

8 March

2022

7 June

12 April

10 May

First European  
Assembly  
of Contemporary  
Art Centres

# *This Time We Talk About Gender*

[www.europeanartassembly.org](http://www.europeanartassembly.org)

DCA

French National  
Network of Contemporary  
Art Centres

# First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres

## Experimental Tools for Ungendering Institutional Practices

### Summary of the meeting on 10 May

This document produced by DCA — French national network of contemporary art centres, is a summary of the discussions held during an online roundtable on 10 May, 2022 in the framework of the First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres.

The video recording of these discussions is available on:  
<https://europeanartassembly.org/en/programme/3>

Discussion 1:  
Julie Pellegrin & Helena Reckitt  
Chairwoman: Céline Kopp

## Taking Care: Revaluation of Practices and Ethics of Care

Céline Kopp: How can we talk in a non-judgmental environment amongst peers as a constructive step towards unlearning unsustainable work habits? How can we imagine ourselves operating as part of a caring alliance? How can we push back against exploitative working conditions? How can we develop propositions for new habits and structures in which care would be more equitably valued, remunerated, and distributed? How can we care *with* others? How can we develop more reciprocal forms of care, based on the redistribution of resources, between curators and the artists, institutions, communities and publics?

Julie Pellegrin:<sup>1</sup> In 2016, DCA organized professional days bringing together teams from contemporary art centres and external workers, over the course of which the constatation that there was a shared and growing suffering at work was made. We did not yet use the term “care” at that point – a term that French social scientists such as Sandra Laugier, Pascale Molinier and Patricia Paperman introduced in France in the 2000’s. They decided not to translate in order to not depoliticise it: they do not use French terms such as “sollicitude” or “bienveillance” to highlight that care is not an essentializing feminine notion but a complex and demanding task of attention.

In 2018, DCA organized another professional day. We invited psychologist Pascale Molinier to discuss the complex relationship between management and care, born from the state of extreme fatigue and burn-out of many female directors. She told us: “you do not do care jobs, you do art jobs!”, but at the same time encouraged us to work collectively, to meet more often and in smaller groups to rethink our modes of working. The problem is that to take and be in charge of care has become an additional skill to acquire and task to perform. We realized that we had to take care of our institutions due to plummeting public funding, of our audiences because there was a demand for accessibility which required the implementation of artistic and cultural education, and of our teams who are becoming increasingly precarious – all with skill sets that we didn’t necessarily have, having studied art or exhibition history! How can care become a real work of (self)critique, without adding more need for polyvalence, new skill for a higher productivity?

---

1. From 2007 to 2020, Julie Pellegrin directed the contemporary art centre La Ferme du Buisson (Noisiel, France), member of the DCA network.

At La Ferme du Buisson, I invited Christine Shaw in 2019 to curate an exhibition called *Take Care*<sup>2</sup> because of her long-term project at Blackwood Gallery in Toronto. She proposed a workshop on the links between curating and care with Helena Reckitt, that opened many avenues of reflection and lasting action, and led us to understand that complaint and refusal can go hand in hand with a great deal of joy when it is part of collective sharing and healing.

Helena Reckitt: The different aspects of care, put forward by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, in the form of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and plurality, communication, trust and respect, very much resonate within the cultural sector. Despite us talking about our work in terms of passion, love and vocation, we create toxic environments because of over-identification. Care is needed but undervalued and invisibilized, it is often background labor, carried out by those who are feminized, classed and racialized as well as having migrant backgrounds. The danger is that it's naturalized as inherent quality of women, who are assumed to be naturally more caring or maternal than me. Seen as a labor of love, their labour doesn't need to be recognized or remunerated properly. A lot of the invisible caring labor that takes place should really be carried out by the state and it is to lesser and greater extents in contemporary societies. There is a temporal element to such work: it's durational, ongoing and often tedious. As Mierle Laderman Ukeles put it in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969*!: "Maintenance is a drag. It takes all the fucking time."

Three years ago, we did the workshop *Taking (back) Care*<sup>3</sup> in Paris with about 14 people, mainly working in the contemporary arts sector and education, and with activist backgrounds. We put a lot of energy into thinking through the idea of how refusal could become an important act, particularly in our cultural sector, where workers are often posited as endless sources of work care and love, to the detriment of themselves and the needs of those they work with. We collectively wrote some propositions for what we thought would be important aspirations to work towards in the contemporary art field, that grew from a frustration that it is easy to diagnose the problems, but challenging to overcome the sense of not having agency:

- Our proposition is that we create structures that find a place for every individuality. This recognises that everyone has their own skills, which can be shared with others in more productive ways than if you work individually. This creation of an environment of reciprocity – rather than a strict economic exchange – increases our collective capacity to do.
- Our proposition is we trust the intelligence of the group rather than only push our own ideas, and find structures for supporting this collective process.

---

2. <https://www.lafermedubuisson.com/programme/take-care>

3. [https://www.lafermedubuisson.com/programme/archives\\_programme\\_2018-2019/helena-reckitt-christine-shaw](https://www.lafermedubuisson.com/programme/archives_programme_2018-2019/helena-reckitt-christine-shaw)

- Our proposition is that we understand care as a finite resource, and value (price) it – and redistribute it (taking back care) – accordingly. Bearing in mind that the Global South is the region most expropriated for its caring resources, as well as so much else.
- Our proposition is instead of agreeing to provide what is demanded, we turn the conversation around to work on what is really needed.
- Our proposition is to understand care as a good that increases when you apply it. It multiplies itself.
- Our proposition is that we allow space for people to speak out, learn to listen to people who do so, and recognise and appreciate that their response is a form of emotional labor. In so doing we recognise that the curatorial gesture is not complete, but is itself a work-in-process.
- Our proposition is that we understand care as not only representing critique – and gaining cultural capital in the process – but applying care to the structures in which we work, ideally in ways that cannot be easily rolled back. E.g: Christine's example of securing funds for gallery staff, who are unionized and whose jobs cannot be easily dissolved.
- Our proposition is that we promote practices of working together, and rethink care as a collective project, among students (and others) above those of the domineering author ego.
- Our proposition is that we attempt to acknowledge those whose work contributes to a project, whose labor might be invisible or under-valued, and to explore ways of doing so that go beyond being a token gesture (perhaps by questioning the logic of authorship and/or intellectual copyright).
- Our proposition is to envision our projects as assemblage in more-than-human worlds, and that we make those assemblages visible, instead of foregrounding individual actors and agents.
- We propose a system by which representatives of a group present managers with grievances that are anonymously leveled, rather than identifying individuals.
- We propose to develop contracts that stipulate we will not work under conditions of under-payment, to which all signatories would adhere.

Three years ago, we hadn't had a pandemic, and we hadn't had this war in Ukraine. What did we miss and what changed in that time?

Julie Pellegrin: I would like to rethink the title of the exhibition and workshop: *Taking Care and Taking (back) Care*, that can sound like an injunction imposed on us and that we impose on ourselves. How could we have problematised this

“injunction” of when an institution declares itself to be ethical or caring, when it is oftentimes with the goal to increase the productivity of the teams in a neoliberal sense. There is an effect of “non-performativity”, as Sara Ahmed describes. Committees and programmes are set up to prove that institutions are socially and environmentally responsible, feminists, antiracists, but this mostly acts as an excuse to not do the work. Care needs to be more than a subject to treat; it should not be represented by art but implemented through concrete and demanding institutional work, as well as dedicated financial means.

In *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, Maggie Nelson<sup>4</sup> treats issues of censorship in relation to art and explains that we have to care about art but art doesn't have to care about us. I left my position at the Ferme du Buisson after I refused to do a very lucrative project. It was the refusal of the artist, Mathis Collins, that led me to dare to formulate my own. He pointed to working methods that we don't question enough. After the 2015 terrorist attacks in France, a large police force was sent to “difficult” neighborhoods to contain “radicalisation” and delinquency (sic). After this failed, the police headquarters attempted to link with artistic establishments to substitute the police with artists, with the same goal in mind! Here, art or the artist cannot take care of us.

However, I think like Maria Puig de la Bellacasa that the link between the function of art and care could be understood as that “which can hold us together”. Without instrumentalizing art, institutions can be inspired by the artistic imagination to invent new ways of being and being together in this world.

Helena Reckitt: It is very difficult to prevent institutional harm, because the people that are doing the harm are protected by the management and hired by the board. One of the few ways toxic managers are removed is through accusations of sexual harassment and while it is good that there is a climate in which sexual harassment can lead to consequences, that is not the only form of abuse that occurs.

For the most part in the UK, the energy around care comes from people outside organizations like artists such as Johanna Hedva, who published a disability rider<sup>5</sup> that she presents to organisations, or Jamila Prowse, who argues for programming that is flexible and attentive to the needs of artists and workers. It is exciting that these requirements sometimes get adopted inside the institutions, following external demands. In turn, taking care of the organization is often used as a justification for uncaring work practices; it is mostly the lowest-paid workers that are doing the work. It is almost like art workers have to internalize the threats and behave in ways that are self-sacrificial and detrimental to their own and others' wellbeing. Oftentimes there is a hierarchy in arts organizations that those considered to have the most authority are those who work the closest with the artists and revered, market-validated works of art, while those working with the public are not consulted and their wisdom is not sought out or valued.

---

4. Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, Graywolf Press, 2021

5. <https://sickwomantheory.tumblr.com/post/187188672521/hedvas-disability-access-rider>

## Discussion 2: Nanne Buurman & Iris Dressler Chairwoman: Céline Kopp


### Hospitality and Diversity Politics, the Ambivalences of Access

Céline Kopp: We have discussed a lot about today's discussion during our preparatory meetings, especially with Nanne Buurman who has raised several questions about its topics. Who hosts whom and to what ends? How can we be inclusive without reproducing given power structures? How can we create safer spaces without depoliticizing art institutions? How can we enable participation without paternalism? How can we avoid stabilizing given epistemologies by simply expanding canons and broadening audiences? How to deal with the risk of inclusion as a means of regulation and normalization? How do we avoid a moralizing self-purification of curatorial practices? How can we acknowledge art's and our complicity with capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy?

Iris Dressler: To talk about hospitality, I went back to Derrida's separation between the juridical social agreements when it comes to the stranger who still has a name and social status, and the absolute other who does not. This is relevant today if we compare the European care, behavior and hospitality regarding Ukrainian refugees and the experience of the people from Africa or Arabic countries, even on a legal level. Our art institutions are not very accessible when it comes to non-normative bodies or people of color. The notion of the audience, to the neoliberal museum that is under pressure of commercialism, is in turn tied to these contexts. While we know that diversity is important, it is also close to the neoliberal ideas of "reaching a diverse public". Talk of sustainability is being used and abused in capitalist terms, which has created a lot of distrust. How do we deal with this? What does hospitality mean in terms of different guests? Firstly, the "invited guests" include the artists, the audience, the staff, my colleagues, collaborators, partners, those that we are aware of and know. What came even more clear during Covid is that the art system is based on precarious work and that care, hospitality and responsibility mean a lot. We in the institutions are the ones responsible to care for the money that we can give to the people that we are working with, our invited guests, especially if we are publicly funded. There is the complex issue of censorship and self-censorship, in which institutions don't take the responsibility to address conflict but simply take out the artwork or the speaker. In terms of hospitality and ethics, we need to think about how we work with the "invited guests": conflict.

Everyone is scared of being accused of being racist, sexist, ableist, excluding, and hierarchical, everyone tries to position themselves as being the opposite of this.





We then lose the space for going into the deep problems of these mechanisms. We need to find ways not to embrace conflict but to give space and moderation for any sort of conflict. I think that unexpected and unwanted guests are related to a loss of control regarding collective processes, modes of sharing, and informal and uncurated formats. We tend as institutions to over-curate, while we should de-curate many things. The most complex and frightening challenge for the institution's internal structures is giving up and losing privileges. We also need to deconstruct our successes: in 2018 we held an exhibition<sup>6</sup> revisiting our successful Bauhaus exhibition 50 years earlier where we looked critically at the entanglement with the heroes of the Bauhaus and the Nazi's which has been well-known since the 90s but isn't talked about enough. Since 2012 at the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, we are exploring the idea of shared, uncontrolled spaces that can be used by different publics that are completely uncurated by us. In other places in the city center, you have to pay rent and to consume. For this, we use the foyer, where all furniture is on wheels and can be moved around, and during Covid, our open-air platform. These have been inhabited by students, local artists, and political groups, for example. What are their problems and what kind of protocols would these spaces need? If you make everything open, how can you for some moments still create safe spaces and who is using these and who is not? This is a question of trust. Because the open-air space is directly connected to a park, this shared space also becomes an important political space to discuss the question of who owns it. We are working with different groups on the problem of racial profiling and control by the police of that park.

Nanne Buurman: It is very important to acknowledge the precarious working conditions of curators or caretakers, but also to check our own privileges in how they are enabled by the curatorial unconscious of racialised, gendered and classed divisions of labor. While most of us tend to work under precarious conditions, many people in the art world still have relatively privileged middle- or upper-class backgrounds. To be able to enter the field, we have to have the necessary cultural capital and be able to financially afford to work for little or no pay. This aspect tends to remain a blind spot when feminism in the arts operates as a kind of identity politics most of the time. Canon revisions, all-women's shows, and quotas for equal representation of "male" and "female" artists have been introduced as means of affirmative action. These are complemented by thematic exhibitions dedicated to feminist, gender, or LGBTQI\* issues, dedicated to the deconstruction of (essentializing) binary gender concepts. Nevertheless, feminist curating is most often concerned with the artists' gender or with the reflections of gender and sexuality in artworks, the focus largely remaining on norm-conforming or subversive visualizations of personhood or tokenistic counts of participants while leaving structural or economic inequalities and exclusions unaddressed.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, my research looks at the socially re/productive functions

6. <https://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/program/2019/exhibitions/50-years-after-50-years-of-the-bauhaus-1968/>

7. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/esse/2017-n90-esse03065/85597ac/>



of curating. Starting from heuristic homologies between exhibitions and households, I analyze the gendered divisions of labor and distributions of power in curating.<sup>8</sup> These often imply biopolitical deployments of “femininity”, a “female” habitus of restraint, or the responsabilization of certain “feminized” subjects as providers of care, who are expected to perform their “labor of love” for free, due to their love of art.<sup>9</sup> In the field of curating, this “feminization of labor” has led to a fetishization, or even commodification of the notion of care, in which the soft powers and governmentalities involved in care and hospitality often remain the unacknowledged curatorial unconscious in rituals of ethical self-legitimization.<sup>10</sup> Moral codes of conduct result in self-stagings of curators as altruistic and angelic carers for others, which these self-purifications tend to deny curatorial powers, complicities and the ways in which hospitality may also contribute to the accumulate social capital.<sup>11</sup>

This year’s Venice Biennale may serve as an example of such contradictions of care.<sup>12</sup> While it was an important feminist gesture by the curator (Cecilia Alemani) to include a huge number of women artists in the main show “Milk of Dreams”, the strong emphasis on maternity and body aesthetics had a certain anachronistic feel of re-essentialization, of reducing “women” to their bodies. While Black “women artists” were prominent and won the golden lions (Simone Leigh, Sonia Boyce), on a structural level, there were still many “women” of color laboring behind the scenes of the Giardini, for instance, taking care of cleaning the bathrooms. Remarkably, the toilets were still organized into “ladies” and “gentlemen”, thus not only upholding an essentializing gender binary but also discriminating “women”, who had to stand in line much longer waiting for their turn. Natascha Sadr Haghghighian and Maria Eichhorn, the artists represented in the German pavilion in 2019 and 2022 respectively, have worked with this infrastructural dimension of the art by bringing the “backstage on stage”, decentering the attention to anonymous migrant laborers and addressing the ambivalent history of the pavilion. Their positions demonstrate that there is a hauntological dimension to hospitality, to hosting, and “ghosting” as practices of social re/production.<sup>13</sup> In the German context, racist, antisemitic fascist

8. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/from-prison-guard-to-healer-curatorial-authorships-in-the-context-of-gendered-economie.html#.YulTRpDP3ly>

9. Pierre Bourdieu/Alain Darbel: *Love of Art. European Art Museums and their Public*, Polity Press, 1997.

10. Buurman: “Wages for Networking? Curating as a Labour of Love, or: Canonization, Capitalization and Care”, in: *Networks of Care. Politiken des (Er)haltens und (Ent)sorgens*, ed. with Anna Schäffler & Friderike Schäfer, nGbK Berlin 2022.

11. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/angels-in-the-white-cube-rhetorics-of-curatorial-innocence-at-documenta-13.html#.YulOtZDP3lw>;

<https://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/ccb-with-displaying-curatorial-relationality-in-documenta-13s-the-logbook.html#.YulTGJDP3ly>

12. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022>

13. “Hospitality” and “Hauntology” are both concepts adopted from Jacques Derrida, see Buurman “Hosting Significant Others. Autobiographies as Exhibitions of Co-Authority”, in *Hospitality. Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, 3rd Vol of the *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. by Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Berlin: Sternberg, 2016.

and patriarchal ghosts still haunt art institutions, both on an economic and epistemological level. And because, as those working in the arts, we are in/habiting of these inherited infrastructures, it is important to address our own complicities, the ways we reproduce the problematic inheritance in our habits (often involuntarily), rather than externalizing problems, or pointing fingers to others. As part of my research on Nazi-continuities at documenta, together with my colleagues from the “dis\_continuities research group” and students from Kunsthochschule Kassel, last year I curated a show titled “wir alle sind gespenster: haunting infrastructure”<sup>14</sup> that tried to acknowledge the way “we are all ghosts”, which bears the potential that “together we can haunt the future” by inhabiting infrastructures differently.<sup>15</sup> Even though Nazi continuities in the early history of documenta have become undeniable,<sup>16</sup> a lot of people still try to uphold the historical myth of documenta in quite problematic ways. As this experience has shown, it is surprisingly difficult to address our problematic histories and to get out of inherited logics, to denazify and decolonize cultural infrastructures. Such denials testify to the continuous reenactment of moral (self-)purification and the desire to be on the right side of history that seems to prevent us to see that it is much more complicated and messier.



14. <https://www.kasselerkunstverein.de/ausstellung/kkvexh/detail/kkv/wir-alle-sind-gespenster>

15. [https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta\\_studies\\_\\_11\\_nanne\\_buurman.pdf](https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studies__11_nanne_buurman.pdf)

16. Buurman: “The Exhibition as a Washing Maschine? Notes on Historiography, Contemporaneity, and (Self-)Purification in documenta’s Early Edition”, in *Stasis. Taking a Stance*, Catalogue of the Thessaloniki Biennale 2019, Summer 2020.

## Q&A with the audience:

Iris Dressler: In January, documenta 15 was accused of supporting anti-semitic positions.<sup>17</sup> This is a complex topic in Germany that is very taboo in public discourse and in the media. Documenta set up an event to discuss this more broadly, after which the Zentralrat der Juden complained that the panel and event was not diverse enough. Documenta canceled the programme and to treat the issue through the programming itself, followed by an open letter,<sup>18</sup> where they position themselves in this discussion.<sup>19</sup>

Céline Kopp: This goes back to the issue of mistrust: how do you invite the unwanted guest? How do we deal with these situations in general, practically speaking?

Helena Reckitt: There is the radical feminist trans-phobic problem: how do trans feminists and their allies deal with the fact that many feminists don't recognize trans women in women's spaces? Not closing the door to these TERFS can be seen as an act of violence against trans women. But despite disagreeing with TERFS profoundly, I still want everyone to keep talking to each other.

Iris Dressler: It is not about inviting conflict, but rather not avoiding it and pretending that it is not there. Building trust is not only about inviting but also visiting, and it is a long process which requires us to think about unusual formats. Sometimes we must give up our privilege and spaces, these are small gestures and ways of dealing with each other.

Helena Reckitt: I don't think it is true that safe spaces are easier to create separate from institutions. We see just as much hurt, volatility and outrage in independent or autonomous spaces. They are not necessarily more conducive to accepting difference or overcoming the difficulty of deep conflict. If you are running an autonomous feminist or Black space, for example, you are really putting yourself on the line.

Julie Pellegrin: I am in residence at the Villa Médicis, and in the principal space that is open to the public, in which activities and events take place, the tapestries and wall pieces represent solely images of slavery. This was a surprise to all of us upon arrival, and we refused to work and exhibit in the space, though we continued to work with the institution when the request to remove the images was not heard. I would have liked to have implemented this productive refusal, as Helena calls it, to have the impression of agency in my work environment.

Helena Reckitt: For the most part this is a middle- or upper-class profession even though we can become precarious by working in it. In the art field we must challenge ourselves to seek out and give power and space to people whose backgrounds exceed traditional academic or professional CVs. What have they

---

17. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/172993/open-letter-on-the-future-of-documenta/>

18. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/open-letter-to-we-need-to-talk/>

19. At the time of the discussion, on May 10th, it was only the beginning of the "antisemitism problematic" at documenta 15.

done as activists, in their communities, outside mainstream institutions? What forms of creativity, skill and verve have they demonstrated that don't fit a narrow European middle-class logic?

Summary written by Eleni Pantelaras for DCA, 2022  
Coordination: Marie Chênél



The First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres is organised by the DCA / French association for the development of contemporary art centres, in partnership with the ADKV (Germany) and the Kunsthallene i Norge (Norway) networks, and the European artistic institutions Fotogalleriet (Norway), Oslo Kunstforening (Norway), CA2M (Spain), and Casa Da Cerca (Portugal), with support from the Ministry of Culture, the Institut Français as part of a development agreement, and the Fondation des Artistes.

With support from



MINISTÈRE  
DE LA CULTURE

*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*



la Fondation  
des Artistes

In partnership with



Oslo Kunstforening



ARBEITSGEMEINSCHAFT  
DEUTSCHER  
KUNSTVEREINE



KUNSTHALLENE  
I NORGE



Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo  
Comunidad de Madrid



CASA DA CERCA  
CENTRO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA  
CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE ALMADA



ALMADA  
CÂMARA MUNICIPAL

And

A Archives  
W A of Women Artists  
R Research  
E & Exhibitions

**AOC**  
[ Analyse Opinion Critique ]

Le  
Quotidien  
de l'Art

**02**

DCA — Association française de développement des centres d'art contemporain

Association française  
**DCA** de développement  
des centres  
d'art contemporain

Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild  
11 Rue Berryer F-75008 Paris  
[www.dca-art.com](http://www.dca-art.com)

Website and Visual Identity of the First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres  
Loraine Furter in collaboration with Laurie Charles and Juliana Vargas Zapata  
[www.europeanartassembly.org](http://www.europeanartassembly.org)

DCA

[www.europeanartassembly.org](http://www.europeanartassembly.org)

First European Assembly  
of Contemporary Art Centres  
*This Time, We Talk About Gender*