

Provocation x Care

By Keith Hennessy, Yelamu/San Francisco, 2020-21...

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Preface #1

Here is a brief introduction to the psycho-emotional-somatic conditions that influenced this writing:

Covid: go outside

California Fires: stay inside

BLM Uprising: you might get shot, who might get shot?, go outside, stay inside

Elections: the great disillusionment

Theaters: closed indefinitely

Billionaires: more than ever

Mental health: worse than ever

Vaccines: the new fascism. (Note: the biggest killer of US cops today is macho stupidity, I mean Covid, I mean liberals getting Pfizer shots.)

The therapists are overworking on Zoom. The body workers are unemployed. The dancers are watching Netflix. Doctors are offering no contact video visits. Sex hook-ups, the same. The stress is high. Uncertainty rules. Capitalism is the virus. Police are the vectors. Precarity is the symptom. Amazon, PornHub, food delivery, clickbait news, and shitty social media call outs rule the attention economy. All the cash is offshore. And the kids are doing ketamine, or mushrooms, or both, while drinking hard seltzer, floating on gummies. Self medicating is not addiction when the pain is real and the jobs are not.

This is a hard moment to care. There is so much need to support each other and to have solidarity for people suffering the structural inequalities that the coronavirus intensifies.

Preface #2

It's queer 2021, what's up with the false binary, provocation x care?

I'm proposing this binary not as a fixed structure but as a way to open a space, more swampy borderlands than wall or line in the sand (Anzaldúa), a place to think and feel while reconsidering creative practices and conceptual habits, to observe and understand both overt and implicit antagonisms that shape our identities, our healing and creative practices/tactics, and to nurture new modes and potentials for solidarity and collaboration across lines of difference and asymmetrical power... Aspirational, I know. And maybe this binary proposal is already a failure because of the way it invokes polarity and division, debate and contest, siding more with modernist provocation than with decolonial care... and is ambivalence a way to inhabit this imaginal swamp?

Provocation x Care

“Our only hope for our collective liberation is a politics of deep solidarity rooted in love.”
Michelle Alexander

I care.

Do you care?

Of course you care.

Everyone cares!

But the ways we care are different and cause tension and conflict. That makes you think I don't care. What we name care and caring is not the same. Can we care about conflict? Can we care about the gaps and distance between our understandings of care?

I came into art and activism inspired by anarchism and punk, by taboo-destroying feminist and body-based art, by socially disruptive and AIDS-informed gay and queer performance, and by the left-field of Modernism's avant garde where provocation, asymmetry, feminism, pelvises, elbows, queerness, antiracism, anti-imperialism, political satire, destabilization, institutional critique, camp, and disciplinary disobedience were prioritized. Simultaneously I studied and practiced the somatic, healing, therapeutic, and ritual practices that have developed in parallel trajectories to these arts of bourgeois provocation.

In my teaching I started to name this generative tension as Provocation x Care. Many of the conflicts I experience in contemporary art, dance, and activist contexts are situated in this tension. There is less and less space and justification for provocative art. The value of avoiding triggering the traumas of the most vulnerable has increased while the value of disturbing the audience's complacency has decreased. This value shift is caused in part by activist turns in art worlds and increased participation and leadership by non white and non hetero artists, and especially artists with disabilities, mental health concerns, or who are survivors of abuse and violence. The shift includes a reconsideration of the public's participation in art from audience to community. One might confront an audience and yet care for a community. I have been a part of this re-valuation, but I'm ambivalent. I still want to yell and break things. And I still want to defend the artistic-activist-therapeutic practices that involve yelling and breaking. But I no longer assume that these practices are welcome or beneficial for all people, or in all contexts.

There are many practices and insights from progressive social movements that support the move towards care, towards an aesthetics of care, and an analysis of the politics of care. The more that our political analysis is informed by trauma and trauma healing, the more that care is recognized as radical activism and necessary art practice. Yes Audre Lorde, and Black feminism, and indigenous ceremonial uprising, and and and... thank you.

In recent years the politics and aesthetics of care have activated many contemporary artists, curators, exhibits, festivals, and more. Since Covid this attention to care in art contexts has only increased. And here we are at ONCA, in Brighton, Making Care. What changes when funders, galleries, and theaters prioritize the creative voices of those who are most vulnerable to

violence, or the artist-survivors who carry unresolved and debilitating trauma? In our need to create contexts for healing, care, accountability, and protection from harm, can anyone defend artistic provocation?

When to provoke? When to heal? When is healing provocative? When is provocation healing? When is provocation inappropriate or harmful? What is the difference between healing as radical care and healing as privileged escape?

Many of us – anarchists, queers, feminists, punks, activists, immigrants, contemporary artists - were taught or inspired to prioritise disruption and critique. Challenging the bourgeois (white) audience was a valued tactic from dada to punk to queer to hip hop. Feminist and AIDS bodies leaking fluids and texts. Black artists re-appropriating and rejecting racist and colonial tropes. Jazz and noise artists dismantling or reordering harmony. Acts of illegibility and nonsense and the impossible. Resistance, breaking, and questioning became foundational artistic practices to those of us who inherited modernist, Black, and activist art histories. What happens when we shift our practice to respond to political anxiety and multi-generational trauma? Who experiences the provocation/noise/shock/unsettling as triggering or harmful? Is the artist shocking an alienated audience or sharing practices in community? Of course questioning is not the opposite of listening and provocation is not the furthest practice from care. And community is not without its dangers.

It's easy to read this as a white and male (supremacist) lineage especially when we look at the masculinist roots of dada and futurism but also of punk and noise. But there are many white feminists and queers (Karen Finley, Tribe 8, Ron Athey, Marko B, Florentina Holzinger, Ann Liv Young, Lydia Lunch, Peaches, Mary Wigman, Robert Mapplethorpe, Michael Clark...) whose performance and body art has intentionally been disruptive or even shocking, aiming to unsettle the structural norms that govern dominant Western and colonial society, and all the ways that it produces and consolidates power by exploiting bodily and cultural differences.

It is trickier to talk about this in relation to Black and other non-white artists and by trickier I mean potentially problematic, more likely to trigger harm by projecting white conceptual frames and histories, and definitely demanding more nuance, especially for a white commenter or critic, which is what I am, white. You knew that already. But then it's even more important to recognize the shock tactics and unsettling practices innovated by artists who identify as or are racially marked as Black and BIPOC, rather than trying to fit or frame these artists-curators-theorists of color into white histories and ideas. And by BIPOC, I mean Black, indigenous, people of color, who also might identify as global majority, BAME, immigrant, ethnic minority, Native, indigenous, undocumented and refugee. The asymmetry, edges, angles, ruptures, and difference that marked Modernism's unsettling aesthetics have deep roots and many influences in Black, indigenous, racialized, and colonized cultures; communities that are marginalized and oppressed by white and settler colonialism and the legacies and ongoing practices of slavery, plantation, police, prison, and permanent war. As a way to point to legendary movements and rich cultural lineages I offer this small sample of Black artists whose work disturbed, unsettled, fought back, or didn't smile and dance on demand: Ornette Coleman, Kara Walker, DEATH,

Poly Styrene, Bad Brains, Mykki Blanco, Betye Saar, Okwui Okpokwasili, David Hammons, Adrián Piper, Elizabeth Tambwe, most free jazz, Nora Chipaumire, Mamele Nyamza, Vaginal Davis, and Jamila Johnson-Small.

The provocation x care tension is very visible in Black arts, especially when the work centers Black or BIPOC audiences, and the work prioritizes community, ancestors, belonging, healing, holding, caring, creating and protecting safer autonomous spaces where racialized harm is minimized or countered. Here, as intended, the binary of provocation x care expands/explodes to reveal intersections, borderlands, ambivalence, contagion, collaboration.

I spent decades in and around the social and artistic contexts of Contact Improvisation where post-hippy flow and liberal universalism are dominant ideas; where whiteness and hetero norms reproduced themselves as easily as a gentle roll across the floor and a shared vegan meal. Disidentifying with these normative defaults I continue to negotiate the tensions between my punk, feminist/queer, and anti-art practices with the healing, somatic, and care practices that took root in these communities. These care practices include BMC (body mind centering), NVC (nonviolent communication), trauma-informed therapies, and aspirational safe spaces where a discourse of privilege and microaggressions aims to refine our sensitivity to harm and power. But the spaces that these practices produce often do not understand or totally reject art that mobilizes aggression, anger, noise, images of violence/harm, triggers or reminders of abuse, and intentionally provocative deconstructions of blackface, oppressive representations, or politically incorrect humor. The territory of political correctness, what is considered appropriate to say or do within an increasingly polarized political situation, has greatly expanded. And that expansion has generated an extraordinary backlash, not only from the right, but also within progressive, radical, Black, BIPOC, academic, art, anti capitalist/left scenes and a more mass or general population.

The wall drawing that accompanies this writing proposes a map of signs and fragments, words that vacillate between provocation and care, salvo and salve, traces from years of conversation and debate, studio practice and training... and uncountable disruptive, caring, collaborative, improvised, live art performances.

I'm trying to work it out, with you, what to do, how to care. I invite you to wrestle, to push and pull, to fill in gaps and draw connections. To a non-binary world I offer binaries and polarities, fake opposites and straw men. Hanging out in the tensions and gaps between provocation and care is an invitation to get complicated together.

Post-script:

From 2011-18, I worked with an extraordinary team of artists on Turbulence (a dance about the economy). At every performance we recited this quote by Peggy Phelan.

“Love, despite its toxicity and violence, can bring us closer to the possibilities of expressing human tenderness. If one is ambitious enough to want to create a shared history, then one must be willing to risk an impossible dance, one that pivots on a desire to outmuscle exhaustion, a

desire alive to our wavering capacities to bestow and receive responses, and an apparently insatiable desire to question these capacities and what motivates or blocks them, repeatedly.”

Thanks

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