Towards Becoming an Ecology of Care

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CARE ECOLOGIES GROUP: VALENTINA CURANDI, INTE GLOERICH, ANIA MOLENDA, MAAIKE MUNTINGA, NATALIA SANCHEZ QUERUBIN, NIENKE SCHOLTS AND MARLOEKE VAN DER VLUGT [1]

It feels as if I am sitting on fertile soil and am digging holes like a little mole. Deep ones, sideway ones. Not all holes are connected, but some find their way to one another. Each dig leads to another dig. There is time and space, we can waste it because not all digging needs to lead to holes. Around me other people are digging too. We are on a journey without a destination, touching everything and nothing on our way. Our hands are dirty with dust and mud. We stop at wiry roots.

Being part of a network (like mycelium, like roots) – sometimes we touch, sometimes we thread through and with each other's processes, and sometimes I'm not sure how we can cross the imposed divides of 'discipline'.

Care Ecologies group members' impressions

In the arts and humanities, 'ecology' is an evocative metaphor for thinking about practices and experiences of care. Paraphrasing artist Francesco Salvini (2019), ecologies are assembled by juxtaposing fragments that interact with one another, including concepts, materialities, relations and experiences. Ecologies become 'practices of organisation in the middle of troubles'. For Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, ecology is inextricably tied up with care. For her, care is about a commitment to 'processes of ongoing relating' (2017: 154) and 'webs of labours of care' (155). It also demands paying attention to the maintenance and repair work necessary so that 'we' – bodies, organisms, objects and materials – 'can live … as well as possible' (3). Puig de la Bellacasa echoes Joan Tronto (1998), who sees care as relational ethics, reciprocal practice and moral investment in collective well-being.

Approaching an ecology through the lens of care demands recognizing what is attended to, but also what is neglected. Although people mutually depend on one another for survival and all bodies are inherently precarious, social institutions do not protect them equally. Care governance creates social differences: 'some lives are protected, others are not' (Lorey 2012: 18). While universal access to care is necessary for collective well-being, care is unjustly distributed in practice. A focus on ecologies of care invites a critical (re)formulation and exploration of 'the role of caring in constituting the social modes of organisation in an ecology' (Salvini 2019).

Thinking about care in the organization of an ecology is central to the research group Care Ecologies. The group (whose members are hereafter referred to as 'we') performs, reflects on and speculates about principles of what an ecology of care could be. We set out to create collective moments and events where care is both a theme and a shared experience. Moreover, we explore how activities that sustain a research group – coordinating, meeting, writing and documenting – may be done *with care*. Or, in other words, we explore how we can perform (as) an ecology of care.

Group members work within performance, scenography, fine arts, medicine, social sciences, architecture, performance philosophy and media studies. Research interests range from health injustice, grief and interspecies reciprocity to feminist economies. Care Ecologies is supported by ARIAS, a platform for research through the arts and sciences in Amsterdam.[2] ARIAS is committed to creating an interdisciplinary space for artists and researchers interested in care, understood as a ground for thinking together and as a practice when working together. The group set off during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when the entanglement of health, social and ecological issues became (even more) painfully visible. These gatherings offered a valuable context for this collective of people during difficult times of isolation.

We aim to place artistic and academic contributions on the same level, an approach that leads to a polyvocal dialogue around care

and an emphasis on performance. In the process of this collective work, we have started to understand it in, for example, the framework of Brad Haseman's concept of performative research, which manifests through artistic interventions, whereby makers, researchers and audience meet and exchange, and can experience new collaborative forms, share and experiment together (2006). This concept relates to notions of performativity in which, as Judith Butler explored (1988), identity is created through physical and repetitive acts, including the active nature of speech and the ability of language to change reality (Austin 1975). New Materialism builds on these foundations, underscoring the co-constitution of material and discursive productions of reality, accentuating how (in)animate objects perform their agency (Bennett 2010). In this same vein, physicist and philosopher Karen Barad reworks ideas of causality, stating that 'distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (2007: 33). Thus far, these are some of the ideas that have helped us to reflect on different formats and outcomes of the Care Ecologies sessions.

This essay offers initial reflections on our approaches to care ecologies. The first reflection concerns our different understanding of care in terms of what it can do and how staying with differences shaped the ways in which we (un)settle the agenda of the research group. We reflect on how care is given meaning, lived and performed in our collective exchanges and entanglements. Our goal is not to pinpoint what care is, but to focus on what care can do while being attentive to what is neglected.

To exchange knowledge and experiences, the group uses various on- and off-line frameworks, like presentations and practice sessions (fig 2). In the second part of the essay, we reflect on our online meetings and two in-person workshops. How can artistic interventions become sites to explore and experience care? How do our social positionings impact how we access and experience encounters with care systems, both informal and institutional? And how to remain attentive to labour and embodiment to avoid romanticizing care? We share how we try to tackle the challenge of planning and

documenting these meetings *care-fully*. We aim to make and take time to (un)learn from one another, which requires stepping out of productivity-oriented logic. To include members who could not join, we try to include principles of care in documenting the events (figs 1–4).

This paper attempts to present a speculative proposition for functioning as a research ecology on and around care. It is an ongoing process, for which the writing of this paper became a catalyst for reflection. We are not aiming for clear answers but rather invite ourselves and others to become more aware, devising and testing work strategies for more care-based practices.

CARE IS MANY THINGS: (UN)SETTLING AN AGENDA

During the first meetings, we discussed the research group's potential priorities and goals. We began without knowing much about one another's backgrounds, positionality and practices but were eager to connect.

Inte: I feel like a care ecology works like a tentacular safety net. In it I am connected to others in different ways and directions. I am cared for and able to care for others. In my research, I look at financial technologies, which can seem very devoid of care. While the stories about them often advertise hope for a (radically) different future, they remain embedded in the neoliberal status quo. What if their focus was not on profitable innovation but on supporting community practices, solidarity and care? Are these technologies too concerned with defining tradable assets for financial speculation to serve this alternative aim? If so, how does this tendency affect care?

Ania: Care is a lens through which I'd like to imagine future ways of living. I am interested, for example, in an architecture focused on providing frameworks for living together, facilitating solidarity, equality and care among humans and non-humans, that is not solely defined by the values of neoliberal capitalism like profit and efficiency. How these frameworks are defined is essential. When defined through economic growth and profit-based exploitation, living based on care and solidarity seems impossible.
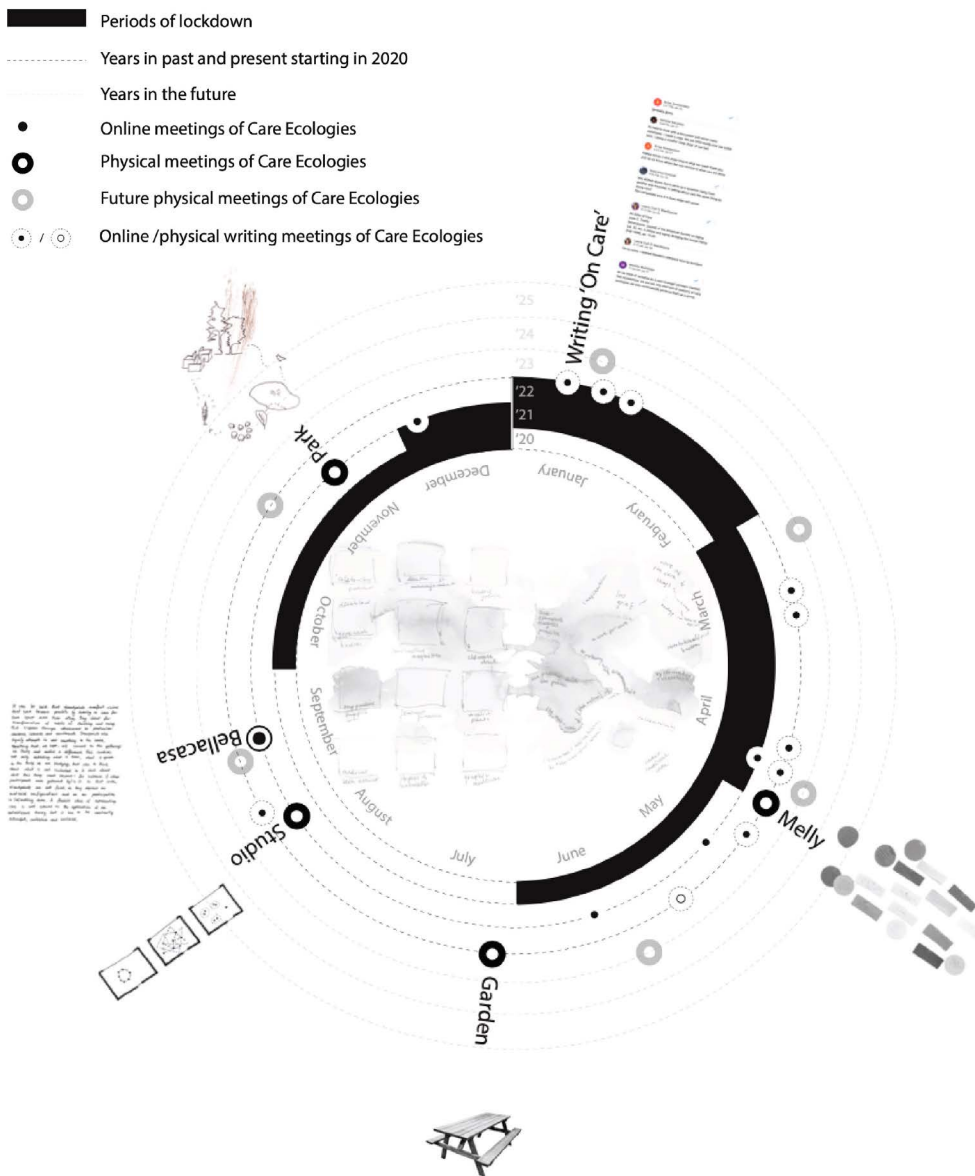
Sabine applies visual methods, including machine learning, to exploring the idea of caring for the climate and multiplying ecological imaginaries. In her work, both science-fiction and social media images are speculative data about the future. Natalia explores how people who are ill use social media to create care networks.

Maaike: I am a native Dutch, queer-identifying person who benefits from white, class and able-bodied privilege. Access to care is a human right and, from that perspective, I research global and national health inequalities. I enjoy critically appraising what is considered 'care'. What are the conditions for caring environments? Can care harm? How may care be equally distributed? The health care institution is my work context; I am training to be a physician. I reflect on how to bring care into everyday hospital life and also on how I receive

it; I receive care from educators, colleagues, friends, family, the natural world and myself. I hope to offer the universe different kinds of care. I am learning who needs what, how and when. Marloeke approaches art making as a praxis of care, attending to relationality, materiality, embodiment and power asymmetries. Valentina employs a queer feminist lens to explore care towards art practices that are currently neglected and devalued because of their transience and vulnerability.

Marloeke: I regard 'caring' as re-sensitizing, a rehearsing of an attentional capacity that incorporates mutual response-ability for 'the (in)human that therefore we are' (Barad 2012: 218). Researching tactile interaction, I create sculptural and spatial installations that invite an audience to interact with bodies, organisms, objects and materials in a non-hierarchical manner. A haptic dimension opens for the body

◼ Figure 1. Map of themes emerging in Care Ecologies group. How to read – Left side: Individual research practices from participants, each represented with a box with a colour and a keyword: 'celebrity patient', 'death management', 'housing justice', 'disabled/ female/governed bodies', '(un)healthy inequities', 'climate doula', 'supporting support workers', 'feminist finance', 'invasive plants', 'medical tech ethics', 'objects of knowledge', 'graphic medicine'. Right side: The colours from the individual boxes come together to show how these practices overlap, contaminate and merge into shared interests and concerns. For example, themes like death management and climate lead to new questions about 'imagination' and 'grief'.
Drawing Nienke Scholts

Legend:
- ▬▬ Periods of lockdown
- ···· Years in past and present starting in 2020
- ─── Years in the future
- ● Online meetings of Care Ecologies
- ◎ Physical meetings of Care Ecologies
- ◯ Future physical meetings of Care Ecologies
- ⦿ / ◉ Online /physical writing meetings of Care Ecologies

Labels around diagram: Writing 'On Care', Park, Bellacasa, Studio, Garden, Melly; months January–December; years '20, '21, '22, '23, '24, '25

■ Figure 2. The diagram represents a timeline of the activities carried out by the Care Ecologies group, with each year visualized as a ring and marking periods of lockdown in black. Moving clockwise through time, the dots represent various online and offline exchanges; see the legend. Small icons point to examples of documentation styles used during those meetings. *Diagram design Ania Molenda*

precarious and invisible labour. My potential bequeathment faces many legal and social boundaries due to my position as a woman, mother, immigrant and chronically sick artist.

Nienke: Burnout gave me the space to rethink the dramaturgy of my practice. I have helped shape various artists' practices and worked in a production house. I have always been interested in questioning and engaging with the ways of working – and conditions of – art practices and organizations. However, it was only when my body and mind became utterly exhausted that I started to question my own way of working and change my attitude towards work. How to rethink the dramaturgies of work and perform the caring values that are so often (only) spoken about? I wish to expand my focus on dramaturgy from what is done to *how* it is done, since 'our ways of doing … have world making effects' (de la Bellacasa 2017: 66).

Alexa is a movement practitioner who explores embodied practices that respond to the physical effects of lack of care. Laura is concerned with vulnerability and interdependence and with challenging classic humanist individualistic agency models.

Alexa: Care is part of the choreographic process. How can I enact care from each step of my work while working in an often-careless professional landscape? How do I communicate, schedule, set up a room, initiate invitations, facilitate and open myself to the audience? As a dance artist and support worker, I think about state-sanctioned gestures of care and limited structural access to care. What are the physical/somatic effects of this lack of care? How can embodied practices respond to them?

Laura: I wonder about how I may understand my research practice in terms of care and

to perform various physical sensations. In this sensitized space, affective, emotional and mental responses constantly change due to being in (direct) interaction with who or what one is touching. The aim is to invite participants to experience 'practising care' for our reciprocal nature of being in the world.

Valentina: I plan to leave my body of creative work as a gift, rest, remains and reminder of myself to the school that granted my latest educational degree. I attempt to make an actual bequeathment of my personal property (a body of performative works) by handing it down to a non-human organism and asking them to care for it after my death. This artistic research opens an implicit question about what is not secured, including intangible practices of art and forms of

vulnerability and not of mastery, within an ethics of knowledge. My last research project emerged when I had no choice but to learn to live alongside my vulnerability. The loss of my father became entangled with the disorientation of the pandemic. How to feel vulnerable as a researcher and expose your need for care to others?

A lesson from these meetings was that defining care is not, nor should it be, a simple task. Rather than settling on shared objects and definitions, we seek overlap in terms of interests while valuing confrontation between individuals and disciplines. Such an agenda prioritizes exploring interests and states of being while noticing their intersections, thus driving attention and curiosity forward among group members. Our goal would be to perform interdisciplinary care strategies as a way to explore them critically. Our disciplines and methods will act as lenses that refract ideas about care.

Privileges and marginalizations guide what we can nourish and/or neglect. Burnout, care-giving, business and health are not secondary to our capacity as researchers and artists. To a certain extent, we were aware that these issues affected group members differently; we were and are enabled or disenfranchised by the uneven distributions of care in our lives. Inevitably these differences became tangible and urgent throughout our two years of exchange and made us ask questions about the 'ecology' we set to form. How to care for one another in the context of the group? An awareness of our different positionalities is latently present within the map of our interdisciplinary interests, yet it remains implicit and continuously in flux (fig. 1).

As a group, we do aim to account for these aspects not only as points of reflection when engaging in work. We set out to learn how to become better attuned to diverse abilities, responsibilities and needs. For example, it is important to reflect on how our dynamics may structure inclusion and exclusion. How can we bridge differences in people's ability to participate? What is gained and what is lost when we start to understand care through lived experiences and meetings? What enables

a caring performativity of exchange between, within and outside of defining boundaries of academia, artistic fields and activism's realm? Indeed, the care performed in our activities, we hope, articulates an ecology in which participants validate one another, (un)learn from one another and offer new interpretations of one another's work. This is a process that is not finished as we write this text. Meetings lead to reflecting, gathering input for personal work and choosing topics of the subsequent encounters.

MEETING: ONLINE, IN THE STUDIO AND IN THE PARK

During the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to meet new people and experience in-depth, in-person connections were scarce and precarious, especially for people with chronic health conditions. Like others worldwide, we started using video conferencing, setting out to explore how online meetings could help support one another and be inspirational exchanges. One tactic was foregrounding the body so that seeing, touching and listening played a role in these digital encounters. Perceiving expressions and gestures allowed participants to be more easily affected by conversations and collective responses on the screen. We did joint exercises to foster bodily relations. People were asked to touch objects and surfaces, fold a piece of paper or write/draw and share their answer to a question. These simple actions helped to create awareness of recip-rocality and presence; they supported actively listening to one another while thinking along in often challenging digital environments. Despite the efforts to draw attention to the body, online meetings often led us to theoretical conversations. Care was enacted mostly discursively (through text and speech), represented visually by the frames of one another's faces in the conference call matrix.

After COVID-19 restrictions were eased in Amsterdam, Care Ecologies held two in-person gatherings in the late summer and winter of 2021: a movement workshop and a guided meditation walk in a city park. The possibility of in-person meetings highlighted different dimensions of our ability to participate and the

care needed to support inclusion. Several group members could not attend due to professional commitments, (re)location, personal difficulties or their health. Indeed, privilege (for example, not having care tasks and being able to take the day off) and marginalizations (duties connected to a job or family, having to withdraw because of mental/physical health) determined attendance. These struggles also impacted what people took from these gatherings. Our concern with documentation departs from the fact that being present on-site might not always be achievable.

Note-taking and documentation are part of a research setting. The motivation may be administrative, such as creating records, or practical, like building a repository of ideas. The events we organized focused on the experiential (for example, walking in nature). Why and how to document these events in the context of a research group? Can documentation offer more than information to people who could not attend?

(An)archiving explores the aspects of an experience that can and cannot be documented, the reasons for that being the case and, from that exploration, it presents alternatives to traditional archiving (Manning and Massumi 2006). Tension exists between archiving experiential processes – the impact on the participants can only be performed in the moment – and the desire to share and make them sensible and meaningful to others. In a traditional sense, archiving transforms events into finished narratives and documentation (Sant 2017). Alternatives call for thinking about the surplus-value of the event. Applying the notion of anarchiving to our gatherings, it is not about reliving an experience but about creating materials that group members who were not present might find engaging and evocative. How can we transform affective aspects of experiences into pieces of communication that open possibilities for engagement beyond being informative? How may we share embodied experiences without over-intellectualizing them? How to include (non-)human voices and perspectives that were present? In other words, we look not only at what documentation is about but also what it does.

Below, we share two forms of documentation based on the events we organized. Text and images weave together notes taken directly after the sessions, diary fragments, poetic accounts, scores, photos, images, audio tracks, maps and the immaterial memories of sweat, laughter, handfuls of dirt and the smell of wet leaves.[3] We avoided morphing these elements into one style of academic or reflective writing. Instead, the text is a fragmented and hybrid narrative. We aim to capture the desires into a documentation practice in which we, for example:

- Highlight personal experiences while resisting the desire to produce a unifying narrative. Part of the challenge is respecting the different voices while presenting a cohesive piece of communication. Even if sentences start with an I, they de-emphasize names.
- Include other presences, human and non-human, alongside our own, thus thinking about situated knowledge.
- Be multi-sensorial, presenting more opportunities for inclusive engagement, such as adding visual and audio material.
- Present documentation as an open invitation for others to engage with instead of as a final product. The goal is to re-activate and evoke knowledge.

MOVEMENT WORKSHOP: SCORES

On a dry and sunny August day, we meet with choreographer Alexa Mardon at the DAS Graduate School of the Amsterdam University of the Arts. For several of us, it is the first time seeing one another in person, without the mediation of the screen. Here are our bodies in their three-dimensional and multi-sensorial existence. Shoes come off. We enter the studio. Gathered in a circle, we smile. We check in with one another: we share our pronouns and reflect on how we feel. Alexa says: 'Choose a word that captures that feeling; mine was "sparkling".' We start to move slowly, cautiously. Music plays.

Alexa drops tiny morsels of possibility to help us perceive our bodies, one another and the room. 'Embrace the softness of the salmon belly and be plump like the blueberry in the thimble,' they say. Then, imagining that we are pieces of cloth, we melt into the ground. Our bodies can be un-soft, and we are unable to dissolve. We (re)discover that our bodies have limits. The experience

of having a body varies so much! Despite differences, we share, without speaking. We feel little dances appearing between and through us. We are in this space, as individuals and in relationships that feel dynamic and non-linear.

I am not sure what is happening this morning. I know we dance, shake, play and run loose like a hoard of wild animals. We sweat and smell, and we laugh. Then, we lay on the floor, breathing and experiencing what feels like a warm hand on our bodies. The air is moving within and through our bodies. We give one another our presence and take the time to be vulnerable; we know we have permission to do so. We rest.

The movement session enables us to experience ourselves as dependent and our bodies as vulnerable. The care we provide for one another in the studio allows us to rediscover essential things we took for granted, like being in one room together, aware of space and air moving around us and in us. Witnessing one another's breath brings us closer to all life and matter around us. To breathe means to experience a mutual overlap of the air that contains us and that we contain within. As Emanuele Coccia (2019) writes, life is this rupture in the relationship between what is the container and what is being contained.

During the studio visit, there is no conversation; we only dance. Alexa is the only person speaking and guiding our actions. Their voice is essential for creating a space for mutual care. We enjoy the magic of this moment because Alexa carefully makes a safe space for us. Ultimately, we also create this space with them through our engagement and participation. Nevertheless, guidance, structure, tempo, imaginative triggers and tips are essential. The sense of simply being able to move awakens energy in many of us and generates gratitude. The studio session is a moment to stop reflecting and analysing, leaving the mind behind.

The session ends with us sitting down. We share a few words about what we remembered from the morning and how it felt to share the space and movement. Alexa gathers all the words in a poem about our exchanges and a care ecology of moving bodies. This documentation results in the poem incorporated in the illustration accompanying this section (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Digital collage using documented material from the walking meditation organized by the Care Ecologies group in Amstelpark, November 2021.
Five participants (four people and a dog) explored the park's surroundings while reflecting on the concept of economies of abundance and recording their multi-sensory experiences. How to read – the paths outlined in the collage are the routes taken by the participants. The different photos and the drawing are part of how they captured the experience. The QR code leads to the podcast episode (Wall Kimmerer 2020) that participants listened to in preparation for the walk. *Pictures Nienke Scholts, Ania Molenda, Inte Gloerich, Maaike Muntinga; pen drawing Ania Molenda; digital collage Carlo De Gaetano*

AMSTELPARK

I am in the moist, autumnal Amstelpark in Amsterdam. I'm meeting with other members of Care Ecologies at Zone2Source, an exhibition platform in the park for artistic projects around alternative experiences of the 'natural' environment. Our goal is walking and listening.

I prepared by listening to an interview with Robin Wall Kimmerer.[4] She discusses gift economies and invites listeners to focus on abundance rather than scarcity. Drawing from indigenous ecological thinking, Kimmerer meditates on an economy that replaces extraction from nature and the accumulation of resources with an understanding of nature as a gift of abundance and relationships of reciprocity. Together with Pia, my dog, I roam the park listening to a meditative soundwalk created by artists Saša Spačal and Kaitlin Bryson.[5] Other attendees do the same somewhere around me. The recording guides my imagination towards the earth, moss, mushroom, mycelium, berries and small living things under the leaves. I take notes, draw maps, collect fallen items, dig into the dirt, touch bark and photograph objects, moments and situations (fig. 4).
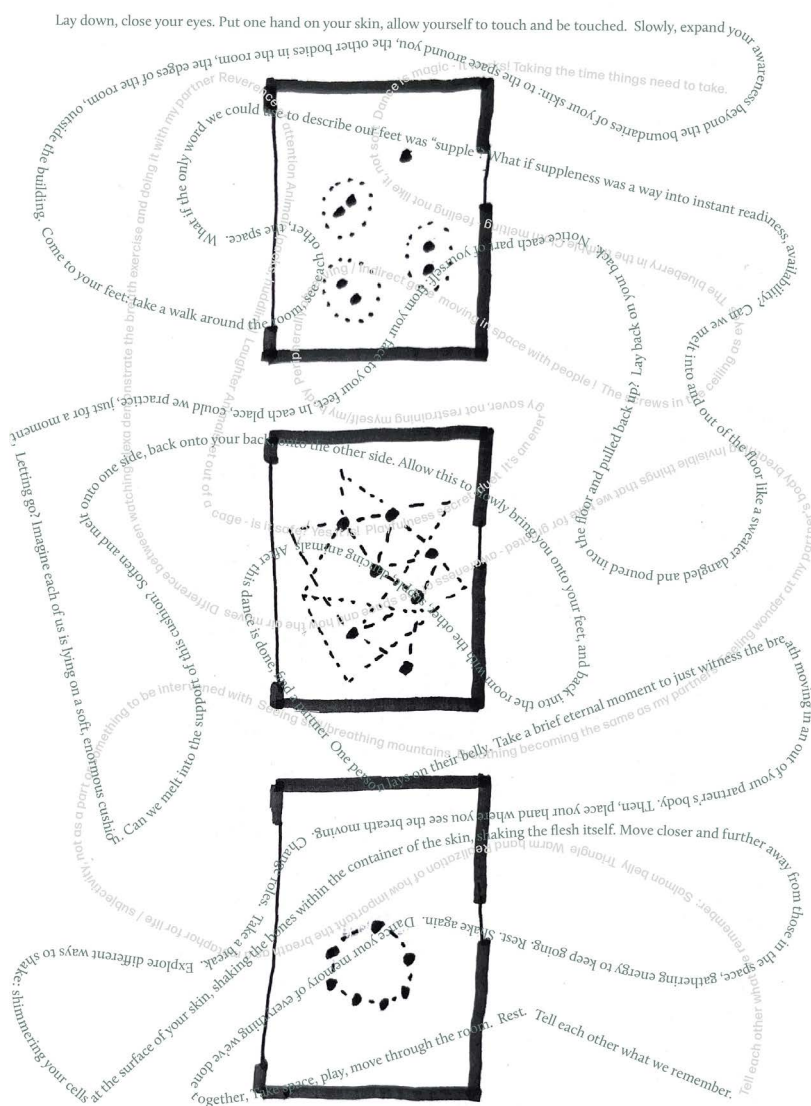
[4] The interview was featured on an episode of *Emergence Magazine Podcast* (Wall Kimmerer 2020).

[5] The soundwalk titled 'How to be a Mushroom Hunter' (with the voice of Whitney Myer) was made by artists Saša Spačal and Kaitlin Bryson as part of their MycoMythologies: Storytelling circle project, an on-/off-line performative workshop (Spačal and Bryson 2021).

■ Figure 4. Drawing produced after the movement workshop hosted by Alexa Mardon for the Care Ecologies group at DAS Graduate School, August 2021. How to read – The instructions for the exercises are written in dark grey. Written in light grey, a 'poem' composed using the impressions and feelings of the participants shared at the end of the workshop. The three sketches represent the different movements and positions of people in the room. *Sketches Ania Molenda; texts Alexa Mardon; design Carlo De Gaetano*

After completing the guided meditation, we gather in the exhibition space to discuss our experiences and connect them to the idea of the gift economy. An essential part of our discussion focuses on the inability to understand what it is like to be non-human and what care may look like for other species. How can humans perceive more than their own needs? Can anthropocentric views ever be challenged? How do other beings thrive? What role do decay, abundance and scarcity play in that thriving and what meaning do we attach to other beings as humans?

Immersing myself in my immediate environment during the walk and focusing on the small details helped me to let go, for a moment, of the desire to be in control. I felt part of the network of life around me. Perhaps, this is what being an actor in a care ecology is like. Caring is a prerequisite to feeling connected to a community of others while not necessarily being like those others.

Combining the guided meditation, which is individual and reflective, with a group discussion has therapeutic dimensions. In this moment, caring for the environment becomes more concrete and multi-dimensional. Theoretical and experiential come together.

PROPOSITIONS FOR A CARE-BASED RESEARCH PRACTICE

The paper discussed different ways a research group may perform a care ecology. How to research the topic of care while practising care in how we organize ourselves and do research? Specifically, we involve notions of care in setting an agenda, planning our (online) meetings, documenting live events and co-authoring this essay. We felt these goals were urgent to address during a period when co-presence was difficult. We used our (online) gatherings to explore the divergence and convergence between researchers, staying with differences and similarities. We used collective physical activities to foreground the body during online meetings. We treated the challenges that prevented people from attending events not as outliers but as a reality that needed attending. We experimented with capturing the (live) events in ways that offer more than forensic reports of what happened and allow the events to continue to unfold. While we have only begun exploring those formats, we find that combining narrative, sounds, movements and affects works well. Care in this context means an ongoing openness to what engagement looks like, becoming aware and being respectful to the speeds at which it unfolds. Looking back, the centring of abstract spoken and written language in the initial online meetings – English – as a mode of meaning-making around care requires that we open up and critically orient ourselves inwards to ask ourselves who our meetings are for. Whose insights and wisdom were shared during the sessions? Whose were – inadvertently

– ignored? Without denying the yield of our online gatherings, we are currently learning to identify how, for instance, classist and ableist structures, as reflected in, among other things, the use of specific words and communication strategies, shape what we claim to know, provide and receive.

Moving through these different performativities of exchanging care as subject and as practice at once, we end with asking what our challenges and desires for future configurations are. Can we make speculative propositions for enriching our ways of being an ecology of care? This involves asking how we can take collective responsibility to meet one another's access needs, interdependently. Which care-full and artistic forms of sharing an experience can we develop to keep including everyone? How can we create space for more continuous performativities of exchange not bound to one moment in time, but as webs of care that spread and branch out?

We approached co-authoring this paper with care as well. We experimented with writing together while acknowledging one another's limitations regarding time and energy and respecting our different voices. Missing a meeting and the time taken responding to messages are not necessarily signs of a lack of care. The consideration of time is essential since this research often is a voluntary act or non-remunerated labour supported by jobs outside its context. We conclude this paper on a practical note, namely, by sharing propositions for how to write together with care:

- Be committed to a shared goal.
- Use writing as a conversation in which you are committed to listening.
- Trust one another.
- Respect when one has no time.
- See everyone as co-author and co-editor; we can all add to and change text written by others.
- Make the best out of the intention of the previous author/editor when continuing collective work during several rounds of writing and editing.
- Give time and thoughts to one another's texts.

- Feel free to look through your lens to improve the text; diverse perspectives make it stronger.
- Establish a clear division of labour: share your availability and skills without feeling pressure.
- Take response-ability; respond to your ability and know that others value your input.

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