

fragments: on meandering together as errant bodies

Meandering.

We were nine, then ten, then eleven. In a dialogue oval, we meandered.

How many turns must have been made within each of us and between us. How many trajectories must have been laid for picking up on in time—our separate lifetimes, in and across multiple lifetimes.

I gestured to the dialogue oval when the question about whether care is sustainable was raised. A provisional oval to be dispersed, as one is never to be in the same river twice. Heraclitus and Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh resonate across the ripples.

It was not just the shape of the oval.

Yesterday, at a public conversation between Indonesian art collectives and Hong Kong art collectives at documenta 15, a member of the audience asked how the collectives could be sustainable – financially and beyond.

Like care, sustainability is a fashionable term. Like care, it is in need of attention, but also as much of troubling. I would rather choose “lives well lived” than sustainability. In context, I see the collectives not trying to sustain themselves with an imagination of permanence. I think they are encouraging non-natal kinship (Haraway and others) to facilitate conditions for the sustainability of others, Planet Ocean included.

What about care?

Suddenly, in the middle, a related question: Is contemporary art violent?

Hannah Arendt’s *On Violence* came to mind, but I couldn’t remember anything precise. I visualized in mind the pages where she made distinctions between Power, Force, Strength, and Authority.

The only concrete idea I remembered was that power comes from acting in concert, while strength is from the individual. In response to the question, I said, in perhaps too much haste, that contemporary art could be violent if violence involved destruction for regeneration. In hindsight, I would say, if a specific act of violence has an object, contemporary art might be violent towards itself, that is, the acts of self-questioning at times running wild. Why insist on its making, its value, its place, its work on us, its hold onto us? Back and forth, the chain of questioning moves between construction and destruction, making and undermining itself. This might be what an ethics look like – to not let the question of what is the right thing to do (with regard to contemporary art) rest. A leap to Bataille’s *Cradle of Humanity*. Ancient hunters, he said, asked for forgiveness before killing an animal. I need more time to understand the question.

What about care? A recent academic conference themed around the work of a woman composer came into our discussion. Greatness is indeed the language and structure oppressive power has used to feed its own survival. Must naming for recognition refer to greatness for it to stand? “The Master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Audre Lorde’s insight has been well

circulated. If we challenge tyranny by means of the same tools of silencing, ostracizing, evoking fear for control, encouraging suspicion for divide and rule, bringing out a possessive individualist tendency from us for personal safety as it pulls us farther and farther away from reciprocated kindness, love and humanity, then, we are no better.

My two questions are, firstly, are the masters' tools fixed, each instrument an isolated sword? And secondly, the desire or aspiration or final goal to seize power, or take power back in "our" hands – is this viable as final?

Regarding the first question, I'd rather think of the tools as situated in entangled relations with each other, constituting and reconstituting themselves in specific circumstances. If care is in the equation, I would say I am not ready to give up on how I too belong to and is called upon by the idea, so that tyranny does not monopolize it, even when it tries to. Or, it doesn't even take trials on its part – what does it care about errors? All it needs to do is to drop care down the well-oiled machine that manufactures its narcissistic glory. There, it totalizes all, care included.

Nancy Fraser argues that justice today requires both redistribution and recognition. (1998) Recognition is not only a matter of self-realization, but also justice, because "what makes misrecognition morally wrong [...] is that it denies some individuals and groups the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction." (3) In addition, if misrecognition is understood as caused by the oppressors' prejudice, "overcoming it seems to require policing their beliefs, an approach that is authoritarian." (3)

I am thinking, if an under-recognized artist is to reclaim recognition, the means would need be the construction of structural conditions rather than taking the lines of personal beliefs for a better state of affairs. Would an academic conference be the right condition for the artist to have access to social esteem, an equal right for all? I am not sure about others, but I participated in the conference not to respond to greatness or her greatness. I was responding to how hearing was studied, keeping what music was at a distance unresolved. Naming serves greatness if it is after fame, when it justifies itself by authority. But could naming serve something else?

Refusing the master's tools is one thing; doing something else to them is another. On the one hand, there is always already more than one master. Not all of them work by coercion. Nature subjects me to their power not by coercion, but by revelation and limitation. On the other hand, I may be using language as the same tool the master uses, but twisting it, structuring it, and letting it touch truth in ways they do not for the ultimate goal of the master to subjugate. This particular tool may not be singularly directed to building a house already present to thinking. Instead, it may lead to an incompleteness that Maxine Greene argues to be a core element of the aesthetic experience.

Still, there could be no adequate defence for greatness in the way it has been made historically. I looked up at the sculptures in the park this morning, and so wished the figures would come down from the pedestal for me to touch, instead of just looking down upon me as another passing body.

Regarding the second question, if seizing power is the final goal, is this not also resorting to the master's tools, or, employing different tools to reach the same goal? I wonder how sustainability could be returned to the equation. If waste dumped in someone else's backyard maintains the "exceptionalism" [thanks Brandon for this reference, in a different context] of one side at the expense of the other, if coal needs to be put in the museum (inspired by documenta15), and if conflict has been over-rated as the origin story of humanity (inspired by ruangrupa and Judith Butler), sustainable care requires a change of material (for making), a shift of goal (for persisting), and a shaping of a different aesthetics (for growing). The materials – from named things to evolving quality of relations between everything? The goals – from power to truth? The aesthetics – from linearity (which is redundant to affirm for clock time never moves in different ways) to roundness via acts of rounding or cascading?

Yes, I believe truth is strong than power. Multiple truths. Interwoven truths. Not one truth. Not any unchanged truths. Not half-truths. Not post-truth. Some say those who hold the truth holds power. I say, yes, but power comes later. The power is not in one single truth claim, but in the listening that is open for all that can come together. By this I mean not only bodies, but everything considered – the effort to consider everything together will more likely bring about truth. Then, there may be power, but by then, it may no longer be important. Is seizing power a mere means for getting to the truth? I am not sure because this may reduce the latter into the former.

One day, over a private potluck dinner with friends to commemorate souls lost in the summer heat of 1989 in Beijing, I shared with them I had recently learnt to say "wow" to July 1st national day celebrations – the same day when 500,000 people protested against the government's imperative to increase police presence in our lives 2003. Since, we marched every year, until 2020. The "wow" is a vehicle that carries parody, irony, exaggeration, but also truth, very much so. It is so that truth can find some shelter and get transmitted in an abject landscape.

"What can art do" must be a question that keeps haunting us. We talked about thieving and smuggling – does art do either or both sometimes? Do we? The trouble with thieving is indeed that one claims ownership of something that is not one's – whether legality and legitimacy matter depend on where one is. The beauty of smuggling is of interrupting a well-oiled machine. Perhaps the latter is noble and the former, petty. But in both cases, the final goal could still be for personal profits. Thanks to Salome questioning thieving, I have no defence for thieving except when it is exchanged as a joke. When it is openly done to and for each other, like putting your ear in my pocket and letting you put mine in yours, thieving becomes an open secret. There then needs no thieving or smuggling because we are both open.

In Dayanita Singh's show, I saw these words: "fugitive and multiple". To be able to move and flow and meander between multiple poles perhaps more likely brings out our troubles and potential solutions to them. To not be fixated on any one position but to keep track of how it may change may more likely bring out our capacities to resolve what remains dear to us. To regard the non-linguistically based interventions as inspiring – walking, loitering, standing, jumping, running, dancing, swimming – is to keep reflecting on what the other side of the commodity is, to follow Agamben, and to construct more than one kind of rationality and criticality. Maybe. If possible.

Yesterday, on my way to Hafenstrass in Kassel, I took a wrong turn. I ended up on a road that's being repaired. One side of the pavement was gone. The other side was crooked. Pedestrians had to use the same narrow path as bikers. No vehicle could pass. The trees kept waiting. It occurred to me if it was intentional of documenta15's curation that some of us took that path, we might be closer to realizing the critique against the Eurocentrism of contemporary art, it being the source of all knowledge, and it having the power to lend tokenism to cultures and practices that are other. Change takes destruction, suspension, detour, and the recognition of the workers' strenuous labour, to nurture. The critique comes about not only through antagonism, but many more qualities of actions aiming for change. Our shoes will be dirtied. What lies ahead is uncertainty.

What about care?

I find myself not ready to leave it alone yet, even when it has become fashion, ideology, top-down control, mutual surveillance... I cannot leave it to rest because I believe there is still something in it that can shake up tyranny's hold.

Yang Yeung
grateful forever to have been among Salomé Voegelin and Brandon LaBelle and
other errant bodies,
one mid-summer Saturday afternoon in Berlin

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Kassel