

## *Staying with the Trouble*

*'it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas.*

*It matters what thoughts think thoughts.*

*It matters what knowledges know knowledges.*

*It matters what relations relate relations.*

*It matters what worlds world worlds.*

*It matters what stories tell stories.'*

(Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with The Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016, 34-35)

Feminist philosopher and activist, Donna Haraway, is invoked as an intellectual participant to this vibrant group show of 14 women artists, *Staying With The Trouble*, the exhibition title has been taken from her book, published in 2016. Whilst Haraway's book is ecologically-focussed, her exploratory feminist thinking provides a dynamic ground for engaging with the very diverse practices exhibited here. How to approach such a kaleidoscope of work by artists from three generations, different geographical and socio-cultural contexts who have interlaced a wide range of media to generate different thematic territories?

*'It matters what worlds world worlds'*

Haraway's term '*worldling*' offers a key. It opens insight to a shared model of art practice understood as active work, the work of world-making. These artists involved in *worldling* are fully committed to '*becoming-with*', to shedding positions of singularity and heroic detachment, to become embedded in the matter and matters of the world, down and dirty with its troubles. They work at troubling/disturbing materials and ideas to free up fresh lines of enquiry and sensory experience.

Artistic *worldling* in the exhibition ranges widely between the private and the public. Some work draws deep from psychoanalytical matters: the photography of Ellen Friedlander working through personal trauma of relationship breakdown or Anna Baumgarten's filmic investigation of hysterical compulsion. Other artistic work 'troubles' with political matters such as Hungarian artist, Katalin Ladik's resistance work in poetry performance and sound happenings. Guler Ates's performative interventions which present a female figure, at once veiled and highly visible, are staged and photographed in public spaces around the world. Polish, artist, Joanna Rajkowska, works across media, often collaboratively, in a highly focussed way, through site-specific, research-led, relational community/public projects. The agency of her work involves propositional what-if? *worldling*. Some projects such as *The Death of the Palm Tree*, 2019, address our most urgent global troubles of climate change and environmental crisis. *Staying with the Trouble*, presents her multi-levelled project, *Light of the Lodge*, from 2012, sited in the city of Copenhagen. The project brought the traditional patriarchal power network of the city's Masonic Lodge with all its representations and secret symbolism to the light. The performative proposition of the lodge as a female order involved the staging of a dramatic night march of costumed women, carrying burning torches, through the city. Her what-if?, alternative *worldling* effectively de-stabilizes the given order of things. Alicja Rogalska's most recent speculative film *Nova* (2019/20), made in collaboration with Ana de Almeida and Vanja Smiljanić, is described as a 'feminist futurist LARP (Live Action Role Play)' which explores the possibilities of post-human identities and future ways of living which celebrate unbounded, *becoming-with*, eschewing all dependence on singularity.

However diverse they seem, the art works in this exhibition all represent acts and gestures of ethical imagination which Haraway describes as acts of 'response-ability; *thinking beyond inherited categories and capacities in and concrete ways.*' Creative work that is undertaken to 'stay with the trouble' has the potential to sustain our ongoing agency for 'partial healing' and 'modest rehabilitation'

These art-works are tools of enquiry not art for art's sake. This model of research-led *worlding* first flourished in tandem with counter-cultures of the post-War period, through the 1960s and 70s. It challenged transcendental beliefs that art must be something extra-ordinary, highly specialised and regulated in its materials, genres, aesthetics; detached from the specifics of everyday life or other forms of labour and production. The elevated notion of art as the unique creation and congealed being of artistic genius (male) is deeply rooted in Western capitalist culture and continues to determine its values as commodity. Much of the art work in the exhibition challenges the commodity status of art, flouting and side-stepping its familiar boundaries of media and genre. Choice of materials and the final formations of the work have emerged from initiatives in the face of alterity (limited time and space for art work) and creative problem-solving using materials that are to hand. The playful, critical strategies put into play by Feminist artists through the 1960s and 70s, drawing down from a range of Conceptual, Performance, assemblage and bricolage processes, have been re-visited, re-iterated and reformed by subsequent generations. Feminist art historian, Alexandra Kokoli, has raised the important critical point that these '*reiterative material processes*' used by women artists strongly indicate ongoing challenges of women's social, political and economic contexts.

*It matters what relations relate relations*

Plural Poetics, patterns of inter-generational exchange, are very evident in the exhibition through curatorial work which embraces a feminist commitment to co-emergence, *becoming-with* others. The curatorial selection and presentation is highly personal, non-authoritarian. Rather than setting out strategically, to represent a singular thematic or survey an artistic category or genre, *Staying with the Trouble* has emerged piecemeal, more rhizomatically, through exploratory conversations with individual practitioners. What has come together as an 'exhibition' is an assemblage of practices with multiple convergences (con-fusion) of *worlding* across time (different generations) and space (different parts of the world).

*'It matters what stories tell stories...'*

*it matters what knots knot knots...'*

There are fascinating threads inter-twining diverse practices. The punning bricolage of Su Richardson, active as a feminist artist in the UK since the 1970s, resonates with subversive craft-based activities of younger artists Anna Perach (Israel), Melania Toma (Italy) and Małgorzata Markiewicz (Poland). Each artist re-deploys materials and de-constructs the grammar of craft/decorative art, recycling matter in unfamiliar and critical ways, to destabilize and un-tame controlling fictions of gender and domesticity. Drawing directly down from lived experience: memories, phenomenologies, social rituals and stories of 'home', they re-animate materials/objects with unsettling magic to become performative, unruly, grotesque. These art works defy positions of aesthetic detachment to celebrate art's agency within what, feminist writer, Jane Bennett, has described as '*a knotted world of vibrant matter.*'

Further interlacing time, the exhibition brings together two series of performative photographs by Polish artist Anna Kutera (born in 1952 and active within 'Conceptual Contextualism' as a Feminist practitioner in Poland in the 1970s). Her work reverberates powerfully across generations and cultural contexts. *Feminist Painting*, a photographic series, of 1973, show her working with a domestic broom on a scroll of paper rolled out in a studio space, painting in wry parody of American Abstract Expressionist, Jackson Pollock. Pollock's floor-based, dripped paintings of the late 40s and 50s determined his celebrity status in the art world and machismo reputation for creating 'action painting'.

For 2021, Kutera shares her most intimate, performative work, *Despair* (2020), consisting of roughly torn and assembled black and white photographs documenting the artist stripped naked, undertaking ritualized grieving. In 2020 she experienced the death of her partner, Romauld, during the Covid 19 pandemic. The same year she lost her companion pet cat and faced her own 68<sup>th</sup> birthday which she has perceived as an ageing rite of passage; a process she terms 'contextual existentialism'.

Kutera has spoken about the process of her performance followed by the acts of tearing and reconstitution of its documentation as a means of finding expression for the unspeakable experience of anguish. Feminist philosopher Helene Cixous discussed her own process of tearing language as a way of finding space for 'feminine writing coming out of suffering'. Feminist art historian Alexandra Kokoli claims that, through such deconstructive strategies, Cixous 'throws the world into *'chaosmos enveloping the cosmos into chaos.'*

Kutera's work, *Despair*, finds correspondence with ancient traditions of 'Speaking for the Dead', mourning rituals for '*re-presencing and resurgence*', which are given significance in Haraway's

book as tactics to sustain living and '*dying well*'. She includes a passage from the witch Starhawk's Song, taken from her speculative, futuristic Camille stories:

...Flush it out.

Let the pain become a sound,

A living river on your breath.

Raise your voice.

Cry out. Scream. Wail.

Keen and mourn

For the dismembering of the world

(Starhawk's song, Haraway, D., *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016, 166.)

It feels right in our time of heightened predicament, in the midst of a global pandemic and climate crisis, to become-with art practices of *worlding* shaped by ethical imagination. To visit the exhibition, to engage with the work, to collect the work, are acts of *response-ability*. Feminist writer and scientific philosopher, Karen Barad has emphasized the foundational role ethics must play in our worldly matterings.

# l'étrangère

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*'A delicate tissue of ethicality runs through the marrow of being. There is no getting away from ethics – mattering is an integral part of the ontology of the world in its dynamic presencing. Not even a moment exists on its own.'*

Donna Haraway, who has been our intellectual companion through this exhibition text, opens her book, *Staying with the Trouble*, with compelling thoughts around the word 'trouble':

*'Trouble is an interesting word. It derives from the Thirteenth century French verb meaning 'to stir up;', 'to make cloudy', 'to disturb'. We all of us on Terra – live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all our bumptious kinds of response. Mixed up times are overflowing with both pain and joy...with unnecessary killing of on-goingness but also with necessary resurgence.'*

It is such a motivating passage of grounded positivity. It comes together with the creative work of the women artists here to provide thoughts for on-goingness and provides insight to the agency of art that sustains living through predicament. *'learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present'*.

*It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas'*

Lizzie Perrotte

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Haraway, D., 2016, 1.  
Ibid, 1.