

“It takes a lot to give
To asks for help,
to be yourself

To know and love
what you live with

It takes a lot to breathe,
to touch,
to feel

The slow reveal of
what another body needs”

—Damian Rice,
It Takes a Lot to Know a Man (2014)

CARE, THE FRIENDLY GHOST
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I want you flat on your back.
Helpless. Tender. Open.
With only me to help.
And then I want you strong again.
You are not going to die.
You might wish you were going to die,
but you're not going to.
You need to settle down a little.

Ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ
Epimeleia Heautou (care of the self)



And I'm getting hungry.

REYNOLDS
Kiss me, my girl, before I'm sick.

—*Plantom Thread*
(dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2017)

γνώθι σεαυτόν
Gnōthi Seauton (know thyself)

—Ancient Greek aphorism

WRITING THIS THESIS was an exercise in entering the multifaceted discussions on care and its enactments, which I think and feel are very much needed in our time of *crisis ordinariness*.¹ The etymology of the word ‘care’ stems from grief and lament (*chara*) and sickbed (*kor*); its Latin root, *cura*, finds its way into *curate*, first as a noun in the English language. From the provision for health, welfare, maintenance, and protection, to the handler of objects, knowledge, and exhibitions, care is both a service industry and a market place, which are often highly racialised, gendered, and morally charged. It links social policy and economy to affects and emotions. Care nowadays is considered as an attitude to life, and one that I would like to call *speculative ethnics*.² Care is transitional and is also essential in forming communities, kinship, and love. Oscillating between the concrete and the abstract, the inception of care studies will take the crossroads of labour and transaction. These bifurcating directions will meet again and mingle, complement, and contradict one and other, and it is my duty of care, as the researcher and writer, to wrestle with and caress the sharp edges and nuances.

1 I have borrowed the term from Lauren Berlant, which she defines as “the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived.” Her claim is most such happenings that forced people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or “crisis ordinariness.” This quote is from *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 10.

2 In her research upon matters of care, Mária Puig de la Bellacasa connects “speculative” and “ethics” to emphasize that the ethics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence. Also, it follows a feminist tradition of thinking with interconnection and interdependency, to avoid a singular critical approach, and to be aware and appreciative of the vulnerability of any position on the “as well as possible” world.

CASPER PREFERS HUGGING over scaring people away. He ventured out into the world, offering help and care to humans and animals, in the hope of friendship and companionship. He is the friendly ghost. However, his kindness is often misunderstood and is overshadowed by fear. For Casper, the journey of winning hearts and minds is very much laboured. On one occasion, the neglected ghost-child tried to commit suicide, only to remember that he is already dead! Isn’t there a lot of pressure riding on his offers? Not to mention the emotional blackmail? A supposedly light-hearted story turned dark in a heartbeat.

THE TRANSFER, EXCHANGE, RECIPROCATION, and appreciation of care is a risky business. How does one express and understand needs? How does one ask for help? Can we say no? What puts you in the position of the giver, receiver, and the judge? Can care be learned, taught and shared? All of these questions cannot not be answered fully without introspection, because care is also a feeling, an emotion, and a mood. Virginia Woolf spoke passionately of the power to cultivate indifference as a form of quiet revolt, choosing not to care about what we are enjoined to. (See Woolf 1977/2012) We need distance and

pauses, and we are not obliged to care *all the time*. The intention of this thesis is to analyse the directionality of care between the different nodes of situations, practices, and decisions. We will also look at the aesthetics and manifestation of care, in the domains of art, literature, films, technology, and philosophy. The incarnation of care in artistic mediums, critical texts, and human inventions is not prioritised over practical reality and lived experiences, it is where the flesh and bone meet, and one carries the other.

THE CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS between feeling, emotion, and mood are dissected by philosopher Byung-Chul Han in terms of their durations, intentionality/performativity, and objectiveness/subjectiveness: mood is static, whereas emotion is more fleeting and short-lived. Feeling, on the other hand, last longer than emotion; mood is neither intentional nor performative, in contrast with emotion, which is intentional, goal-oriented, dynamic, and performative. Feeling is not performative and does not display an intentional structure; mood is objective, emotion is subjective, and feeling is neither. (Han 2017) In more figurative descriptions, mood is an atmosphere, emotion is about action and deeds, and feeling is the narrative. These definitions

provide a grounded framework to look at care and caring. For instance, the enactment of care is triggered by a gut feeling; sensing needs from within yourself and others, it becomes an emotion, which leads to the action of either giving or asking for care, while the mood would be the state of mind or being of the care-givers and the care-receivers. The ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside-in’ models of emotions encapsulated by Scholar Sara Ahmed might help to reinforce the directionality needed to understand the affective aspects of care studies. Ahmed coined the phrase “sociality of emotions” (See Ahmed 2014: 8–12) to suggest that, “Emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.” The ‘inside-out’ model of emotions is: I have feelings, I may laugh, cry, or shake my head, which are my emotional expressions that move outwards towards you, my feelings may also become yours, and come back to me as a response. Such relationality has been described above. In reverse, the ‘outside-in’ model emphasises “Emotion is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together.”³ One

example could be the feelings of grief existing in a crowd, and only then get taken in by individuals. In this case, the mood of the care-givers and care-receivers might inspire or discourage the enactment of care and the emotions induced from it. The inside/outside or me/we analogy is not meant to be absolute, while feelings can be latent and emotions can be non-expressive. My feeling and your relation to it could be completely different. Similarly, these frameworks and models are not indications that feeling, emotion, and mood are linear processes, but pre-empt the innocent generalisation of these qualities of care as being fluffy and indescribable.

IN SCHOLAR María Puig de la Bellacasa’s book, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (2017), the author posited the question, “Can thinking be connected if it pretends to be outside of worlds we want to see transformed, even those we would rather not endorse?” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 10) Following the more generic definition of care by fellow scholar Joan Tronto, “Everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That work includes our bodies, our selves and our environment, all of which we

seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web,”⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa further stipulates the urgency of *reclaiming* and *displacing* care, to be cautious towards purism, keeping in mind the tension exposed by situated and material conditions specific to each entanglement and fostering human-decentered epistemologies. Reading through and think with her text is the foundation of this thesis.

THIS THESIS IS organised in two acts, formulating a Tête-bêche which emulates a wandering spirit in different bodies, different lives. In Act I, we are greeted by a cleaner. Besides dusting and mopping, She deals with themes like affective labour, maintenance art, the gig economy and platformisation of work, emotional capitalism, and robots; In Act II, her spirit leaves her body and goes traveling in time and space, passing through pre-industrialised tribes, a bible study in the 1450s, the Vietnam War, New York in the 80s, and colonial Hong Kong. The friendly ghost gathers all the care as the gift to summon Shakespeare’s sisters from the future. Mediating through cleaning chores and love, making art and grief, *Care, the Friendly Ghost* riffs on Jacques Derrida and “Stay[s] with [the] uncertainty of not knowing what this something is prior to its arrival.” (Henriksen 2016, 20) The

not-knowing puts the study of care in an intriguing position when a fixed mandate of secure knowledge or competence is impossible. I echo Puig de la Bellacasa that care studies is a contested terrain and meanings and relevance cannot be taken for granted. The exploration then is to consider care – or its absence – as a trigger to locate contradictions and new associations. By calling care a friendly ghost is to recognise my own limitations and my indebtedness⁵ to my predecessors who have taken serious steps in treating care as a critical discourse for knowledge and the world. The challenge, as Derrida argued, is therefore to stay “with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them.”⁶

3 Randall Collins. stratification, emotional energy, and the transient emotions in ed. T.D. Kemper, *Research Agenda in the Sociology of Emotions* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990) 27.

4 Joan C. Tronto. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 103.

5 In particularly, art critic and cultural theorist Jan Verwoert, researchers Niels van Doorn and scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn have all provided significant clues and departure points for my research and writing.

6 Jacques Derrida. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011 [1994]) xvii – xviii.



FIG. 01

We enter through the curtains, possibly made from silk organza. It's a breezy afternoon, we follow the figure of Guadalupe Acedo, the housekeeper of *Maison à Bordeaux*, a private residence designed by Rem Koolhaas. Surrounded by glass windows on all sides, Guadalupe is on the ground floor, using her entire body to gather the straw-coloured curtains into a bundle.

IT IS THE BEGINNING of another busy day, taking care of this now 20-years-old *Maison*. Over the course of weeks, Guadalupe did a lot of vacuuming, sometimes using the raised platform (a key feature of the *Maison*, since it was designed with a wheelchair-bound person in mind), sometimes struggling a little when cleaning the spiral staircase. She then tells us about the false flat courtyard and recommends that we zig-zag through it; and when it rains, we see buckets of all colours, collecting drops. The leaks are as much a comedy as a symphony. The upkeep of a post-modern property requires the attention of others besides Guadalupe, there are also the

window cleaners (a lovely father-and-daughter-duo), and drainage experts, as well as the gardener (there is a patch of grass constantly browned due to a window's reflection). I can't remember who said that while there is architecture's history, there is very little builder's history. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched that a cleaner's history is equally necessary. One of the directors of the documentary, Ila Bêka, said in an interview, "Cleaning is the symbol of control. Cleaning is controlling. When you clean, you are fighting against the death. You clean, you clean, you clean, you say you do not want to die, do not want to die... as human beings, we clean every day. When you have a new building, you have to think about the people who are cleaning the building. It goes together. To watch people cleaning is to watch people's fight to control. But at the end, we just lost control, (just like) the way life is. So failure for us is very interesting, every failure is the door to go inside, to find everything inside, everything you do not show. We are working behind the image."⁷ Instead of "empty space and beautiful light," Bêka and Lemoine want to show the use and emotion of the space, through the movement and activities of Guadalupe, who knows the house thoroughly. The portrayal of care in *Koolhaas Houselife* (2006)^{FIG. 01} is manifold: the architects design the building with

care,⁸ the housekeeper takes care of it, and the directors chose to film and portray the architecture through the lens of care. Therefore, the meaning of care can be seen in the design, as an occupation as well as an artistic gaze.

THE MAISON ITSELF is magnificent on many levels; Guadalupe keenly expressed her amazement that it could even stand with no walls except on one side. The circular windows, metallic features, and the key-less gate give future-retroism a cheerful nod. The idea of designing a complex building came from the vision of the handicapped client himself, in which he envisaged that, "The house will define his world". Unfortunately, he passed away in 2001, merely three years after completion of building. What remains is a panoramic structure, with "a machine at its heart."⁹ And the pleasantly engaging Guadalupe, in her polka dot blouse, sweeping through the house with ease.

I HAVE WATCHED *Koolhaas Houselife* in one sitting, including a bonus feature of an interview with the architect, Rem Koolhaas. His first comment, presumably after watching this documentary, was to ask if the bad weather was a coincidence. He later offered his views on the project, making references to the city of Lagos, stating how we become an "editor"

when the architecture becomes an image, and he is half amused by Guadalupe's insistence upon cleaning the hollow backspace of the spiral stairs with a vacuum cleaner. These comments alone could easily constitute another YouTube video, or even a documentary. While humans are bound to outlive by buildings, how does one truly understand a living space, while factoring-in the scale of time, weather, and cleanliness? *Koolhaas Houselife* is an apt title, even without the surname of a well-known architect attached to it. While life itself is housed within, the *Houselife* of a building is a complex web of material reality, economy, labour, and care.

7 Bêka & Lemoine Interview: *The Emotion of the Space Louisiana Channel*, <https://vimeo.com/272727945> Accessed 19 October 2019.

8 The Story behind *Maison à Bordeaux*: "A couple lived in a very old, beautiful house in Bordeaux. They wanted a new house, maybe a very simple house. They were looking at different architects. Then the husband had a car accident. He almost died, but he survived. Then he needed a wheelchair. Two years later, the couple began to think about the house again. Now the new house could liberate the husband from the prison that their old house and the medieval city

had become. "Contrary to what you would expect," he told the architect, "I do not want a simple house. I want a complex house, because the house will define my world ... They bought land on a hill with panoramic views over the city."

9 See <https://oma.eu/projects/maison-a-bordeaux> Accessed 19 October 2019.

A FEMALE VOICE is counting, “One, two, three, four, five ... twelve ... fifty-six.” She was first describing the number of offices in a building block, and later concluded by telling us the number of toilets. Framed through a window, the women at work are dusting, scrubbing, and vacuuming silently, monotonously. Shot in grainy black-and-white, it is almost impossible to tell the time of day anymore; one might even ponder if these women are ever there at all, since their labour of care has been rendered invisible, and hence dismissible. *Nightcleaners Part 1*,^{FIG. 02} a documentary made by the Berwick Street Collective during the period 1972–5, leads us into the sleepless lives of these women, roaming through empty office spaces in the twilight hours. During the 1970s, women were the sole home carers in most British households. In order to make ends meet, they had to take up side-jobs, and very often being a night cleaner was one of the few remaining make-shift solutions. Spending the majority of their daytime child-rearing and taking care of their own homes, these women cleaned offices for minimum wages, with very poor working conditions, after the sun went down and their child was put to bed. In order to represent the tension and politics between the cleaners, the

Cleaner’s Action Group,¹⁰ and the trade union, the second half of the documentary jumps into meetings and conversations between the cleaners and activists, attempting to help the marginalised group to be unionised for better working rights and protection. Women from underprivileged backgrounds do not often have the capacity to choose, whether it be for motherhood, raising a family, domestic labour, or jobs. “And of course they always had grievances,” reflected activist Sally Alexander. “It was the conditions of work they wanted to change even more than wages, and trades unions understand one thing and that is a wage demand. You know, other issues like health and safety, proper food, breaks, equipment, proper supervision, open windows, those conditions which they were very, very keen on would have changed the quality of their working life, the trade unions thought weren’t an issue.”¹¹ *Nightcleaners Part 1* was originally conceived as a campaign film, but instead, it has morphed beyond a documentary, and is more akin to avant-garde filmmaking. There are long, contemplative pauses between sequences created by the insertion of black leader tape,¹² and the clapboard is visible between takes of interviews. The materiality of filming and the materiality of lives being night cleaners are made

legible, most apparently in an extensive sequence of watching a toilet being cleaned in real time. The magic of it all, however, is that we have started to witness the dawning awareness that a life as given is not the only available option, and the care and solidarity among these women sows the seeds for collective action.

THE IMPOSITION OF care labour upon women both inside and outside the house has been central to feminist struggles and discourses. In her seminal piece, *Wage Against Housework*, Theorist Silvia Federici advocated wages for housework as a political perspective, “To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and the more insidious character as femininity.” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten also pointed out “the right to refuse what has been refused to you,” in order to forge any kind of revolutionary understanding of the “crisis of care.”¹³ The accumulation of domestic ideals of femininity has taken many guises in the name of ‘love’ and ‘virtue,’ but the result still very often turns out to be a “dualised organisation of social reproduction,” (Fraser 2016: 104/112)

commodified for those who can afford it, privatised for those who cannot; in other words, women of colour found low-paid waged work raising the children and cleaning the homes of ‘white’ families, at the expense of their own. To enact the potentiality of dissonance, as conceptualised by Harney and Moten in their discussion of the “under-commons,”¹⁴ we must look at the realignment of assigned values to care labour and its inherited gender order, and we must recognise that the opposed structures are not only bad for some us, *they are bad for all of us.*

FIG. 02



10 The Cleaners Actions Group is set up by Mary Hobbs, a cleaner turned activist, who also led the night cleaner Strikes in 1972.

11 See <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/view>. Accessed 26 November 2019.

12 “These included the persistent insertion of sections of black leader tape, the presentation of processed and repeated sequences, and the inclusion of the clapboard, all of which draw the viewer’s attention to the process of the film’s making, to *Nightclearers as filmmaking*. These elements, Johnston and Willemen claimed, produce an effect akin to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, interruptions that disrupt the theatrical (or cinematic) spell and as a result making the audience critically aware of the representational illusion being presented. Reflexivity was thus connected to the notion of critical distance and the idea that the viewer would become an active participant, or to use the Benjamin-ian term, producer of the film’s meaning.” This quote is from Siona Wilson. *Art Labour, Sex Politics, Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2015) 8.

13 Here I have followed Nancy Fraser’s claim is that, “Every form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilise the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies. This social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism lies at the root of the so-called crisis of care.” Nancy Fraser. *Feminism’s Home Front. New Left Review* nr. 100 July/Aug, 2016: 100.

14 The *Undercommons* begins with refusal. The goal is not to end the troubles but to end the world that creates those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed. To form a coalition, we must locate *hapticaplicity*, a feel for feeling others feeling you. In order to achieve this, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney propose to enter into *study*, a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you and allows you to spend less time antagonised and antagonising. *Study* is what we do with other people. The *Undercommons* is a passionate call for resistance upon the *Maroon communities*, “where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons.”

‡
ARTIST MERLE LADERMAN UKELES cleaned the museum for eight hour straight, outside and inside, and called it art.^{FIG. 03} So much so that she went on and wrote a *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition “Care”* (1969), declaring that: *I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I “do” Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art ... My working will be the work.* Most known for her unsalaried position as Artist-in-Residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation, Ukeles’s work looks at sanitary service, an indispensable but latent public service, and positions it centre stage and in the forefront. She purposely enters the bureaucratic domains, which are highly constrained but are also underrepresented. Her interests in cleaning service range from the bodily and gestural (in *Touch Sanitation: Follow your Footsteps* (1979–80), she followed and mirrored the workers’ movements as they lifted and emptied garbage cans into their trucks), to the celebratory (in *Touch Sanitation: Handshake Ritual* (1979), over the course of 11

months, and in a faithful imitation of an 8-hour-work-shift, she met and thanked 8,500 workers with a handshake and a personal greeting, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive!”, across cleaning stations from 59 sanitation districts in New York), and the mechanical and poetic (her work ballet series with the workers and their sweeping machines, garbage trucks, towboats, and motor graders would become her longest ongoing projects). Ukeles’s artistic materials are rooted in organisational structure, labour work, and the individuals’ willingness to take charge of their own participation, a “revolution during office hours,” to use her own phrase. Despite the often large-scale format of the latter work, and her affiliation with institutions and governmental bodies, Ukeles’s idea of *Art as Maintenance* is evidential from an individual level, and her own active and genuine way of being-in-the-world is what gives it its agency. Being a mother and an artist, she wrote about how a baby’s metabolism is 3 times faster than an adult’s, which meant she had to calibrate herself to a completely different time and space, and she questioned why we could not call it a sculpture; as a citizen and an artist, she stressed our co-dependency with sanitation and our co-responsibility for waste,

“to do sanitation is to husband the city as home”.¹⁵ She further elaborated that sanitation could serve as a model for democratic imagination because it implies “the possibility of a public-social contract operating laterally, not upstairs-downstairs, but equality between the servers and the served. This is accomplished at totality of scale; yet it deals on an incremental basis (house to house, bag to bag), and it cuts across all difference.” Art as Maintenance, is to preserve and sustain life, on a mass urban scale, as sanitation is to a city, and at the most primal and individual level, as a mother is to her child.

THE INTEREST IN Ukeles’s work circles back to the discovery of Dutch artist Job Koelewijn’s graduation work as a Fine Art student from the Rietveld Akademie. Entitled *Het Schoonmaken Van Het Rietveldpaviljoen* (Cleaning the Rietveld Pavilion, 1992),^{FIG. 04} Koelewijn invited 4 women – his mother and three aunts – to clean the namesake’s pavilion from his school wearing traditional Spakenburg costume. The doubling of vernacular imagery within the Dutch consciousness: the typical and religious values such as cleanliness and industriousness overlaid with the sobriety and functionality inherent in the architecture of Gerrit Rietveld, yield multiple readings.

While the Dutch word *schoon* can mean clean or pure, it can also be linked with fine art, or “schone kunst”¹⁶ in an old-fashioned way. A subsequent piece, *Schoonmaakdoekje* (Cleaning Cloth, 1993), bears an illustration of a woman, again in traditional Dutch costume, cleaning Bruce Nauman’s famous neon spiral sculpture, *The True artist Helps The World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967); the double connotation of cleaning and art finds its way into the work’s title and the packaging.

KOELEWIJN’S CLEANING WOMEN, not without its problematics,¹⁷ is a poetic tribute to his cultural heritage and the canon of contemporary art and modern architecture. Two decades apart, Ukeles enacted her own body and worked with city cleaners to address the white-cube status of museums, using the city as an open stage for performance and critique. Both artists have inspired a continuous line of feminist and socially engaged art, and discussions arose from cleaning as an exemplifier of care labour and the socio-economic and technological frameworks that mediate it.

IN NOVEMBER 2017, artist Alina Lupu re-enacted Koelewijn’s *Cleaning the Rietveld Pavilion*, and engaged with an online platform to recruit cleaner-performers.^{FIG. 05} As part of her research, she enrolled herself as a cleaner online in order

to understand the inner workings of the platform, two months prior to the performance. She manoeuvred through the recruitment process (all done through phone interviews and online submissions), made discoveries of technical glitches (the same e-mail address could not be registered twice as both a hirer and a service provider), looked at wage structures, and navigated through the grey areas of hiring cleaners for an artistic performance, by making informal arrangements with the opaque backdrop of platform economy. Despite her failure to work with on-demand cleaners to complete the performance, her experience became a catalyst for what Donna Haraway would call “feminisation of work,” when employment, or in gig economy terms being on-board,¹⁸ is made “extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force ... borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex.”(Haraway 1991/2016: 133) Lupu concludes, “As work becomes an increasingly autonomous task, platform mediated, similar in that sense to the apparent autonomy of artists, it also tends to become invisible yet again, engendering division and bringing about an impossibility of understating its mechanisms when one looks at it

FIG. 03



FIG. 04



FIG. 05



FIG. 06



from the outside.” (Lupu 2018)

THE DOMAIN OF care labour, characterised by immediate availability and minimum human contact, continues to be a highly radicalised and gendered space,¹⁹ or even further, a dismembered one. The latter-day cleaner without body is portrayed as such in American artist Josh Kline’s *Cost of Living (Aleyda)* (2014).^{FIG. 06} Kline made interviews with janitors and couriers, and used a 3-D scanner to make a high-definition record of their bodies and the objects they used for work. The digital files are considered superior to their 3-D printed prototypes, a new normal which Kline refers to as the “resolution gap,” given that the advancement of 3-D printers will continue to bring about more detailed, more ‘realisable’ prints. The rendering of a service worker into fragmented body parts on a cleaning cart points to the material reality of care labour in a dematerialised information economy – “Somebody is still scrubbing the toilets at the museum that hosts your symposium on Internet art”²⁰ – and also the dehumanising of labour-as-service, whilst the cleaner’s segmented parts have merged with cleaning products, as hybrid objects with a planned obsolescence. Apparently, *Cost of Living (Aleyda)* has presented a challenge for the conservators

at the Whitney Museum, where it was shown in *American is Hard to See* (2015), the new venue's first exhibition. The absence of a 'correct' original, and the culture of disposable prototypes, staged a confrontation with the culture of conserving museum artefacts. This paradox is also a stand-in for the problematics of value and visibility. Care labour is at once a commodity and a lived experience, determined by an invisible infrastructure of connectivity, evaluation, and surveillance.

15 Merle Laderman Ukeles. *Why Sanitation Can be Used as a Model For Public Art* (Originally published in *The Act 2*, no. 1 (Winter / Spring 1990) 85.

16 Carel Blotkamp, Sjoukje van der Meulen. *New Dutch Sculptors: Job Koelewijn* (Rijssen: New Sculpture Museum Foundation) 13.

17 As part of her reenactment of Koelewijn's work, artist and Rietveld alumnus, Alina Lupu, raised a series of questions, "How can this work be reframed? Where can it come from, when one's aunts and mother can't perform the function? How I it stand up to the scrutiny then, in the case of family, the womenfolk, performing it? What was it a performance of? What would it be a performance of today?"

18 This phrase is borrowed from one of the key scenes of *Sorry We Missed You* (dir. Ken Loach, 2019), during a job interview of the main protagonist entering into a work contract for becoming a van courier.

19 In his paper, *Platform Labor: On the Gendered and Racialised Exploitation of Low-Income Service Work in the 'On-Demand' Economy* (2017), Researcher Niels van Doorn argues the 'on-demand' and 'gig' economics are historically constituted by class, racial and gender inequalities, and subordination, which has been extended into the networked present, in which neo-liberal success depends on the algorithmic intensification of established moms of exploitation and control. By quoting the work of scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn, van Doorn pinpointed this traceable, structural violence as *from the plantation to the platform*.

20 Ben Lerner. *The Custodians* *The New Yorker*. (3 January 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/the-custodians-onward-and-upward-with-the-arts-ben-lerner>. Accessed 1 December 2019.

‡
“Maybe his name was Glen. Maybe it was Daniel. Or John or Mark or Tim. The actual name matters only because it is a piece of information that Sandra chooses to keep for herself.”²¹

SANDRA PANKHURST is also Stacey Anne Vaughan, or Amanda Celeste Claire, or Celestial Star when she performs in drag. These are the names of the many lives led, before she became a professional trauma cleaner, entering yet more life stories of others, often in their darkest, sickest, dirtiest corners. The service of trauma cleaning includes crime scene clean up, managing estates of the deceased, dealing with cases of hoarding and long-term property neglect and also with the living clients cocooned inside many of these premises. “Her work,” writes biographer Sarah Krasnostein, “is a catalogue of the ways we die physically and emotionally, and the strength and delicacy needed to lift the things we leave behind.”²² An unofficial expert on removing body fluids, airing-out odours, turning over dust and mould and blood-soaked carpets, Sandra treats her clients with care and lightness, while helping them to be rid of the heaviness of attachment, failure, bad memories, and neglect. Sandra survived an abusive childhood, drug addiction, economic hardships,

homo- and transphobia, and rape. Her livelihood and personal safety are constantly under threat by the corrupt police, the conservative politics, and the rigid bureaucracy. I am speculating that Sandra's own trauma has led her to navigate through the darkest of hearts and the filthiest of human debris, something less convenient than the so-called empathy, but an unflinching recognition that “the order of things includes those who are excluded.”²³

READING *The Trauma Cleaner* (2017)^{FIG. 07} is like going through a checklist of man-made obsolescence, except that the ten or so ‘trauma scenes’ could merge into one newly induced apocalyptic world, where decay and rot have just set in. It is rumoured that the diversity of man-made objects has potentially exceeded the diversity of biology, which would have already involve 8.7 million species.²⁴ The accumulation of objects is an accumulation of dreams and nightmares, and while we are surrounded by an anxious, late-capitalist, consumerist culture, which constantly equates materialistic values with domestic imaginaries and self-actualisation, the cleaning of your own house could be elevated into an emotional exorcism.

“DOES IT SPARK JOY?” is the spell cast upon millions of American

consumers and TV watchers by housekeeping guru Marie Kondo, whose personal brand now epitomises the soft power of Japan and recycled ‘Eastern wisdom’. The magic does not lay solely on Kondo's t-shirt folding techniques, but on the offering for westerners to escape their existential maladies by appending pop-culture-induced orientalism, a just-enough dosage of “joy” to alleviate our “trauma.” The mystic quality of self-care has been amplified and performed (the house has to be ‘greeted’ with a moment of silent contemplation to ensure its cooperation), and the narrative arc rests more on the clearance of emotional baggage than on actual home improvement. *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo* (2019)^{FIG. 08} is the spatial manifestation of what philosopher Byung-Chul Han and sociologist Eva Illouz would term “emotional capitalism,” (Han 2017 ; Illouz 2007) where the matters of the heart are muddled with the mechanics of the neoliberal economy, and the benign realisation of over-consumption is effortlessly nudged into the quest for happiness. The excavating, tracking, plotting, and analysing of emotional data has incubated a lucrative industry²⁵ of the “quantified self,”²⁶ capitalising on “treating ourselves,” on self-care and self-work, and has transformed them into prices, products, and places.²⁷

Looking closely at neoliberal human capital theories, philosopher Michel Foucault prophesied all persons to become “entrepreneurs of the self.”²⁸ The redefined *homo oeconomicus* figure actively chooses to work for income, as a return on an investment, a return on capital. This future-oriented subjectivity applies to all scopes of life, from education and relationships, to working out at the gym. Every decision made contributes to a “productive consumption,” (Foucault 2008: 226) and the boundaries between workers, consumers, households and producers have been broken down. Following this logic of investment and maximum return, happiness is no longer a goal but an asset to be invested in, a resource to be drawn upon for benefits and protection further down the line. The enchantment of *does it spark joy?* no longer suffice, and needs to be rephrased as “does it spark enough joy?” or “Will it continue to spark more joy?” to summon the self-optimising souls of neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*.

FIG. 07



FIG. 08



21 Sarah Krasnostein, *The Trauma Cleaner: One Woman's Extraordinary Lie in Death, Decay & Disaster* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2017) 21.

22 Ibid. 2.

23 Ibid. 140.

24 See *Species count put at 8.7 million*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-14616161>. Accessed 18 January 2020.

25 See Rina Raphael, *These 10 Market Trends Turned Wellness Into a \$4.2 Trillion Global Industry*, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90247896/these-10-market-trends-turned-wellness-into-a-4-2-trillion-global-industry> Accessed 13 January 2020. Accessed 20 December 2019.

26 *Nervous System: Quantified Life and the Social Question*, exhibition, curated by Anselm Franke, Stephanie Hankey, and Marek Tuszynski, presented at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 10 March–9 May, 2016.

27 William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London: Verso, 2016), 230–232.

28 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans, Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 252–3.

‡
“What if it all failed?” You may ask.

“Don’t worry, Barnaby, put on your Sunday clothes. There’s lots of worlds out there ...”²⁹

AT LEAST that’s what kept Wall-E going, tirelessly scavenging and cleaning up what was left of a garbage-strewn earth.^{FIG. 09} The subsequent discovery of a living seedling by a vegetation detector known as EVE led both robots to the off-world spaceship, Axiom, a Noah’s Ark built by their maker, the mega-corporation Buy-N-Large. Infante and obese, the humans on-board are carried around in large motorised chairs, their only interaction is through an on-screen interface, and their only action is to be fed and sun-bathed under artificial sunlight. Quoting from philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher has poignantly dissected the portrayal of an evil mega-corporation and human greediness as only fulfilling the “structure of disavowal” (Fisher 2009: 13) – anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism – “the film has already performed our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity.”³⁰ Upon their eventual return to earth as planned-out in *Mission Recolonise*, humans and

robots are shown learning to farm, fish, and build when the credits roll, reclaiming their ravaged planet together. The reassurance that one day we will all be saved by a machine feels distant and does not come without irony, but when it comes to delegating chores, we are more easily warmed to the idea of a post-work future. In 2016, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg,^{FIG. 10} took his interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI) into developing his personal butler “like Jarvis in Ironman.”³¹ Originally, the word ‘robot’ came from the Czech word *robota*, meaning drudgery – hard menial or dull work in a household – and it first entered the English vernacular in 1938, through the two adaptations of Karel Čapek’s 1920 stage play *R.U.R (Rossum’s Universal Robots)* on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation).³² The association between robot and servitude has its historical lineage. The Roomba 980^{FIG. 11} is the first vacuum-cleaning robot to combine adaptive navigation with visual localisation, and cloud-connected app control. With more than 4 million units sold,³³ the low humming machine has the tenacity to trace a cabinet’s edges, avoid kitchen steps and shoelaces, and self-empty when it is full.³⁴ The alleged fear of your home being scanned and its metric data being shared and capitalised upon without

consent is not entirely unfounded, but accordingly Roomba's given vision has yielded interesting opportunities as much as criticism. What if Roomba could detect fire or burglary? And how about a memory search for lost items? Could their data be submitted to a court case? It is estimated that two-thirds of Roomba owners give their robot a name,³⁵ but at the same time, children have also been shown to be more likely to abuse robots.³⁶ The legal, ethical and cultural realities are still catching up with the smart home assistant.

IN THE NETFLIX SERIES, *Love, Death & Robots* (2019), artist Zima captivated the art world with his majestic murals of galaxies and blue shapes. One day, the artist revealed his final artwork in a swimming pool, stripped of all his body parts while swimming, and back to his original form as a pool cleaning robot.^{FIG. 12} The colour of the pool tiles was his first vision of the world. Cleaning, as a metaphor for care labour, is also an act of beautification. A highly racialised and gendered activity, working as a cleaner is conditioned by class consciousness, employment policy, solitude, and the 'gig' economy. A cleaner provides and a cleaner revolts. To clean is to declutter emotions and to maintain a clean slate, a tabula rasa. The scenes of

FIG. 09

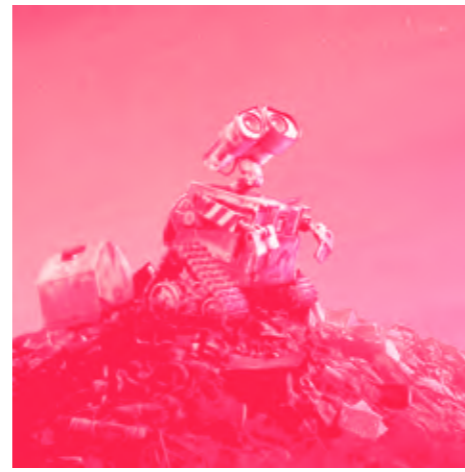


FIG. 10



FIG. 11



FIG. 12



cleaning are a performance and also entertainment, or art. The future of cleaning will not be done in singularity, but in multiplicity, with WI-FI, via the cloud, through machine learning and mapping technology; your cleaner is also my cleaner. Nonetheless, if there is one thing to remember, it would be: *Always say please.*

37 Lyrics from *Put on Your Sunday Clothes* (performed by Michael Crawford, written by Jerry Herman, 2008). The song was a key feature in *Wall-E* (dir. Andrew Stanton, 2008)

30 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009).

31 See <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-arvis/10103347273888091/>. Accessed 13 January 2020.

32 See *FUTURE TENSE: British Science Fiction Television*, <https://medium.com/cathode-ray-tube/future-tense-british-science-fiction-television-122c20845742>. Accessed 7 January 2020.

33 See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/731473/irobot-consumer-robot-shipments-worldwide/> accessed 19 January 2020.

33 See <https://www.wired.com/review/irobot-roomba-s9/>. Accessed 7 January 2020.

34 See <https://www.wired.com/review/irobot-roomba-s9/>. Accessed 7 January 2020.

35 Justin McGuirk and Gonzalo Herrero Delicado, ed. *Fear and Love: Reactions to a Complex World* (London / New York: Phaidon, 2016) 64.

36 *How can we stop robot abuse?* Chips with Everything podcast, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/audio/2018/may/18/stop-robot-abuse-children-ai-chips-with-everything-podcast> Accessed 18 Decemeber 2018.

Act II. A Ghost

“Carlos, is this what you are talking about, huh? It’s full of junk, it’s a storage shed, you idiot!”

“No, it’s not. It’s full of ghosts or spirits, okay? They just try and make me look bad.”

THE ENCOUNTER with the notion of care and the machine happens in the film *Batteries Not Included* (dir. Matthew Robbins, 1987).^{FIG. 13} Set in late nineteen-eighties New York City, a group of marginalised residents are facing eviction. Thugs are sent by the real estate developer to break into the residents’ homes and to vandalise the downstairs café, coercing them to leave. The situation is temporarily relieved by the arrival of two small living UFOs, which take temporary refuge in the building, and repair many of the broken items and the vandalised café. Dubbed *The Fix-its*, these visiting UFOs bring new light into the relationships between the human characters, and contribute

to a stronger communal bond. The residents briefly ponder the reasons behind the arrival and assistance of the helpful *Fix-its* (“It must be because of me!”), and attempt to form a reciprocal relationship (more from the side of the *Fix-its*, less from the residents themselves). After a series of escalated events, the building remains a holdout, sandwiched between towering high-rises, and at the mercy of corporate America.

THE UNCONDITIONAL CARE from the *Fix-its*, these sentient machines, towards the humans’ struggle, is coincidental. This reminds me of multiple paintings^{FIG. 14} of Saint Jerome, and their introduction by art critic and cultural theorist Jan Verwoert, “One day a lion walks into Jerome’s study with a thorn in his paw. Jerome plucks it ... What we are facing in this second moment of care is actually an impossible situation, maybe even a whole misunderstanding.”³⁷ A scholar best known for having produced the first Vulgate translation of the Bible, Saint Jerome is, however, not a veterinarian. The lion, on the other hand, has probably come to the right address without knowing it. If we permit ourselves to look at the paintings literally, the accidental quality of the encounter between the creature and the translator is the defining feature of the situation.

Potentiality happens, and St. Jerome had simply left his door open. To follow Verwoert’s argument, could we say that this “exposed potentiality of being together in a space ungoverned by any economy is, in fact, care?”³⁸

BUT WHAT IS CARE without a transaction? The conviviality between Saint Jerome and the lion might seem agreeable, but we cannot always count on the extra-terrestrials. The closest scenario might be, if we could think of care as a gift, then the strength of a gifting relationship would rest on its reciprocity. However, according to philosopher Marcel Mauss, the voluntary character of gift exchange is only a “polite fiction,” and based on ethnographic research on archaic societies across Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest, he argues that the major transfer of goods has been by the obligatory cycles of gifts. Anthropologists Mary Douglas, in her introduction to Mauss’s essay, posits further, “Each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. It is a total system that every item of status or of spiritual or material possession is implicated for everyone in the whole community ... The whole society can be described by the catalogue of transfers that map all the obligations between its

members. The cycling gift system is the society.”³⁹ The function of gifts, among clans, phratries, and tribes, is to maintain social order and kinship, to contract morality and norms, and even to declare and resolve rivalry.⁴⁰ The institution of ‘total services’ implies the equal importance of the obligation to give, to receive, and reciprocate. Compared to the market economy, “Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them.”⁴¹ Manifesting itself through public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible and more readily subject to scrutiny. The economy of care, on the other hand, is often latent, and verges on presumptions and assumptions between both the giver and the receiver. The carer is expected to determine the need of the others, for the others and as a service to the others. The carer is the psychic of needs, the shaman of expectations.

PSYCHOANALYST JACQUES LACAN famously asserted the maxim, “love is giving what you don’t have,”⁴² which could be thought through as the linchpin of the paradoxical economy of care. The concept of ‘lack’ or ‘without’ stems from ‘symbolic castration’ which, in psychoanalytic terms, describes the futility of expressing needs through language and the loss of *jouissance*.

Admitting to love is to admit to our lack thereof, and to open our mouths to speak, constitutes an almost unspeakable demand for love. The double negativity postulates the economy of care as a risky business. Grossly misinterpreted by the rom-com troupe of Hollywood cinema, the declaration of love-giving is oversimplified as “I lack and therefore you complete me.” In Lacan’s analysis, “I love you” is “I lack, I give you my lack and you speak to my lack.” Bound by “mutual ignorance,”⁴³ the entanglement between the carer and the receiver of care shadows the lover and the beloved. Giving what you do not have is often considered more meaningful⁴⁴ and the power of care comes from without. The enactment of care by the *Fix-its* or Saint Jerome, derives from not knowing the cause, and without the acknowledgement of needs, hence their potentiality is fulfilled because it arrives from the outside. They act not because of their bravery nor innate talents, but due to the state of not being indifferent.⁴⁵ Such a state of affairs might come close to philosopher Jacques Derrida’s definition of *impossible pure gift*. While the Maussian gift emphasises obligatory reciprocity and social binding, the conditions implicit in the idea of a free gift are suggested as: (1) First, there can be no reciprocity, in order to avoid

entering an interested ‘economic cycle.’ (2) Neither the giver nor the recipient should recognise the gift as a gift, or themselves as giver and recipient, to avoid leading to a sense of debt and obligation, self-gratification, and self-remuneration. (3) The gift cannot exist as a gift as such; as Derrida remarked, “The truth of the gift ... suffices to annul the gift.”⁴⁶ To care beyond economy is to be devoid of coercion and indebtedness, and one has to ‘impersonalise’ the gift.

BOTH GENEROSITY AND anonymity are two other important concepts in the articulation of free gifts, which we can feel flowing in our veins. Social researcher Richard Titmuss argues that anonymous blood donations may be “the closest approximation in social reality to the abstract concept of a “free human gift.”⁴⁷ Though heavily regulated and premeditated by governmental apparatus, the gift of blood takes place in impersonal situations and in almost all cases, the recipient and the donor are not known to one another, hence no personal expressions of gratitude or other sentiments are inherent or embedded. There is no moral penalty for not giving, and there is no formal contract of a reward or return gift, except a good conscience, generally promoted and publicised through medical and social policies. The

value of free gifts is intensified by the absence of exchange, although it is true that, to a point, some blood donors are motivated by the non-guaranteed affirmation that others will also donate if they ever require a blood transfusion at some future time. Echoing the pre-industrialised genealogy of gift exchange observed and drawn by Mauss, Titmuss further suggested a hopeful proposition, “Men are not born to give; as newcomers, they face none of the dilemmas of altruism and self-love. How can they and how do they learn to give – and to give to unnamed strangers irrespective of race, religion or colour – not in circumstances of shared misery but in societies continually multiplying new desires and syndicalist private wants concerned with property, status and power?”⁴⁸ The circulation of blood between the bodies of strangers could be envisioned as a form of communal care, and a fungible network of free gifts.

GENEROSITY IS NOT only linked by blood, which has found its expression in Hirokazu Kore-eda’s film *Shoplifters* (2018).^{FIG. 15} Tied by a quiet desperation to survive, a tribe of non-familial individuals are bound together in a cluttered house full of noisy and tender moments. The ‘family’ steals, and their thieving way of life is encapsulated by Osamu, the ‘father’ character,

FIG. 13



FIG. 14



FIG. 15



saying, “What is not bought in the store is free.” Besides toilet rolls and candies, the children in this ‘family’ are also either taken or are ‘found by chance.’ The formation of a criminal household provides shelter for runaways, the rejected, and the forgotten. The pragmatism that laces together the collateral damage of a neglected society is ambiguously benevolent, and Kore-eda soaks his characters with the gentlest of light possible. Taught by Osamu, Shota, the ‘son’ character, performs a little finger-rolling gesture for luck before lifting an item. It is a double blade of warmth and heartache to see this gesture repeated by the neighbourhood girl, Juri, who sequentially becomes the youngest ‘daughter.’ Inside their self-made ‘home,’ who could say the years they spent taking care of each other are inadequate or a plain misfortune? *Shoplifters* is an eerie story, blurring the divide between the unforgivable and understandable; what moves us as viewers is its ambivalence, even in the bleakest of situations.

IF BLOOD DONORS could form a community of givers following an approximated logic of the free gift, then the main characters from *Shoplifters* would be a community of takers, albeit caged by legality and legitimacy, but no less intimate. Both concepts of community are deemed by artist and writer Paul

Chan, as “unthinkable.” Borrowing the term from philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Chan sees *compearance* or *co-appearance* as what collective subjects have sought and continue to seek. In order to compear, all members of a group take part in a mutual composition, building a figure substantial enough to stand in for them over time. “The figure that compears is what one calls community.”⁴⁹ The compearance could be about bringing change, and it could also be care. To care is to enter change, and when care is elevated to a communal level, it fulfils its general will of finding “a semblance of completeness.”⁵⁰

Acknowledging the lukewarmness and the loss of currency in the social-individual tie, to potentiate solidarity, and then inner change, is kept stagnant by the tension between “cruel optimism”⁵¹ and indifference. UFOs and evictees, a lion and a translator, blood donors and then a group of thieves? At their core, they are all communitarian experiments, conjuring the unthinkable: the spectre of care.

37 Jan Verwoert. *Support Structure: How to Care?* ed. Céline Conddorelli, Gavin Wade and James Langdon. *Support Structure* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009) 170.

38 Ibid. 171.

39 See Mary Douglas’s introduction text in Marcel Mauss. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2001 ed.) Foreword xi.

40 Mauss uses the term ‘potlatch’ to describe the system through which gifts are exchanged, encompassing the acts of giving, receiving, and most importantly, the way they are reciprocated. The Chinook term essentially means ‘to feed’ and ‘to consume.’ The phenomenon of ‘potlatch’ is exemplary in the alliance of two phratries in Pacific or North American tribes. What is noteworthy in these tribes is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in their practices of exchange; in order to outdo one another in their gifts, they even go as far to destroy accumulated wealth. Mauss defines this type of ‘potlatch’ as: *total services of an agonistic type.*

41 See Mary Douglas’s introduction text in Ibid. *Foreword xviii. Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2001 ed.) Foreword xi.

42 Jacques Lacan. *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII: Transference (1960–1961)* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015). Original work published in 1991 and the second, revised edition in 2001.

43 In his book, *Lacan on Love* (2016), scholar Bruce Fink recalled Lacan’s suggestion that the lover is in search of something and yet does not know what it is; the beloved, on the other hand, is thought to have something by the lover, but the beloved does not know what he has that makes him loved by the lover. He termed this intrinsic problem of love ‘mutual ignorance.’

44 Fink uses the example of a well-to-do parents who could easily afford to spoil their children, and their children will hardly be inclined to take store-bought gifts or large allowances as

proof of their parents’ love for them. On the contrary, if these same parents are very busy and have little time to spare, but they nevertheless give freely of their time to their children, the latter might well be inclined to view that as a sign of love. Giving what you have is easy – anyone can do it. Giving what you do not have is far more meaningful.

45 Referencing from Martin Heidegger, Verwoert dissects the meaning of *sorge*, the German word for ‘care’, as the existential sentiment par excellence. In the stage of *sorge*, one receive the calling of being, which reveals the question: what am I going to do with my life?

46 Jacques Derrida. *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University Press, 1992) 27.

47 Titmuss, Richard M. *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (UK: LSE Books, 1997) 140.

48 Ibid. 2.

49 Paul Chan. *Paul Chan: Selected Writings 2000–2014* ed. Isabel Friedli and Eric Banks. (Newmünchenstein: laurenz Foundation, Schaulager; New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2014) 101.

50 Ibid. 101.

51 *Cruel optimism*, according to cultural scholar Lauren Berlant, denotes the condition “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your own flourishing,” namely the fantasies of the good life that are no longer attainable in the present. This sense of precariousness – a gut-level suspicion that hard work, thrift, and following the rules might not “add up to something” – has become cathartic as much as it is confirming.

‡

“When people ask me, ‘Who is your public?’

*I say honestly, without skipping a beat, ‘Ross.’ The public is Ross.”*⁵²

THE PORTRAITURE BY artist Félix González-Torres are always without limbs and without a face, sometimes they have no shadows. In the beginning of the 1990s, González-Torres started conceiving a series of candy pieces, entitled “Untitled” in quotation marks, sometimes followed by parenthetical titles: an intentional scheme that runs through the artist’s body of work with only a few exceptions. “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991) was made promptly after the AIDS-related death of his lover, Ross Laycock.^{FIG. 16} Composed of 175 pounds of a candy called Fruit Flashers, the candy portrait spills over galleries’ floors and into corners in loose piles, ready to be consumed. The candy portrait series takes specific form in piles or spreads, but the ideal weight always corresponds to that of the individuals’ bodies: two portraits out of six are the bodyweight of Ross (“Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991); two are the total weight of Ross and the artist himself (“Untitled” (*Placebo*), 1991 and “Untitled” (*Loverboys*), 1991); one is of the artist’s deceased

father (“Untitled” (*Portrait of Dad*), 1991); and the final one (“Untitled” (*Portrait of Marcel Brient*), 1992) is of Marcel Brient, a curator and a close friend of González-Torres.

THE ABSENCE OF a figurative portrayal of bodies encourages a more open-ended reading from the viewers, one without a specific gender or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the erotic and sensual undertone is buoyant: the seductiveness of candy wrappers and sweet candies, the unwrapping, the tasting, sucking, swallowing, and ingesting ... all point to appetites and bodily pleasures. Philosopher Georges Bataille described eroticism as a form of bodily “excess,” a non-procreative sexuality in which

FIG. 16



energy is spent without gain. The dissolution of continuity and discontinuity breaks down the physical limitations inherent in human beings, and “given its emergence as an effect of cultural systems of rejection, prohibition and taboo ... Eroticism’s transgression of boundaries turns, thereby, on abject forms of existence ... in its embrace of the rejected, profane world, it paradoxically accedes to the sphere of the sacred, negating nature, precisely through its adoration of the base corporeality of the flesh.”⁵³ Bataille envisions eroticism as an escape from the prevailing system of capitalist existence, which reduces us to “servile dependence.”⁵⁴ The sweet escape of candy portraits underlines their subversiveness, especially as the series was made during the rampage of AIDS and its surrounding phobias, and when homosexuality was still a taboo in the USA. “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) is a gift for Ross, a parting gift perhaps, in a disappearing act.

REFERRING TO THE making of “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*), González-Torres said, “I want to make artwork that could disappear, that never existed, and it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying. So it was a metaphor that I could abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I’m going to destroy it before it destroys me.”⁵⁵ Echoing Bataille,

González-Torres continued, “It’s also about excess, about the excess of pleasure, it’s like a child who wants a landscape of candies. First and foremost it’s about Ross. Then I want to please myself and then everybody.” Giving away one’s pain, through seduction and destruction, is the hard business of catharsis.⁵⁶ The excessive generosity and promiscuousness –its willingness to give itself away to any admiring beholder – is the soft romance. There are instructions that the candy spills are to be “endlessly replenished,” but the “sculpture risks the danger of total dissipation.”⁵⁷ The word care originates from its root word *chara*, meaning grief. The candy portrait series formulated a structure of grief-sharing, or care-sharing. It’s a poignant performance of public discourses and private emotions. Through mourning his lover, the artist cares for himself. Writer T. Fleischmann uses González-Torres’s art to thread together tales of personal encounters, hidden histories and snow in their⁵⁸ book, *Time is The Thing a Body Moves Through* (2019). One paragraph reads like this, “A thing conceived to be so confidential and amatory that only one person can be in mind, and then given again and again to someone else. Because there are no limits to how much we can give each other, when we recognise that none

of this was ever ours to give, and as we give each other the world.” Felix González-Torres died at his Miami home in 1996, 5 years after Ross’s passing. He was 38.

52 The Quote is from an interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres by Robert Storr, originally published in Art Press January 1995. It is retrieved from <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2000/Torres/torres/storr.html> Accessed 15 January 2020.

53 Fred Botting & Scott Wilson. ed. *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 13.

54 Ibid. 19.

55 Also from the interview published by Art Press January 1995.

56 When he made the first candy spills, González-Torres commenting on the idea of “how to let go,” said, “I am losing the most important thing in my life—Ross, with whom I had the first real home, ever. So why not punish myself even more so that, in a way, the pain would be less? This is how I started letting the work go. Letting it just disappear.

People don’t realise how strange it is when you make your work and you put it out to be seen and say, simply, ‘Take me.’ You watch them take pieces of the work—pieces of yourself—and start going out the door. And feel like saying, ‘Excuse me, but that is mine. Bring it back.’” The quote is from Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzales-Torres* (New York: Hate Cantz, 2007) 154.

57 Ibid. 154.

58 Non-binary pronouns.

IN VIETNAM, many unnamed graves are inscribed with the words *Vô Danh*. In Vietnamese, this means “unnamed” or “nameless,” and those buried below are most likely anonymous victims from the Vietnam War. *Vô Danh, Danh Vô*. Only able to speak but not read the language, artist Danh Vo only discovered the coincidental inversion of his name through his mother, after their visit to a local cemetery. The unnamed becomes *Untitled*⁵⁹, an exhibition composed of work made by Vo’s father, friends, lover, and professor, through to gallery technicians, and a group of children who visited his Berlin Farm. There are also objects acquired through acquaintances, archives, and personal collections, as well as incorporated works by other artists, designers, and Vo himself. A curious array of biographic fragments, found materials and historical artefacts, pop culture and biblical references, immigration and colonial histories, chance encounters and personal relationships, all captured by the “hunter-gatherer artist”⁶⁰ in the mist of time. Reflexively, Vo also acts like a curator, a carer for objects, memories, and lost voices. *Lick Me, Lick Me* (2015)^{FIG. 17} placed a dismembered marble torso of the Greek God Apollo inside a Nestlé Carnation Milk crate purchased

on eBay. An image of death, the hereditary of symbolism is entangled in both its material and linguistic qualities. Whereas the condensed milk, a favourite childhood treat for Vo, was rationed by American soldiers during the Vietnam War, the purchase of a found wooden crate through an American-led, e-commerce platform as part of a high-valued artwork is subsequently shown at an Anglo-Saxon gallery. The circulation of material goods and geopolitical power is twinned with motifs of motherly love (milk and carnations) and fighting evil (Apollo as the “avertter of evil”⁶¹ and the American invaders in Vietnam). The title, *Lick Me, Lick Me*, is snarled at her mother by the possessed protagonist, Regan, in *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973). Apparently, Vo grew up watching horror films with his own mother.⁶² Doubling is Vo’s favourite trope of horror, but it always comes with tints of tenderness and humanity. A father meticulously replicated another father’s letter from his son on the morning of his beheading (2.2.1861, 2009)^{FIG. 18}; a closeted anthropologist and his locked-away photographs of men walking hand in hand (*Photographs of Dr. Joseph M. Carrier 1962–1973*, 2010), which were framed and backgrounded with black walnut wood and orchard timber, gifted from the son of a notorious

defence secretary.⁶³ The shadowy spirits of mothers, fathers, lovers, friends, and foes, are all present in Vo’s work, oscillating between sorrow and relief, ambivalence and lucidity. Vo’s practice is a careful re-consideration and rendition of the invisible force of histories, he partakes the responsibility of a curator, in “repairing’ things in a culture that values reuse and recycling over *tabula rasa*.”⁶⁴ The writer, William Faulkner, famously⁶⁵ wrote, “The past is never dead ...” and its apparition is a continuous endurance for Vo. The second half of the sentence, “... it’s not even past,” demands a prophetic⁶⁶ attitude towards life, art, and death. It is not about setting up dichotomies, but when breath becomes air, we are all in it together.

FIG. 17



FIG. 18

59 *Danh Vo: Untitled* was held at the South London Gallery, from September 19 to November 24, 2019.

60 Known for his often octopoid approach to art-making and conceptualising exhibitions, Vo has been described as a ‘hunter-gather artist’ by curators and the media. In this instance, I am quoting from art critic Roberta Smith. See *Danh Vo: An Artist at the Crossroads of History and Diary*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/arts/design/danh-vo-guggenheim-review.html>. Accessed 18 January 2020.

61 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo>.

62 See <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/lick-me-lick-me-by-danh-vo>. Accessed 18 January 2020.

63 Craig McNamara is an environmental educationalist, and son of former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who was responsible for the escalation of US presence in the Vietnam War. Craig McNamara befriended Danh Vo when the artist started to acquire and exhibit objects at the estate of Craig’s father.

64 Elisabeth Lebovici, *Danh Vo: Slip of the Tongue* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2015).

65 The quote is often paraphrased, and is made even more so by then-Senator Barack Obama in his speech A More Perfect Union in 2012. It has also been adapted into the lines of the film *Midnight in Paris* (dir. Woody Allen, 2011).

66 “Without the work of distillation and synthesis, the past can’t be turned into meaning for today. Nicolas Bourriaud’s term ‘semionaut’ might be the best designation for this tendency: surfing from signifier to signifier, the artist invents meandering trajectories between cultural signs. Raw data is gathered and presented, but to aesthetic and ornamental ends.” This Quote is from art critic Claire Bishop’s feature text *History Depletes Himself*, published in *Artforum International* September 2015, Vol. 54. 324–330.

‡

“This is not here.”
*Summer 2006: no girlfriend, no studio. The government announces that, starting next year, smoking will be banned in bars and cafés. I am without cigarettes at the moment, and my right hand trembles and flops around the tabletop like it has a mind of its own.*⁶⁷

STARRING AT A HOLE on a pale turquoise table-top, which apparently was scratched by the artist’s fingers over a period of 4 years, I have realised that artist Lee Kit is a master of mood and his own time. The process of scratching was documented in a lengthy video, as well as on some 300 postcards sent to friends and acquaintances. Trained as a painter, Lee’s work deals with the formal quality of compositions, colours, and light, as much as his inner state of mind, which surface in pragmatic, everyday “situations.”⁶⁸ Alluding to the domestic setting and painterly concerns of Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, *Scratching the Table Surface* (2006–10)^{FIG. 19} demarcates the borderline of idleness and boredom, and the fixation and privilege of being an artist.⁶⁹ The seemingly loose and unrehearsed arrangement is also a matter of control.⁷⁰ The aimless fingering brings to mind a sexually frustrated young man, but also an anxious body “living his daily



life according to the redundant gaps, trivial spaces and moments of inaction and restlessness.”⁷¹ Watching YouTube videos of Lee, one might notice his assertion in describing his processes and himself as an artist and a political being; after all, his work has been well received by cultural institutions and art fairs, but his tone of voice often changes when it comes to the ephemerals. There are more hesitations and filler words. *Scratching the Table Surface* is particular to the stubborn equivocacy in Lee’s work. The wormhole represents a possibility, a liberation to “do something meaningless.”⁷² Can we look at art-making as a form of self-preservation, a proactive grapple with free time, as in fact, care? It is a very delicate question one is too shy to ask, given our constant demand for achievement and for “being-able-to-do-everything (*Alles-Können*).” Philosopher Byung-chul Han advocates *profound boredom*, to counter hyperattention and its tendency to reduce life to a performance-machine (*Leistungsmaschine*), which he believes will eventually take “*livingness from life*.”⁷³ He recalls Walter Benjamin’s metaphor for deep boredom as a “Dream bird that hatches the egg of experience,”⁷⁴ and the egg is the creative process, which is often long and slow. Han elaborates, “A surely hectic rush

produces nothing new. It reproduces and accelerates what is already available.”⁷⁵ There is a Cantonese expression that depicts boredom as the “ghostly stiffness” of life. *Hou² Gwai² Mun⁶*, or *very ghostly bored*, is often said when one has nothing to do, which is essentially eerie. What does one do with oneself? Why there is nothing to do? Why am I so ghostly bored? We scratch and scratch, only the hole knows.

67 Yung Ma, ed. ‘You (You).’ – *Lee Kit* (Hong Kong: M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, 2013) 12.

71 Pauline J. Yao, Lee Kit: A Slice of Life. *LEAP Magazine* June 2012 (Issue 240) 122–133.

68 “When Lee Kit describes his exhibitions as ‘situations,’ he is among the things referring to an action taking place there.” This quote is from an interview with the artist by curator Martin Germann, available at <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/lee-kit-a-small-sound-in-your-head/>. Accessed 18 January 2020.

72 *Lee Kit Documentary*, <https://youtu.be/3qCGthXDZsl>. Accessed 18 January 2020. Produced by Walker Art Center on the occasion of Lee’s exhibition *Lee Kit: Hold Your Breath, Dance Slowly* (May 12–October 9, 2016).

73 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (California: Stanford University Press, 2015) 50.

74 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938* ed. Micheal W. Jennings, Howard Elland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 149.

69 “To me, this is the most fundamental of contradictions. How come being an artist means I can choose how I want to live?... I work to make money for a long time; I’ve done it ... Now, I am an artist. Why do I have the privilege to go do something, and why do other people not have it?” The quote is from a conversation between Lee and curator Yung Ma, published in ‘You (You).’ – *Lee Kit* (Hong Kong: M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, 2013) 112.

75 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (California: Stanford University Press, 2015) 13.

70 “My inclination is to control each part as much as possible, and as for those parts that cannot be controlled, I want to make sure they are all passable. Only then can I relax.” *Ibid.* 76.

‡

“It is a restless moment. She has kept her head lowered ... to give him a chance to come closer. But he could not, for lack of courage. She turns and walks away.”

“He remembers those vanished years. As though looking through a dusty window pane, the past is something he could see, but not touch. And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct.”

—Excerpt from Liu Yi-chang, *Tête-bêche* (1988.) Featured in *In the Mood for Love* (dir. Wong Kar-wai, 2000)

TWO MACGUFFINS in two of my favourite films by Wong Kar-wai both hold secrets and confessions. In *In the Mood for Love* (2000),^{FIG. 20} a hole in the sandstone wall at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, and the tape recorder in *Happy Together* (1997).^{FIG. 21} The characters whispered into the eternal void, a celestial reception or a malfunctioned tape. The beauty (and sorrow) of a one-sided confession lies in its narcissism and queerness. “The association between homosexual love and lost – a link that, historically, has given queers insight into love’s failures and impossibilities ... I see the art of losing as a particularly queer art.”⁷⁶ Although their feelings for one another are unadmitted and unrealised, the losers are not holding anyone indebted. Their prayers

are purposely or accidentally not to be heard and remain as secrets and ghosts, the only chance of ingratiation is through memory (one could always ingratiate oneself) or a different script. These confessions are closer to dedication and because they are muttered to the future, they ask for no promise and no return. To dedicate one's love – and care – to the impossible, as ridiculous as it sounds, is beyond transactional. At the end of *A Room of One's Own* (1929), writer Virginia Woolf calls us forth to summon the ghost of Shakespeare's sister, "To dedicate the project of feminist writing ... to her arrival ... to allow her to come back from the past and arrive from the future."⁷⁷ What makes Woolf's dedication so powerful is that it is anonymous (no hierarchy as she could be anyone) and free of obligation (no penalty, no rewards, no interests, and no debts); it is not bound by the singular subject of the beloved (no projection, and hence the absence of ego) and invokes a network of care for the yet-to-come: "Drawing her life from the loves of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born."⁷⁸ If not entirely, the wanderlusting souls of our sisters have found some of their ways online. Art+Feminism is a non-profit organisation mobilising a global network of contributors to add content to Wikipedia about female

and non-binary artists. They produce and share open-source materials and tutorials for a format called edit-a-thon, where volunteers gather, edit and write content, specific to their own locations and languages. These meet-ups, which sprout up at their own pace, duration, and frequency, can be followed mostly in person or over the internet. There are core organisers worldwide, but they are also participants with mutual commitments and responsibilities. Nobody owns articles⁷⁹ and each entry will undergo multiple versions before being published, as anyone can compose and edit, and contributions are unnamed. Wikipedia is non-personal,⁸⁰ but the community of Art+Feminism encapsulates the principles of dedication as non-economical care and ridiculous love, in the form of intellectual labour. It was both the pens and the bodies Shakespeare's sisters once laid down. The ghosts from the future, is yet-to-come.

⁷⁶ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ Jan Verwoert, *Personal Support: How to Care?* *Personal Support*. ed. Céline Conorelli, Gavin Wade and James Langon, Support Structure (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009) 176.

⁷⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1977 [1929]) 123.

⁷⁹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Ownership_of_content. Accessed 12 January 2020.

⁸⁰ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars. Accessed 12 January 2020.

The Unfinished Business An Epilogue

THE FIRE BURNS for days, and then weeks and months, animals are running with fright all over Facebook and the internet. As I am writing this thesis, the landscape in Australia continues to be going up in flames. *Care, the Friendly Ghost* was originally conceived of three chapters: Act I. A Cleaner (care labour), Act II. A Ghost (care in transaction) and the now missing Act III. A Old(er) Woman (care as preservation). The preservation of the environment, the self and memory could be narrated and analysed through the critical lens of care. Framing and thinking with Puig de la Bellacasa's definition of *speculative ethics*, it is important to further the human-decentered perspectives. Attempting to trace the contour of the friendly ghost, one has to look at the past lives of nature, lost rituals and knowledges and their rehabilitations; the conceptualisation of failure with care will be a key theme. There are necessary moments that we fell with grace, not from it; We will also look at resting, ageing and mourning, and how these processes could be viewed as challenging positions, forms of resistance; Finally, we are with the hypothesis which our memory are the only remaining resource, what kind of future would it imply? And

how do we best equipped ourselves for it? Writing this thesis is as much giving as receiving, and many of the cited examples and theories requires more consideration and elaboration, as Derrida suggested, "More justly, but with them." The metaphors of the friendly ghost is not merely a flight of fancy, but a fluid way of thinking, *a passing-through*, and an omnipresence of awareness. Writing is often said to be an act of solitude, but I am not alone.



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Finally, I dedicate the time and effort in writing this thesis to myself, is who makes all these possible and allows it to happen. I took care of myself.

Simo
January 2020

