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*Beyond burnout culture? Artistic imaginations of care (crisis) in Barbara Raes's *Zon dag kind* and Els Dietvorst's *Field Guide**

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Abstract

Recent studies of contemporary burnout culture, as I will argue, have much to gain from recent feminist critical theorisations and artistic imaginations of care (crisis). The suggestion is indeed to re-think burnout culture in relation to capitalism's care crisis in order to bring into view the valuable perspectives offered by feminist theorizations and artistic imaginations, which have thus far been largely side-lined, or not properly been considered in the discussion.

Closereading *Zon dag kind* by Barbara Raes and *Field Guide* by Els Dietvorst, I show that both works challenge conventional artistic boundaries so as to carry out experiments in sociability which help us imagine caring subjects and a sense of community, which can be seen as an important part of the answer to the self-sufficient entrepreneurial individual in our neoliberal society, in particular, to his or her total exhaustion and other related mental and affective states.

Keywords

Care, Vulnerability, Burnout culture, Capitalism's care crisis, Women's art, Belgium

Introduction

Bodies are exhausted under today's unrelenting pressures and divisive and exploitative climates. That we are currently experiencing a 'burnout' epidemic is increasingly recognized as a major public health problem. Burnout rates have grown in alarming numbers, although women are more prone than men (Robinson, 2019). In the face of the unprecedented challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, rising numbers of cases and new types of burn-out have been acknowledged, which were already widespread.

Concomitantly burnout has increasingly been studied as more than 'just' an issue of mental health, but rather, as a 'signature affliction' of the early 21st century acutely revealing all that has gone wrong in the spirit of our age.¹ From this perspective, the roots of the burnout concept are seen to be embedded within broader social, economic, and cultural developments that took place in the last quarter of the past century and signifies the rapid and profound transformation from an industrial society into a neoliberal service economy, a social and cultural transformation resulting in unprecedented psychological pressures. Examples of such cultural approaches to burnout are, for example, Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2010), and Pascal Chabot's *Global Burnout* (2013).² Both Han and Chabot contend that burnout, exhaustion, and depression are affective states linked to neoliberal capitalist political economies, which are centred around values of meritocracy, hyperindividualism, and free-market competition.

Each in their own way, Han and Chabot try to seek alternative propositions to the early 21st century burnout culture they diagnose. Han finds inspiration in a notion of "We-Tiredness" (*Wir-Müdigkeit*), as elaborated in Peter Handke's *Versuch über die Müdigkeit* (An Essay on Tiredness). Warning that grind and fatigue often lead to emptiness and isolation, Handke summons individuals to change this individual form of 'I-Tiredness' to 'Wir-Müdigkeit', a 'communal tiredness', 'which results in a feeling of unquestioned belonging and of taking in the whole world', 'a pleasant impersonal tiredness in which the superego is finally quiet, leaving a space of receptive, creative emptiness.' In so doing, Han proposes as an antidote to a life reduced to, or subjected to, positivity, profit and productivity, a model that revalorizes contemplation, conviviality, life-making activities and care-based communities. In *Global Burnout* Pascal Chabot introduces a notion of 'subtle progress' through which he argues for a renewal of renaissance humanism, 'to restore and nurture, along with useful progress, a subtle progress that 'centres around individuals, their education, their way of living and caring for themselves [...] the prioritization of their happiness.' To Chabot we are in need of a new version of the 18th century 'social contract', a form of regulative ideal that is to prevent us from making the human cost secondary to the logic of economics and technology, and which will ensure that 'our primary objective is the human race and the biosphere that sustains us.'

Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2010) and Pascal Chabot's *Global Burnout* (2013) are undoubtedly spot on in their diagnosis of burn-out as a 21st century cultural phenomenon.³ Yet, it seems that their suggestions provide us with too facile concepts of 'burnout culture' and fall short in providing the adequate conceptual frameworks that could properly guide us towards imagining post-burnout socialities and imaginations. For instance,

¹ Originally burnout is deployed as a metaphor describing an individual's state of mental weariness (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment among those who do people work of some kind (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

² Another example is Paul Verhaeghe's *What about me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society* (2014).

³ All the more since more often than not burnout has conventionally been reduced to an individual pathology. The latter approach has particularly problematic consequences, all the more since it leaves seeking solutions to the problem of burnout up to the individual, while at the same time the 21st century cultural norms and values of profit, production, self-responsibility to which individuals are subjected remain unaddressed, even reconfirmed.

it is difficult to envision the extent to which a restoration of an eighteenth-century notion of social contract will be structurally helpful in addressing the current global burnout pandemic problem. In a similar vein, Han's proposal of 'we-tiredness' seems to be an idealized, ahistorical metaphor which is far removed from the actual early 21st century cultural conditions producing burnout in the first place.

Perhaps even more importantly, social historian Hannah Proctor (2019, p. 89) has pointed to Chabot's rather unspecific use of notions of care(work), despite the fact that burnout originated as a term relating to overworked caregivers and still disproportionately affects people, especially women, in 'caring professions'. To Proctor, Chabot is too abstract and ahistorical about care – the extent to which it is (un)waged labour, what kind of people it is traditionally performed, its affective dimensions – and 'he does not engage with the large existing feminist literature on these subjects, from social reproduction theory to theories of emotional labour.'

In what follows I will build on Proctor's observation and propose to consider recent feminist theorizations and artistic imaginations that have taken up the issue of care, capitalism's care crisis, and social production in today's neo-liberal austerity policies and capitalist political economies. Cultural approaches to burnout culture, as I would thus like to argue, have much to gain from these recent feminist critical theorisations and artistic imaginations. The suggestion is indeed to reframe the debate on the so-called 'burn-out society' as a debate on capitalism's care crisis to bring into the discussion the valuable perspectives offered by feminist theorizations and artistic imaginations of care, which have thus far been largely sidelined, or not properly been considered.

This essay, then, signals the start of a proposition that explores how concepts of care can be developed, troubled, and enhanced through a close reading of some recent artistic imaginations of care and, simultaneously, how these art works can be better understood by situating these within a theoretical context of contemporary gender theory in which a renewed interest can be viewed in care ethics as an alternative mode to the governing neoliberal technologies of self. To this purpose, I will sketch out in the first section a series of recent approaches and key concepts of care and neoliberalism. I will outline how recent gender theorists of different backgrounds have discussed how the structural inequity and disenfranchisement engendered by neoliberalism come with corporeal and emotional tolls that care seeks to remediate. The latter theoretical framework will inform my analysis of two contemporary imaginations of art as a matter of care, *Zon dag kind* by Barbara Raes and *Field Guide* by Els Dietvorst.

As I hope to show, in their own idiosyncratic way, the two works under investigation explore different ways in which art can act as a matter of care that can bind together individuals and communities where larger institutions or governments fail to intervene. In doing so, Raes and Dietvorst break down conventional artistic boundaries and the conventions of the performing and visual arts respectively to carry out experiments in sociability which help us imagine caring subjects and a sense of community, which can arguably be seen as an important part of the answer to the self-sufficient entrepreneurial individual in our postmodern society, in particular, to his or her total exhaustion and other related mental and affective states.

Contemporary Theorizations of Care and Capitalism's Care Crisis

In the last decades feminists of different backgrounds and strands have addressed 'the crisis of care'. This commonly refers to the systematic pressures, mainly related to the ways in which labour is currently organised and which are squeezing a key set of social capacities, including capacities available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally. These 'life-making' instead of profit-making, activities and professions, which are also called processes of 'social reproduction', have been historically cast as women's work. Although often performed without pay, such forms of care work are

indispensable to society.⁴ According to feminist theorist Nany Fraser (2016, n.p.): ‘No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long. Today, however, a new form of capitalist society is doing just that.’ The result is a major crisis, not simply of care, but of social reproduction in this broader sense, which in Fraser’s eyes is one aspect of a ‘general crisis’ that also encompasses economic, ecological, and political strands, all of which intersect with and exacerbate one another. Capitalism’s care crisis thus shows itself in the persistent devaluation of the time, energy, and human resources it takes to perform life-making activities and care(work), whereas these are crucial in providing the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for people, planet, and non-human creatures to thrive.

Despite, or precisely because of, today’s structural erosion of society’s capacities for care, care seems to be experiencing a remarkable success lately. Care has become indeed a veritable buzzword during and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to tremendous ‘discursive explosions of care’, as the editors of a recent special issue in *Feminist Media Studies* (Chatzidakis e.a., 2020) have observed. It is as if care’s popularity has grown proportionally alongside the way in which the pandemic has democratized human vulnerability. At the same time, however, the amplified rhetorical use of care in the public arena, where it is deployed by celebrities and politicians across the spectrum as well as by corporations promoting themselves as ‘caring’, summons us to be cautious, as the editors in *Feminist Media Studies* warn us: ‘Underlining these representations and proclamations are often disturbing assumptions about what counts as meaningful care’ (Chatzidakis e.a., 2020, p. 980).

When corporations are trying to present themselves as socially responsible, while simultaneously contributing to, even capitalising on, social inequalities, the term ‘carewashing’ has been coined to denote the rhetorical move that uses discourses of care while profiting from the care crisis they have helped to create (Chatzidakis e.a., 2020, p.891). In April 2020 a new care emoji was launched on Facebook, as ‘a way for people to share their support with one another during this unprecedented time’, as Facebook’s tech communications manager, Alexandru Voica, explained.⁵ Such caring initiatives, however, disguise the more uncaring practices in which global companies, like Facebook, structurally engage (Baumer e.a., 2019). Such forms of corporate care are what Emma Dowling (2020) calls a ‘care fix’ – they offer us a temporary comforting balm whilst failing to address the deeper structural crisis.

Given such shifting uses and contradictory significations of care, such as the ones described above, it might perhaps be tempting to derive from this that we have to resist care as a politics, in a way similar to Sarah Bracke’s (2016) intriguing proposal to resist resilience. In ‘Bouncing Back. Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience’, Bracke offers a critique of resilience, which she views as ‘a point of departure to tell yet another tale of neoliberal governmentality’ (Bracke, 2016, p. 34). One of the main problems Bracke has with resilience is that it ties up the subject structurally to the shocks of neoliberalism she is assumed to bounce back from, while simultaneously withholding her the possibility of imagining substantial social transformation. Bracke thus calls for a resistance to resilience, even though she admits that it is unclear what this might precisely entail. Part of this difficulty, she argues, possibly results from our understanding of ‘a neoliberal social ontology that revolves around the individual, and the paralyzing effect that the complexity of our world has on that individual.’ Bracke’s suggestion, then, principally revolves around the refusal of such ontology and a shift to a ‘social ontology centred in relationality and interdependence’ (Bracke, 2016, p. :72).

⁴ Many feminist theorists have made versions of this argument. see Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” 99–100, esp. 100n4

⁵ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/what-facebook-care-emoji-how-18183980>

In so doing, Bracke joins a chorus of feminist voices who have recently embraced and reclaimed notions of vulnerability, precariousness and care as a ground for politics and ethics (e.g. Butler, 2004; Butler & Gambetti, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; The Care Collective, 2020). Vulnerability in this sense is understood, not as something that needs to be overcome (as resilience asks us to do) but seeks to reconstruct an ethical condition of human life, which is domesticated and obscured within contemporary political economies of neoliberalism. (Bracke, 2016). It sees human beings as embodied creatures who are inexorably embedded in social relationships and institutions and thus underscores the necessity of rethinking social relations and interdependencies as well as neoliberal notions of the autonomous, self-sufficient, and resilient individual.

In *Matters of Care* (2017), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa offers a mode of thinking with care in a posthumanist world, which deserves special mention as it will be important in the close reading of Els Dietvorst's *Field guide* (2019) in the next sections. Extending the work of Donna Haraway, Joan Tronto, and Bruno Latour, de la Bellacasa develops a philosophical framework and ethics of care which challenge dominant technoscientific productionist ways of thinking and acting in a posthumanist world. Puig understands care as a three-dimensional concept entailing labour, affect/affections, and ethics/politics. Puig understands care as a vital part of sustaining worlds, yet it is also continually appropriated by, and entangled in, powerful configurations, including those with ultimately destructive effects (e.g. marketing discourses that call for commodity-driven self-care or justifications for armed international interventions). For Bellacasa, thinking with care offers a way to think both through and beyond these entanglements. Moreover, in contrast to a dominant notion of care as an act of the human self, Bellacasa suggests humans are not the only beings engaged in practices of care and she stresses the importance of multispecies caring as a practice situated within historical and naturalcultural relationalities.

The current interest in feminist theorisations of care builds on a long tradition of care ethics dating back to at least Nel Noddings question: 'Why care about caring?' (1986). Noddings's book signalled a shift in moral philosophy away from conceptualisations of an autonomous human subject and towards concepts of relationality and dependence. Other theorists such as Carol Gilligan (1982), Eva Kittay (1991), Joan Tronto (1993), and Virginia Held (1993) began to lay out philosophical frameworks for a terrain of care ethics which would go on to influence a wide range of interdisciplinary fields such philosophy, political theory, education, nursing, and social work, although it has had arguably less impact on the arts. In particular Carol Gilligan's work has been of great importance in challenging patriarchal and capitalist understandings of 'justice'. In that work, Gilligan argued that girls exhibit distinct patterns of moral development based on relationships and on feelings of care and responsibility for others. Gilligan proposed that women come to prioritize an 'ethics of care' as their sense of morality along with their sense of self while men prioritize an 'ethics of justice'. Taken together, this body of theory has been fundamental in understanding how care and care work is socially engendered, historically being assigned to women and devalued.

However, one of the most important concerns that has been raised towards this earlier second wave strand of predominantly white feminist theorists, is that a static notion of gender has been the privileged optic through which care ethics has been theorised. Consequently, it risks essentializing care work as a feminized realm. This concern echoes critiques to the idea of a universal 'female' subject by deconstructionist and postcolonialist feminist scholars (Mohanty, 1988; Butler and Scott, 1992). In their wake, a long line of theorists has argued that gender intersects with other vectors such as race, class, and disability in the social world, including in caring practices. In this vein, an emergent literature on intersectionality and care ethics has focused on how racialized difference affects care practices and therefore care ethics (Hankivksy, 2014; Raghuram, 2019). From the latter perspective, care has been problematized, especially the ways in which discourses of care oppress, manipulate, and produce certain kinds of subjects for certain purposes. For example,

Fraser underscored how the capitalist crisis of care is built upon ‘transnational care chains’ that disproportionately affect immigrant women of colour and their children (Fraser, 2016; Nguyen, Zavoretti and Tronto, 2017). The changing division of domestic labour has resulted in the unpaid domestic labour of middle-class women in rich countries being replaced by the paid domestic labour of those from poorer nations.

A related strand of anti-racist feminist scholarship including Ericka Huggins (2016), Audre Lorde (1988), bell hooks (2000), Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) and Angela Davis (2018), has highlighted how the practice of self-care and self-love is crucial, particularly for women of colour, in dealing with the daily onslaught of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression. Moreover, from very early on feminists of colour have challenged individualized, nuclear family-based, white, middle-class understandings of care that do not recognize ‘othermothering’ and how black women’s caring practices centre on maintaining family and community bonds in the service of freedom and liberation. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argues that although mainstream feminists’ re-evaluation of motherhood might effectively challenge white, middle-class man’s images of motherhood, yet these do not encompass black motherhood. Black mothers historically created women-centred networks among grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins, all of whom are called ‘other mothers’ (Collins, 1995). They have struggled not with the image of attentive, self-sacrificing, and passive women, but rather with that of ‘the white-male-created ‘matriarch’ or the Black-male-perpetuated “superstrong Black mother”’ (Collins, 1995, p. 119).

Given the theoretical debates about, and amplified discursive uses of, notions of care in the public arena today, we need more theorizing of care ethics and the potentially productive links between contemporary art practice and care ethics, in particular in forging innovative responses to the various crises wrought by neoliberal values we are experiencing today. In what follows, I will endeavour to open up such worthwhile perspectives by exploring two very specific artistic imaginations of care (crisis) in the neoliberal context of contemporary Belgium.

In the close readings of the works by Raes and Dietvorst which follow, I will build on Toril Moi’s proposal to ‘think through examples’ (2015). Inspired by Wittgenstein’s philosophy, Moi argues that thinking through examples releases us from the grip of the logic of representation and the craving for generality which dominates, in Moi’s view, feminist theory today and consequently, transforms our understanding of concept and theory. Rather than aiming to ‘do’ theory or formulate a concept of care in contemporary artistic practice, I will alternatively approach the topic by means of attentive close reading of the particulars of two distinct illustrations.

More specifically, I will think through the examples of the artworks by Barbara Raes and Els Dietvorst in order to theorise artistic imaginations of care a form of ‘aesthetic resilience’ in the contemporary Belgian neoliberal context (Steinbock e.a., 2021). Both works’ engagement with care will indeed be seen as context-specific artistic expressions addressing a particular configuration of capitalism’s care crisis in contemporary Belgium. As such, the two works under investigation can be understood as part of broader currents of contemporary art that have sought to ameliorate neoliberal harms through social practice, including interdisciplinary collaboration, ritual, creative approaches to community, for example by artists such as Alain Platel or Arne Sierens and or more recent younger collectives such as Action Zoo Humain, K.a.K, Globe Aroma, Zuidpark. The ways in which artists have sought to confront systemic crises around the globe, searching for new and enduring forms of building communities and reimagining the political horizon has been at the forefront of debates in literary and cultural studies (e.g. Steinbock, de Valck and Ieven, 2020; Greenwald Smith 2021). In the next paragraphs let us now proceed with understanding the creative and critical potential of artistic imaginations of care ethics against the background of this context by close reading *Zon dag kind*.

***Zon dag kind*. Grief at the Crossroads of Performance and Ritual**

The project *Zon dag kind* by the Belgian artist-curator Barbara Raes probes some of the most essential conventions of the performing arts in order to create a modern ritual that transforms unacknowledged feelings of individual grief into a communal experience of vulnerability and care. Seen from this perspective, *Zon dag kind* can be seen as an expression of what Judith Butler wrote in *Precarious Lives*: that mourning can provide resources for the rethinking of community (2004, p. 20). Human beings are tied to one another, even in the form of loss and vulnerability, Butler argues, and it is precisely this human condition of interdependence and vulnerability that is the basis of reimagining the possibility of community.

Following her personal experience of vocational burn-out in 2014, Barbara Raes (2014, n.p.) extensively reflected upon what she perceived as a society and a cultural sector 'in overdrive' and called upon the art world to transform itself into 'a fertile zone with rich resources for a care-based society.' In today's age of secularization, individualism and acceleration, humans lack the time and tools to work through feelings of loss and grief, 'those moments in life in which we are not supposed to mourn [...] because we live in a world in which even sadness must be consumed quickly' (Raes, 2015, n.p.). From this realization, Raes decided to establish *Beyond the spoken*, an artistic space dedicated to inventing new rituals and rites of passages marking unacknowledged loss. To Raes (2017, p. 10), art and theatre could play a significant role in working through such unrecognized feelings collectively: 'Creating and experiencing rituals for loss helps to keep our messy, vulnerable society together.'

Zon dag kind is a new ritual which deploys dramatic conventions and the institutional environment of the performing arts to transform one child's experience of loss into a collective work of care. Although programmed as a performance in a public, socially shared, space of a major theatre festival in the Belgian city of Ostend (an important aspect to which I will return below), *Zon dag kind* is foremost a rite of passage in which one singular child honours and works through an experience of grief. Situated then at the crossroads of art, care, and ritual, in Raes' terms, *Zon dag kind* is 'theatrical but not theatre. It is artistic but not art; it is therapeutic but not therapy; it is festive but not a festivity; it is playful but not a game; it is time out of time but not a time-out' (2017, p. 20).

Like most rites of passages, *Zon dag kind's* basic narrative structure is deceptively simple. One child, oblivious about what is about to happen, is invited to spend the night on board of a fishing boat which will leave the port before sunrise. The child enters a realm where fiction and non-fiction, imagination, and daily reality become intertwined. They are woken up by a Sun Princess who asks the child to help the sun rising by singing a song. The child is thus invited to play a protagonist role alongside a Sun princess in a theatre play in which the dramatic turning point is in fact one of the most normal, everyday natural phenomena: the sun rising. This pivotal encounter between the sun and the child will change the protagonist's fate, which is encapsulated in the double meaning of the title: *Zon dag kind* is a composite signifying literally in Dutch 'Sun. Greets. Child'. It also refers to the well-known expression *zondagskind*, a very fortunate person. The suggestion is clear: just as the end of the night promises the breaking of a new day, so does loss open up space for the beginning of something new.

Centralizing a sea journey by boat, *Zon dag kind* navigates along the classical three-phases structure of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and reintegration (Raes, 2017, p. 25-29). After the boat's departure from the shore (and its separation from society), the child enters a transition phase in which the cyclic time of the natural world prevails and where loss signifies rebirth and regeneration, as night always becomes day. In this shifting, fluid sea space, the child is invited to abandon the position of the passive sufferer of private pain in an isolated world and is instead endowed with the more active role of singer and accomplice of the sun, bringer of light. It is worthwhile mentioning that not only water (sea), but also other natural elements play a vital role – earth (port), fire (sun) and air (song). The universality of these references to the natural elements arguably serves a goal similar to archetypes such as

the guide, the boat, the journey which *Zon dag kind* integrates, and which characterize the ritual form more generally: It releases humans from what ecologists Joanna Macy and Molly Brown in *Coming Back to Life* call ‘the grip of a hyper-individualized sense of self’ (2014, p.81).

The institutional arrangements of the performing arts environment in which *Zon dag kind* is embedded, further serve to transform individual feelings of loss and grief into a collective experience of care, which is socially shared and can be worked through together. *Zon dag kind* was first performed as the central event of the major ten-day theatre festival *Theater aan zee* in the Belgian coastal city of Ostend curated in 2018 by Raes. Just like all the theatre plays of the festival, *Zon dag kind* was programmed, publicized, sold, and performed daily for the duration of the festival. Yet in contrast to the other plays, the general audience is not supposed to attend in a traditional sense - *Zon dag kind*'s only immediate audience is one single child (actor) per day. The audience could buy entrance tickets, yet the play's starting time and location mentioned were intentionally kept vague. Ticket holders were directed to a geographical point at the quay where they could watch and wave to the fishing boat in the distance returning to the shore. They had to figure out the starting time for themselves, the exact moment when the sun would rise on that particular day. By thus simultaneously engaging with, and subverting, the ‘horizon of expectations’ of a theatre performance, *Zon dag kind* establishes a formal instantiation of making visible the invisible, of creating space for absence, of publicly acknowledging loss which is nowadays in our society left too often unacknowledged. It makes a collective experience out of individual grief which is too often left unrecognized.

In yet another way *Zon dag kind* engages the institutional environment of the performing arts for the transformation of personal pain into a matter of collective care and vulnerability. It involves multiple layers of spectators, who are placed in the position of witnesses to the child's pivotal meeting with the sun. These various spectatorial witnesses form circles widening around the child's rite of passage. Firstly, in recruiting and preparing the participating children, Raes collaborated with their primary caregivers and social organizations and support groups for mourning children, such as *vzw Lost*. Secondly, members of the child's social world are involved, who are invited to welcome back the child at the quayside once the boat has returned to the shore and share breakfast together. Thirdly, the actress and shipper, the immediate witnesses of the child's boat journey. Fourthly, the ticketholders who woke up in the morning and saw the sun rising together with the child, who were waving at the shore and made a connection to the boat.

In so doing, an individual's grief is honoured in its singularity, yet it is also seen and recognized by bystanders and becomes a source of shared vulnerability. In *Precarious Lives*, Butler indeed argues that through the act of grieving we come to realise that we are inherently connected to others, both human and non-human. There is a realisation that there is a ‘you’ in the collective notion of ‘we’ and that part of us is lost when we grieve for others. This notion is aptly expressed by Butler, who contends that ‘we are undone by each other’ (2004, p.23).

Yet *Zon dag kind* goes one step further: this shared sense of vulnerability becomes a source of hope. By means of a daily one-sentence announcement on social media, the general audience is implicated into a collective experience of a caring community. Every day for the duration of the festival, the child who undertook the rite of passage was designated and mentioned on social media, for example: ‘Today the sun was sung up by Finn (age 7)’. This simple sentence draws for its immense emotive effect on the simultaneous invocation and disruption of the association we usually make between children and new beginnings. We feel it appropriate that precisely children help the sun announcing the start of a new day, both conventional symbols of optimism and future. Yet this impression is unsettled since in this case, the child embodies loss and grief, which we, as adults, can connect to and identify with. And right at the moment when we start resisting or feel confused by this disruption of what we feel is the natural course of events, we are consoled by the restoration and even

reinforcement of the association we usually make between children and beginnings: This particular child transforms a personal experience of loss and pain into a courageous, communal act of care by inviting the sun to start a new day, for us all.

In what follows I will examine how the Belgian artist Els Dietvorst challenges in *Field Guide*.* *Acte de révolte* the literary genre of the field guide for her imagination of a web of care in a multispecies world inhabited by human and nonhuman agencies.

***Field Guide*.* *Acte de révolte* by Els Dietvorst. Caring for Soil at the Crossroads of Art and Farm Life**

From 2011 until 2018 Els Dietvorst ran a sheep farm in a small village in rural East Ireland together with her girlfriend, the Irish artist Orla Barry. Today Barry continues to manage the pedigree Lleyn flock on the farm. Els Dietvorst completed this artistic period with the publication of *Field Guide* and the concomitant exhibition *Wintrum Frod* at the Ostend museum Mu.ZEE in 2019, in which Dietvorst and Barry brought together the artworks that were inspired by their joint sheep farm life.

The title of *Field Guide* evokes the conventional type of an illustrated manual for identifying natural objects, flora, or fauna in nature, which is generally brought along on exploratory journeys into nature in order to help distinguish and identify natural phenomena. Dietvorst's *Field Guide* indeed captures observations, images, insights, and thoughts about life on the sheep farm in rural East Ireland. However, it simultaneously subverts the traditional field guide's problematic systems of ordering based on Enlightenment ideals, such as man as master over nature and rationality as the governing principle of both man and nature, and replaces these with more care-based socialities based on vulnerability and interdependence. In this sense, the work could perhaps more fittingly be called a 'critical field guide', defined by Johnston and Pratt as the type which loosely interprets and experiments with the field guide format to critique dominant discourse and further possibilities for living in a more just society' (Johnston and Pratt, 2020, p. 49). Indeed, as Dietvorst herself somewhat tongue-in-cheekily conveys in the opening pages, *Field Guide* is 'a dictionary for the DIY (do it yourself) brigade, for the DIWO (do it with others), but more likely for the DOIWN (do it with nature) or the DITSTW (do it to save the world).'

Field Guide consists of nine chapters on seemingly arbitrary subjects: Resilience, Muck, the Circle of Things, the Black hole, Just Digging, Reverie, An Ode to Slowness, The Beast in Me. The respective chapters contain a multimedia patchwork of materials in black and white colours, including short autobiographical essays in which Dietvorst voices experiences, memories and opinions regarding the respective topics of the chapters, images and photographs portraying farmer's life, drawings, documentary stills, woodcuts and artwork by other, befriended artists and even by the artist's sons.

Like Raes' *Zon dag kind*, Dietvorst's work is characterized by an ambition to establish a sense of interconnectedness, which challenges conventional notions of the autonomous art work and individual authorship. To Dietvorst, art is not as a goal in and for itself, but rather a medium for co-creation, a means to create dialogue and involvement. In *Field Guide* the footnote text is in fact a long commentary written by the befriended artist Max Borka. The footnotes 'got out of hand', run across the pages, become merged with the multimedia materials which make up the different chapters and thus becomes an integral part of *Field Guide* itself. Similarly, Dietvorst's autobiographical excerpts included in the chapters contain multiple footnote references, suggesting that autobiographical experience nor memory is inherently intertextual and never a totally individual affair. Furthermore, *Field Guide* includes images of art works by befriended artists, for example Aurelie Di Marino or Gerry Smith, which are juxtaposed to Dietvorst's own work. All of this makes of *Field Guide* an inherently collaborative, dialogical mixture. Instead of individual notions of Authorship, it suggests that art is produced by humans who are social beings, always relational, open, interacting with others. As is often noted, Dietvorst situates herself in the tradition of the German performance artist Joseph Beuys, who suggested with his notion of '*Soziale Skulptur*

that the entire society could be seen as one large work of art, and that revolutionary social change could be brought along by means of an interdisciplinary and participatory art practice for which the creativity of everyone is needed, not just of so-called artists.⁶

In *Field Guide* (2019, p. 9) Dietvorst explains her reasons for moving to the Irish countryside as follows. She was 'tired of the speed, the noise, the individualism and the hyperconsumerism' defining her former place of residence in the Belgian city of Brussels. Her retreat into the Irish nature is thus an escape from the civil urban world of acceleration, capitalism, and social inequality, in ways similar to her famous predecessor, the transcendentalist American author Henry David Thoreau, who wrote his renowned memoir *Walden* (1854), a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings. Like Thoreau, Dietvorst wants to 'speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness'. (2019, p. 9) Yet, the nature in Dietvorst's work is all but a safe Arcadian paradise where humans could find refuge. It is a natural world reigned by chaos, loss, death, and decay. The nature that confronts her in rural Ireland is hard, merciless, unpredictable, it is raw, *claire-obscur*, *Field Guide* is indeed a colourless world of shades of grey and black and white.

Rather than a well-ordered guidebook designed for the purpose of scientific knowledge and the rational organization of natural phenomena, *Field Guide* collects scraps and fragments of the natural world and models them, films them, draws them, tells their story in images. For example, the chapter 'Just Digging' consists of an autobiographical essay on gardening, juxtaposed to a close-up photograph and a drawing of a broad leaf cress seed, a still photograph of broad leaf cress seed, a drawing of a pot plant and a drawing of a flower resembling a sun, entitled 'sunshine, a photograph of a piece of driftwood. On page 32, we find a poem and a charcoal drawing by another artist, Aurelie Di Marino, on page 33, a recipe of 'pancakes stuffed with sea beet', by the artist Roger Philips, a drawing entitled 'The State of the World', a photograph of Seakale resting on a piece of white paper. *Field Guide* portrays a messy micro-reality, a multitude of individual stories and images. It is a testimony of the particular, of the transient, of the natural web of life. The purpose is not so much to convey a political message about the world, nor impose an ordering system onto that world, but above all, to provide something to hold on to, albeit in bits and pieces, and through the enumerated chapters depict a messy reality that reflects our universal everydayness.

If we focus on Dietvorst's portrayal of human-soil relations, it becomes clear how *Field Guide* disrupts the field guide's conventional governing principle of man as master over nature to portray a more care-based social ontology. The notion of soil as a resource for humans is indeed replaced by a concept of care beyond human agency in a multispecies world, in a way reminiscent of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's idea of care (2015, p. 691). In *Matters of Care* Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that what soil is thought to be considerably determines how it is cared for, and vice versa, ways of caring affect what soil becomes. From this perspective, it becomes clear how the chapter *Muck* conjures up an image of soil as a living community that involves humans amongst other species. The chapter includes a short essayistic text entitled *Muck* which simultaneously engages with, and disrupts, the rational, scientific register of the conventional field guide. The essay reads as an attempt to categorize varieties of soil 'objectively' - muck, mud, chicken shit - a categorization, however, which is based on autobiographical observation. 'Muck is not the same as mud', the essay (2019, p. 18) opens, which is followed by the comment that the worst muck 'can be found' in front of the chicken coop, 'where simple muck becomes real muck: a mixture of mud and chicken

⁶ "Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build 'A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART'... EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. Beuys statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art* (ICA, London, 1974), p.48.

shit. Chicken manure is hot, high in nitrogen and kills the grass; it also turns the soil bone-hard.’ Although the passive tense and neutral register would suggest human control and mastery vis-à-vis the object of examination, quite the opposite is stated: ‘Set one foot in some muck and you’ll immediately know that all is lost.’ (2019, p. 18) The controlling I/eye is totally subverted in the conclusion: ‘the only thing you can say about muck is that it perseveres. By the end of winter, all you can do is accept your own vulnerability.’ The ‘scientific’ approach to soil is thus entirely abandoned, as the only knowledge the observing I/eye has gathered is the displacement of her own human agency.

The idea of soil as an active, living multispecies world involves changes in the ways humans maintain and care for soil and certainly disturbs the unidirectionality of care we conventionally associate with human-soil relations. Juxtaposed to the autobiographical essay on Muck, we find in the same chapter a series of works portraying human-soil relations which foreground alternative modes of care, affective relations, and involvements with the temporal rhythms of more than only human worlds. For example, it includes a painting containing the text *November Rain Rain Rain*, drawing attention to the repetitious, cyclic time of the natural world on which farm life is depended, while questioning the anthropogenic power of predominant timescales. In the photograph entitled *Mud boys*, a photograph of Dietvorst’s sons covered up in mud, the haptic as a mode of knowledge based on proximity and reciprocity is revalorized. The muddy boys symbolise a mixture of soil and human. In their attempt to playfully control soil, they themselves got stuck in the sticky, liquid, powerful material, suggesting that for humans to touch mud means to become stuck in the mud. A similar idea of soil-human relations based on proximity and mutuality is suggested by the image of a woodcut entitled *Mud*. We see a human digging his or her hands in the mud, forming one entity as the hands are covered in black substance, a black substance which is similar to the black hair. It reminds of Puig de la Bella Casa’s suggestion that a ‘relational web of care [could] trouble productionist relations (2017, p. 197).

Conclusion

In the previous paragraphs, I have tried to weave together feminist literature and artistic practices to build a critical notion of care, lifting the meanings, activities, emotions, politics and ethics of care as coordinated, relational and affective practices that build, support, and sustain communities of care in the context of racial capitalist political economies and neo-liberal austerity politics. This endeavour was aimed at challenging the facile concept of ‘burnout’ shifting the focus from an individual problem of exhaustion, depletion, and psychological stress to a social and cultural problem, notably a problem of care, that is the outgrowth of economic and political policies. More specifically, I tried to reframe the debate ‘on the so-called ‘burn-out society’ (2015) as a debate on capitalism’s care crisis in order to bring into the discussion the valuable perspectives offered by feminist theorizations and artistic imaginations of care, which have thus far been largely sidelined, or not properly been considered.’ In the wake of Toril Moi’s proposal to think through examples, I have explored how, and particularly by which aesthetic strategies, an artistic politics of care could take shape by closereading *Zon dag kind* by Barbara Raes and *Field Guide* by Els Dietvorst. As became clear, in both instances, conventional aesthetic boundaries required probing for the imagination of care-based socialities.

In *Zon dag kind* Raes deploys dramatic techniques and the institutional environment of the performing arts to transform an individual child’s grieving ritual into a collectively shared sense of vulnerability. In the process, many conventional borders needed to be crossed: between everyday life and performance, night and day, darkness and light, the end and the beginning, sufferers and actors; protagonists as well as bystanders all become implicated subjects in a human community connected in vulnerability and care. In *Field Guide* Els Dietvorst invokes the conventional literary genre of the field guide in order to question the Enlightenment ideals – anthropocentric notions of human rationality and mastery over nature – which underpin this genre ideologically. Instead, her art and farm life

on an Irish sheep farm are presented as a relational web of care through a variety of means: the view of art as a medium for dialogue and co-creation, the black and white patchwork of materials representing fragmented bits and pieces of transient natural elements, the displacement of human agency, the view of soil as an active, living multispecies world.

‘If the pandemic has taught us anything so far, it is that we are in urgent need of a politics that recognises this interdependence and puts care front and centre of life,’ as has recently been suggested by the members of the Care Collective (Care Collective, 2020, n.p.). That neoliberalism’s ideal subject of the self-sufficient entrepreneurial individual has run its course, is indeed an observation more and more shared. Increasing groups of people indeed see a more sustainable future residing in care-based social ontologies based on interdependence and vulnerability, in ways in which recent feminist theorists of care ethics have suggested. Even though the arts and the humanities are very much part of the larger neoliberal ideologies and concomitant racial and gendered structures of inequality in which they are embedded, as for example recent controversies of sexual harassment in the arts have convincingly demonstrated, it might be reasonable to assume that art and the humanities have a particular role to place in the collective task of imagining new, more care-based, post-burnout culture socialities. As Judith Butler reminds us: ‘If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense.’ (2004, p. 151)

Art works such as the ones by artists such as Barbara Raes and Els Dietvorst are only two out of many other possible examples to think with concerning the issue of care ethics and art. By opening up their perspectives it has become clear that we are in need of thinking through many more examples, certainly those imagining care from intersectional perspectives. For example, Blerri Lleshi’s defense of bell hooks’s notion of love in today’s context of racial capitalism (2016) illustrates how care is socially differentiated, racially marked, and makes racial diversity and power in care ethics more visible. Action Zoo humain’s recent piece *Flemish Primitives* (2022) addresses, albeit in passing, the global care chains by referencing migrant women’s domestic work and by underscoring the deeply entrenched interlocking power inequities that undermine the realization of care in an increasingly complex context of national and international policy and politics.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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