

it will not be simple,
it will not be long

it will take little time,
it will take all your thought

it will take all your heart,
it will take all your breath

it will be short,
it will not be simple

Adrienne Rich

I've begun writing this preface so many times, usually with the sentence "at the heart of this project is..." Each time, I've faltered. Unable to find the right word, I've turned the page and started again. And that, I guess, is rewriting—the project's impetus, and one of its hearts. The heart is, after all, a messy place. This project (comprising this book and an exhibition at Bus Projects in August 2021) has several hearts (messy ones); that messiness is part of the character of collaboration.

Triangulating themes—rewriting, politics, and care—the project aims to take the monopolistic way we tell the past and to tell it again, tell it differently. We need to keep rewriting histories: to write the women back in, to refute the direct lies and strategic omissions of colonial narratives, and to cast light on that which has gone unwritten, on those whose labour has been taken for granted. But rewriting is a method as much as a topic—it is a way of being, making, talking, thinking, picturing, and assembling.

As the nominal curator of this exhibition, and editor/publisher of this book, I find myself trying to take on the professionalized role of 'speaking for' the project as a whole, and for those whose works make up its parts. But that is not possible (or desirable), partly because this show has unravelled—or unwritten—my understanding of curatorial work and with it my sense of self as a curator. Since the word 'curate' shares DNA with the word 'care', this seems entirely appropriate. It stands to reason that a complicated understanding of care would complicate the project of curation. In this preface, I can only gather together some of the themes that have stood out to me, as one among many participants. The things that I have to say are not definitive or conclusive, but open-ended and necessarily incomplete. In this introduction, I use 'we', 'them', 'there' and 'here' and yet I cannot tell you exactly 'who'

or ‘where’ I mean: this language is, rather, a gesture towards a potential political community, with all the possibilities and pitfalls of collectives. It remains slippery and ambiguous.

So, without speaking for the artists in the show and the writers, poets and scholars in the book, let me tell you that they span generations and continents, that they are also precarious labourers, teachers, gardeners, scholars, parents, readers, siblings, daughters, friends and more. They speak eloquently for themselves. The works that they have each brought forth for this project complement and complicate one another. Multiple themes interleave and cut across, expanding and enriching my understanding of care and its politics.

Let me also tell you that this project has unfolded in stages, unevenly and organically. It began small, and then expanded, ending up with eight participants in the exhibition. We met several times in the lead-up to tell each other about the works we were including and to reflect on our methods: the fruit of these conversations have been gathered together (see p. 24). The politics of assembly is necessarily agonistic; an organic series of relationships (some with long histories and others freshly forged) has spawned a “collaboration with friction at its heart” (to borrow Anna Tsing’s phrase).¹

When Covid-19 hit, the exhibition was postponed. And yet the circumstances that postponed it also highlighted its urgency as a topic: this time of global physical vulnerability and economic uncertainty showed the stark realities of inequality, the extent to which care is needed, and who bears its costs. In the interval that the pandemic imposed, we reimagined the exhibition in the form of this book.

The book also includes an excerpt of a scholarly essay by Helena Cleeve, ‘Marking Boundaries,’ which deals with elder care in the institutional space of a dementia unit, and while it predates the project, it models some of the interdisciplinarity and indeed tenderness that this project hopes to cultivate. As a piece of writing, it exceeds the frame of academia; the sketches that Cleeve intersperses with her writing are in themselves an act of care.

As Adrienne Rich tells us, “[w]e need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.”²

...

At the heart of this project is ...

At the heart of this project is a tension between care as nurture—invisible forms of love that we must make visible, for they are life-sustaining labours—and the more problematic potential of care as a form of control and coercion. The project’s critical intervention is at the intersection of cadences of care. The invisible labours of filial and domestic life overlap with legacies of colonisation; practices of grief and mourning intersect with those of family, and of ‘home’, broadly conceived. There are mothers and grandmothers here, whose domestic and emotional labour continues, even now, to be elided. They aren’t all biological mothers, many are what Dana Ward calls “the many-

gendered mothers of my heart.”³ There is a network of informal carers here. There are administrators, real estate agents and municipal officials here. This opens onto the complex reality that care is not always as benevolent as it may appear; there is violence, even here. There are biopolitical regimes—enacted by federal, state and local authorities—here. These categories are not entirely separable.

At the heart of this project is labour

Hands feature in many of these works: re-enacting forms of violence disguised as care and custodianship of objects; hovering above children; knitting through bouts of sleep and wakefulness; clasped in prayer, and reaching out to interlocutors. There are implicit hands, too—the hands of generations packing up their homes, the hands of Indigenous women harvesting murnong, and of colonisers carrying smallpox-infected blankets to kill them. There are hands that place small headstones marking the graves of bodies found in the desert, and which close and lock the gate to the cemetery. Rewriting is an iterative gesture that takes the script of the past into one’s own hands, if only to pass it on.

At the heart of this project is domesticity

The question of home runs through this project in various forms. In a literal way, the domestic appears populated by walkers and crutches; family photos from long ago, screenshots of real estate listings, and objects from the home. Spanning continents, many participants in this project have moved and continue trying to find a home (and in a way, this book is designed with that experience in mind: its cardboard cover recalls a box containing a library.) There is domesticity in the contract of sale and the act of ‘settling down’ which, in the Australian vernacular, carries unwitting echoes of the settler-colonial regime that makes property-

owning, home-ownership and certain forms of domestic life possible in Australia. Domestic politics is mobilized by border regimes that leave people who try to cross them to die out in the open. This kind of domesticity is a colonial technology that, having displaced people from their land, maintains infrastructures of dispossession and smuggles the proceeds of that displacement into its own domestic spheres.

At the heart of this project is responsibility

What do we owe to one another? And what, by the same token, do we take from one another? Responsibility is politically charged and also quotidian. We find ourselves in positions of filial responsibility—as parents, siblings, children, grandchildren, we are inevitably asked to take care of someone. Often, this means informal carers stepping in where the welfare state has fallen short (especially in cases of aged care and mental health). At the same time, we are all inevitably in positions of social and political responsibility—as citizens and social beings, we have to recognise the ways in which we are responsible to those we do not know, have not come face to face with, and cannot name. Rebecca Schneider tells us that “it is in the future that our pasts await us: awaiting our response, awaiting our revisions, or even awaiting our refusal—waiting for the rebound or the redress.”⁴

At the heart of this project is grief

Grief for the dead whose names we cannot know, for ancestors killed and stories untold, for the dislocations of cultural and ecological epistemes, for the dispossession of people from their land, and for the land itself, ravaged by salination and agricultural mismanagement. There are shredded funerary flowers, the material remnants of lives that have passed on, headstones, fences, empty rooms, blankets that took rather than sustained life.

Grief takes many forms, but it can hold open a space.
We hope that this is what this project can do, too.

- 1 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, 2004. 246-7
- 2 Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' *College English*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1972. 270
- 3 Dana Ward, 'A Kentucky of Mothers', *Pen America*, <https://pen.org/a-kentucky-of-mothers/>
Published 2014, accessed 9 June 2021
- 4 Rebecca Schneider, Lucia Ruprecht, 'In Our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Response-ability.
Rebecca Schneider in conversation with Lucia Ruprecht', *Performance Philosophy*, 3(1), 2017. 286