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Other forms of conviviality: The best and least of which is our daily care and the host of which is our collaborative work

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In this collaboratively written essay, artists Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos take a queer materialist feminist approach to the entanglement of dependency and reproductive labor, disability, intimacy, and the impossibility of exchanging incommensurables. The text merges the authors' experiences receiving and providing one another care with their artistic practices, and includes instructive performance scores for past, rather than future, events.

Keywords: disability; performance; care; dependency; labor; collectivity; intimacy; exchange; affect; reproductive labor

I

SCORE FOR BEFORE

Think about the evening during the day.

Text about when and where.

Be there when and where.

Care collective is a group of 10 people who coordinate Park McArthur's nightly care routine. The basic function of care collective is to assist in changing Park's clothes and to lift Park in and out of the shower and into bed. This routine is often accompanied by other convivial activities, such as making dinner, drinking, talking, reading, watching YouTube videos, massaging limbs, drawing, videotaping, and sharing stories. In June 2011, Park and Tina began using letters, text messages, and text-based art to explore ideas of care and intimacy. In November 2011, Park began a routine of brushing Tina's teeth. In April 2012, Park and Tina began writing scores for lifts and transfers. Tina Zavitsanos, along with Amalle Dublon, are care collective Friday night.¹

"XO" is often left at the bottom of what appear to be exchanges: kisses for greeting and parting; signed letters; an end to correspondence; a smoothing over of communication delays and failures; the arrangements of players and antagonisms; a process of score keeping. As an abbreviation, XO may signify intimacy or curtail it. Sometimes the banal routine of this curtailment is itself the location of intimacy – when, for example, "love you" means "this conversation is over."

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Yet convivial forms of correspondence need not constitute exchange. Marx (1976 [1990]) suggested in the first chapters of *Capital* that exchange asserts an impossible equivalence between irreducibly incommensurable terms; exchange violates that incommensurability, while mobilizing it as quantifiable (in)difference. Gestures of intimate inclusion are regularly used to make violence appear as equitable exchange. Given that care work has historically been a site of violence done to both domestic workers and those who depend upon care,² can we find other convivial forms for this labor (care work) that do not depend on exchange? Can these new forms cripple our understanding of labor? What is the capacity of debility in terms of labor power? What are the possibilities of (inter)dependency for the “temporarily abled”?³

What if we refuse the convivial forms of care that deal in contracts of exchange? What if we approach care as an event? How are we to accept and coordinate our mutual and divergent forms of precarity and (physical) risk? Let us acknowledge that such precarity and risk are routine.

Can the banality of care, its constant rehearsals and routine demands on buttons, joints, and coordinated movements, produce and sustain intimacy without becoming fixed? Can the intimate actions and bodily movements of care work coordinate themselves in terms of *the event* – simultaneously static and dynamic?

We – in the midst of care – wonder how needing help with daily activities mandates a physical closeness that complicates the utility of actions and gestures most often associated with intimacy. What might be the consistency of this intimacy if the main caring action of care collective – wrapping arms around each other to lift and transfer bodies – weren’t so reminiscent of a hug? There are many ways to lift and transfer someone, one of which involves leaning forward so that the person lifting can grab around the liftee’s waist, pivoting from surface to surface. Really, how much of this is that we are often cheek-to-cheek in acts of care, head on shoulder? Should reasons for being this close be intimate ones?

II

There is tension in the word “moment” – between *maintenant* (French for “now”) and the Latin *momentum* – that crosses the word itself, that complicates where it comes from, what it *is*, where it *goes*. Moment, from its French and Latin roots, is simultaneously to hold (to hold in the hand) and to maintain (sustain). To hold in motion, now, we prepare to lift, to lift-and-transfer: your arms looped and anchored at my lower back, legs on either side or in between mine. My arms around you, your knees bent. The strain of your body lifting, my body’s strain in keeping myself upright. A moment, *maintiens*, is maintenance and a keeping of one’s demeanor: decorum. One body lifts and moves another body as a definition of now, both spatially and temporally, two bodies with given properties approaching in time.

SCORE FOR LIFT AND TRANSFER

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Work to deliver your bodies safely from platform to platform, surface to surface.

Hold yourself; stand.

Stand and hold yourself while holding someone else.

Learn how the you of your body and me of mine work our mutual instability together.
Learn how the instability of holding while moving is a moment.

Learn that to move is to hold a we.

When we are crossing, dressing, lifting, rounding, it reminds me how rarely I share this kind of coordinated unstable touching, these routine experimentations, with others besides Amalle. What contexts, proximities, and spaces permit the sharing of these simple actions?

SHIRT SCORE

Bow your head forward.

Look at your lap.

If the person doesn't notice your position as a gesture of what you want to do next, say "hey, can we take my shirt off please."

Once you are positioned facing one another, put your head very close to your partner's stomach, placing your hands on your thighs to keep yourself upright.

Feel your stomach tighten as you continue to work to keep yourself stable against the motion and pull of fabric over your head.

Give yourself a challenge; wear a turtleneck.

With the opening of the shirt over your head and resting as a droop at your neck, have your partner pull the bottom of the shirt resting at your shoulder past your left arm.

Your left arm leaves the sleeve.

This helps the right sleeve to pull down, too.

Your right arm is free.

Your shirt is now on your lap.

There are many times with lovers where the takings off and buttonings down are also completely utilitarian, but the enjoyment (the use) of their utility is subordinated to, and aestheticized by, imagined sexual ends (endless sexual means). But with you my desire stays with and explores these acts of (un)coordination themselves. When I lift you, I know it probably does not feel intimate to you. You tell me that lifting is not touching. The open secretion of limbs through sleeves of weights and falls that are really leans, these things shared make me feel close, but I am not sure if it's close to you or just open to you, or just close to the coordination of our bodies. Others who I want to share these coordinated movements with are usually just closed to me, closed to and by an ideology of independence and utility. So often I practice these actions elsewhere. By this I mean I pay attention to how we move ourselves around our proximities – with my lover, with other friends, with strangers, on the subway, in my mind, in front of mirrors, with objects, with objects in front of mirrors, sometimes in front of other people, but usually alone. Sometimes these are partners who I think are open to doing this with me, and sometimes I just have these acts of attention as secrets that open me.

Really I want a focused attention on a present act.

I want a focused attention on a present act too. But it is also really exhausting if I can remember the first days of care collective when attentions were extremely focused: each

carer on not fucking up and lifting me wrong, me on not fucking up and explaining something incorrectly. We attended to each word and description so that the descriptive directives become actions between the two of us, 10 times over with 10 different people. A sustained attention week after week for those early weeks of September that had me so attentive and attended to was very difficult – and very difficult to find intimacy within. It was not intimate, in fact. Each hand placement was asked about, each foot placed properly. Or not, an action just done as an experiment and we were left to figure out how it went later. This was a process of getting to know there *there*. Is knowing necessary for intimacy?

SCORE FROM BEFORE VII

Share your feelings.

Ask someone to share their feelings with you.

Is experimentation about first times? Is intimacy about familiarity? Is it more about what people want? I want it to feel like we had always known each other. I want it to feel like the first time every time.

So funny that I can't talk about it without it sounding like sex. The relaxed enjoyment of being able to do something (taking off clothes) without the what comes after. But is this only about taking clothes off? Is this the same with toweling hair or pulling elastic pants on, or rounding my back? Those are not preparatory actions for sex in the way that taking off clothes is. Yet they ask something of sex. I'm not interested in thinking that utility is less than intimacy. There is such a relief for me in utility that it is another kind of intimacy.

I think about this with Benedicte when we do yoga. When we must round my back from its position of overextension she asks every time "is this okay?" before reaching between my legs to bring my pelvis forward. I think about this touch that has use and is useful in relation to reasons hands are between legs.

SCORE FOR BACKING UP

Think about your first lift with your partner.

Know that your partner has done this one million times more than you and that in twelve point font, a list of names of people that have done these lifts with her is 38 inches long when printed and leaves a 14 inch block of space for all the names that will come after you.

Realize you don't remember the occasion of your first time, despite never having done this before.

Realize that she probably does remember.

Consider this discrepancy.

Know that now feels like the first time precisely because the first time felt like you've done this forever.

Pull the manual wheelchair down the ramp backwards.

The Thursday prior Benedicte asked me to hum into my kidneys and to breathe into them because they were somewhat constrained. I hadn't been drinking enough. She said two sentences I've since put on a paper taped to my wall: "The body speaks to us in

images. Our kidneys carry the sadness of our past lives.” Benedicte placed her open fist on my lower back and lowered her mouth to her fists, blowing into this opening. We both asked my kidneys, my kidneys that really ached from the day before because I held my pee from 9:30am to 8 something at night, to receive our hums. How do you hum backwards? How do artists regulate their pee when performing? And how does this relate to not being granted a bathroom break on the job? Does it?

SCORE FOR CROSSING AN OPEN FIELD

Notice your partner’s lap has been the same shape for some time and ask if she’d like it tight or open.

Wait for her response.

Bend over and pick up her leg from the mid calf.

Place her ankle over her opposite thigh.

Adjust as directed.

III

X & O are two letters that look like they are doing something. In relation to care collective, we are interested in XO as hieroglyph, especially as it pertains to the body: the lifting and crossing or uncrossing of legs, the drawing of kisses or kissing, kidneys, bladders, opens, openings, and armatures of all kinds.

At stake here is the long entanglement of dependency and labor, an antagonism we must confront. But a distinction must be made between the constitutive dependency of the capitalist (as nothing other than the expropriation of labor) and the dependency of everyone, including people needing substantial care.⁴

Sometimes we have imagined care collective in terms of exchange: one act of care for another. But recently, though we go on caring for each other, we question the valorization of exchange as a conceptual framework, because imagining these gestures as exchange may attempt to cancel out the antagonism that our love confronts us with.

Don’t you dare leave me like that again.

Don’t make me offers that tempt, then go away for months at a time.

It’s like waking up alone after a night you began with someone else – no message, no goodbye.

And just to make it perfectly clear, I’m the one still in bed and you’re the one jauntily sipping a cappuccino in your own world of influence, eyeing an incredibly sexy, more brilliant artist by the bar.

You stupid, amorous shit.

Because this is all I can do; you know that, right? You are my one option, and one is not really an option at all, so enjoy that power.

It’s not during the fire alarms and tornado drills that I need you. I can fend for myself, thank you. It’s during the quiet times – during the silence so lonesome I hope for someone to punch me in the ear just to hear the ringing. So please, please, show

me your fists and let's finally settle who is more dependent on whom. If I win, I'm less, and if I lose, I'm less.⁵

SCORE FROM THE MIDDLE III

Don't leave me tired.

Make me try.

We are interested not in the exchange of XOs, but in (X,O) as coordinates, or rather unstable coordination. We approach the event of intimate care as a shared risk of falling and failing.

SCORE FROM BEFORE VI

Look up the floor plan online.

Guess the width of the stairs.

Go to the site; imagine holding the weight of another body as you use the stairs up and down. Express your worry.

Show up together.

Look at everyone looking at you with expectation.

Look back with expectation.

Feel the expectation of embodiment.

Reassure each other.

Accept help from others.

Decide on a piggyback classic with additional butt support.

Look at the stairs' steepness and narrowness.

Look at each other.

Imagine falling together.

Imagine losing footing.

Bend your knees until your hands rest on the ground; stabilize yourself.

Wrap legs around the sides of your body.

Hook elbows and knees.

Lean arms over shoulders, chest on back.

Prepare to stand.

Accept weight.

Accept leaning, working against leaning.

Stand to hold while holding.

Hold onto someone holding you.

Hold on to someone holding onto you.

Take the first step down.

Notes on contributors

Park McArthur is an artist from North Carolina. She attended Davidson College, the University of Miami, and the Whitney Independent Study Program.

Constantina Zavitsanos is an artist living and working in Brooklyn, NY. She is a 2012–13 participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program.

Notes

1. Amalle Dublon also contributed some writing to this piece.
2. People with disabilities who depend upon daily care experience a disproportionately high rate of sexual assault, physical abuse, and neglect. In addition to physical violence, affective claims of intimacy – “but she’s one of the family!” – attempt to conceal and steal the reproductive labor of domestic and direct care workers.
3. In “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability,” Eva Feder Kittay (2011) terms non-disabled people “temporarily abled” in recognition of the fact that dependency is a reality for all bodies. This reality is not meant to de-center disabled people from the particular material struggles and real-world concerns that construct their daily lived experiences.
4. Note that “the dependency of everyone” may be understood in different ways, but we do not mean something like “everyone is disabled” as a way to de-center the uneven distribution of ableism across bodies, identities, and experiences.
5. *Muse MIA* (2009) Park McArthur; 8.5" x 11", type and sharpie on bond paper.

References

- Kittay, Eva Feder. 2011. “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability.” *Ratio Juris* 24 (1): 49–58.
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