

We

I will start with a long quote. A quote that isn't even mine. It isn't even meant to be the voice of a human, and I am unlikely to do it justice as you listen:

*the apocalypse
is toxic*

*when we feel
we feel so deeply*

*we crack and
shatter
into parts and
pieces*

*this is
the vulnerability of
our society of
empathy*

*we feel your
aches
and injuries*

*all the demons
of power and
dominance*

*affection makes
dangerous
creatures*

*the ones sleeping
the ones resting
the undead and the artificially
intelligent*

*look at the damage
look closely
and tell me*

*my
crystalized
society*

*you fear them
oh we fear not*

*the future offers
more refuge
than the past ever did*

*i regenerate
resting
8% of my body
next to your body*

*my body
moves yours
and yours
moves mine*

we like it that way

*because that I like
your body
and you like mine
makes so much sense*

This is a section of narrative comes from artists Barbara Kapusta, 'Empathic Creatures' (2018)¹, it was mined, and extracted from her recent pre-pandemic published writings 'Dangerous Bodies' ²(2019), which gives an overview of her writings, forming the core for her unnervingly rich practice.

In Kapusta's imagination of a future, a multitude of characters from within a techno-humanity era somehow created an imagining of what we can be. The voice/s of her disembodied entities are fervently coming to terms with their own being. In various stages of forming themselves, they come together, learning from the mistakes of the past and somehow through their interconnectivity, they become strong. Dangerous even.

Embracing diversity and vulnerability, the dangerous bodies are stronger together: they are a multitude. Kapusta's protagonist(s) describe a society of empathy. They are one and many, decentred and sprawling, fractured parts that talk as one, and at the same time not

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/kunstraumlondon/videos/barbara-kapusta-empathic-creatures-2018-hd-video-644min-sound-by-fauna/619179505283271/>

² <http://www.mottodistribution.com/shop/9783950439427-dangerous-bodies-barbara-kapusta.html>

at all. Their mode of speak is simultaneously threatening and gentle as they raise new approaches for a society as it has developed, from what has gone before. Destructive and apocalyptic, they ask how to imagine future societies, and what tools or thought experiments we have left, or have to invent, to fully imagine an otherness³.

You may ask why I start with this very large quote from an unconnected artist. But it is an intuitive connection and trigger to contextualise the concept of this intervention as a curator. It enables me to vocalise a personal feeling I have been unable to articulate in response to a series of public interventions across Nottingham (a place I once lived for 10 years); some of which is hosted in a studio complex I had to pleasure to grow in and be moulded by (One Thoresby Street⁴); whilst being coordinated by young creatives who are emerging from Nottingham Trent Fine Art (the same course I graduated from decades before). A place that has become an enduring tendril which regularly pulls on my being. [when I say tendril, I don't mean an insignificant fragile squid-like limb, but instead a Kraken scale beast: long, worn with use, whose suctioning grip holds on firmly- but never enough to cause harm].

I needed something more visceral to introduce and describe the thoughtfulness that resides in the us-ness of these public presentations, which are emerging through a considered approach to curating art in a post-pandemic world. Perhaps it is a diversion too far, but the use of terms such as love and care -precise font and bold in my mind- flash at me, it is a sensation that is hard to describe but somehow tangible and pungent

I informally address you, my listener, and why do I mention this you may ask. In the same way that the Kapusta's beings adapt to their post-apocalyptic era into a new age of empathy, I also see a very present catastrophic event, and through this, a new era of burgeoning creatives, I sense the potentials of collaboration working for us, and within us, with no divisions between us and them. They -a creative body of individuals- seek to prioritise a series of collective strategies that ultimately consider human wellbeing. This doesn't seem like a neo-liberal agenda, with artists clambering to get ahead and seek their glory (well maybe in satire) but in total opposition to this, there seems to be a completely altruistic focus.

We- yes, we are going to use the term we because we have earned it. We, who have worked so tirelessly to keep our equilibriums in a moment of unprecedented global turmoil. When in the last year we have had to reiterate that global extinction is a real threat. Where the world literal burned and melted in front of our eyes. Where we had to remind ourselves that black life's matter and had to *still* make distinctions on why. Where we unable to ignore scenes of distant parts of the globe suffocate to death in the streets. We felt helpless but we continued to do what we can. We, who have navigated a new socially distant life, have gained a new gratitude for 3D existence, savouring the sensual surfaces to reveal an epidermis of emotion and hidden meanings. The textured crust which was once soft and pliable becomes solidified. The geology of its making becoming an archaeological site,

³ Barbara Kapusta - https://www.giannimanhattan.com/artist/Barbara_Kapusta

⁴ <https://onethoresbystreet.org>

where its hidden sedimentation is primed for exploration, layer by layer, emotion by emotion, affect and effect, delving deep into strata of what lies beneath. What we reveal and what we don't.

We crave a nostalgic new -not a new-new which is sensational and unnerving- but an in-between new that seeks comfort, support and joy. It is difficult to get distance from that which we inhabit, or could we say, be able to respond to our current trauma-in-motion. As we chart new distances created between what used to be, and now, we realise that this odd and perplexing moment hasn't necessarily pushed us apart, but instead it has made us more empathetic. We care. We care a lot.

In a moment where our future seems so uncertain and our immediate environment becomes the overbearing reference points to our thoughts. We grab at, and reimagine, the everyday to repurpose the mundane into something that proves we can imagine at all. The shrinking of globes to rooms; studios to laptops; touch to screens, is unexpected and jarring. Yet this isn't a reduction. Instead, it is a concentration: a condensed nucleus of energy waiting to explode. The drawing back of an arrow and the delicious pause before it projects full force towards its unknowing target.

When reflecting on the intense amount of sensitivity covered within these public moments, I thought of two recent pandemic reads. The first was 'I Love Dick' by Chris Kraus, a diaristic exploration of a female's inner/outer dialogue, as she admits her unnerving obsession with another human. I read a never-been-heard-before voice that exuded confidence in her vulnerability. It was an obsessive fractured self-laid-bare, for all to read. It lingered in my thoughts. It was liberating to be allowed to revel in an exposing private monologue, troubling and uncomfortable, because I could see elements of me in her. Positioned on the nervous edge of mental health -a grey area residing in grey matter- I wondered 'is it ok to be this honest about potentially not being ok?'. It made me think about how do we as a collective voice represent this aspect of *WE*, and how we experience interaction, frustration, loneliness? How do we talk about our need for others in our lives? How do we nurture and create a sustainable future and ethically consider those whom we don't know around us?

The second read, was 'All About Love' by Bell Hooks, a recommendation of a curator friend which stemmed from a conversation about how we can move forward as cultural producers. It empowered me, and once I digested it, I could for the first time affirm that love can be a critical reference point in a society of narcissism and individualism. Through this provocative feminist voice, I was reminded that we have to be courageous in embracing love and build an emotionally connected loving world that is more embedded in ethics than romance.

This text is a virtual tendril of hope and empathy to reach the artistic practices that reach back. Each work embraces the physical and digital realms, caressing thoughts and ideas to position them in the vulnerable place that is public space. Whether using modes of advertising, the internet or physical intervention, we jointly have the intention to touch and impact each other- even though we have never met in person.

As I started with an unashamed quote, I will also finish with a final sampling of Kapusta's words of wisdom from a show I curated⁵ a whole other world ago (I must ask permission to use these in this way). I credit Barbara 100% for her unknowing collaboration on this text. She is prophetic and profound and deserves all the creative kudos she is due.

*Our being in this world
is a public affair.*

We live in relation.

Our bodies are open.

*We touch.
We fight for each other.*

*This is not a fragile
formation!*

*We are true
dangerous bodies.*

NOTE

Things I left out, but would like to acknowledge:

Brian Massumi's publication 'Parables for the virtual'⁶ (particularly chapter on 'The Autonomy of Affect') and the wondrous exploration of affect and sensation. Deep and too complex for me to simplify.

'Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet'⁷ Catalogue for the show of the same name at Whitechapel, curated by Omar Kholief. A must-see collection of historic and contemporary works, with a useful timeline for the creation of the internet. It took me down a wormhole of research which stemmed from my idea that "After the Internet" could be expanded to our current moment of "existence through the internet", but again, perhaps another thesis.

⁵ <http://kunstraum.org.uk/dangerous-bodies/>

⁶ <https://www.dukeupress.edu/parables-for-the-virtual>

⁷ <https://shop.whitechapelgallery.org/products/electronic-superhighway>

'The Tao of Pooh and the Te of Piglet'⁸ by Benjamin Hoff. An exceptional book which describes the principles of Taoism demonstrated by Winnie-the-pooh and piglet, which I remind myself of yearly.

⁸ <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9780413691606/Tao-Pooh-Piglet-Hoff-Benjamin-0413691608/plp>