

**Critical Friend Report**

**Workshop TOWARDS PERMACULTURAL INSTITUTIONS:  
CURATING TRANSFORMATION**

**Earth Care: Grounding**

**1–2 December 2023**

**by Giulia Bellinetti**

In her book *My Garden (Book)* (1999), Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid shares the ambivalent and unsettling fantasies of mastery that pervade her garden meditations. These fantasies intertwine with considerations on the garden entanglements with consumerism, coloniality, botany, and forms of Orientalism. Personal and political entanglements and inescapable contradictions coalesce in the space of the garden, which emerges from Kincaid's narration more as a space of discomfort than the lush and peaceful idyl of the more romantic genre of garden prose. In the last chapter of her book *Unthinking Mastery* (2017), American post-colonial scholar Julieta Singh reflects on Kincaid's garden of discomfort and expand it by sharing childhood memories of her mother's garden, a refuge from and repository of „psychic and physical discomforts proliferating within the home“ (Singh, 2017: 153).

Both authors emphasize the vital ambivalence and rooted contradictions inherent in the garden, a material and allegorical space that has inspired many authors, curators, and artists concerned with environmental breakdown, ecological repair, and more-than-human relationalities. One garden in particular has attracted a substantial level of attention in contemporary art: the permaculture garden. This specific kind of garden is cultivated according to a set of design principles developed by two Australian researchers, David Holmgren and Bill Mollison in the 1970s. Despite its problematic genealogy<sup>1</sup>, permaculture has been widely appreciated as a design method capable of creating human settlements and food production systems in balance with the environment. With time, permaculture has become quite popular beyond landscape design and food production. In contemporary art especially, there is an emerging field of enquiry named 'Institutional Permaculture' (Fenner, 2022; Harman & Schroer, 2022; Désanges, 2022), that looks at how the term 'permaculture' is used as a metaphor and model for differential institutional, curatorial and artistic practices striving for sustainability, diversity, response-ability, and interconnectedness.

The series of workshops curated by Aneta Rostkowska and Nada Rosa Schroer and hosted by Temporary Gallery from September until December 2023 would be certainly an excellent case study for this emergent field of study. The series consisted of three workshops, each of them inspired by one of the core tenets of Permaculture ethics: People Care, Fair Share, and Earth Care. The last iteration of the workshop, titled 'Grounding' and dedicated to the principle of Earth Care, was specifically focused on institutional practices and modes aimed at eco-social regeneration. What is the agency and responsibility of art institutions as we are confronted with long-gone, present, and impending ends of worlds? How can art institutions sustain life in terminal times? What are the necessary transformations art institutions must undergo in order to attend to the needs of the present time?

These questions were at the core of the workshop and explicitly addressed by Lucia Pietroiusti, Head of Ecologies at the Serpentine Galleries. In her workshop and public lecture, she asked how an institution can inspire, create connections, and mobilize action in times of ecological disruptions. Perhaps even more importantly, she also wondered how institutions can create empathy towards a context, and how a situated commitment towards the survival and prosperity of that context could emerge from that empathy feeling. In her work, Pietroiusti attempts to create parasitic strategies that might eventually pervade the institution allowing it to recognize the earthly entanglements between the institution's first body and second body, to think with British author Daisy Hildyard (2017). This process of acknowledgement refers also to the violent systems and systemic violence in which we are all enmeshed, the more powerful and all-encompassing of these systems being Modernity. Through a collective reading of some excerpts of *Hospicing Modernity* (2021) by Brazilian scholar Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, Pietroiusti reflected with the participants of the workshop on the difficult but necessary work of hospicing the Modern structures of thoughts that feed us and feed upon us.

Another generative thought suggested by Pietroiusti was the collapse of metaphor and material in times of environmental breakdown. The significance of this idea became tangible during the second day of the workshop, the Study Pattern Collective, represented in the workshop by curators and researchers Biljana Ciric and Madeleine Collie. Ciric and Collie prompted the group to reflect on the metaphorical and material meanings of compost and other faecal matter we constantly (re)produce.

1 In her ORFC 2020 keynote speech, Kreyol farmer, writer, and activist Leah Penniman states: "Permaculture isn't really real. It's the amalgamation of a number of different indigenous agroecology technologies that have been rebranded, packaged and sold by college-educated white men to turn a profit on their courses." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x31POPHF6bl>)

When and how do we contribute to maintain toxic institutional practices, and when and how do we become agents of transformation that produce rich and alive composting matter? Through an exercise of visual mapping, the group was invited to look into their institutional ‚compost toilets‘ and discuss the flows of metaphorical s\*\*t unfolding in their institution. Thinking with compost entailed also to reflect on failures and how one own’s failures can become compost to nurture regenerative collective pedagogies in times of eco-social collapse.

The collapse of matter and metaphor was further signaled by the movement of metabolic flows in the programme. Metabolism is a way to nurture „a diffractive and relational understanding of one’s own practice in relation to the surrounding environment and the cosmos“, suggested Madeleine Colle, and to think about the agency curatorial and artistic practices might have in caring for other modes of existence. In the afternoon, Ciric and Colle guided the group to explore interspecies relations of care in a collective writing exercise that resulted in 19 declarations of care and love for rivers, whales, fires, and sourdough communities, among others. In this exercise, participants were asked to imagine caring for a non-human being for a period of 5, 50, and 500 years. The powerful and evocative stories that emerged showed how radical imagination and fiction can help in the arduous endeavour of committing to care and love within and beyond human lifespans.

During the two days, metabolic flows of matter and metaphors were activated both in an intellectual as well as embodied fashion. The phenomenological affordance of the body was at the centre of the somatic exercises led by iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo & Darya Myasnikova. Massaging and holding each other’s bodies or shaking and twirling them in synch with the music beats, were ways to create a corporeal counterpoint to the conversations, to activate energetic flows, and to foster a sense of mutual care and connection within the group. A reflection on the metabolic entanglements between bodies was occasioned also by the dinners realized by food artist Paula Erstmann. Visually enthralling as much as rich in flavour, the dinners created moments in which participants could experience their connections with the vegetal beings and microorganisms they were ingesting as well as reflect on the blurring of individual and collective subjectivities that occurs through the digestive process.

The two days concluded with a guided meditation that prepared the ground for a moment of sharing between the participants. The generosity and emotional intensity shown by the participants as they shared their fears, struggles, dreams, and aspirations, bore witness to the impact the workshop had on the group. The contributions of the Grounding workshop at Temporary Gallery did not offer solutions or easy fixes to the questions at the core of the event. Instead, the workshop portrayed a complex affective and material landscape of struggles, hopes, generative failures, and ongoing quests. Is this, perhaps, the agency and responsibility of art institutions: to creating safe spaces of empathy and vulnerability where communities can gather to share the struggles, heal the wounds, mourn worlds that have ended? Certainly, in those two days of December 2023, Temporary Gallery was more similar to Kincaid’s and Singh’s gardens rather than to the landscapes designed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. A space where to grasp the tensions, dilemmas, and vital ambivalences of these terminal times.

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