes hobbled by a notion that the body supporting my head is not me, such that I ignore it – until it stubs toes or looks especially fat. At the same time, I understand my body as a discrete entity, one that is separate from an environment that is separate from *me*.

I know that it cannot survive if severed from this environment and its intertwined systems of support. Yet generally I picture these systems as entities *out there in the world* that I move through and between. Also *out there* are affordances that capture my attention. This situates me as a separate body within a physical environment, which presents me with useful things, places and opportunities – something to eat, an inviting surface for skateboarding or sleeping, a flower to smell or pick, etc. But my body is also material. How should I think about the animate and inanimate things of which my body itself is made?

Ben Spatz argues for understanding ‘embodiment as first affordance’ (2017), bringing an entirely different nuance to the word *affordance*. He agrees with Marcel Mauss that ‘the body is simultaneously both the original object upon which the work of culture is carried out, and the original tool with which that work is achieved’ (2017, p. 257). Thus, before I can even begin to perceive the environment, I must first grapple with the material of my own body (2017, p. 260). My engagement with material reality begins with learning to operate the material of myself.

In Spatz’s view, philosophers who think about our physical interactions with reality largely disregard this aspect of our embodiment (2017, p. 258). By holding focus only on



interactions between the body and things outside of it, he argues, they fail to see embodiment itself as the ‘primary medium of practice’ (2017, p. 258). In a similar way, scholars of craft practices also tend to emphasise a ‘division between practitioner and materials’ rather than thinking about how expert practice is developed within the craftsperson’s body (2017, p. 259).<sup>104</sup> Thus, Spatz argues, our relationship to reality tends to be defined in terms of ‘the relation between human agency and material environment’ which obscures ‘the essential channel of *human materiality* through which agency and environment interact’ (2017, pp. 259-60).

There is therefore much to be done to understand the ethical and political work that thinking through embodiment can do (2017, p. 261). Spatz expands on three ways of engaging with reality that have been theorized by others: 1) *tinkering*, used by Karin Knorr Cetina to describe scientific laboratory work; 2) *tuning*, proposed by Andrew Pickering to describe the ‘mutual resonance between’ scientist and material, and 3) *tracking*, used by Manuel De Landa to designate the weapon-inventor’s search through interplay with materials for the precise point of a material’s useful change of state (2017, p. 261).

*Tinkering* involves combining and re-combining pre-existing components of practice in different ways. Found in choreography and pedagogy, for example, tinkering involves questions like: Should participants be in a circle, a line or a square? What activity should come first? What would happen if I bring this activity from that discipline into the mix?

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<sup>104</sup> Spatz mentions studies by Tim Ingold, Andrew Pickering and Richard Sennett.

Tinkering does not move toward any ideal form or goal; we tinker when our goal is imprecise.<sup>105</sup>

*Tuning* involves a more subtle feedback mechanism wherein the body slowly strives toward resonance with an ideal. When coaxing my back into a desired relation of alignment and balance in yoga or modulating my voice to blend in with others, I compare the shape or sound I make to a perceived ideal as I gradually move closer to it. Listening to the notes around me, the shape I make with my throat adjusts, seemingly automatically, to produce resonance with what I hear (Spatz, 2017, p. 262).

Different again, *tracking* aims for a singular success to be achieved in the moment. It targets a precise solution and involves a single-minded (single-bodied?) engagement where every fragment of feedback is mined for precise clues to be tracked and tracked again. The desired outcome for the dancer, horsewoman, gymnast or footballer remains out of reach, over and over again, until suddenly it is not (Spatz, 2017, p. 264).<sup>106</sup>

Spatz discusses tinkering, tuning and tracking in the context of the individual body. But what happens in a collaborative context? I can imagine tinkering at work in collaborative improvisational theatre and dance, or in peer learning systems; tuning in collaborative music making; tracking in collaborative lovemaking – and all three in team sports and

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<sup>105</sup> As an example of everyday tinkering, Spatz gives is fidgeting while waiting for an important interview to begin – trying out this or that leg, body or head position to find a posture that conveys the right impression (2017, p. 262).

<sup>106</sup> Examples of tracking in everyday life are ‘wait[ing] for the right moment to ask a question [... or] direct[ing] intimate gestures of touch and sensation to provoke orgasm in our own body or another’ (2017, p. 264).

collaborative kitchens. I propose that these are also non-verbal collaborative thinking techniques.

These terms describe the active bodily engagements that hone my ability to work with my material body. But what of the longer-term consequences of habits of movement and posture, and the residue of practice? Spatz introduces Sara Ahmed's challenge to 'the assumed uniformity of the embodied mind':

'the repetition of norms and conventions, or routes and paths taken' gradually leads to the development of 'a specific "take" on the world [...] as well as a route through the contours of the world, which [in turn] gives our world its own contours' (Spatz quoting Ahmed in 2017, p. 260).

Ahmed imagines this as processes of 'differential sedimentation [...that] congeal in bodily comportment' (2017, p. 260). I am reminded of Bohm's idea, in the context of thought, that each individual selects images from the broader system of thought generated by a dominant culture, to create their own private mixture (Bohm, 1994, pp. 215-16).<sup>107</sup> Bohm argues that the culture and the individual become attached to their set of images, which come to define them, and to restrict their ability to think beyond them. Ahmed and Spatz's words suggest something similar operating corporeally – where repetition of stance, movement, action, or the physical adoption of sets of norms and conventions become fixed in bodies.

Among the exercises developed by Augusto Boal as part of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, is one in which participants mime the mundane things they do whilst at work (2002, p. 211).<sup>108</sup> In my first experience of this exercise, I was struck by the changes in posture and presence I

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<sup>107</sup> Bohm's uses the word 'idiosyncrasy' to describe this private mixture.

<sup>108</sup> This is a version of 'The Circuit of Rituals' exercise (2002, p. 211).

observed in other students when they re-enacted snatches of their daily work routines. The ways in which their work shaped their bodies was immediately visible, and when I mirrored another student's work stance and movements, I could *feel* the physical effects of *their work in my own body*.<sup>109</sup>

Susan Epstein and Boal wrote that

[t]he smallest cells of social organisation (the couple, the family, the neighbourhood, the school, the office, the factory etc.) and equally the smallest incidents of our social life (an accident at the corner of the street, the checking of identity papers in the metro, a visit to the doctor, etc.) contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of oppression (Boal & Epstein, 1990, p. 40).

I think Epstein and Boal would allow me to add an even smaller cell of social organisation – the human body – to this statement. This would become: the *human body* contains the

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<sup>109</sup> In a study of *Forum Theatre* (and interactive form of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*) in care settings and prisons, psychosocial scholars Lynn Frogett, Laura Kelly-Corless and Julian Manley concluded that 'devising and performing a drama entailed the production of [...] a transitional space in which relations to reality can be re-figured' (2019, p. 23). Drawing on Donald Winnicott, Frogett et al. argue that playing within this 'third space' that lies between 'immutable objective conditions' and a 'mental space of unconstrained fantasy' allows 'one to see how things might be different' (2019, p. 27). Boal argued for theatre as a space where both inner and outer change could be rehearsed through embodied enactment. In *Forum Theatre* this happens when audience members step into roles on the stage to shift the action and experiment with different outcomes. According to Frogett et al., *Forum Theatre* offers opportunities to 'project [...] into roles and establish a third position from which to observe self in interaction with others' (Frogett, et al., 2019, p. 24). Thinking through Spatz, I see a failure to fully consider the role of embodiment in Frogett et al.'s interpretation. In my experience of *Forum Theatre*, my embodiment in the role I stepped into was fundamental – I felt the role and situation from inside my body before I could observe myself from a 'third position'. The gap between these perspectives underlines Spatz's position that discourse has yet to come to terms with embodiment. As he writes: 'we have yet to see [...] specialized embodied practices [...such as] martial, healing, and performing arts treated as substantive ontologies alongside those produced by discursive thought or material science' (2017, p. 265).

moral and political values of society, its structures of domination and power and all of its mechanisms of oppression. Then, the values and structures of society and society's limits and affordances are all inscribed in our individual bodies.

Spatz's elaboration of types of embodied engagement with reality constitutes a forceful argument. We must look at what a focus on embodiment brings to collaborative thinking as a practice. Bohm argued for group dialogue to sense the movement of thought within and between bodies. But dialogue is accomplished through the language of words, which, although issued from mouths and received by ears, and therefore of the body, is otherwise divorced from the fully embodied practices Spatz writes about.

Through *Turning Tables*, I experienced power as a shifting field of relations. I felt its forces moving through my body. I felt how I contribute to this field even when I do not intend to. I understood that it might be possible to practise or even play within the field. *Turning Tables* allowed me to inhabit different points of view, and to feel something of what they feel like. I became acutely aware of the constraints and affordances built into the physical setting and its cultural associations. *Turning Tables* enhanced my awareness of how rooms, tables, chairs, mysterious cupboards etc. participate in human intention and regulate participation, and pointed out the effects of the mental furniture I rely on as well.<sup>110</sup> Moving, interacting, and building images together using objects and spaces can capture nuance, feeling and ideas that may not be consciously known to any one individual. This seems to me to be what thinking together with bodies is like.

Thinking with Latour and Bohm, I understand that material and mental supports shape my individual memory and mental processes, as well as my body and its way of resting and

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<sup>110</sup> This relates to the concept of extended mind discussed in Cut 3.

moving. But what happens when a public table is shared by a group? The table is part of the physical context that organises bodies into particular formations, regulating their movement and comportment. It also contributes to the development of body memory of rituals of gathering. If I accept the logic of the extended mind, then the public table is an extension of each of the minds gathered around it, a component of the mental scaffolding that is held in common by the group and therefore part of an emerging plural mind.

The final exercise in *Turning Tables* foregrounded stories of exchange and their consequences. Collaboratively acting out a few of these stories created opportunities to embody different roles within exchange processes, and to physically experience power shifts between them. By stepping away from the stories as they happened in order to enact different forms of exchange, each person was able to ‘try on’ and assess alternatives within our own bodies, perceiving aspects of lived experience in new ways. I see in this a potential link between practising techniques of physical embodiment, and the development of potentially powerful new images within a shared space of imagination. *Turning Tables* suggests that digging into the embodied character of shared spaces can reveal techniques for cultivating or destabilising power relations, as well as commoning memory, creating impersonal fellowship, generating solidarity, and possibly building plural minds.

### **Bodies in the Street**

I turn now to consider protest activities as forms of thinking together in public, in order to think about how collaborative thinking might manifest. A number of scholars have written extensively about the durational occupations of public space that took place between 2011

and 2014 across the world.<sup>111</sup> In a 2011 essay and the book that followed, Judith Butler applies her speculative method to public protest (2011; 2015). Some of the questions that animate her inquiry are: What happens when bodies assemble in the street for political protest? What are demonstrators/occupiers doing, learning and showing? What language and ideas do their actions generate and with what significance?

In earlier Cuts, I speculated that collaborative thinking might occupy the threshold between private and public, somewhere between work and speech in Arendt's cumulative continuum of labour, work, speech and action. Butler understands Arendt to comprehend everything other than speech and action as pre-political or private. Butler proposes, however, that drawing a line around politics in this way robs labouring and working bodies of their potential for agency (2015, p. 205).<sup>112</sup> She argues that the struggles and suffering of the working body do not simply exist to be transformed into the action and thought of others, but have their own performative agency. As I write this today, the people spending the day *sheltering-in-place* at home near me on the edges of Oakland, California are the same precarious and vulnerable bodies that will defy curfew tonight to assemble in solidarity for Black bodies abused and disrespected by the police.<sup>113</sup> Thinking with Butler, I

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<sup>111</sup> Butler (2015), Haiven (2014), Thompson (2015) and Stravrides (2016) have written about durational protests in Athens, Madrid, Cairo, Istanbul, Kiev, New York, London and elsewhere.

<sup>112</sup> Butler suggests that it renders the physical struggles and suffering of the working body as 'experience' rather than 'action'. Experience, she argues, is not performative, therefore it cannot make anything happen. I am not convinced of this understanding of experience. Is not experience something I receive through doing things, some of which may be productive? When I give birth, I produce something new, whilst at the same time experiencing the suffering of labour.

<sup>113</sup> Protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers are taking place across the US as I write. *Shelter in place* is the name of the order for residents to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

see that I am guilty of making misleading distinctions between life and politics, private and public, the individual and the collective. The private is embedded in the public.<sup>114</sup>

Butler writes:

[S]ince the political body can only emerge into the light of public space to act and think if it is well fed and well sheltered [...] then the political defined as the public is essentially dependent on the private, which means that the private is not the opposite of the political, but enters into its very definition (Butler, 2015, pp. 205-6).

Extending the notion of linguistic performativity to encompass non-verbal forms, Butler sees the assembly of bodies in the street as presenting their challenge corporeally. Their persistent presence alone calls the legitimacy of the state into question (Butler, 2015, pp. 83, 156-7). A group standing silently in front of a police line presents a set of demands even without speaking words (Butler, 2015, pp. 28, 168). In this way, concerted bodily action communicates and ‘signif[ies] principles of freedom and equality’ (2015, p. 48), alongside other demands which are not easily expressed through speech.<sup>115</sup>

As discussed in Cut 2, Arendt understands thinking as an internal process that becomes visible through speech. If bodies in formation ‘speak’ even when they say nothing, could this silent speech manifest their silent bodily thinking? Three related characteristics of

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<sup>114</sup> Thinking in terms of my public table, I see the surface as a type of public space into which matters of public concern are brought and displayed for view and discussion. This space is supported by legs that are tall and level enough to hold the surface at a good height, and strong enough to support the things brought to it. Legs also labour under the people who bring things and themselves to the table. Without legs there is no surface, no display, no people and no public space above. What is under the table cannot be separated from the public realm above.

<sup>115</sup> It is important to note that acting in concert is not acting in conformity. Those assembled may be acting and speaking at cross purposes – tracking divergent trajectories (2015, p. 157).



being human discussed by Butler inform this idea: our fragility and vulnerability; our interdependency with each other; and our dependency on the organic and inorganic infrastructure of our environment.<sup>116</sup>

Relying on Gilles Deleuze's reading of Baruch Spinoza, Butler argues that humans, as organic bodies, are naturally open to other organic bodies. We are not self-enclosed discrete entities; interdependency and intertwinement are fundamental characteristics of our embodiment (2015, p. 149). My organic body produces, performs and persists only because it is supported by others and the living infrastructures we share (Butler, 2011, p. 5) (Butler, 2015, p. 21). Any conception that my body is distinct from others is false. As Butler writes, 'negotiating the sphere of appearance is a biological thing to do' (Butler, 2011, p. 7). I can act 'only [...] when [...] supported by environments, by nutrition, by work, by modes of sociality and belonging' (2015, p. 44).

Butler also argues that individual bodies do not establish the space of appearance on their own. Rather, this forms in the gaps *between* bodies (2015, p. 77). It is not individuals who act, therefore, but interdependent bodies in alliance, mobilising the spaces between them as a sphere of politics (2015, p. 84). Butler writes that the freedom to assemble and establish this between space must be in place before politics can emerge (2015, p. 160).<sup>117</sup>

Neither the fact of interdependency nor its acknowledgment guarantees social harmony. As Butler puts it, '[i]nvariably, we rail against those on whom we are most dependent (or [...] who are most dependent on us)' (2015, p. 151). Every public expression of freedom,

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<sup>116</sup> I have opted to follow Butler's use of *interdependency* and *dependency* throughout, although in British usage, the words *interdependence* and *dependence* would be correct.

<sup>117</sup> Butler's argument here recalls Deutsche's that democracy both demands and creates public space discussed in Cut 1.

especially in the form of protest, is shadowed by the risk of capture and confinement (Butler, 2015, pp. 173, 185). When I stand in protest and present my body to this risk intentionally, my purposeful ‘political exposure’ generates political power (2015, pp. 184-5).<sup>118</sup> At the same time, I also risk abuse or injury at the hands of fellow protesters, many of whom I have not chosen as compatriots. Butler acknowledges with Arendt the fact that no living thing gets to choose the others with whom it shares its world.<sup>119</sup> Our ‘solidarity with others’ in public protest is similarly unchosen (Butler, 2015, p. 152); making ourselves vulnerable to unlikely compatriots is a basic feature of protesting in public. For Butler, solidarity actually arises out of this unchosen aspect of political exposure, emerging ‘from this [lack of control] rather than from deliberate agreements we enter knowingly’ (2015, p. 152).<sup>120</sup>

As noted in Cut 2, Bohm argues that a group in dialogue can establish a bond or ‘impersonal fellowship’ based on mutual participation rather than shared opinions. I propose that solidarity is a bodily (non-intellectual) form of this kind of fellowship. Perhaps when exposed to threat, my body automatically establishes and reaffirms interconnections, a process I perceive as solidarity. The feeling of being in solidarity with

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<sup>118</sup> Butler points out that protest is not the only situation where bodily vulnerability becomes political. Heightened bodily exposure also, as Butler writes, ‘happens daily under conditions of occupation, when walking down the street [Sarajevo] or trying to pass through a checkpoint [Palestine], making the body available to harassment, injury, detention, or death [...]. Other forms of bodily exposure take place within prisons, detention camps, in refugee camps [...]’ (Butler, 2015, p. 125). Under conditions of occupation and incarceration, the exposure is individual and is at the point of greatest vulnerability.

<sup>119</sup> Butler argues that ‘any choice about who may or may not live is always a genocidal practice’ (Butler, 2015, p. 111).

<sup>120</sup> This recalls Simondon’s idea that compatibility for individuation does not arise out of what is shared by individuals, but out of what is still unfixated within each of them. See Introduction.

others inspires hope in me; and this hope helps me to neutralize fear. Chung has said that fear is the loss of connection.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps, in situations of uncertainty, when I open myself to chosen and unchosen compatriots, my interconnected body reaffirms the connections it needs to function without my conscious knowing, and – by establishing solidarity – affords me the sense of hope I need to persevere.

For Butler, the establishment of solidarity intersects with an ethical imperative. She draws on Emmanuel Levinas to explore the ethical implications of our interdependency. If I live only because I am dependent on ‘a world of others’ then, Levinas argues, my life and the life of the other cannot be separated. As a ‘precarious and corporeal being’, no matter how threatened or afraid I feel, I am ‘responsible for the life of the other’ and it is essential that I preserve that other life (Butler, 2015, pp. 108-9). Here is another reason why solidarity would emerge among those who share political exposure and vulnerability.<sup>122</sup>

Interdependent, vulnerable and in solidarity with others, I am part of the emergent personality of the assembly, which affects and is affected by existing power structures and their manifestation in architecture and formations of other bodies. In Arendt/Butlerian terms, politics and its ‘space of appearance’ are entangled with the infrastructure that organises it. Infrastructure and architecture both ‘condition the action’ and participate in creating the space of politics (Butler, 2015, p. 127). As I learned in *Turning Tables*, the form and location of the space or street that accommodates protest limits who is able to

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<sup>121</sup> Chung, in conversation with the author.

<sup>122</sup> Something similar can be said for infrastructure. If my life cannot be separated from the organic world of others with whom I am interdependent *and* I am responsible for their lives, then I am also responsible for the material and institutional world that supports all of us. Butler provides an example in my relationship to an unhoused person: any person suffering lack of shelter indicates my society’s ‘failure to organize shelter [...for] each and every person’ (2015, p. 21).

appear (for whom the risk is worth taking), conditioning the assembly as well as who can be seen and/or heard within it (Butler, 2011, p. 6).

As public assemblies emerge and evolve, they change not only the political conversation, but also the meaning of the place where they occur. Butler invites me to consider the kinds of affordance public places offer for corporeal political expression, and conversely, the opportunities that corporeal political expression generates for public places. As she puts it, ‘collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture’ (2015, p. 71). Bodies coming in and out of assembly in public combine with the material environment that supports their action to redefine the public quality and meaning of that environment, and this new public character persists after the gathering disperses (2015, p. 71).

Thinking alongside Latour, it is clear that architecture itself can act on an assembly to amplify or muffle human action within it. Conversely, the actions of bodies in alliance in public can sometimes transform the architecture into platforms for practising and displaying forms of interdependency and for broadcasting our need to build and maintain sustainable supports (Butler, 2015, p. 43). At the same time, as established in Cut 1, public space – even when not taken over by protest – is always a space of potential conflict. When I join a protest, I intentionally enter a public space of conflict. Because acting in concert does not guarantee agreement, the space of the protest assembly is itself potentially conflictual. Butler, who has thought deeply about non-violence, advocates deploying aggression with prudence and care, non-violently instead of trying to eradicate it.<sup>123</sup> ‘Cultivated’ aggression, she writes, takes form in ‘a way of holding and comporting oneself

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<sup>123</sup> See Butler’s book *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, published by Verso in 2020.

on one's own and with others in [...] conflictual space' (2015, p. 190). It 'can be seen in the body as it stands, falls, gathers, stops, remains silent, takes on the support of other bodies that it itself supports' (2015, p. 188).<sup>124</sup>

Writing about the 2013 Gezi uprising in Istanbul, Gurur Ertem describes the protest as a form of 'performative democracy' (2017, p. 3). She argues that by living in the park, protestors 'reconstituted' it as a public space –

reclaiming it as a [...] place where bodies assembled not only in speech and action but also in eating, sleeping, dancing, and dreaming [... and in so doing] affirmed their most immediate and obvious statement: that public space belongs to the people (2017, p. 4).

The protest struggle becomes 'a collective acting'. Through it we affirm our mutual dependency on working infrastructures, social networks and each other, enacting a *we* and bringing our bodies together to lay claim to the public sphere (2015, p. 59). As Butler writes,

the embodiment of equality in the practices of assembly, the insistence on interdependency and a fair distribution of labor [sic] tasks, the notion of a commonly held ground or "the commons" all start to put into the world a version of equality that is rapidly vanishing in other quarters (2015, p. 181).

Butler proposes, and Ertem describes, how the emergent character of a group in protest can sometimes combine with the specific characteristics of physical infrastructure to challenge existing power structures. An important aspect of Butler's broader project is to 'link interdependency to the principle of equal value' (2015, p. 43). She argues that 'no

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<sup>124</sup> For Butler, cultivating aggression is learning to harness aggression, in order to use it effectively in a civilized manner (Butler, 2015, p. 190).

human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality' (2015, p. 88). 'Self-evident truths'<sup>125</sup> are made self-evident only through their performance (2015, p. 177). This means that the behaviour of our bodies when assembled in public shapes the truths in support of which we gather. Plural action offers us opportunities to practise, rehearse and 'enact the world we wish to see' (2015, p. 153).

I propose that bodies assembled in the street not only speak and act but also think. The form thinking together takes in this context is neither discursive – a back and forth of words emerging from talking mouths or typing fingers – nor similar to the dynamic, multi-disciplinary iterative process of the design team meeting. In this situation, public collaborative thinking is an interactive process, taking place over time through the layering of bodies and practices in public spaces. Ideally, in public protest, democratic values are practised by disparate groups finding bodily solidarity through their interdependency and vulnerability. The layering of these activities in public space changes the space's *meaning*. This calls to mind Arendt's understanding of thinking as a quest to understand meaning.<sup>126</sup>

If my table is a public space, its meaning is therefore always contingent on the group and situation. Compared to the formless changeable possibilities of a *we* produced in public protest, the table is rigid and confining. Yet, by giving structure and narrowing possibilities, the public table offers a place to practise and rehearse embodied practices of thinking and acting.

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<sup>125</sup> For example, those referred to in the U.S. Constitution.

<sup>126</sup> See discussion of Arendt's thoughts on knowing versus thinking in Cut 2 (Arendt, 1977, p. 57).

## Thinking bodies in practice: *We Are Here*

In 2019, the retrospective, *Suzanne Lacy We Are Here*, was presented across two institutions in San Francisco.<sup>127</sup> ‘We Are Here’ is what bodies assembled in protest say even when silent. ‘We Are Here’ – embodied and conscious individuals appearing together in a place, establishing a *we*. ‘We Are Here’ – not somewhere else in time or space, but the here and now of the insistent birds in Aldous Huxley’s 1962 novel *Island*. ‘We Are Here’ in public – appearing, breathing, responding, and, I propose, *thinking* together.

Suzanne Lacy does not generally make objects or images whose meaning is to be found through looking or witnessing. Bodies are central in Lacy’s work; participants, collaborators, performers and viewers are present, seen and heard. They appear, move, listen and speak. They do this together, with and in the presence of each other.

Early in her career, Lacy used body parts as material, mobilising the shock and disgust most feel when confronted with internal organs to bring attention to the nature of our own embodiment.<sup>128</sup> She mined what was available in her own body, observing and activating

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<sup>127</sup> *Suzanne Lacy We Are Here* (2019) was curated by Rudolf Frieling, Lucía Sanromán and Dominic Willson at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Associated events included three panel discussions: a panel of young artists addressing civic engagement, Lacy in conversation with curator Liz Thomas and artists Gregory Sale and Caleb Duarte and Lacy in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Director of the Serpentine Galleries, and Catherine Wood, Senior Curator, International Art (Performance) at the Tate Modern. In the following discussion, I rely on multiple visits to this retrospective, the catalogue, my attendance at the panel discussions, my participation in *Silver Action* at the Tate Modern in 2013, Lacy’s books (1995; 2010), Lacy’s website (2020) and a telephone conversation with the artist in 2016.

<sup>128</sup> Tanya Zimbardo writes: ‘Her early live pieces and performances for the camera confronted the interiority of the body and the psyche. She developed her signature aesthetics of drawing into comparison human and animal anatomy [... later moving] to live performances, foregrounding the process of assembling or disassembling parts. [...R]ecurrent physical actions in her performance



Figure 19: Suzanne Lacy, *Anatomy Lesson #4 Dreaming* (1977) photograph by Rob Blalack.

the affordances she found in its organic material, its consciousness and its capacity to affect others. Later, using her own body as material in a different way, Lacy investigated imaginative embodiment as a technique for communicating ideas by inhabiting other consciousnesses or versions of herself.<sup>129</sup>

In the 1970s and 80s, Lacy moved away from the revelation of the stuff under her own skin toward exposing what is hidden beneath the surface of social contexts (Zimbardo, 2019, p. 43). Her projects became more complex, involving lengthy development periods and carefully planned public events. Many of these projects are represented through iconic photographs of staged visual tableaux involving tens and, in a few cases, hundreds of participants. The tableaux are carefully choreographed to approach an image that Lacy has in mind.<sup>130</sup> From the perspective of my practice, Lacy's reliance on images pictured in

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imagery [...] were fundamental to her thinking around what it meant to be a body with a consciousness' (Zimbardo, 2019, p. 43).

<sup>129</sup> She sought to communicate by means of what she calls an image. In 1976 she wrote: 'whatever it is that I experience in this lifestyle as it intersects with mine I synthesize into an image [...]. Then this image and this information becomes a point of contact between you and me, and my life becomes, in this limited sense, your own material, out of which you will make your images [...]' (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 72). These words echo Morizot and Zhong Mengual's mechanism for generating a *true encounter* discussed in the Introduction. Lacy's embodied performances and the image she synthesizes from them become pieces of active information – splinters which might snag a viewer and instigate an individuating encounter.

<sup>130</sup> Although most discourse around her art focusses on its socio-political content, as Willsdon notes, Lacy herself insists 'on the importance, even the primacy, of form' (Willsdon, 2019, p. 34). In a conversation with Allan Kaprow recorded in 1981, Lacy stated that each work has two components – how it handles an issue (content) and how it relates strategically to society (form) (Willsdon, 2019, p. 35). Interestingly, she goes on to say that each work also has both an image and a geometric shape or form. She sees form and image in an inverse relation: 'the fewer images my work has in it, the stronger I rely on the geometric shape that underlies the piece' (Willsdon, 2019, p. 35). Her words 'image' or 'shape' function in the visual register, but for Lacy, 'form' is more embodied. She refers to an 'internal sense of form' – 'a rolling motion [...that] has a clear sense of an internal thing that holds it together. It can be a geometric form; it can also be a kind of thought process [...]. I like it when they sort of



Figure 20: Suzanne Lacy, *Cinderella in a Dragster* (1976) illustrated on the cover of the first issue of *High Performance* in 1978.



advance seems to contradict the participatory nature of her work.<sup>131</sup> In my work, participant and audience generally coincide, and visual images of projects develop organically and collaboratively as the project unfolds.<sup>132</sup>

One of Lacy's goals is to make the subjects of her projects – older women, youth, victims of domestic violence, rape, prostitutes, etc. – visible and audible in public. She and her collaborators achieve this through public performances; carefully thought-through television, news and social media campaigns, as well as exhibitions in galleries and museums. Lacy's project images must be powerful enough to speak for her subjects and the issues they expose again and again in a wide variety of situations and settings. An open-ended participatory project may not necessarily generate the kind of images needed to capture the attention of these different audiences. Adhering closely to a preconceived visual idea may be one way she can guarantee that this happens.

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revolve in spirals' (Willsdon, 2019, p. 35). Form for Lacy seems to be an embodied affordance – something inside herself with the capacity to structure and hold meaning.

<sup>131</sup> My own experience as a participant in one of Lacy's projects – (*Silver Action* (2013) – supports this. As a body and voice playing a part in a visual/aural tableau, I appeared and filled a pre-defined position and tonal register for a precise interval of time. My bodily presence was important, but my thoughts and story were not.

<sup>132</sup> Lacy has an expansive understanding of her audience and broader ambitions for her work. She regularly revisits past work through writing, installations and events. The early stages of the work take place within communities and often culminate in a public participatory performance event. In later stages, components of the work are presented back to that community, later still, they may be revisited again and shown in art settings far from the original location of the work. Since the 1990s, her work has involved complex layering of activities over long periods of time, with many collaborators, participants and technicians as well as local and remote audiences. Lacy has always been clear that she considers every stage of the work – and all the ways that it is materialised, experienced and viewed – as art. As ambitious as she is for the social aspects of her projects, she is equally determined for each one, and for her thinking around and beyond it, to make an aesthetic impact in the art world at the global scale.



Figure 21: Suzanne Lacy, *Silver Action* (2013). as part of BMW Tate Live, Tate Modern. Photo © Gabrielle Fonseca Johnson for Tate Photography, 2013.

In the 1990s, Lacy did a series of interlinked projects with youth in Oakland California, some of which also engaged with the local police. In 1993-4, Lacy, Annice Jacoby, Chris Johnson, and over two hundred public high school students presented *The Roof Is on Fire*: a remarkable multimedia performance event in a multi-storey carpark where groups of youth sat in parked cars talking about topics important to them, whilst an audience wandered between the cars, listening in. In 1996, Lacy, Jacoby and Johnson together with a group of Oakland youth presented *No Blood/No Foul*, a basketball game between youth and police officers as an art performance (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 206). In 1999, Lacy, Julio Cesar Morales and Unique Holland worked with teenagers to create *Code 33: Emergency, Clear the Air!*, a performance event in which youth and police officers sat in small groups on the roof of a carpark to talk about the situation in Oakland. The conversation circles were surrounded by thirty monitors screening youth talking about Oakland neighbourhoods, and more than 100 cars arranged by colour with headlights blazing. Again, members of the public were invited to wander through and listen in.

In *We Are Here*, the presentation of *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2001) was bookended by a presentation of contemporary work by local youth, and a bank of monitors screening interviews with original participants reflecting back after twenty years. These interviews underscored how participation in *The Oakland Projects* shaped who those young people have become in profound ways – testament to Lacy’s continuing vision and caring perseverance. The legacy of Lacy’s work in Oakland lives on in the activism and advocacy of these local collaborators, some of whom now occupy influential positions in the City’s cultural and political arenas.

A revisiting of another work – *La piel de la memoria/Skin of Memory* (1999-2000), a project Lacy did with Pilar Riaño-Alcalá in Medellin Colombia, includes films in which



Figure 22: Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson, *NoBlood/No Foul* (1995–96), photograph courtesy of Chris Johnson.

participants speak about how the project affected them and their communities. As part of this project, residents were invited to write letters to unknown neighbours that were delivered with ceremony by young people on bicycles (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 219).

Looking back after 10 years, one participant reflected that those letters were

about touching [...] something we have inside. I don't know if we can touch people's hearts again, but I know that it helps, it helps so much to talk about the problems we all have. I had such a good time, and they got me out of the gang (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 223).

One of the young cyclists related the pride he felt being given the responsibility to deliver a letter to someone he did not know in a neighbourhood that was normally too dangerous for him to visit.

It is difficult to fully account for all that multi-faceted artmaking like Lacy's achieves, but by including recorded reflections of project participants, *We Are Here* offers a rare window into the impact a participatory art practice has had on real people and places over time. Viewed through the lens proposed by Morizot and Zhong Mengual sketched in the Introduction; *The Oakland Projects* exemplify many of the ways that participatory work increases possibilities for true encounters.

First, the student participants took a leap of faith. Despite their initial hesitancy, finding in Lacy a truly open mind, they joined although they had no idea what it might entail. Second, the students' relationship to the project was constantly changing as they moved from participants to collaborators. Third, a variety of different kinds of relations were created including: among the student collaborators; between student collaborators and artist; between school administrators, teachers and student collaborators; between police and artist; among police officers; between police officers and student collaborators; between audience and student collaborators; between audience and artist; between audience and

police; between public officials and all of the above; etc. Fourth the project catalysed a collective. An overt goal of the project was to generate a collective that would continue to work together to change how youth were perceived and treated in the City.<sup>133</sup> Finally, the project as a whole and the individual pieces took place over a long period of time, offering multiple points of entry over that period. *The Oakland Projects* happened over a decade (1991-2001) and were revisited by Lacy in her own research and writing a number of times, most recently as part of *We Are Here*.

I cannot help but see a thread linking these projects to the work of Boal. In a 2006 essay, Lacy herself mapped the common ground between the feminist performance art she was involved in and Boal's methods (Lacy, 2010, p. 274).<sup>134</sup> Both Lacy and Boal's activities aim to instigate positive social change. Boal worked in theatre and distinguished between *political theatre* and *theatre as politics*: arguing that political theatre *comments* on politics, whereas theatre as politics *is one way in which* "political activity can be conducted" (Lacy quoting Boal in 2010, p. 281). When Boal wrote this, he was an elected City Councilman in Rio de Janeiro, practising what he called *Legislative Theatre* as an official City government protocol. Lacy tries to draw an equivalence between her work in Oakland and Boal's in Rio, but in fact Lacy and Boal occupied very different positions relative to government institutions at the time. Using Young's binary of advocate versus

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<sup>133</sup> Some groups and institutions persisted until 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Unlike *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Lacy writes, '[v]isual art performance [...] evolved as a series of reactions: to the object, to the museum, to the market system, to the subjects seen as appropriate for art, and to the identity of the maker' (Lacy, 2010, p. 274). This changed with the establishment of The Woman's Building and the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles in 1973, which led to the development of activist feminist performance art 'more akin in spirit of Boal's' (Lacy, 2010, p. 274). Lacy and others began to take on issues in broader society and find ways to make them more visible and audible in the world.



If I look back down, I think my parents . . . they were a lot more tolerant and believed [more] in interfaith dialogue than what I see today. And I question that as well today, when I come back—because I live away—and I come back and I question why there isn't that integration, especially that I grew up with. Because I see a huge gap. And that for me is very scary, because I wasn't raised like that.

Figure 23: Suzanne Lacy, *The Circle and the Square* (2015-17) film still [left], text (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 241) [right].

activist discussed in Cut 1, it is clear that Lacy was operating as an *activist* whilst Boal was in the advocate position.

If I substitute the word *art* for *theatre* in Boal's statement, it becomes: whereas *political art* comments on politics, *art as politics* is one way in which political activity can be conducted. It seems to me that what *Legislative Theatre* and *The Oakland Projects* do have in common is the goal of conducting political activity through theatre/art.

Returning to practising, disclosing and re-grounding, the three characteristics of practice I introduced in Cut 1, *We Are Here* presents ample evidence of both practising and re-grounding having occurred for project participants, and the exhibition itself discloses through documentation. Also evident is Lacy's continuing search for ways to provide a taste of participation to the gallery visitor. A new element appears in two of her most recent works, in the form of nearly human-sized screens presenting individuals speaking directly to the camera/viewer.<sup>135</sup> This format allows Lacy to tightly control the image (in this case an arrangement of screens/individuals in a space) yet at the same time permits individual participants to occupy the image *and* speak for themselves from within it. I see this development in her work as evidence of a continuing exploration of ways to draw out individual voices, and to bring them into a variety of public settings.

In the latest version of the project *De tu puño y letra* (2014-15, 2019) a circular array of vertical screens sketches a notional bullring with the audience (me) in its centre.<sup>136</sup> A man

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<sup>135</sup> *The Circle and the Square* (2015-17) and *De tu puño y letra* (By Your Own Hand) (2014-15/19).

<sup>136</sup> In the original version, 350 local men read aloud letters written by local women about their experiences of violence in a public ceremony held in a bullring in Quito, Ecuador. The letters were written for the *Cartas de Mujeres* project that Lacy encountered when she arrived in Quito (Frieling, et al., 2019, p. 118).

enters one screen, walks toward me until nearly full size and begins to read a letter written by a female victim of violence. When finished he quietly turns and leaves as another man enters through another screen to read another letter – over and over around the bullring. Turning to meet each speaker, I receive the tragedy and trauma that each voice aims at my heart. Because by physically turning to meet each reader, I play a small embodied role in its reception, this work invited me beyond simply witnessing how the work was made or documented. The work carried me somewhere beyond disclosure, although perhaps, not quite to re-grounding.

### **Bodies at the table**

This Cut has so far underlined two key points about relations between the body and collaborative thinking. First is that thinking is a biological activity that relies on sustainable natural and man-made supports for the body's organs. Second, humans are interdependent beings whose ability to think at all is sustained by this interdependence. An additional point to be highlighted is that our human bodies are a crucial link between natural systems and technology.

For Butler, the ability to rely on our life-sustaining interdependency is both the base condition for thinking and acting politically, and the most basic right that we must fight for. If our shared precarity is what brings us together in the first place, then the support we offer each other in response is a basic condition for thinking (Butler, 2015, p. 119). Looking forward, Spatz argues that placing a better reckoning of human embodiment at the centre of how we think about the environment would unlock our ability to build a sustainable

world.<sup>137</sup> He visualises the human body as a delicate hinge between the technological and the ecological, and argues that only by attending to this link through our embodiment can we ‘develop a more *sustainable ecotechnological* practice’ (2017, pp. 266-7). He invites you and me to see technology as an extension of the brain, and ecology as an extension of the digestive organs.<sup>138</sup> If we could then zoom way out, we would see our bodies as the fragile physical material that holds the two together.

Harking back to the question *What is thinking good for?* discussed in Cut 2, I propose that we need to place a better reckoning of human embodiment at the centre of how we think in general. Butler writes that ‘our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of the interdependent and sustaining conditions of life’ (2015, p. 119). Here thinking is a vector – an arrow making progress – whilst the ‘sustaining conditions’ of life do not move. But the crises of our time – climate change, the undermining of ecosystems that support human life, the accelerating rate of habitat loss and extinctions of other animals and plants etc. – indicate that the sustaining conditions of life are actually moving away from us. This Cut suggests that as long as we fail to think together as interdependent embodied beings, the

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<sup>137</sup> Arguing with Paul Rekret and Anna Tsing, Spatz warns against eliminating the human as a defined group, instead we need to deepen and expand our ethical sensibility (2017, p. 266). In his view, it is ‘crucial to distinguish between *post-humanism*, which critiques the anthropocentrism, eurocentrism, and heteropatriarchy of humanism; and *posthuman-ism*, which offers techno-capitalist fantasies wherein human beings are increasingly severed from our ecological tethers and freed to design ourselves without material limits. [...]the emergent complexity of embodiment can be a crucial resource for posthumanist critique, highlighting the difference between *humanity* and *embodiment* as possible grounds for action at every scale’ (2017, p. 266).

<sup>138</sup> Although utterly dependent on natural ecosystems, the city dweller’s connection to them is mediated through layers of technology, which Spatz calls the ‘machine of the city’. Biological substances – ‘water, food, medicine, pets’ – are pumped into the machine and waste is pumped out, all happening out of sight and mind (2017, p. 266).

interdependent and sustaining conditions of life that support our organic bodies will continue to retreat.

But what does this mean for my table? Earlier I wrote that by providing structure and narrowing possibilities, my table offers a safe place to practise or rehearse embodied public thinking and acting. Its possibilities may appear modest, especially when set beside the scope and ambition of Lacy's oeuvre, but I see power in this modesty. As a device that can be easily made, assembled and placed by one person, it can appear anywhere, at any time to afford opportunity and means for experimenting with and practising ways of being, thinking and doing together as interdependent, embodied humans.

Spatz's image of the body as a hinge between technology and ecology reminds me of the *selendang* I was given when traveling in Bali.<sup>139</sup> By symbolically dividing the good or clean upper body from the evil or dirty lower body, wearing the *selendang*, I was told, would help me to re-examine these two aspects of human life and thereby enter a temple with the clear mind appropriate for religious worship. As a person embedded in Western culture, I am accustomed to sitting at desks and tables that sever the upper and lower parts of my body. I am used to seeing only the upper parts of teachers in classrooms, pundits on screens, and just the heads and chests of important men and women of the past in sculpted busts. I also unconsciously use metaphors that define practices that are above or on the table to be open and appropriate and those under the table to be secretive, untrustworthy or underhanded.

My tables operate as setting, surface and thing supporting, linking and separating bodies. They draw groups together, offer opportunities for shared experience, bounce light and

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<sup>139</sup> A long narrow scarf-like piece of fabric worn around the waist when entering Balinese Hindu temple precincts.



sound onto gathered faces and ears, etc. At the same time, they tie us down, trap our bodies, constrain our movement and generally thwart whole-bodied thinking. A table might link and separate individuals sitting around it, allowing each person to see what is on the table from different perspectives, as Arendt proposes. At the same time, it splits those sitting around it into parts that can be seen and parts that cannot. It divides talking heads from the guts, legs and feet that support them. It constructs an *above* and an *under*, encouraging us to distinguish a rational, acceptable and light-filled world above from a separate, mysterious and unlit world below. It persuades us to forget that thinking is an organic process connected to all the sticky, damp, smelly and messy parts of life.

And so, I propose to think of the table as a kind of *selendang* that, by clearly dividing us in half, reminds us what we hold together through the fact of our bodies. The world is not simply the things we build and the affairs between us, it also includes the material of us, and that brings everything we rely on with it. What if each time we sit at the table that separates and holds us together across its surface *and* draws a line across each of our bodies, we are reminded of our responsibilities in and for the world, finding the clear minds appropriate for thinking together?

#### **Cut 4: Conclusions**

Returning to my overarching questions, what does this Cut uncover about what constitutes public collaborative thinking in an art context, the forms it might take, and the conditions required for it to acquire agency?

When we come together to think, our bodies come with us. In addition to the collaborative thinking we might do with words, there is also always the thinking our bodies do in silent proximity. And with our bodies also come the values, structures, affordances and limits of

our society. The space we occupy, and the extensions of our bodies and minds we arrange within it – the tables, eyeglasses, coffees and teas, notebooks, computers, pacemakers, high heels, artificial knees, etc. – bring other possibilities and constraints that affect our thinking. All of these things will participate in our collaborative thinking, and in whatever communities of inquiry and/or plural minds we might nurture into being. Thinking together with bodies will involve interaction, making and doing things, speaking, moving, arranging objects and spaces, creating images, performing and exploring above and under the table to capture ideas and feelings that no individual can know alone.

Digging into the embodied character of shared spaces, as we did in *Turning Tables*, suggests techniques for cultivating and for destabilizing power relations. Embodied collaborative thinking could generate and support spaces for commoning memory, building fellowship and solidarity, enabling communities of inquiry and nurturing plural minds. This kind of thinking together may be unruly, and in that very unruliness, lives the potential for building eloquent and mighty embodied images of other ways of being, thinking and doing together.

[END OF CUT 4]

## **Conclusion**

[T]he radical imagination is not something possessed by individuals like some sort of radical capital that can be accumulated [...]. Rather [...it] emerges from the experience of 'acting otherwise', from the friction between one's values and the reigning paradigm of value, and from the process of building alternatives, whether those alternatives are as big as a housing co-operative or as small as an unlikely friendship [...]. The radical imagination is a collective process of developing alternative modes of reproducing our selves as social beings, and it in turn nourishes those efforts. (Haiven, 2014:19)

## Optimism

More and more I have come to admire resilience.  
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam  
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous  
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,  
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.  
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,  
mitochondria, figs -- all this resinous, unretractable earth.

(Hirshfield, 2002, p. 71)

In the first part of this Conclusion, I present outcomes of my research. First, after reiterating key points raised in the Cuts, I note characteristics of and conditions for public collaborative thinking. I briefly discuss the aftereffects of my research and then note the potential offered by my practice and tables. In the second part, I propose frameworks for scrutinising and reflecting on participatory art practices. In the third, I briefly reiterate the contributions made through this research and finally, I look to the future to sketch possible trajectories outward from my research.

### **Outcomes**

I have presented my research through this volume of essays, a series of projects presented in Volume 2 and the film *I was there* (2021). Each volume maps a distinct speculative trajectory that developed organically in relation to the other, following its own circuitous, wayfaring route through the research landscape. The outcomes of the research, whilst in relation to each other, are distinct ‘thought-things’ (Arendt, 1977, p. 62) that operate in discrete registers and stimulate incommensurate narratives. These chains of linked ideas or ‘thought trains’ (Arendt, 1977, p. 62), resisting classification and generalisation, establish a richness of possibility.

In Volume 1, Cut 1 – asking *How is this practice political?* – I explored two interfaces that connect everyday life and the formal institutions of deliberative democracy: the individual act of voting, and the collective act of public protest. I proposed the territory between the individual/family group and the institutions of political life as a site for practice and identified three categories of practice – *disclosing*, *practising* and *re-grounding*. These intersections of practice and participant reception can also be seen as milestones along a transformative process and used to evaluate the transformative potential of participatory practices.

In Cut 2 – asking *What is collaborative thinking?* – I probed individual and collaborative thinking and thought, commoning memory, extended mind, neuro-sculpting individual brains and cultivating neighbourhood networks. These speculations led me to two potential corollaries to public collaborative thinking: *communities of inquiry* and *plural minds*.

In Cut 3 – asking *What material form might this practice take?* – I analysed a model of collaborative thinking common in architectural design processes, in order to speculate on how a practice of public collaborative thinking might manifest in the world. Exploring the material metaphor of *the public table*, introduced questions about how material things act, perform and are activated through practice.

Finally, in Cut 4 – asking *How do bodies participate in collaborative thinking?* – I explored collaborative thinking as an embodied practice. Moving between individual bodies and assemblies of bodies, these speculations revealed what is at stake in coming together to think collaboratively as a public art activity.

In each of these essays, I presented examples of my own practice alongside those of other artists including Jonas Staal, Imani Jacqueline Brown, Forensic Architecture, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Taryn Simon, Melissa Wyman, Artur Żmijewski, *transparadiso*, Warren

Neidich, marksearch, and Suzanne Lacy. Interweaving the ideas in the essays with my projects and works by others revealed patterns, pointing to five key characteristics of a fruitful public collaborative thinking practice in a participatory art context. First, such practices involve coming together with intention to create spaces between, on the one hand, the private spaces of individual, family, and deliberative enclaves, and, on the other, the hyper-public space of the formal institutions of deliberative democracy. Second, public collaborative thinking practices deepen as the number and variety of points of view present in a gathering increase. Third, such practices intensify as the diversity of forms of thinking on offer expands – spatial, embodied, hands-on, theoretical, playful, verbal, gestural, etc. Fourth, they embrace conflict and explore ways to ‘cultivate’ aggression.<sup>140</sup> Finally, they are open-ended, free to meander organically through ideas, in unruly ways.

I can also offer a subjective list of conditions that might assist practices of public collaborative thinking to generate agency in the world. First, there must be enough time for trust to build. Participants must be given opportunities to acquire a sense of ownership over the process and come to see themselves as collaborators. Potential pitfalls, like those discussed in Cut 2, must be acknowledged, and a set of principles developed and agreed by each group. The process must be engaging and memorable. It should be grounded in a specific place and time, with components that link to what is meaningful in participants’ lives. The project should produce ideas, material objects and images that can be passed on. And finally, it should build and maintain connections across a variety of networks, including social and other kinds of media.

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<sup>140</sup> See reference to Judith Butler’s proposal that we ‘cultivate’ or channel aggression into a positive, non-violent collective action (Butler, 2015, p. 190).

It is only by looking back after a period of time that it becomes possible to ascertain whether an activity has generated agency in the world. In *The Missing Things*, transparadiso hoped to guarantee this by presenting the Mayor with a challenge, but it is beyond the range of my research to determine what aftereffects this may have actually stimulated. I do know, from the participant interviews included in the exhibition *We Are Here*, that Lacy's *Oakland Projects* and *La piel de la memoria/Skin of Memory* generated significant and long-lasting *agency* clearly manifest in the actions of the young participant/collaborators as they entered roles in society.

Interviewing participants for *I was there* (2021) gave me the opportunity to better understand some aftereffects of my practice and draw connections between what participants found notable and the ideas I developed through writing. It allowed me to more clearly see how theory, practice and participatory experience intertwine in this kind of inquiry. For example, as more than one person mentioned in the interviews, the engagements drew participants beyond their comfort zones, opening them to new ideas.<sup>141</sup> Also noted were how the mix of activities introduced a variety of routes into the ideas. These comments resonate with Morizot & Zhong Mengual's discussion of the *true encounter*.

Other participants mentioned the social activities outside the events as having been rewarding. Looking back today during our era of narrowed social possibilities, the lunches and dinners we enjoyed together in crowded restaurants 'shoulder to shoulder', as one person put it, are memorable and affective.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Most, but not all these comments were made, in relation to *The Land and Me* (2019) (Volume 2, 52-53).

<sup>142</sup> The interviews were conducted during enforcement of a 'shelter in place' order to combat the spread of COVID 19.

In *I was there*, more than one person states that the project created community. One described how the audience went into *The Land and Me: Part 3* (Volume 2, 44-49) as ‘individual wayfarers’ and were transformed by the process into ‘people of counsel’. This suggests comradeship and solidarity, something like David Bohm’s notion of impersonal fellowship. To my mind, it also reflects a way of being together which is conducive to collaborative thinking.

Participants I interviewed offered five things my practice has the potential to do. It can:

- create opportunities for the serious work of learning through play (as adults);
- construct affective environments – using people, objects, space, questions, etc – or in other words, transform space using people;
- generate settings or situations where people feel able to reveal themselves;
- transform strangers into a community of inquiry and
- provide a model of how to work together in times of uncertainty.

Other components of the research suggest that my practice also invites us to:

- bring our isolated individual experiences together in ways that nurture a more comprehensive understanding of our shared situation;
- notice who and what can be seen and heard and why;
- notice the agency of things and the inherent limitations of human intentionality;
- probe the gap between perception and meaning that Rancière calls dissensus;
- assemble and display a variety of representations of matters of concern, to allow different perspectives to be disclosed;
- experience different perspectives in action and experiment, rehearsing ways to mobilise differences in order to contribute to what Latour calls reformatting;
- practise collaboration in open-ended and unruly ways;



- develop body memory of new or uncommon rituals of gathering;
- practise forms of embodied public thinking and acting;
- approach Arendt's *vita activa* by facilitating movement from labour to collaborative work through to speech and action;
- develop flexibility around enacting public discord and cultivated aggression through playful enactments;
- facilitate the appearance of plural minds and grow communities of inquiry;
- practise ways of being and doing together in recognition of our common interdependency, embodiment and vulnerability and
- practise moving away from problem solving to emphasise processes and principles over outcomes.

The research also indicates that my tables can:

- transform different locations into settings for collaborative activities including thinking;
- mobilise as a piece of flexible, mobile, contingent, temporary local public infrastructure that provides a useful surface and orders spaces, bodies and rituals for coming together;
- link us together whilst keeping us safely apart;
- function as an extension of the brains gathered around it and
- remind us that even though our culture and the table would separate our thinking brains from our labouring bodies, we can choose to re-ground ourselves in the living systems of which we are a part.

It is important to note that although I have chosen to place tables at the centre of my practice, public collaborative thinking in an art context can take many different forms. It

might find inspiration in situations of everyday life and work like project design team meetings. It might also borrow from traditional or historic practices of gathering, like a quilting circle or a sweat lodge. It might re-enact parliamentary or judicial committee proceedings, incorporate forms from theatre or other kinds of performance. Or, it might reimagine military strategy sessions and/or operations.

### **Frameworks for analysing participatory artwork**

As I sketched in the Introduction, the discourse around participatory art tends to focus on issues of ethics and aesthetics. My research points to a number of other approaches to making and critiquing these kinds of practices.

#### *Diversity of aesthetic engagement offered*

One approach relates to the types of aesthetic engagement an artwork extends. Drawing on Simondon's concept of individuation of selves and collectives, Morizot and Zhong Mengual advocate for a way of thinking about encounters with art that brings a greater variety of forms into focus. Questions that might be asked in this category of analysis include: Does the encounter rely primarily on aesthetics understood through perception, or are there opportunities for other kinds of experience and action? Do the forms of engagement on offer evolve unexpectedly with time, or degree of proximity? Does the work offer the potential to catalyse a collective? How does duration come into play?

The three categories of practice I proposed in Cut 1 – practising, disclosing and re-grounding – might also contribute here. *Practising* can involve trying out and rehearsing alternative forms of everyday activities (exchange, assembly, narration, self-management, debate, argument, negotiation or conflict, for example). Here the artwork is an activity

taken through the body and repeated. The kinds of transformation that practising offers are embedded in everyday life, and may only be noticeable over time.

I defined *disclosing* as creating representations of matters of concern in ways that support the gathering of publics around them. Here the artwork is apprehended from a distance through the senses, most commonly through sight, with the body involved primarily as a receiver of sensory information. Practices that re-ground go beyond making visible or practising other ways of being and doing. *Re-grounding* compels viewers or participants to engage in a process of taking an issue apart, using their bodies and minds to re-assemble the pieces into other configurations.

*The Land and Me* incorporated elements of all three categories. Listening to stories of each participant's relationship to the land disclosed personal histories of trauma. We practised ways to process trauma by transforming the words and phrases of these stories into materials we could use in artistic processes. The final participatory performance event was an exercise in re-grounding through an embodied enactment of community and the symbolic performance of hopes for renewed relations with the land.

#### *The character and quality of relations generated*

Another useful way of looking at a participatory artwork is with a focus on the character and quality of the relations it generates. As Butler argues, the space of appearance exists in the gaps between people, and politics appears in the spaces that link us. We must pay attention to the character and quality of what goes on in these inbetween spaces (Butler, 2015, p. 77). Lacy has described her work as 'a sort of net' which she uses to shed light on what exists in the spaces and relationships between people. She speaks of it as material objects – strings that could be drawn from one person to another, and from which the words and interactions of their exchanges could be hung (Willsdon, 2019, p. 35).

*The Land and Me* established a series of relations, some of which are still alive two years later. Lacy's *Oakland Projects* built relationships among hundreds of people, some of which continued for at least thirty years as evidenced in *We Are Here*. To my mind, the persistence of those relations raises the cultural value of participatory art. Bishop's appraisal of Santiago Sierra's work, focused on spectator relations. I propose that much more would be learned about the full reach of Sierra's work if the other relations formed along the way were also considered. This would include those formed among the people paid to stand against a wall or to crouch inside boxes.<sup>143</sup> In addition to ethical questions, we should ask what relations are generated and what, acting together, they make visible or conceal. In other words, we should ask what together they bring to the table.

Recalling Arendt's theatre analogy, looking only at the performance event misses much of what a theatre production does in the world. For the makers of theatre, architecture, an exhibition or a book, the process of getting to the final performance, building, exhibition or publication is an essential part of the work (Spatz, 2015, p. 58). Although they are generally shielded from public view, the behind-the-scenes practices may contribute the greater part of what the work does in the world over time. Public participatory art practices often bring back-of-house activities into public view as part of the work. Following Lacy, I propose that all the relationships and experiences provoked, prompted or produced throughout the generation and life of participatory artwork should be brought into the discourse.

*Materiality – how the work physically manifests in the world*

Many participatory art practices activate a range of objects (like tables) in interesting ways. Another lens might focus on these material participants, and their interactions with each

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<sup>143</sup> See discussion in the Introduction.

other and with human participants. Paying attention to how practices activate different material objects offers new avenues for reflection and analysis.

A table is an everyday utilitarian device, a technology that extends what an individual body can do and what bodies can do together. When brought into play, its affordances physically invite you and me to do certain things. When placed in an art setting, tables may remain unnoticed, but something else happens when they are activated. When I place segments of *Table 15* around a room and invite participants to help me bring them together, I gather the attention of the group, get them moving in relation to each other and to the other material actors in the room. Assembling the table brings us all into active relation and collaboration with each other, with the table as a material participant.

Activating the table in this way transforms it and its usual table-affordances, into a specific material presence, which offers a unique set of possibilities for meaning to emerge within the engagement. In *The Land and Me: Landscape in the Round*, *Table 15* came together as a installation that evoked the land. It offered itself as an unspoken invitation to gather, as a support for making objects and displaying them, a hub around which to dance, a surface for writing, and a symbolic space for our emerging community of inquiry.

At *The Land and Me: If the land could speak...?*, the pieces of the table came together as an altar-like space, where the hopes of a community traumatised by fire could be held, honoured and possibly turned towards a renewal of a loving mutual relationship with the land. Through serial activation, we transformed disparate objects (the table segments) first into building blocks for collaboration, then into an everyday working surface, and finally into a shared symbolic space.

*Local knowledge and grounding in specific place*

A fourth frame relates to local knowledge production. Noval and I created *Uncaptured Land* in response to the unusual setting of the Albany Bulb and *The Land and Me* in response to a particular situation in Santa Rosa. Specific to their place and time, each project contributed to the understanding of that place in that moment. As one-off projects, however, their impact on the places were less readable than what might happen with longer-term projects, which involve layering artwork and activities into a place over time.

Analysis of place-grounded participatory artworks or practices must include criteria relating to impact on the local setting. Of course, this is not easy to do. Each situation is unique and not commensurate with any other. Even if I could visit all the different places where this kind of participatory artworks take place, I could never acquire the knowledge of the specifics of each place to truly understand their impact.

The quality of the afterlife of a work of participatory art is equally difficult to assess, because it requires continual attention after the work is 'completed'. The way the art world operates – the rhythms of biennales, residencies, funding cycles, etc. – works against recurrent or durational participatory art practices as well as against extended analysis.<sup>144</sup> Despite these difficulties, attention to the potential and actual afterlives of this kind of work is a valuable criterion for analysis and critique.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> The Liverpool Biennial and the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale are two notable exceptions that I know of.

<sup>145</sup> Lacy has revisited many of her participatory artworks in gallery settings making films, photographs, installations and performances. These gallery-friendly components of her participatory projects are made to be easily disseminated in the global art world. By doing this she extends the reach of her work. But, at the same time, does this devalue the contributions of the participant/collaborators who made the work with her and appear within it?

An example of how a participatory artwork might contribute to local knowledge was revealed during my interview of Tara Thompson, the Santa Rosa Arts Coordinator who commissioned *The Land and Me*. Thompson spoke of having been impressed by the number and diversity of people the project connected with.

I had no idea that they were paying attention to this kind of thing or that they would come out and be part of this and that. ... It relates back to ... the changes we're looking at for the public art program in general, because ... if people want to react and interact with something like this, that speaks to their need to connect with other people, and a traditional public art program doesn't always facilitate those connections.

There is another question to be asked here, which is whether it important for a participatory artwork – grounded in a place and time – to reach beyond its specific context. In other words, a framework for analysis based on an artwork's level of connection to a particular place or situation can also be considered from the opposite direction, to analyse a work's degree of connection or relevance to the global art world.

My tables are not grounded in any specific site. Their specificity comes through activation. My intent has been to make a transportable table that can be activated, interpreted and/or performed meaningfully in different situations and settings. In each situation, the context colours the table's meaning. In the context of the Stanford d-school, for example, *Table 15* – seen as a designed and digitally fabricated prototype of an object useful for collaboration – complemented the setting conceptually as well as physically. In contrast, the same table presented an incongruous presence in the unkempt terrain of *Uncaptured Land*. As a home base for that engagement, it conferred an unmistakable temporary identity to a particular place in the landscape.<sup>146</sup> Setting sand situations offer different affordances for

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<sup>146</sup> As noted by participants in *I was there* (2021) (Volume 2, 52-23).

table activation. Assisted by a unique score, we – artists and participants together – establish the specific character of an engagement.

### *Potential for transformation*

Many artists take up participatory art forms in order to contribute to positive social change. Critical evaluation of practices like mine should include clear-eyed questioning of its potential to do this. Creating opportunities for Morizot and Zhong Mengual's *true encounters* seems like a first step, but, as they argue, it may be impossible to design a *true encounter* or make one happen. I am not sure if it possible to look at a practice or a project from the outside and learn anything about its transformative potential. Nevertheless, I return to *disclosing, practising and re-grounding*, which in this order might be understood as places along a transformative process that moves – perhaps like learning to play something on the piano – through hearing something, to practising it, to being able to play it without thinking.

### **Contributions**

This research contributes to the field in a number of important ways. It offers public collaborative thinking as a category of participatory practice, illuminating its political relevance, revealing its possibilities and limitations and developing tools for doing it. Building on the work of others (Helguera, 2011) (Jackson, 2011) (Harvie, 2013) who have developed tools for doing and evaluating participatory art forms, it introduces new methods including tactics for unsettling fixed ideas about situations or places and challenging them in ways that might lead to shifts in local social and political relations. It contributes to local knowledge through critical site and situation specific public engagements as evidenced in *I was there* (2021) (Volume 2, 52-53). It offers new knowledge about political and social transformation, and roles that participatory art forms



can play in them (Kester, 2011, p. 226), by proposing five criteria for scrutinizing and reflecting on these kinds of practice. It also explicates and quizzes Morizot and Zhong Mengual's theory of the *true encounter*. My research problematises the relationships of private, public and political life as elaborated by Arendt and Butler in relation to collaborative activities including thinking, by proposing collaborative thinking as an intermediate step or category in the continuum of labour, work, speech and action. It also identifies three intersections of practice and participant reception as milestones along a transformative process: *disclosing*, *practising* and *re-grounding*.

### **Trajectories outward**

I began this thesis by asserting that I see the public realm – which should be a common resource genuinely open to all – as hopelessly co-opted by political and economic forces, and that contemporary public art practices sometimes participate in this capitulation. I have argued that certain kinds of public participatory art practice resist this by enabling fresh ways to think about the structures that support our everyday communal life. I have proposed that public collaborative thinking in participatory artworks can create opportunities for alternative ideas and practices to emerge and take root in public discourse. My research inquiry has been driven in part by a desire to find and establish theoretical and practical supports to help me practise with conviction and purpose, even in the midst of profound disillusionment. To help me cultivate – like Hirshfield's tree – the resilient ability to turn to the light, finding affordances even in seemingly hopeless spaces.

In the Introduction, I posited that every artistic practice has an embedded political agenda. Mine would be to generate practices that become embedded and active in the world – practices that acquire a life of their own. In most cases this afterlife may simply be a memory shared by a few people, as in *The Land and Me*. However, there are many artists

who aspire to make something that could become part of the ‘cultural DNA’ of a place and community – not just as a memory, but as an evolving practice, or even an institution; something like that which *Commons Archive* achieves.

### **Art to cultural practice, practising to heritage**

The Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale is an art festival that has transformed one region’s cultural landscape.<sup>147</sup> As I wrote in 2009:

One of the goals of the Triennial [sic] [...was] to expand the understanding of the public realm within the community and open a space for communication, discourse and cross-fertilisation with mainstream urban culture. [...] Built and maintained with great skill and care over hundreds of years, Japan’s rural landscape is clearly the product of a traditional culture making best use of difficult terrain and limited resources. Still, it [...was] unlikely that producers of that landscape [...saw] their work as ‘cultural’ activity (2009, pp. 179-80).

*This is Not a Swing*, an artwork made by Masanori Handa for the 2006 Triennale, illustrates how the layering of art in a place can change how that place is understood. Suspended from four delicately tapering yet sturdy bamboo stems brought together and lashed five metres in the air, each simple board swing offered a surprising invitation;

The cut bamboos were dragged to the location for placement, and the artist, together with [...] local people, stood [...them] up, [...] and designated them as ‘sacred pillar[s]’ of the community. Through the ride on a swing, we were given an

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<sup>147</sup> The first Triennale took place in 2000. It is now preparing for its seventh iteration. I first became involved as a volunteer in 2003. In 2006, I was commissioned to do the architectural design part of the collaborative empty house project *Shedding House* (2006) with Junichi Kurakake and the Sculpture Department at Nihon University. In 2009, I was commissioned to do the sound installation *Togetime/Pass time* (2009). I also went to see the Triennale in 2012, 2015, and 2018 and have visited the region several other times, often staying for a number of weeks. I had already spent quite a bit of time in the region, when I first noticed Handa’s artwork.

opportunity to turn our eyes to the scenery of the place and to feel the wind blowing (Echigo Tsumari Art Field, 2006).

Although, at first, I wondered if the swings were part of an older local tradition, an offering of public pleasure seemed out of sync with the serious business of life in this region of extreme snow accumulation and severe depopulation. Yet the swings seemed at home, and because they appeared just about believable, they conjured the possibility of another way of living, even in this difficult place.

The swings fooled me. Their ambiguous status as both of the place and yet not, and as swings and yet not, caused me to look again at the other things around them. Were those handmade walls also an artwork, or products of an older tradition? What about that straw stacked neatly around those poles? I began to see everything in that landscape as art. Through conversations with local residents, I learned that they also began view the places they and their ancestors had built, differently, seeing in them cultural practices and artefacts, more beautiful than – and equally rich as – anything a city might have to offer.

The swings did not become a new local tradition, as I might hope. But, over the last twenty years, I have watched the Triennale evolve into a broad collection of events, practices and institutions, through collaboration between the initiating organisation, local individuals and groups, and artists from all over Japan and abroad.<sup>148</sup> The Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, as this collection of activities is now called, continues to transform the how the region understands itself.

Of course, *This is Not a Swing* is not a form of public collaborative thinking – although I might argue that the process by which it came into being is. The artwork represents a link between art and the development of new cultural traditions, which suggests a future

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<sup>148</sup> The Triennale was conceived by Art Front Gallery under the artistic leadership of Fram Kitagawa.



Figure 24: Masanori Handa, *This is Not a Swing* (2006), photograph courtesy of (Echigo Tsumari Art Field, 2006) [left], photograph by author [right].

trajectory. Ben Spatz elaborates on repetitive technique as a form of knowledge developed through practice (Spatz, 2015).<sup>149</sup> I propose an analogous relationship between how practising might transform repetition into fully embodied technique, and how participatory practices in public might become cultural ritual and possibly heritage.<sup>150</sup>

An example that brings together public performative practice, embodied technique, and cultural heritage is the historical practice of Sumo wrestling in rural Japan. In parts of the countryside, it is still possible to see evidence of the sacred circles where local youth once trained and participated in ritualised Sumo wrestling on the grounds of Shinto shrines. In keeping with the practical wisdom of traditional cultural practices, Sumo can be seen as an excellent way for a community to channel the excess and potentially aggressive energy of young men into a cultural form that celebrates brute strength cultivated through skill, purity and grace. Imagining this kind of wisdom in California in 2020, I wonder what relations between youth and police in Oakland might be like today if Lacy's *No Blood/No Foul* basketball game performance had become a regularly practised cultural ritual.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> See discussion in Cut 4. In her book *Social Works* (2011), Shannon Jackson traces connections between participatory practices that choreograph bodies in public space and traditional performing arts.

<sup>150</sup> Cheong Siew Ann of Nanyang Technological University Singapore has identified three components of the kinds of human-to-human interaction patterns that become intangible cultural heritage: 1) it is replicated in different places, transmitted across generations and transformed over time; 2) it is enhanced by landscape features; and 3) it occurs as part of a symbiotic relationship with tangible heritage (Cheong, 2016). Also of interest here is Nietzsche as interpreted by Nikolas Kompridis, who writes that Nietzsche's "Architect of the future" [...] names an attitude or stance that one is required to assume in order to think anew "the proportion of continuity and discontinuity in the forms of life we pass on" (Kompridis, 2006, p. 11).

<sup>151</sup> Both this historic practice of local Sumo and Lacy's *No Blood/No Foul*, could be seen as examples methods for the 'cultivating' of aggression that Butler advocates.

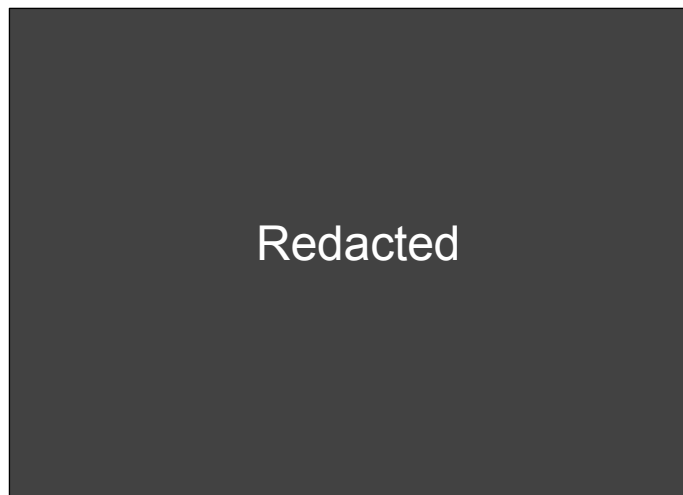


Figure 25: A dohyo (Sacred Circle for Sumo wrestling) at rural Shinto Shrine, photograph by Takeshi Murakami (2008).

## **Fissures**

Despite the fact of our human interdependency, I experience the world independently of you, and of our collective 'us'. Enveloped in my own perceptions and thoughts, I am locked away from you and from the society we share. I experience most visual art forms in a personal way. Facing the artwork in my own time, I perceive it and it affects me, based on my individual experience and the personal associations it attracts for me. I might succeed in communicating some of my experience to you through words; you and I might find common responses through language and gesture, but my experience of the art feels separate and discrete.<sup>152</sup>

Morizot and Zhong Mengual argue that, even in my isolation, there are parts of me that remain open – open to receive active information that might generate something new in myself and others at the same time, catalysing a form of community. I argue that something like this happens when we think and make things together. In so doing, response and feedback become mutually interactive, producing experiences in you and me that – although not identical – rely on, complement and resonate with each other.<sup>153</sup>

I proposed in Cut 3 that you and I enter the political realm when we begin to work together. Today, a stone's throw from my front door, a group of people live on the street under conditions of extreme precarity. I do not know them, and I do not know their lives. I can only imagine that if I were in such a situation, the lack of reliable supports would undermine my ability to act. Yet, through their collaborative practices of living together in public, they persist.

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<sup>152</sup> Even agreeing with Bohm that my responses are part of a culturally constructed system, my experience of them is isolated and independent.

<sup>153</sup> Somewhat like making improvisational polyphonic music, perhaps.

In Cut 4, I argued alongside Butler that bodies in formation – labouring in proximity – speak and act even when silent and still. Why is it then that efforts of the precarious community in my neighbourhood remain invisible, even though their encampment is in plain sight? It seems to me, that your and my collaborative efforts in the service of our shared world, are also overlooked. Not so, the celebrated participation of corporations. The contributions made by you and me through taxes to fund a local public hospital, for example, may be eclipsed by a corporate donor’s name adorning its front door.<sup>154</sup> Capitalist business-as-usual conceals collaboration outside corporate settings, obscuring our experiences of shared collaborative agency from ourselves.

In my professional art and architecture sphere, one area of public collaboration remains somewhat visible: the design and construction of public infrastructure. Such projects are generally achieved after a public deliberative process, during which we collectively consider and decide what should be done. In this case, our collaborative work begins after this political collaborative thinking process, which involves negotiating differences and agreeing protocol for bringing something new into being. Perhaps the way that public infrastructure is achieved can show you and me how to own and celebrate our individual and collective contributions. Perhaps it can show us how to fight to make and keep those contributions visible. An affordance in a hopeless space, perhaps?

In this context, my research emerges as an exploration into one way to activate this affordance: with a participatory art practice of thinking together in public, illuminating manifold ways to see, make and do our world differently.

[END OF CONCLUSION]

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<sup>154</sup> San Francisco General Hospital is now called Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center.

## **Accompanying Material**

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## **Confirmation of ethical approval**

Submitted separately.