



CRAFT, RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, AND ETHICS OF CARE

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Belinda MacGill is a lecturer, artist and researcher at University of South Australia. Her theoretical work is informed by Indigenous knowledges (Rigney, 2001; Tuhiwai Smith 2012), Giroux's border pedagogy (2003), and place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). She has published in a broad range of articles concerned with postcolonial receptivity, teaching in the contact zone, critical pedagogy and feminist art theory.

Abstract: A conceptual framework for *looking* and *listening* operates within aesthetic and affective moments when crafting objects. Assembling and modifying Sea Balls into arranged composition is my craft process that I use to access a state of mind play. Each found and modified object represents a key theoretical framework that I connect and re-organize in relation to each other to produce new ways of perceiving. Considerations of Massumi, Fish and Jameson's (2002) notion of perception and how I experience affect through embodiment in the moment of re-crafting and re-assembling items is central to the practice. Emergent ideas occur through re-crafting found objects in conjunction with broader considerations of relational aesthetics.

Keywords: craft; relational aesthetics; ethics of care

Crafting is a powerful political weapon that resists neoliberal manifestations of *being* in this world. Creating craft through embodied relational aesthetics disrupts the economic drive to impose *purpose*. That is, our expected purpose to be productive citizens of the State. This paper addresses three key narratives that were shaped by a collective journey and meditations on assembling craft from found objects. The first section outlines how relational aesthetics informs “connectivity” (Weir, 2008), others and non-atomistic objects. Ahmed’s (2003) notion of accumulation is navigated in parallel with craft and ethics of care. This is followed by unpicking the dearth of literature on ethics of care within western philosophy and exploring how craft-making as embodied knowledge is generated within the cycle of ethics of care. Finally, craft as a political enactment that includes ethical considerations of subjectivity in neoliberal times is hewed.

Meditation 1: Craft Practice

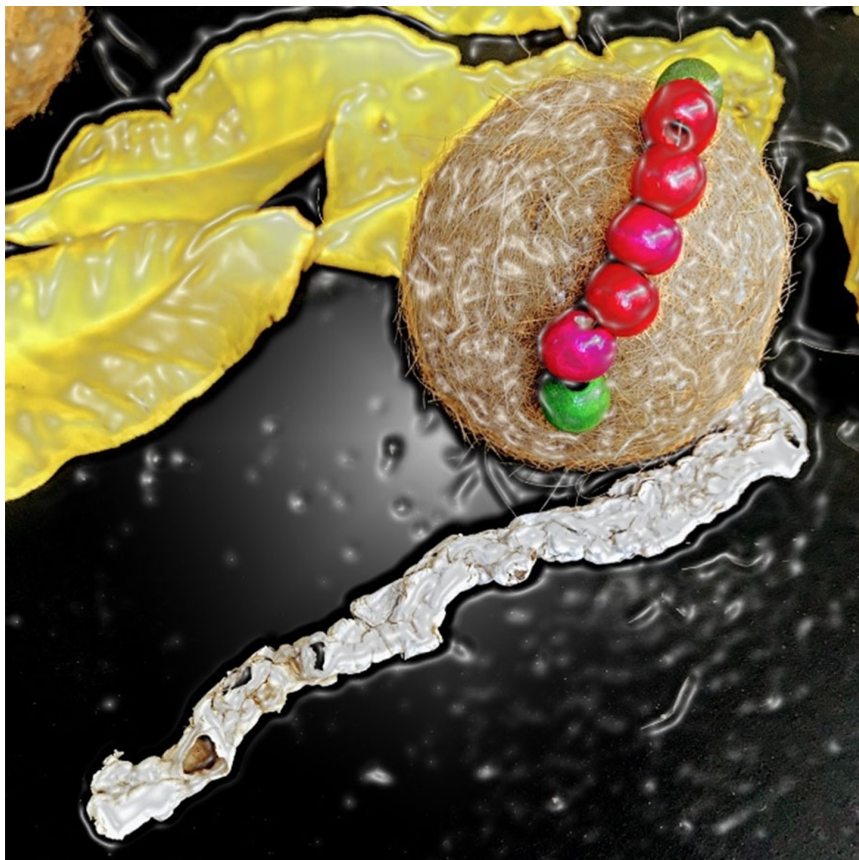


Figure 1. Craft Act 1: Modified Sea Ball

My practice in craft involves modifying Sea Balls found on the beaches in the intertidal zones in South Australia. Also known as *Ruppia*, these tightly woven fibrous balls populate the beaches after being shaped by the tides. These filamentous seagrass balls accumulate feathers, sand, fishing lines and shells and therefore always become an assemblage of divergent elements.

The practice of finding and re-crafting Sea Balls is not efficient, has no economic value, but is created with others and within a framework of community that routinely includes friends, children, birds and dogs. The process of collecting Sea Balls begins with a quiet listening and meditation that invites a connection with the space in which we walk on the shores. Asking which Sea Balls can be taken from the intertidal zones includes an attunement to hearing the spaces we occupy. In this context I am in a “soft state” whilst feeling sand crunch under my feet and viewing the array of Sea gifts presented to me in my path. Deep listening is an enactment of care. It is an embodied listening that allows space and time for the sea to offer a gift and includes gratitude *to* the gift as an enactment of reciprocity.

I am attuned to the practice of listening to the gifts offered by the sea that has developed from growing up by the Sea on the North side of Kangaroo Island, South Australia. It is a practice of verisimilitude deeply personal to one’s own life journey. I grew up in this way as a result of remoteness that was made fulfilling through the practice of listening and attunement and connecting this practice to the internal narratives that occupy my daily life. Choosing the Sea Balls and the infinite array of materials is the moment of hearing with clarity in the same way one connects to another person: I like you/;-I connect to you/;-I feel you. This is the enactment of reciprocity that works both ways between the gifting of sea material and the purchasing of the material that I take with gratitude to turn into a craft object.

The modification of the Sea Balls becomes relational between the human subject and the found object, but the meditation focuses on the responsibility of dependent non-human actors within an arrangement of care and reciprocity: that is caring for the planet as inter-related actors (Rose, 1999).

Meditation 2: Assemblage

The meditation on re-assembling involves placing the modified Sea Balls and found objects in a relational composition as in Figure 2 below. The material objects are weaved together to signify interconnectivity. This collection of heavily matted fibrous material rolled into tight balls is metaphoric of the possibilities of exquisite sensitive relationality. Mapping

these into a composition and weaving through and into each other draws on weaved networks of ideas around intersectionality.



Figure 2. Craft Act 2: Assembled Sea Balls

Relationships between non-human and human actors enhances the interstitial nature of care. Sea Balls move within the interstitial tidal zones of the sea and land. This metaphor of movement and space enhances the language of the ephemeral in art. In much the same way as I have been shaped by my learning working with Ngarrindjeri Elders on the Coorong, Murray and Lower Lakes area and across the sea to Kangaroo Island in South Australia where Ngurrunderi, the Dreaming Ancestor/Creator left the earth to become a star. This learning is experienced through working with and alongside weavers and Ngarrindjeri political actors who generously teach Ngarrindjeri sovereignty through deep knowledge and the enactment of a land ethic of care. As Elder Tom Trevorrow stated:

The waters and the seas, the waters of the Kurangh (Coorong), the waters of the rivers and lakes are all spiritual waters...

The land and waters is a living body...

We the Ngarrindjeri people are a part of its existence...

The land and waters must be healthy for the Ngarrindjeri people to be healthy...

We say that if Yarluwar-Ruwe dies, the water dies, our Ngartjis die, the Ngarrindjeri will surely die. (Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarluwar-Ruwe Plan, 2006, p. 5)

Not belonging as sovereign does not annul my responsibility to ethically engage with the land with sensitivity and to fight for the protection of lands and waters alongside Ngarrindjeri people. Working towards sensitivity of listening to the land is part of the Ngarrindjeri political and pedagogical practice, and as a learner I continue my journey as a listener and a seeker of connectivity. A land ethic of care where “connectivity” (Weir 2008) is centralized within Ngarrindjeri positions on Ruwe/Ruwar (land, body, spirit) and is:

Entwined with belonging to the land [and] in this way includes the ethical obligation to be morally responsible for Caring for Country. Just as the starting point for any ethics of care is the relational subject between mother and child (Held, 2006), so is Ngarrindjeri relationality inherent in Ruwe/Ruwar. Shifting from an individualist perspective to a position of inter-relationship between the landscape and the human collective allows for an alternative moral philosophy and a caring perspective that includes a land/water ethics of care. This includes the responsibilities involved in caring for lands and waters as an expression of belonging. Arguably, it is only over time that human actors are shaped by the lands and waters which provide the insight into how to care for the needs of the lands and waters. It is this Ngarrindjeri knowledge, developed over 40,000 years, that is being used to respond to the Murray River environmental crisis. (MacGill, 2014, p.149)

My practice involves gathering, collecting and crafting found objects on Ngarrindjeri Country. My craft practice does not imitate the weaved vessel designed by Ngarrindjeri weavers, nor does it hold the deep knowledge acquired over time regarding what, where and how sedge grass can be harvested, but it does involve deep listening. The purpose of this practice also differs from weaving as its focus is on re-assembly as an enactment of relational aesthetics and a political railing against the economies of time directing our daily lives.

It is at this intersection that I marry my dis/comfortable heritage occupying a settler’s body with deep respect for Ngarrindjeri sovereignty. I walk in the stories of colonization in melancholic silence and traverse the deep ruptures that only the earth can heal and in so doing the Sea craft Balls act as a way to sew myself back into a place of relationality where the assemblages work metaphorically; signifying the possibilities of postcolonialism. As Bignall outlines (2010, p. 125), attempts at universality are marred by hegemonic normalization, in contrast, I sit in discomfort and create works that are assembled as an

enactment of a hopeful future that is facilitated by hearing the nuances of the inter-tidal zones of difference.

Epistemologies of Care through Craft

Offering dis/comfort as an alternate set of logics is of course resisted by western philosophical underpinnings that locate the self in the centre of the universe. Indigenous and feminist epistemologies in mainstream academic discourse continue, in various formations, but the force of these epistemes has not shifted the destructive pursuit of masculinized, individualized and universalized subjectivity. The impenetrable concrete landscape of neoliberalism offers no generative invitation for collective learning and positive change but instead offers “post-truth” realities that are sold as hope (Burdick, 2018).

The post-truth constructions circulate and acquire accumulation and significance in an ever-increasingly cracked world. The notion of accumulation is driven by epistemological framings that have “accumulated over time” (Ahmed 2003), such as singular subjectivity that has manifested into representations of the “Selfie.” This version of subjectivity has accumulated over the tendrils of time and informs one’s meaning in the world that distracts from the work of ethics of care and the practice of craft as an enactment of care.

Craft, historically, was a female occupation to fill time for women from all races, classes and backgrounds. Craft was performed in groups or alone, but it involved making something, pinning something, constructing something for the purposes of aesthetics. It was the embodiment of aesthetic relationality. Craft does not reside in the body, but it moves between the maker and the object being made. It is accumulative and is assembled. In the same way as warbling narratives occur during the working progress with my children or close friends willing to co-create with me, there are stories within stories that have gained their own accumulation and weight within our lived realities. These stories shape our subjectivities that resist being silent in the world.

Craft was for the woman whose body was designated to be “modest” (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2012). The subjective bodily presence – the body in space, is to be made silent not like “the objective modest male mind” (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2012). Whilst both have accumulated they have not accumulated evenly. As Haraway and Randolph question:

How did the masculine practice of modesty, by appropriately civil (gentle)men, enhance agency, epistemologically and socially, while modesty enforced on (or embraced by) women of the same social class simply removed them from the scene of action? How did some men become transparent, self-invisible, legitimate

witnessing to matters of fact, while most men and all women were made simply invisible, removed from the scene of action, either below stage working the bellows that evacuated the pump or offstage entirely? Women lost their security clearances very early in the stories of leading-edge science. (1997, p. 29)

Being made absent or invisible in sites of significance, such as science labs, is symbolic of the general mechanisms that retain the misrecognition and distortion of women in current culture (Lazzeri, 2009). Anchoring this narrative in craft highlights practices of omission notably found through the absence of ethics of care in relation to accumulation (Ahmed, 2003). Active listening (or dialoguing) (Warburton, 2004, p. 93) informs relationality and builds new knowledge through understanding. It is a sense of completeness that is not dependent on the modest witness, but instead is dialogic. We become anew through our collective actions, by making, doing and co-creating in craft. This epistemology is informed by deep-listening where we become “more sensitively attuned to the need for new ways of thinking and reasoning with others, ways that must themselves be newly cultivated” (Kompridis, 2013, p. 21).

Deep-listening that leads to the embodiment of new knowledge provides possibilities for transformed lives, but theft of knowledge systems re-located out of context runs slipstream with capitalist consumption of “accumulation” of knowledges (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2012). The practice of re-locating feminist and Indigenous knowledges that are reapplied to neoliberal agendas is a case in point. Stolen knowledge like stolen land can be made visible through diffraction.

Meditation 3: Diffraction

You become part of the diffracted slit when you enter into an **encounter**
Patterns emerge and are bound to the processes **that inform the networks**

Things become **materialized**

Craft is **political** through its unseen materialization

There are always Conditions of possibility

Meeting the universe halfway

Look at the cutThe Diffracted slit

Then co-emergence

What we see-Like our patterns

Reading through together what **newness** emerges



Figure 3. Craft Diffraction-1

Craftwork is raced, gendered and classed. The spaces of knitting, embroidery, felting, quilting and other aesthetic pursuits were relegated to women's work but were assigned differently for different purposes. Craft has not acquired "accumulation" in Ahmed's (2003) terms. It remains in the field of affect, between bodies within communities, but has not accumulated affective value in the world. Ahmed outlines the accumulation of affective value over time and a theory of passion:

What I am offering is a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate (whether it be value, power, or meaning), but as that which is accumulated over time. Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to "contain" affect. (Ahmed 2003, p. 120)

Craft has little affective value within neoliberal times. The practice has not generated affective value in general, but has within its own domains of practice, such as knitting groups or weaving practices. The enactment of craft disrupts the patterns of neoliberalism as its focus is not financially economic, but has an emotional economy. When creating craft there is a re-valuing of the energy

spent making things that are not made for economic purpose (Springer, 2012), it thereby becomes its own act of politicization as we are not all creating things for economic purposes.

Luminescent Hyper-Realism (Unthreaded Thought)

The affective value of continental philosophy informing psychoanalysis, ontology and epistemology is a set of logics about subjectivity that places the collective into the negative space (as in a painting). This collective is what constitutes humanity but is trumped or foregrounded by individualism. These are my internal dialogues whilst crafting, but are drawn from curious readings operating as a cognizant textual relationship. Simultaneously, the hands mediate the craft practice as Sea Balls have their own temperament: fibrous material float to my working surface as I weave, thread and pin. The thought re-weaves upon itself: Individualism, atomism, hegemonic, gendered, universalist assumptions are normalized through western social and economic systems mobilized in everyday life. Conversely, collective identities formed within the field of craft is dearth within academic literature. Similarly, ethics of care gains limited traction in terms of “accumulative value” in academic theory. Both craft and care do not serve an economic value nor accumulative value.

Craft circulates and is reborn in various movements over time, but remains without value within the economies of knowledge production. Coupling ethics of care with craft as a philosophy is an enactment of crafting aesthetics and love. This set of logics offers a different narrative from masculinized epistemologies where truth is constructed out of the self, rather than within dialogic meaning making practices through “yamin”¹ whilst assembling. These dialogic meaning-making processes enabled through “yamin” are old, new and imagined, collated into the fabric of my world-view. Sharing “yamin” is both done when making Sea Balls and in everyday life. We choose how we live in the world through our “yamin,” which operates as a form of counter-engagement that expresses the way in which we see ourselves. It is our return to key “yarns” that shape us most significantly as it is these that made us strong, tough, survivors, endurers, lovers, carers and activists.

The desire to remain in-tune to the practice whilst re-assembling Sea Balls, whilst sewing luminescent yellow leaves into patterns on an oval densely matted, offers an approach to life and a way of making sense of the world. It is the intersectionality of the assemblage that is reflective of reciprocity with my daughters, lover and friends. Assemblage, in this way, signifies my ethics of care bound by deep listening. The signs that generate affective value circulate between crafters, shared by enthusiasts over their craft form. “Emotion as an economy” (Ahmed, 2003) still exists, but only contains value within these circles.

The literature on ethics of care, the fabric of emotional economies, is un-coupled from masculine western philosophical tenets and instead retains a set of logics that informs belonging. The circulation

of atomistic subjectivity remains within the economies of emotions, but is weak in presence. Relational aesthetics co-merges reciprocity as a set of practices; it relies on interconnections and assemblages. This is most clearly articulated by Ettinger and Massumi:

Difference from a feminine angle diffracts; it is a difference based on webbing of links and not on essence . . . Differentiation and difference in co-emergence are attuned in metamorphoses that create – and that are created with-in – relation-without-relating in permutations of distance-in-proximity along borderlinks, transiting between presence and loss, subject and object, the foreigner and myself. The feminine participates in the information of the subject via transformation-by-transgression toward others differentiated-injointness. The matrix is a dynamic borderspace of active/passive coemergence, with-in and with-out the uncognized other, that inscribes joint existential ontogenesis, a becoming-memory in relation to the feminine-Other desire. We may describe the matrixial borderspace after Francisco Varela's utopoiesis, as a space of co-poiesis. (2006, p. 110)

Craft brings us into being through enactments of co-construction, making, being and belonging: it is a practice of "injointness." Grounding practice in relational aesthetics is arguably as "a genre of activism that is small in scale and limited in impact but nevertheless can show the way toward a more democratic political community" (Chou & Bleiker, 2013, p. 232). My craftwork is political and an enactment of an ethics of care without economic purpose.

Coupling a feminist reading of craft with Ahmed's (2003) notion of accumulation emerges as a set of logics that is not bound by economic value and purpose. Centralizing the community and a dialogic model of craft shifts binaries of the subject/object into a relational aesthetics bound by an expanded notion of ethics of care. This ethics of care moves beyond the human and includes a relationship to listening for the gifts from the sea.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Yarnin is an Indigenous term used in relation to storytelling.