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Life,  Adam
Walker
art and
(child)
care

In spring 2017 I was due to start a residency of sorts, spending time in a nursery school and developing a project through this. My collaborator and I, in discussion with the project curators, had become interested in early-years pedagogic approaches developed in preschools in Reggio Emilia, northern Italy: that architecture and environment might become a 'third teacher', with children enabled and supported in their own explorations and centres on granting children agency and voice in democratic decision-making processes around their education. Reggio Emilia also has a history of long-standing strong Communist Party support (and local governance), and the new educational ideas emerged in a broader context of radical leftist thought and practice.¹

Also in spring 2017, my partner and I were expecting our first child.

A few weeks after birth, 'regular' life partially resumed, and we began bringing weekly deliveries of bricks, soil, aluminium tubing and other materials to the nursery, and discussed and worked with the children exploring the various—sometimes collective, other times disparate—uses to which we might put them.

Several years later, in the midst of Covid-time, I am working towards completion of my PhD. Craving some form of social interaction, I post an annotated image on social media: my thesis-in-progress on a laptop in the foreground, 'Frozen 2' on the screen behind, amid the toys. My daughter and I both find the environment we are constrained to unsatisfactory.

I am re-reading Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's book

¹ Beatrice Balfour, 'Early childhood education, politics, and memory: tracing social imaginaries in Reggio Emilia schools' diaries of the 1970s', *Paedagogica Historica*, 58:1 (2022), 19-31.

² Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

³ Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

Matters of Care, having become interested in the theory of a critical care she develops.² Care is plural, she writes, stretching out to encompass a wide range of meanings and practices: the bodily-material care of 'caring for', the affective-relational care of 'caring with', and the ethical-political care of 'caring about'. A reflexive care, acknowledging our diverse caring needs and requirements, is vital, recognising the messiness of our selves, our bodies, our relations.

Care has understandably risen to prominence as a topic through the pandemic, but an implicit hierarchy too often manifests amid care's plurality of meanings. The typically more abstract, intellectual aspect of care—ethical-political care, 'caring about'—is rightly valued. Those whose endeavours toward a more caring world are relatively more cognitive, whether activists, theorists, artists, doctors or lawyers, are largely recognised and acknowledged (in some form, by a certain community at least).

Meanwhile the material-bodily care we all need (when we're young, old or sick, at the bare minimum) is routinely devalued, and un- or under-paid. It is outsourced, racialised and gendered onto those in marginalised positions. As Anne Boyer writes in *The Undying*, those who provide for the material needs of her ill body, and who undertake the discomfotingly invasive sustaining of it in its vulnerability, are disproportionately female and 'people of colour', unlike the doctors who interpret and decide but do not actually touch.³ If not critically and reflexively cared for, and about, and with, care within itself comes to reflect and reproduce the extractive, exploitative hierarchies of an uncaring world. As Puig de la Bellacasa emphasises, care, like our selves, needs to be recognised as messy, complex and plural: an



⁴ Puig de la Bellacosa. ongoing process requiring ongoing care.⁴

⁵ SopraSotto
[website] < <https://soprasottomilano.it> >
[Accessed 21 November 2022].

Practising care is never resolved; we need to continually reflect on our extensions of care, including unto itself.

⁶ Maddalena Fragnito, 'Soprasotto, a Pirate Kindergarten', presentation at Pirate Care conference, Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University, 19 June 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n98GxLlOlist=PLX-N8krB-2JMcVktreeqLJAKTY-qNoiSnO&index=11>> [Accessed 21 November 2022].

When schools are not shut by Covid, our daughter is now attending nursery, but only for half days. Between us the precarity of our employment means we do not qualify for full-time provision.

I learn about SopraSotto, a 'pirate' nursery collectively conceived and run by a group of parents in Milan in response to a lack of available places in public nurseries.⁵ The Reggio Emilia approach seems central to SopraSotto, though not as rigid doctrine: as co-founder Maddalena Fragnito emphasises, a reflexive care for the contingency of context is central to the ethos.⁶ As I watch and read, it occurs to me that through this mutual collectivising of early years childcare and education, the facets of care Maria Puig de la Bellacosa identified are drawn into reflexive interplay. There is an immediate need for bodily-material 'caring for' as parents and guardians, caught between diminishing state provision and increasing labour precarity, struggle to meet their children's needs on an individual basis. Through the collective sharing of bodily-material care, further forms of care are further enabled. A co-equality (amongst adults but also extending to the children) enables a new sociality to emerge, as relations of affective-relational 'caring with' are enabled across the community. It is a sociality in which bodily-material care is vitally valued, but through collectively sharing out the meeting of material need it is also a sociality in which an ethical-political 'caring about' can emerge. For example, a

Image courtesy of the author.

critical contestation of regressive (but still pervasive) gendered assumptions of childcare which the neoliberal state implicitly upholds through under-provision. Through, and in, the collectivising of childcare, parents and guardians are enabled in developing, reflecting upon, and practising a complex, critical, reflexive form of care. The collectivised bodily-material care in *SopraSotto* is not only a practical enabler of this, but a vital context for ongoing development of this multi-faceted care.

In 2017, during our nursery residency, our focus had gradually shifted. Through spending time in play and discussion with children, parents and staff, we increasingly learned of the lack of suitable provision for children with 'special educational needs and disabilities'. One child who we developed a relationship with was taking an extra year at nursery, as no school in the area would accommodate her. While the local authority was still legally required to educate her, the logic of marketized competition and austerity under which individual schools were operating permitted and incentivised them not to.⁷

A reflexive, critical care requires time, patience and a holding onto of complexity. It is not about efficiency, it is not linear. It is a taking care, a caring for, a caring with, and a caring about, and a caring with, a caring for, a caring about, a taking care. Such care is ever more vital in an uncaring world.

Meanwhile however, our world continues on. It is a world in which the dominant logic is one of techno-rationalist

⁷ The residency concluded with the development of the publication *Special Rights* along with a number of events bringing together parents, teachers, activists, artists, curators and politicians.

Adam Walker and Emma McGarry with the Portman Early Childhood Centre, *Special Rights* (London, Serpentine Gallery, 2018).

⁸ Norman Brosterman, 'Fröbel and the Gifts of Kindergarten: Cultivating the Modern Child in the Garden of Play', *Cabinet* 9 (2002) <<https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/9/brosterman.php>> [Accessed 21 November 2022].

acceleration. The abstracted, automated networks and structures which increasingly mediate and constitute our world proceed ever faster. Such a logic justifies its own perpetual reproduction through proclaimed certainties: 'the market', 'the individual', a rationale of future focussed efficiency and progress. A complex, reflexive care and those who seek or require it are, in the terms of this world, a burden, a cost, and a hindrance.

Accelerated beyond, there is a risk that reflexive, critical care will always be left behind, cast into a reactive position. Valuable counter-sites such as *SopraSotto* will occur, but risk always being the exception, the much-needed response to a broader context of uncaring, onrushing faits accomplis.

Researching, spending time in, and taking my daughter to various nurseries, I think upon their proximity to art. I recall how the Bauhaus Vorkurs, precursor to the 'foundation course', was profoundly influenced by the development of kindergarten. Through the nineteenth century, early years education, or kindergarten, became a focus of intellectual enquiry and development, notably in Germany before spreading across Europe. Friedrich Fröbel introduced an emphasis on fostering abstract thought and playing with materials in a non-representational manner to the nascent curriculum. Johannes Itten, creator of the Bauhaus Vorkurs, had formerly been a Fröbel-influenced Kindergarten teacher, and concepts and practices from this early years experience permeated the new course.⁸

Via the Bauhaus Vorkurs, a thread runs between nursery and the avant-garde. It may be tenuous to suggest that

the fostering of abstract playfulness in kindergartens played any significant role in the emergence of the radical, disruptive intentions of the avant-garde, but there was at least some interplay between the two.

I wonder: will the playfulness, agency and imagination which my daughter's nursery seems, thankfully, to place an emphasis on be overwritten by subsequent schooling increasingly turned toward the labour requirements of the future reproduction of the way things are?

In my thesis, I begin to attempt to articulate a concept of 'radical care' as an extension of critical reflexive care which might incorporate the immediate, forward-flung, potentially disruptive act.⁹ How to permit the paradoxically careless act of unknown consequence—an artwork perhaps—which upholds the possibility of instigating a structural shift toward a more caring world, while recognising it will almost always fail in these intentions? More worryingly, in its carefree immediacy, it may cause harm. And yet, despite this, it is vital in holding open the possibility to affect change within an uncaring world which otherwise accelerates perpetually forward.

The radical act, I realise, must be rooted in critical reflexive care. If it is not, it is no different to the world it purports to affect. It must be permeated through with critical reflexive care. Only in an ongoing committed, careful acknowledgement and practice of care, in all its aspects, can the potential radical actor foster the connections and experience the conditions which extend their intuitive carefree cares beyond themselves. And only in committed practice of, and careful reflection upon,

⁹ Adam Walker, 'Ways of being beyond the perpetuating inequalities of the technosphere: Textual artistic intervention as a vital strategy in enabling resistant agency, or, Embodying a practice of radical care' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal College of Art, 2021) <<https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/4778/>> [Accessed 21 November 2022]

¹⁰ Eyal Weizman, 'In Kassel', London Review of Books 44:15 (2022) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/eyal-weizman/in-kassel>> [Accessed 21 November 2022].

Frank Wasser, 'Is Art Rooted in Life? Documenta, Now', Flash Art International 340 (2022), 194–200.

Documenta Fifteen [website] <<https://documenta-fifteen.de>> [Accessed 21 November 2022].

care in the present, can the potential radical actor come to understand the myriad, complex, reflexive, cared-for care we might hope for in the world their radical act just might edge us toward.

Earlier this year, I attended Documenta Fifteen. For all the acrimony surrounding it, and the various valid critiques which have been made, I found the explicit centring upon non-hierarchical, collective modes of artistic-curatorial practice as inseparable from being around which the exhibition was centred to make a powerful, important statement.¹⁰

As I entered the Fridericianum, one of the largest, most central Documenta venues, I turned toward the first room I came to. It was a large, prominent, ground floor space facing onto Joseph Beuys's 7000 Oaks in the main square outside. It was a collectively organised creche, given over to early-years childcare.

Adam Walker is an artist, writer and curator with a research-practice focussed on critiques of self-perpetuating structures of inequality (including self-reflexively within the economies and circulations of art) and the speculative envisioning of other ways of being. His work takes textual, performative, collaborative, moving-image and digital forms. Recent projects, performances and exhibitions have taken place at and with the Serpentine Gallery, Tyneside Cinema and NEoN Digital Arts Festival (UK), Izolyatsia and Yermilov Centre (Ukraine), and online at www.hoaxpublication.org and www.skelf.org.uk. He is currently writing a monograph, 'Art, Labour, Text, and Radical Care', which will be published by Routledge in 2023. www.adamjwalker.co.uk