



Situated Knowledges in Art and Curating

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Imprint

Cacoethes*

Lee Weinberg and Alison Green

*Borrowed from Latin *cacoëthes* “malignant tumour at an early stage, disease of character,” borrowed from Greek *kakóēthes* “malignancy, wickedness,” noun derivative from neuter of *kakoéthēs* “ill-disposed, malicious, (of things) abominable, (of tumours, fevers, etc.) malignant,” from *kako-* + *-éthēs*, adjective derivative of *éthos* “custom, disposition, character.”

Prologue

We/I discovered this word: *cacoethes*. A very old word, and one that has likely been mistranslated along the way. Its meaning includes malignant, wicked, abominable, malicious. A tumour, a disease of character. It also translates as insatiable desire, like a craving, or a yearning. The most intriguing definition for this context: *an irresistible urge to do something ill-advised*. This may sound a bit exciting, but isn't that the rub of desire?

For how long have we/I imagined and managed relationships within this forceful push of desire? For how long have we/I imagined desire as an unstoppable fire? For how long have we/I used desire to justify our violent movement in the world?¹ And if desire is, in its core, insatiable, what will be the end of us? If desire is what moves us, how can we reimagine it? Can we desire without its fire? Can we desire without the passions² of desire? Can we desire someone else's simple pleasure and wellbeing? Can we desire in peace?

Desire wants what already is in its hand, but it is unsatisfied because it wants to hold it; it wants it to be perceived and conceived in shape and weight. Desire desires the illusion of extended life through the object.

In Preparation

The past year, with the uprising around Black Lives Matter, we/I have felt a renewed urgency around doing social justice work with curating. As two curators and committed feminists given the opportunity to run a workshop around Donna Haraway, we/I decided we wanted to think about the ways curating is rooted in the exchange of objects through asymmetrical power and the display of them as trophies.³

From the get-go, Haraway's suggestion to think and act beyond the prism of extraction and production led us to think about this asymmetry as rooted in our dependence on objects in the construction and organisation of subjectivity and identity.⁴ If indeed, within the logic of late capitalism, the subject is defined in relation to an object and vice versa, we wanted to ask: what is it about our relationship to objects that replicates the asymmetry we observe in curatorial power dynamics? And how can we/I relate to objects differently?

From this perspective, we found interesting the notion of desire as a means of defining the given relationship between subject and object. We/I looked to expand this reading of desire, from the psychoanalytical perspective that looks at the relationships between individuals and themselves, towards cultural perspectives that take into account the ways desire functions as a mechanism that drives us towards logics of extraction and possession. This desire infects and implicates and takes at all costs.

Our culture, that is Western Culture, is preoccupied with the reproduction of this desire. It is there in how it displays and manages objects, sanctifies them, evaluates them, exchanges them, researches them, thinks about them. Whether in a supermarket or a museum, mechanisms of possession and desire drive the production of culture. And in a way, culture is thought of as this exchange of objects. Most certainly, economy⁵ has been very much reduced to that. This understanding of the object of desire, and the ambiguous approach to desire—on the one hand as a necessary force of life, on the other hand as a sinful or prohibited emotion—creates those asymmetries.

We/I felt that desire can be mutual and amplifying; desire can offer gifts.⁶ Inspired by Haraway's writings on “oddkin,” we planned that the workshop, titled “Six Degrees of Separation: Curatorial Practice/Objects of Desire,” would explore the intimate potential of desire, while facing the issue of a group of people who did not know each other, coming together for a three-hour workshop, held online only. We aimed to build in processes that create links between the participants and allow us all to explore how such relationships are made.

It seems now like it was a strong way to start a workshop with strangers; speaking about desire produces desires, or at least emphasises and replicates it.

After the introductions, we divided into pairs.

The first exercise

Try to make eye contact. This is based on a face-to-face exercise where you hold the eyes of another person for one minute. It is hard to do on the computer but see what happens! Find a way of creating a physical encounter through the camera.

This exercise was intended to bring awareness to the limitation of the media we were using—how mediating tools such as video calls change the way we interact with each other, and how you act with yourself. Attempting to work with this limitation and “stay with the trouble,” as Haraway suggests, we formed relationships based on a desire to connect, despite the challenge of achieving an embodied connection with the other.

In what follows we include reflections we wrote directly after the workshop.

Lee: “This exercise emphasised that relationships are always—even within those educational frameworks—embodied and situated in space. It was interesting because suddenly it was not the static camera that stipulated our relationship to our own images and the screen. My partner and I both tried to move ourselves and the cameras, to come nearer and then further away and see where we felt such an embodied connection can happen. The awareness of the limitation of the media, and the awareness of the lack that exists in this on-screen relationship, created a bridge between us. Eventually, we took turns looking straight into the camera while the other had a chance to gaze into the other’s eyes. It brought a playful feeling to it all. It was a process of overcoming embarrassment, laughing together, sharing an experience. It may not have built a connection like what happens when you look into someone’s eyes, but it definitely created a connection that was more intimate than the formality of the image—the façade of the screen.”

The second exercise

Still in pairs, start talking about the objects. Partners can ask each other questions about their object:

- *Do you want to hold it?*
- *Does the other person want it too?*
- *Do you have the space (and resources) to store it?*
- *Would you keep it? Would you show it to other people?*
- *Who does the object belong to?*
- *If you can’t or won’t keep it, how would you dispose of it?*
- *Putting the two things together, what is the relation between them?*

Preparing these questions, we asked ourselves: what forms relationships with objects, more specifically curatorial objects? We also thought about the consequences of desire, of getting something out of this urge. And then the care of the object, the resources that are used, and how the value of the object accumulates. We wanted this conversation to lead eventually to relationships between the objects, ones that would reflect a relationship between individuals.

Alison: “The ambition of creating a strong tie with someone—I still hold this as important, and possible, but it didn’t go the way I thought it might. In my pair, we delved right into one object and had a fascinating and free-ranging conversation about shoes. This took all the time. Although we touched on them, we did not get far into the questions. I felt divided between participant and workshop-planner: being present in that conversation but wanting to test the questions we had drafted. I felt the gap between that magic potential when meeting someone for the first time and the harder work of something growing from it. I reflected on the experience of making an oddkin: it doesn’t follow one’s internal image. What’s at stake in offering yourself to it? What’s at stake in building and maintaining such a relationship? What are the structures or ties that would need to be there to hold it together if the personal doesn’t hold/isn’t enough?”

Clara: “After this workshop I am left with feelings of sentimentality around objects and our relationships with them. Through feelings of desire, we are constantly building narratives between us and each other and things. Whether we believe this desire to be a biological, all bodily encompassing feeling or one that is infiltrated by binaries and society that we must make a conscious effort to repurpose, for me the result is the same, and the result is a reflection on human experience and the union of personal narratives through the things we

expanding perception became crucial to understanding Haraway—that is, to consider relationships as Haraway suggests (we read an excerpt on oddkin from Haraway’s book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016)). There first needs to be an acknowledgment of what is here. Who is here? Pay attention to understanding, sensing the space in which relationships are formed (whether mental or physical). Slowing down, remaining with the silence, remaining with the lack of—there is a possibility of extending sensual perception—first beyond the screen, then beyond one’s own body.

A possibility of identifying ourselves with something other than our body as a vehicle for life and survival, something I felt related deeply to the notion of kinship. It’s an externalisation or an expansion of the self into the other, but not necessarily through means of reproduction. Such an expansion of awareness, beyond the realm of the self as a single body, allowed me a key to understand, contain and hold the object as oddkin. I asked myself as we were reading and talking, whether we could tell our stories through the lens or consciousness of an object—an object not as an inanimate lump of matter, but an object as a vector, a meeting point of narratives, memories, stories—and whether containing objects in this way, essentially removing the category of object altogether—could be an interesting break in my way of thinking about curatorial practice.”

Mya: “When talking about desire and situated knowledge I think of desire as words. Their inner meanings, their personal attachments, them belonging to me or to the person in front of me. How things become at once polysemic, intimate, and political. How you learn words through feeling them. And how it is almost impossible to communicate them fully if the person in front of you has not lived something like it. Empathy and vulnerability. Collective and personal. As a practitioner, I want to feel what I define. Feeling means something very specific. A lump in the throat, a smile or that fuzzy chest you get when having a conversation with someone you understand. So, the desire is about reaching out. The most amazing moments are when managing to create a space where words/concepts are understood viscerally. And it’s a synonym for it feeling real, true (but not objective: rather this sensation of translation, of unknotting you have when discovering something). That’s it: it isn’t so much about an idea of truth but learning and discovering.

Also, this idea of escaping academia, coldness in writing and thoughts. Of going back to being clear (or very

unclear) of using words or images as metaphors. Either escaping direct/straightforward narration or simplifying to the maximum. Of not assigning a definite meaning on what things are or are meant to be.”

We concluded with a brief discussion, back in the main room, where everyone was asked to share observations and thoughts about the process.

The rich discussion testifies to the variety of experiences. These, we/I think, have more to do with the relationships that had been created between the pairs, less with a unified understanding of the workshop, or the way the Haraway texts may have suggested a reading of this experience. We/I find it difficult to recall the different things that were shared, because in that moment we were dedicated to being participants, listening closely and being in the workshop. This only underlines the gaps that exist between knowing and being, between experience and theory. Interestingly, there is something in common between this gap and the gap between reality and imagination, where desire arises. The objects become bridges that hold the space of both knowing and being. This is the role of the object as a social agent—to be that common space where desires meet.

Mya: “I think of nations, narrations, and canons and archive: how not to create a story of what happened, of not falling into linearity but instead finding strength in the particular, in the specificities; creating conversations instead of being didactic; memories and odd documents or experimental texts as replacing straightforward (untrustworthy) text; strings of exchanges instead of a history.”

Lee: “Desire can function as a funnel for sensual perception, that is, when all the sensual capabilities are directed towards and consumed by the desire (like in the sense of being trapped in the two-dimensional world of the screen). However, desire can also be a motivation for expanding the sensual paradigm—if the desire for an alternative future is replacing the desire for one’s own subjectivity.”

Processing

Probably because the idea of running a workshop with unknown participants is a daunting task, it seemed interesting to run it as an experiment in Haraway’s call to “make kin” (the full phrase is “make kin, not babies”). We did this through the eyes and through touch, taking on the impediment of the way the workshop was held online, to bring a haptic intimacy to an experience of

meeting and starting a conversation, for the first time, with another person, via a video call.

Within the realm of the screen, there is a kind of identification with self-image on the one hand, but also within the limited visual field that the screen provides. So, moving away, trying to look at the camera, to create a relationship with another through the mediation of these technologies was a challenge. That said, sharing the challenge, sharing that inability—and maybe that unfulfilled desire to be with another—did bring us closer to intimacy.

We are not sure that people understood what we were doing.

People brought their objects of desire. These were interesting and diverse. They did work as curatorial objects, in that the connection between them created a space for renegotiating social relationships. There is a gap between what we had hoped for in the workshop and what we were able to do. The work of decolonisation is for sure slow and long.⁸ (Was I) were we trying to tease out a different *modus operandi* for “desire”? From desire as having/holding/keeping to... what? Prior to the workshop we imagined that their opposites are sharing/giving/not having. Now we think it is something else.

If desire is a vector, a force that moves us towards a certain direction, it is not about replacing desire itself but changing the direction of the arrow. Maybe multiplying and stretching desire so that it encompasses an expanding landscape of things to desire. It's a shift from desiring one thing at a time—a shift away from the focus desire holds us to, that compression that moves us passionately towards another, be it a body or an object—a shift towards the landscape, the background the field around the object that we want to be part of, rather than the object itself.

We hope that this essay suggests open-ended questions, assumptions, experiments with memory, with words. We tried to continue the process and expand it onto these pages, with hopes that readers will find themselves participating in the discussion, prolonging it. This writing, like the workshop, tries to slow down—to not arrive at a set conclusion—rather—to offer a relationship, some correspondence, a gift. We write it as an open letter to readers and to the participants in the workshop.

Notes

1 To signal that this essay was written collaboratively, we're inserting this confection, “we/I” into the subject-position of some sentences. We do this to break down the problematic universal we and to make it clear that this we is made up of two Is. We think it's interesting that the two Is are not interchangeable, but it is ambiguous who is who.

2 I/we are thinking about passions' layered meaning: in our modern day-to-day life, we think of passion as that heat that drives us forward. We think of it in relation to sexual energy. It's an interesting question to ask: what are the relationships between passion and desire? Can that investigation lead us to a breakthrough in how we think about desire? Maybe passion can be read as the emotional driving force that adds a layer of meaning to the direction desire takes us. Unlike desire, we think of passion as a positive drive—a passionate individual is one that has a focus, a goal, a motivation. It is deeply related to ableism.

In its medieval meaning, “the passions” are equivalent to the general notion of “emotion,” and in the Christian tradition they relate specifically to the “passions of Christ”—the suffering that comes with virtue, sacrifice, repentance. The eating up of oneself within; it is also an ordeal to work with the passions, a spiritual ordeal: one needs to pass through them on the way to liberation. For St. Augustine, the distinction between the passions is related to time. Desire, as one of the passions, is situated in relation to an anticipated joy. Joy, however, is related to the present.

3 The role of citations in this essay is not to make it academic per se, but to reveal the associations and references engraved in our minds, the larger scope of meaning that certain terms and words hold. It exposes asymmetrical power dynamics, as these are engrained in our brain. This one touches Walter Benjamin's line, “There is no document of civilisation that is not also a document of barbarism.” For today's project of decolonisation, the link Benjamin made between civilisation and barbarism (barbarism meaning slavery or class exploitation) reminds us/me of the plantationocene, a term Haraway uses. Benjamin also wrote, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256 and 257, respectively. For a critique of the way the plantationocene is ‘given’ to

Haraway (an example of White suprematism), see Mythri Jegathesan, “Black Feminist Plots before the Plantationocene and Anthropology’s ‘Regional Closets,’” *Feminist Anthropology* 2 (2021): 78-93. DOI: 10.1002/fea2.12037.

The tradition of psychoanalysis, rooted in the Lacanian definition of the subject from which “object relation theory” is derived, contends that social relationships are, to a very large extent, mediated by objects. Jean Baudrillard, in his essay “The System of Collecting,” in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), combines this psychoanalytical perspective with a critique of consumerism to describe and analyse the relationship between such personal, psychological tendencies, and cultural paradigms. In this text, the term “possession” is used to symbolise the fleeting moment of accomplishment that still does not satisfy desire but creates an illusion of mastery or total control over something. Objects can be possessed, and therefore controlled in totality. Subjects cannot. But we know this isn’t true. So rather, we can look at this critically, and see how possession becomes the pivot that exposes the ambivalent relationship between object and subject. We think and define the object as passive in its relationship to the subject, who is deemed active. In the scenario of desire, driving us to possess an object, it is desire that controls us. The desire to possess possesses us, maybe like a spirit, a subjectivity, projected by the object that promises us control. Of course, the control of the object here is only but a projection. What we desire to control, subjectivity, remains possessed—untameable. We are sold the illusion of control and possessed by the desire to attain it. But if we are possessed—doesn’t that make us, by definition, objects? Our dualistic division of the world into notions of object/subject, based on politics of possession and control, are insufficient to describe the complex working of our relationship to the world around us. It may be that such divisions do not allow us to see things as they are, but do allow us to colonise, torture, and think we have the right to control and possess other bodies. How can we think—and act—beyond them?

5 I remember, as a teenager at summer camp, I was given the role of “economist.” The responsibility of the role was to manage resources, making sure they were maintained and provided when necessary. Our headquarters was the kitchen. It was not about stashing, keeping, possessing. The joy of the economist was in the sharing of resources. In that sharing, providing, caring, there was a sense of control. But it was not a control that sought to restrict; it was a control that sought to hold together, to allow, to sustain the joy of the moment.

6 Different approaches to the object, and the meaning of exchange, do exist in cultures beyond the West. There is the Vedic concept of *Dāna*, or generosity, in which you give without wanting anything in return. *The Gift* (1925) by Marcel Mauss, also comes to mind. As his subtitle indicates, Mauss explores “Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.” What’s interesting about Mauss’s exploration is that in some archaic cultures, the logic of possession runs opposite to Western thought and proves that our presuppositions about *how* social relations can be mediated by objects are not a given, not a fact of human nature, but a learnt behaviour—an education. We must ask ourselves who educated us, and for what purposes. In the “potlatch”—the most famous example that came out of Mauss’s book, one’s possessions are only powerful if they are shared. As long as they are accumulated and possessed, they hold no value.

In Western culture and religions, we may find similar practices under the notion of “charity.” However, in our modern interpretation of this word, we think of it as a surplus that projects back on the “giver” as subject, and the “receiver” is objectified in return, reinforcing object/subject relationships. Both the *Dāna* and the potlatch are embedded as essential to maintaining social order. Such is also the concept of *Zedaka* or charity in both Islam and Judaism: these are not acts of choice, but of necessity. They do not empower the “giver” with any control over the receiver. It requires an equal relationship with the other, whose value is not measured by the number of possessions that they hold.

This glimpse of another kind of intersubjectivity is something we need, in the West, to theorise in order to consider and remember that our sense of subjectivity, agency, and power cannot be reinforced by possession—only by the acknowledgement of another life.

7 The two recent graduates who are also quoted in this essay are Mya Berger (<https://myaberger1542.wixsite.com/myaberger>) and Clara Wicaksono (clarawicaksono.com).

8 One of the participants recommended a video by Suely Rolnik: “Micropolitical Conceptual Tools for Decolonizing the Unconscious (Notes on Caring and Repairing Life),” filmed August 2020 at Saas Fee Summer Institute of Art. 1:30:39. <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/350702/suely-rolnik-micropolitical-conceptual-tools-for-decolonizing-the-unconscious-notes-on-caring-and-repairing-life>.

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