

Caring for contemporary art

Citation for published version (APA):

van de Vall, R. (2023). *Caring for contemporary art: Reflections on ethics and aesthetics in precarious times*. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/spe.20230119rv>

Document status and date:

Published: 19/01/2023

DOI:

[10.26481/spe.20230119rv](https://doi.org/10.26481/spe.20230119rv)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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**Caring for contemporary art:
Reflections on ethics and aesthetics in
precarious times**

Caring for contemporary art

Reflections on ethics and aesthetics in precarious times

Valedictory lecture

Renée van de Vall

Labia

Dear dean, dear colleagues, students, family and friends,

In July and September last year I had the pleasure of participating in a small brainstorm group around the restoration of *Labia Virginica Grandiflora* (1968), in the collection of the Bonnefantenmuseum.¹ *Labia* was created by the Dutch artist Ferdi Tajiri (1927-1969). It is one of a series called *Hortisculptures*, brightly coloured plant-like forms made of various kinds of fabrics. Bonnefantenmuseum owns four of these *Hortisculptures*, plus the large *Damsel Dragonfly*. All of the four *Hortisculptures* need cleaning and repair, but *Labia* has more problems than the other sculptures. Not only is the fabric discoloured, it is also worn and even torn at several places, in particular at the seams where it is attached to the metal frame. The form and volume of the leaves have changed, the leaves are hanging rather than pointing upwards or sideways; the electric lights do not work anymore. As the short video on the Bonnefantenmuseum's website explains, the works have to regain their playfulness and vibrancy and this is particularly the case for *Labia*.

Such meetings have always been precious to me. Being involved in conservation questions has been a continuous *education of attention* (Ingold, 2000/2022, p. 25). I never learned as much about works of art as when listening to conservators/restorers, and so it was this time. Walking around the *Labia* with the group members who asked all kinds of questions – what is more important for the vitality of the work, the colours or the posture of the arms? Were the lights white or coloured? Who did the stitching of the seams, the artist or her assistants? Is it a stand-alone sculpture or part of a group? – all these questions greatly intensified my perception and appreciation of the work. As if wondering what the work should look like is a kind of re-enactment of its making, getting in touch with the work from the inside out. Moreover, there was

¹ For pictures of *Labia* and the other *Hortisculptures*, and for a video about their restoration, see: https://www.bonnefanten.nl/nl/tentoonstellingen/restoring_ferdi

something refreshingly *unzeitgemäß* in making this work, almost 55 years old, object of such attentive scrutiny, outside any exhibition agenda, outside what is hot and trending. Of course there is a wider movement of reviving interest in forgotten or neglected female artists, but even then: why choose this so notoriously difficult-to-restore object? There have been restoration plans since the 1990s, which were never carried out. Why this work? Why now? What is this, if it isn't an act of love, an act of care?

I have been so fortunate to spend my entire professional life reading, thinking, writing and teaching about what was dear to me: contemporary art – how to look at it, how to understand it, and not in the last place how to think about its conservation. But now, at the end of my university trajectory, in these increasingly worrying times, the question arises: what could it all mean in a larger scheme of things? Contemporary art is but a tiny, very specialized cultural niche and its conservation again an almost invisible aspect of its existence. Is there something that I have learned – something the field has learned – that might contribute to facing the problems the wider world has to deal with? Looking back to some of the conservation conferences and workshops of 2022, I know that I am not the only one asking these questions. This lecture is heavily indebted to the reflections of Glenn Wharton, Pip Laurenson, Jill Sterrett, Helia Marçal and many others in these meetings; I hope to add a small step to their thoughts.

Precarious times

The following words by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing eloquently summarize why the troubles of the world seem to have reached a point of no return.

We hear about precarity in the news every day. People lose their jobs or get angry because they never had them. Gorillas and river porpoises hover at the edge of extinction. Rising seas swamp whole Pacific islands. But most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works. It is what "drops out" of the system. What if, as I'm suggesting, precarity *is* the condition of our time – or, to put it in another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?

(Tsing, 2015, p. 20)

Climate change, pollution and massive extinction of species, increasing differences between rich and poor, North and South, dislocation of millions of people by wars, hunger and natural

disasters – we have arrived at a point in time in which it becomes obvious that these are not unfortunate side effects of a globalized economy that might be solved in the future if we all do our very best. They are systematic for the capitalist organization of production and consumption that acknowledges no limits in turning humans and non-humans in resources for investment and exploitation and that now threatens the future of life on earth. And there might be no happy ending. As Tsing writes, we can no longer rely on the stories of modernization and progress that promised a better future for all, we have to do without ‘the handrails of stories that tell where everyone is going, and, also, why’ (Ibid., p. 2).

But then, Tsing warns us, we also shouldn’t. Stories of progress and modernization *exclude*: they tell us about those parts of the present that might lead to the future and leave out what doesn’t – the leftovers that drop out of history (Ibid., p. 20). They form the unacknowledged ‘Rest of Now’ – the title of the exhibition by the Indian artist group Raqs Media Collective for the *Manifesta* of 2007 I discussed in my inaugural lecture 12 years ago: the abandoned factories, deserted bauxite pits, deforested landscapes, evicted tenants or dislocated migrant workers that stay behind when ‘the breathless pursuit of tomorrow’s promised riches’ moves its focus elsewhere (Raqs Media Collective, 2008, p. 51).

Although it is almost impossible not to think in the categories of modernization and progress, Tsing notes, we need to develop another imaginative framework, a framework that allows us to look *around* rather than *ahead*:

Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns. Each living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion. [...] The curiosity I advocate follows such multiple temporalities, revitalizing description and imagination. [...] These livelihoods make worlds too: and they show us how to look around rather than ahead. (Tsing, op.cit., pp. 21-22)

Tsing looks for hope, for stories of *collaborative survival*, in what she calls the *cracks*: the patches of ruined landscape where uprooted species (human and non-human) meet, where a rare mushroom flourishes and provides a living for a polyphonic assemblage of beings. She advocates an *art of noticing* that appreciates the multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories of such assemblages. In this lecture I will speculate not so much about cracks but about *niches*: these *unzeitgemäße* ‘spaces of perpetuation and care’ (Scholte, 2022) that have not yet been

completely colonized by the logic of progress; and I will try to foreground the resilience of preciousness against the forces of precarity.

Care

The guiding concept in my speculation is the notion of *care*. I am not so naive to think that changing concepts will change the world – that requires dedicated activism. I am also not so naive to think that ‘care’ alone is sufficient to understand human and more-than-human reality, nor that care is this innocent, feel-good panacea for the destructions of today’s global capitalism. As feminist care theorists have pointed out, real-life care arrangements are full of inequality and exploitation along lines of class, gender and race. But I do think, with them, that it is important to rethink the basic notions that structure our understanding of how we relate to our surroundings – and I do think that ‘care’ may open up an alternative, hopefully connecting people rather than dividing them.

In a way, everything that makes the care perspective in ethics distinctive is present in the often-quoted words of Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as *a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.

(Tronto & Fisher, quoted in Tronto, 1993, p. 103)

Care is not something an inherently isolated and egoistic individual needs to be forced to do through considerations of self-interest or duty; it comes natural to us because we are all involved in and dependent on this live-sustaining web.

Science and technology scholars and posthumanist theorists like Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols (2012) and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) have included technological artifacts and non-human nature to this web of dependencies. Mol, Moser & Pols (2012) comment how activities like cooking, washing, building, nursing, in spite of being central to daily life, have never received much scholarly attention – until recently. But foregrounding care is more than just placing a hitherto invisible domain of activity in the spotlights; it implies a shift of values that ultimately is political as well. For them, care signifies not only a domain, but also ‘a

mode, a style, a way of working' to be found in all spheres of life; they talk about the *logic* of care, 'its kindness ..., its effectiveness, its tenacity and its strength' which needs to be salvaged against erosion, for instance by 'rules and regulations that are alien to them'. (Mol et al., op.cit., p. 7) Maria Puig de la Bellacasa defines care as 'a "generic" doing of ontological significance, as a "species activity" with ethical, social, political, and cultural implications' – referring to the words of Tronto and Fisher quoted before. (Puig de la Bellacasa, op.cit., pp. 2-3). And Joke Brouwer and Sjoerd van Tuinen write, equally referring to Tronto:

We are entering an era of a generalized ecology, which foregrounds the inter-implications between people and things, or even between things, as much as those between people. Our next task in thinking is to finally pay equal attention to our habits and habitats: to mind is to care.

Care provides a different foundation for modernity, one characterized less by new beginnings or an opposition to nature or the past than by the humble and curious curation (*cura* means care) of what already – and/or still – exists. (Brouwer & Van Tuinen, 2019, p. 5)

So, although some scholars stay close to empirical examples of care and others think far more speculatively about the future of life on earth, for many of them care promises an alternative way of thinking, an approach that can be used to criticize and hopefully replace the individualistic, competitive, and exploitative logic of global capitalism. When this speculative thinking goes beyond ethics in a narrow sense I will call it 'care-thinking'.

So what does it mean to re-think conservation of contemporary art in terms of care? I will illustrate this with an example. As my research on *Labia* is still in progress, I will use an older case study, two SBMK Platform meetings I have observed.²

Hout Auto

SBMK, or Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, is an organization supported and financed by a great number of Dutch art museums.³ Next to Platform meetings SBMK organizes special thematic days and research projects on topics such as plastics, photography and digital art.

² For a more detailed (and slightly different) analysis, see: van de Vall (2023).

³ <https://www.sbmkn.nl/en/>

Usually, Platform meetings are organized when a member of the SBMK, for instance a conservator of one of the associated museums, proposes to discuss a difficult case from the museum's collection. The SBMK coordinator and core Platform members invite experts, as well as participants from the network, like conservators from other museums with comparable works in the collection. At least two meetings are held, following a protocol rooted in the SBMK decision-making model.

The object discussed in the two Platform meetings I observed was Joost Conijn's *Hout Auto* (*Wood Car*), which is in the collection of Central Museum Utrecht.⁴ With this car, Joost Conijn travelled around in Central and Eastern Europe in the autumn of 2001. There is a video film made of the journey, which always needs to be shown together with the car and vice versa.⁵ The car is a complete Citroën DS, but its original body was replaced by wood panels and during the journey it ran on a wood burning fuelling system, added by the artist. The traditional DS engine engineering determines part of the conservation problem: the car cannot be moved without the engine running. The wheels only move when the coachwork is lifted by a hydraulic system and for this the engine has to be switched on. So the car cannot just be pushed to be moved—and it needs to move into and out of the transportation truck when it is on loan, and into and out of the exhibition venue. This is problematic because of the maintenance of the motor, which requires that the car has to be driven around at least twice a year; exhaust fumes when the care leaves an enclosed exhibition space; and having an object with inflammable fluids in the storage rooms.

Therefore a main question for the SBMK Platform discussions was: should future conservation of *Hout Auto* include its functioning as a car? Two meetings were organised, one on November 20, 2015 in the external storage rooms of the Central Museum and a second meeting on August 30, 2016 in De Hallen, Haarlem, where *Hout Auto* was then exhibited. Present were: the SBMK coordinator Paulien 't Hoen (only at the first meeting); Lydia Beerkens, SBMK board member and chair of the meetings; Marije Verduijn, head of collections at the Central Museum, Arthur van Mourik, collection manager at the Central Museum; photographer and film maker Rob Janssen, involved in the maintenance of the *Hout Auto*; Danielle Laudy, collection manager of the Rabo Art Collection; Christel van Hees, head conservation and restoration at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Nicole Delissen, SBMK board member and independent museum professional, and, at the second meeting only, Susanna Koenig, curator of the exhibition venue

⁴ <https://www.sbmknl/en/platform/JoostConijn>

⁵ A short clip is available on the artist's website: <http://joostconijn.org/film/houtauto/index.php>.

De Hallen. Apart from one question at the end of the second meeting, I did not participate in the discussions.

So again: how do these discussions exemplify characteristics of care-thinking? I will answer this question in 7 steps, all boiling down to the idea that care-thinking is thinking from within.

1. From protection/preservation to caring for a flourishing existence

Art conservation traditionally focuses on the protection of the original materials of which artworks have been made and on the safeguarding of the maker's intentions. Contemporary art has made this focus problematic, by its use of degradable materials and of media technologies that become rapidly obsolete. Often, in the case of site-related installations for instance, the work is even *meant* to change and/or even disappear. So rather than staying the same, often a work *has* to change in order to survive. In a care-oriented perspective, conservation may still imply protection (preservation) of the original, but then as part of a more encompassing approach, aiming at 'practices, relationships, and experiences that contribute to and constitute a flourishing existence' (Rabinow & Bennett, 2009, p. 218)

For *Hout Auto*, it was already a question what state should be protected. Already before the acquisition by Central Museum, Conijn had disconnected the wood-burning mechanism so that the car could be powered by gasoline. So the question came up: should the car be returned to the previous state with the wood burner connected? But preservation was not the primary objective of the meetings. After the journey the work was turned into an installation, consisting of a video film and the car. The car became a prop for the film, which made its driving function merely instrumental. The discussions in the Platform meetings were not so much about how to keep *Hout Auto* in a pristine state, but rather about how to make its future in Central Museum sustainable in the long run?

2. From conserving autonomous artworks to designing future networks/assemblages

Important about care ethics (and crucial for care-thinking) is that it is a **relational** approach. Rather than taking individual autonomy as a starting point and principle, it emphasizes the mutual dependency of people, even all individual entities and beings, as caring and being cared for. (Pols, 2015, p. 82) Both people and artworks derive their existence and their meanings from the relational webs they are a part of and that sustain them.

The importance of such relational webs already appeared during the journey. As Joost Conijn was operating outside the usual support system of highways and gasoline stations, he was depending on the assistance of the people he met along the way in order to keep the car moving. Since the acquisition by Central Museum, *Hout Auto* has *two* identities: it is a car and it is an artwork. Again, both these identities are sustained by relational webs, which partly coincide, but also partly diverge. Caring for *Hout Auto* as a car included driving it twice a year for the maintenance of the engine. Rob, filmmaker and technical assistant for the *Hout Auto* and also a DS enthusiast, always came over to drive the car – and likewise to assist when the car had to travel for a loan. Driving the car was a spectacular event and a real adventure; but also quite laborious and risky. Hence the question whether the car should continue to drive or might be transported in another way, like, let's say, a big bronze sculpture, on a tailor-made trolley?

More than on conserving an object, the deliberations focused on identifying possible identities for *Hout Auto*, weighing the pros and cons of various *scenarios for desirable futures*. Each scenario required a different constellation of equipment, skills and people: *networks* (Dekker, 2016) or *assemblages of care* Where the current scenario included for instance Rob's coming over to drive the car, for the alternative scenario mention was made of a big trolley with wheels folding in and out and drivers strong enough to steer the car the last few meters without power steering or brakes.

Although the second option seemed the most viable, there was an itch. *Hout Auto* is popular with old-timer societies and has been frequently asked for at old-timer events. So because of this other network, its identity as a car was not that easily discarded and kept coming up in the discussion that it might drive again in the future.

3. From general guidelines to situated ethicality/ethos

Care ethics and care thinking are first and foremost about **situated practices**. Rather than theoretically working out general ethical rules and principles, and subsequently applying them to practice, it starts from the ethical dimensions of how people practice care in concrete, empirical situations, which are always to some extent unique. (Pols, op.cit., p. 82)

In the discussions about the *Hout Auto*, the term ethics was mentioned only once. Nevertheless, conservation-ethical considerations were present throughout the discussion, but not in terms of explicit rules, principles and values, but rather implicitly as a part of a rather specific and practical question or exchange. We could replace the fragile bottom of the car, but is it then still

the artwork Joost Conijn made? (the rule of respecting the work's integrity) Or: we could remove the engine, which makes the car lighter and much easier to handle, but isn't this too big a step? (the rule of minimal intervention). Or: shouldn't we keep the option open that the engine will again function in the future (the rule of reversibility)?

When I asked why no one in the meeting pleaded for taking out the engine altogether, the answer referred to the professional reticence of conservators and their preference for step-by-step changes, beautifully described by Sanneke Stigter in her PhD thesis (Stigter, 2016). This is what Puig de la Bellacasa (op.cit.) calls an *ethos*, a disposition or “spirit” in which members of the conservation community have learned to work—an ethos that will thoroughly form their perception of the possibilities and constraints of a situation, but cannot *a priori* determine what is the best way to proceed.

4. From deliberation to the practicing of care

Ethical deliberation is not restricted to a phase before the actual giving / receiving of care, because there is so much judging and decision-making in the doing itself. This emphasis on the *doing* of care is expressed in Joan Tronto's (1993) well-known four phases of care: an ethics of care does not only include that a 1) need for care is recognized (*caring about*) and 2) a responsibility assigned (*taking care of*); that 3) care is *given* and *how* it is given and 4) whether and how it is *received* are just as important aspects of care-ethical consideration. The central values good care asks for *attentiveness* (1), *responsibility* (2), *competence* (3) and *responsiveness* (4).

In the **doing** of care, ethics takes the form of practical tinkering and attentive experimentation (Mol et al., op.cit., p. 13), including learning from failures. The ethical is closely connected with the technical, as in the following conversation about how to keep the car on height without activating the engine.

Marije: What Joost [Conijn] told me on the telephone, he said you could screw off this sphere [part of the hydraulic system, RvdV] and put a [wooden] stick in [the system] ...

Rob: Never do this! What happens, this stick takes up all the oil, and the stick will start rotting at a certain point. [...] What I do myself, I have a DS in my garage which doesn't ride [anymore], and then I fetch a broomstick, which I saw into different sizes [...]

Paulien: So you say: never do this, but you actually do it yourself. Rob: Well, it is a car I

use for its parts, [after which] it will go to the scrapyard. That is not what you should do with an artwork.

5. From rational distance to affective and sensory engagements

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (op.cit.) explicitly points to the affective and sensory dimensions of care. These can be positive and negative. Both emotions were present in the meetings. Although the trolley scenario seemed the most viable solution, this step was not easy to make. Marije expressed that she found it difficult to take leave of the old scenario, with all the energy and carefulness that went into it.

Lydia: The big step is to realize that [the car] doesn't function anymore.

Marije: That has a terrible coldness to it. And that you [Rob] come twice each year that is also just ... Paulien: You'll just come twice a year [laughter]. Here I am, it's in the contract!

And where Rob enjoyed the excitement of driving the car, Arthur struggled with the trickiness of the whole operation:

Rob: The happening is the driving and that the engine runs and there is a lot of smoke coming out and crowds of people in the streets [...] Arthur: Yes, but Rob that is nice what you say but that is exactly, that part exactly is like a boy's adventure book, but I also find that difficult ... It is my task to ensure control and that part feels a bit difficult.

6. Negotiating conflicting values and comparatively judging outcomes; intra-normativity

These discussions show that values may **conflict** in concrete situations and may be a matter of compromise, balancing or negotiation. That an artwork may have different aspects and that its conservation may imply that some aspects may be prioritised over others, has been recognised early on. The SBMK decision-making model (1999) and its updated CICS version (2019) have been designed precisely to make this negotiation possible: they provide a protocol for the attentive balancing of the importance of these different aspects.⁶

But if care ethics focuses on specific, local practices, how can we ever go beyond what happens to happen in an individual case, and reflect on the desirability of the outcomes of such

⁶ Both models are available on the SBMK website: <https://www.sbmkn.nl/en/tool/decision-makingmodel>.

negotiations in terms of a broader ‘good’? The answer is sought in terms of **comparison**. As Pols suggests, care ethics should neither try to *prescribe* values from an external standpoint, nor to remain purely *descriptive*. It should be *rescriptive*: looking at how values are shaped in daily life practices, and achieving its normativity by **comparing** these practices: that is what she calls **intra-normativity**. (Pols, op.cit., p. 83)

In the Platform discussions, comparison was all over: the car was compared with other moving artworks, with old-timers, with pianos and bronze sculptures. Solutions found in one case were invoked to be applied to another, as in the following quote, referring to the moving sculptures by Tinguely that often can no longer move:

Lydia: When do you put in a new engine and when do you let it go? The idea of a work of art ‘in retirement’ comes from the Tinguely Museum; some works have been retired; they may be presented without moving; for other works a movie is made to be shown next to the non-moving work; there are all kinds of forms in between still living and being written off.

On a more encompassing level, the SBMK Platform is one of the means of the field to exchange experiences by comparing practices. Other means are: research projects (like *Inside Installations*⁷), conferences and databases (like the INCCA database⁸). With a term borrowed from Wyatt & Balmer (2007) I have called this *middle ranging*: going beyond the singular by looking at similarities and differences between cases and finding patterns and contrasts (van de Vall, 2023).

7. Collaboratively ‘caring with’

In 2013 Tronto added a fifth aspect to her list of four: *Caring with*, aligning care with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all, which requires *plurality, communication, trust and respect, solidarity*. (Tronto, 2013, pp. 23; 35) Although this fifth aspect ultimately addresses care on the level of society as a whole, it is also relevant for discussing the relational dimensions of care on a more restricted level.

The loan to Museum De Hallen proved complex, because getting it into the museum was a problem. So finally the car was hoisted to the level of a smaller window in the building’s sidewall; the car had to drive over a bridge connecting the container with the museum room. The

⁷ <https://incca.org/project-inside-installations-2004-2007>

⁸ <https://incca.org/>

whole operation took a lot of preliminary research, consultation and collaboration. An important factor in getting the loan to succeed was the determination and experience of the responsible curator and the trust between the loan giver and the loan taker.

Susanna: This has been very laborious and at one point I thought: I just want this car to come; this was just a matter of honour that it should succeed. [...] The *Hout Auto* is yours, you wanted it as much to succeed as we did. Arthur: Yes. Susanna: That made it very pleasant; if you have a loan giver who seems hesitant ... Marije: I think it was also your experience; you had already managed to get in more big objects here; if you had just started out, you probably would not have dared to do it.

So even at this micro-level of collaboration, plurality, communication, trust and respect, and solidarity were important in making the loan work. However, these same values are important for the middle-ranging practices of SBMK. SBMK Platform meetings contribute to the ethos of *caring with* throughout the conservation community. They set the stage for an open discussion in an atmosphere of respect, trust and solidarity in which all aspects of the care for a work can be addressed from a plurality of perspectives.

Looking around

But how do we return from the micro-level of caring for a particular artwork to the wider world outside conservation?

Tronto's 5th phase of care refers to society as a whole, which she sees as the outer circle of a series of nested practices. This looks quite like a model Jill Sterrett showed in her reflections in the conference *Reshaping the Collectible*⁹: the socio-ecological model of wellbeing, used in health care, which is built up as a series of concentric spheres from the individual to the general. Care needs to pay simultaneous attention to all these spheres. The question is: how to navigate this environment, how to select relevant areas to work on, as we cannot do everything at once, and to connect it with what others do? How to go forward from the singular case to a wider perspective without excluding what doesn't fit and without losing the uniqueness of the concrete situation? *How to look around?*

⁹ In the session 'Thoughts on Discomfort', available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUw8-BjicNM&list=PLsOWGNAa1NChHsDONURcvHcvH60EHB9fs&index=11>.

Here we leave the domain of ethics. I would like to draw on Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective to propose a way of relating activities with each other without homogenizing them into an abstract generality. The dwelling perspective sees human and non-human activity and knowledge as emerging *from within*. It is because human and non-human beings already live in the world that they can act upon and think about it. The key concept for my purposes is that of the *taskscape*, which is a way of imagining the structuring of this world, from within, in terms of space and time. Ingold defines 'task' as 'any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business of life' (Ingold, 2000/2022, p. 195). Tasks are not carried out in a vacuum but derive their meaning from their position 'within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together.' (Ibid.) The concept of a taskscape refers to 'the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking'. What relates the numerous activities and tasks is *time*, not in terms of measurable units in linear succession, but in terms of how we go about in performing these tasks; it is a *social* time, 'because people, in the performance of their tasks, also *attend to one another*' and adjust their movements to each other. (Ibid., p. 196) The temporality of taskscapes can be best compared to the temporality of music, as a complex interweaving of many concurrent and resonating rhythmic cycles.

Defined as qualitative and heterogeneous, rhythmic, complex and always in movement, the notion of taskscapes might be a helpful conceptual tool to bridge the singular and small tasks of caring for artworks and the collaborative tasks of caring for the world we share.

So how can the conservation community widen its taskscapes of care? Against all odds, against the pressures that urge us all to do more in less time, attract more students, visitors, or clients, acquire prestigious grants, publish more in higher ranked journals, in short: to look ahead and compete, the community has succeeded in maintaining a spirit of collaboration and sharing – that is why I call it a *niche*. My suggestion is: from within this *niche*, *look around* deliberately, consistently and collaboratively, beyond the established museum and university practices, for the *cracks* where care is needed. As examples I'd like to mention some initiatives that I happen to be aware of and that have already been developed or are under way. What the notion of the taskscape does is providing an imaginative framework that helps us to see these initiatives as somehow resonating, adding to and amplifying each other. For instance: look around for ignored, neglected, or contested artistic/cultural legacies. (I think here of the LACUNAE network

investigating artists' estates¹⁰). Use the collective experience the field has with case-based research and collaborative work forms to draw in hitherto under-addressed problems (*Reshaping the Collectible*¹¹ was a wonderful example of a conference addressing issues as climate change and social injustice both on very hands-on and practical and on a more reflective level). Work together with other fields and groups and do so in an open-ended way, together exploring what the problems might be rather than solving pre-defined problems (like what happened in the Lorentz workshop on *Conserving Art and Nature*¹²). Take a next step in the development of tools like the decision-making model by opening it for links to wider matters of care. And in all this: keep facilitating and cultivating the attending to one another, to the mutual resonance of movements in what ultimately is the task that binds us all together.

Dankwoord

Again, also here I am not alone. My thinking about care has developed together with the thinking and practicing of many dear colleagues in the field of contemporary art conservation, old and young, sometimes in close collaboration, sometimes in a more distanced form of resonance. I am grateful to have been and still be part of this wonderfully open and hospitable intellectual world and hope to continue to add something helpful to its on-going work of caring.

IJsbrand Hummelen and Tatja Scholte, you were my mentors and continuous sources of inspiration, and above all friends. The New Strategy group has been a warm and enthusiastic 'think tank' over many, many years. I thank all colleagues of the two subsequent projects, NECCAR and NACCA, early stage researchers and supervisors, plus Yleen Simonis, who supported us so wonderfully. Our Summer and Winter Schools were memorable events, both intellectually and personally. Thanks also to my colleagues from SRAL and MACCH.

All these collaborations would not have been possible if I hadn't worked for one of the most exciting faculties in the Netherlands. FASoS has been my home for almost 30 years. As its teaching and research are interdisciplinary, I had the opportunity to work closely with colleagues of all its departments in different constellations over the years. I have always enjoyed this

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https://mailing.maastrichtuniversity.nl/public/preview?xMQT4UnBV*cX81XmSaBJompgG6gCkPMI51q1SZ75likbgx2ogeJ18yIWgPseTuTQ

¹¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/online-event/reshaping-the-collectible-learning-through-change>

¹² <https://www.lorentzcenter.nl/conserving-art-and-nature.html>.

immensely. And in spite of the sometimes much too heavy work pressure, the spirit of collegiality has always survived. For this I thank all of you, plus my successive deans and directors. The department Literature and Art was my home within this home, first under the fatherly wings of Wiel Kusters, later the good care of Lies Wesseling – until I myself became its head of department: I always felt proud of being a member of this most lively and creative group of people. Thank you all – and not in the least for taking over my tasks and responsibilities in the time of my burnout. I am very happy that Aagje Swinnen took over my role as department chair.

Teaching at FASoS is special. I want to thank my students for their curiosity and engagement. The PhD candidates I have worked with and still am working with: your dedication to your research and your expertise have been a great source of inspiration. I also want to thank our eminent support staff. The organization of the faculty is incredibly complex, and our educational structure even more so: applause for keeping this machinery running and all the while remaining patient and accessible for scientific staff and students alike. Special thanks to the secretariat History/LK, the real engine of our department. There are some colleagues I want to mention in particular. Lilian Essers, you cannot be here, but I am sure that my words will reach you: thank you for being my eyes and ears, during the time I was department chair (and not only then). Dorry Spijkers and Sophie Vanhoonacker, your support and sympathy were a major factor in helping me to recover from my burnout. Jack Post, as I already told in your own farewell party: thank you for your vision and companionship over all these years. And, of course, my partner-in-crime for so long: Vivian van Saaze. From your pre-scriptie and internship by way of your PhD thesis to the successive research projects, to NACCA and MACCH and the Science & Visual Arts course – I have so much enjoyed our collaboration, learnt so much from you, that I find it impossible to express this in words. I am glad there is still a lot to work on together, because I can hardly imagine not talking to you almost every week about on-going business and a lot more in-between. Your new job at RCE is an important step and I am proud that it is you who will follow in the footsteps of IJsbrand and Tatja, with whom it all started.

Dear friends and family, thank you for being here and sharing this farewell with me. And my final thank you is to this very small, more-than-human relational web that sustains me every day: René and Dana, thank you for your loving presence in my life.

Ik heb gezegd.

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