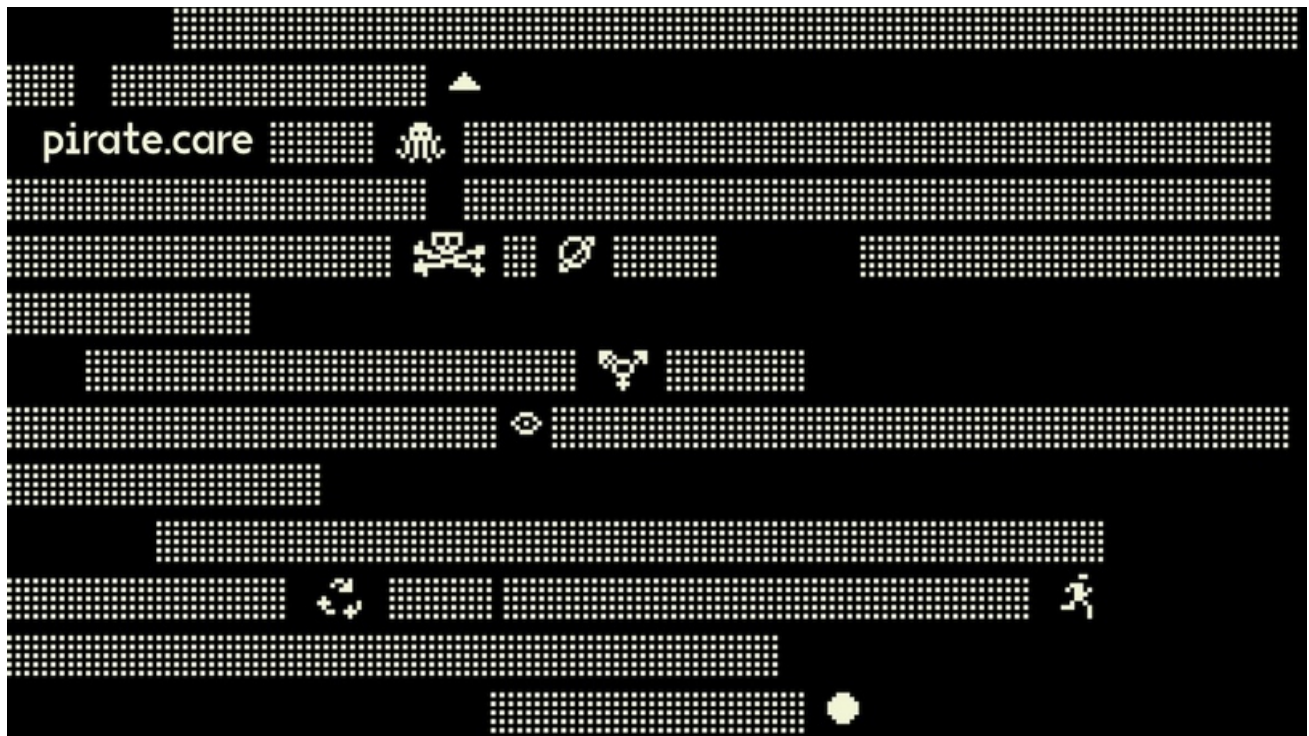


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PIRATE CARE

May 11, 2020 • Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak on the care crisis



IN LATE 2019, we organized a writing retreat at the Croatian cultural center Drugo More, in Rijeka, to create an online syllabus with activists who practice what we call “pirate care.” These practices represent an emergent form of militancy and civil disobedience—helping migrants survive at sea and on land, providing pregnancy terminations where they are illegal, offering health support where institutions fail, and liberating knowledge where access is denied.

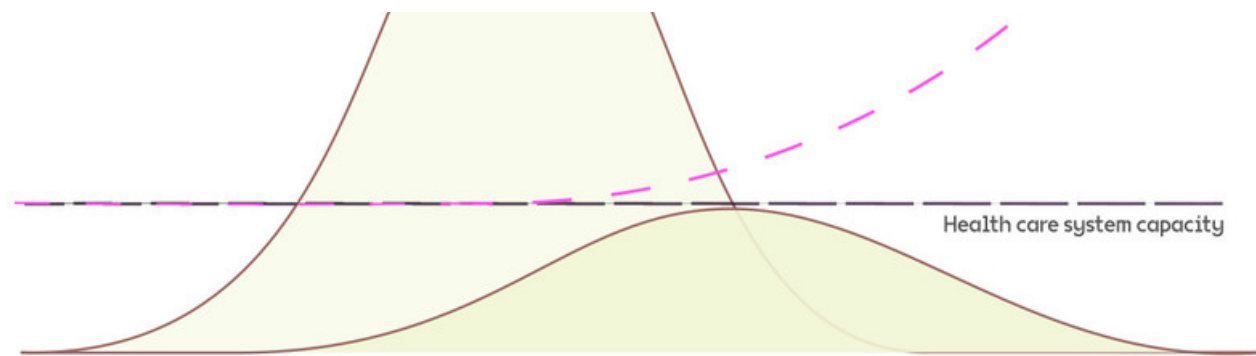
Despite the recent “care” emoji launched by Facebook, pirate care dismisses the idea

that caring is simply an emotion. Caring is not intrinsically “nice,” and always involves power relations and processes of discipline, exclusion, and harm; it is a necessary and skilled form of labor that is shouldered by workers, mostly unwaged women and migrants, who themselves receive the least amount of care while serving those who take care-labor for granted. Reciprocity and solidarity are not implied.

While the dominant discourse today involves heroizing care workers, mainstream discussions often elide their vulnerability. Meanwhile, we’ve seen that financial cuts, the rollback of reproductive rights, and criminalization of migration have structurally stripped many care workers from the capacity to do their jobs and have made them into pirates. That’s why we hope to link together a chain of disobedient acts made in defiance of laws and executive orders when they stand in the way of safety and solidarity.

Our Pirate Care Syllabus draws on localized organizing efforts, such as support for migrants on the Balkan and Mediterranean routes; support for those experiencing housing and anti-eviction struggles in Croatia, Serbia, and the United Kingdom; collectivized childcare in Italy; psychosocial support among United States insurrectionary movements; and community protection from racialized policing in Canada. Other such efforts cover technology-oriented experiences, including transfeminist biohacking, exploring hormone toxicity and bodily sovereignty, gender equality in tech milieus, and the politics of digital piracy.

The syllabus, created within the European Capitals of Culture program in Rijeka, Croatia, went online on March 8 for the Kunsthalle Wien exhibition “...of bread, wine, cars, security and peace,” staged by What, How & for Whom (WHW), the Croatian curatorial collective newly at the helm of the institution. By then, the Covid-19 pandemic was spreading in our part of the world, and cultural events in both Rijeka and Vienna were canceled or postponed, including our own public program, exhibition, and collective learning camp that was planned for September.



In response, together with our network of pirate care collaborators, we began to document the unprecedented wave of solidarity and mutual aid organizing. This collective note-taking, titled “Flatten the Curve, Grow the Care,” problematizes the famous graph depicting the outbreak: two curves denoting higher or lower rates of contagion, with an unspecified “health care capacity” represented as a straight line, which the ideal pandemic curve would not breach. We wanted to highlight how the straight line is not a given, but instead is a flatline of society’s capacity for care under relentless neoliberal retrenchment. The preexisting care crisis—until recently felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable populations—suddenly detonated as a generalized social threat. Much in what has been termed the biggest crisis of care in the century is not, in fact, so new.

Now, as many countries begin to gradually reopen, we wonder what the afterlife of these solidarity and mutual aid initiatives might look like. Due to the radical and unthinkable temporality of today’s condition, fiercely pitching bodies against economy, think pieces drawing on existing interpretative frameworks are often at a loss in analyzing the points of leverage that can be effective. Yet unlike the monolith of governmental responses and media coverage, organizing is instead registering wildly different care needs and demands. If, as Deleuze suggested, theory does what practice cannot do, and practice thinks what theory cannot think, we are now witnessing a swarming of new, necessary thinking coming to the fore through these autonomous initiatives. The current system, flawed as it is, would not exist if it weren’t for such grassroots efforts: miners’ medical aid societies sparking the National Health Service in the United Kingdom; the feminist movement’s foundation of reproductive health centers in Italy in the 1970s; Black Panthers clinics’ organized resistance to racialized medical testing; and ACT UP’s actions in the 1980s forcing the US Food and Drug

Administration to change protocols relating to the availability of life-saving trial drugs in the United States, to name a few. There is little in the way of stable knowledge, and we will continue to work toward the horizon of a universally accessible, publicly funded health care that we believe is a common good.

We know “back to normal” would be disastrous, particularly as the world edges toward an environmental breakdown. When parents in Milan whose kids don’t have access to public kindergartens get together to set up their own; when activists across the United States organize autonomous structures for emotional health and well-being; when indigenous communities in Canada create their own patrols to protect themselves from racialized policing; when feminist biohackers develop tool kits for emergency gynecological care, these organizers are saying that such provisions must not only be protected and reclaimed but also detoxified and redesigned along anti-oppressive principles. For these defiant self-organized actions to have a lasting effect, institutions need to support their struggles. Our destination—real and ideal—will be defined by a myriad of ongoing repair processes at different scales, determined in part by those institutions that will embrace the risk of becoming complicit in the exploding world of pirate care.

— Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak

Kunsthalle Wien will host an online conversation between the authors on May 14, 7 PM EDT.

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