International Journal of Education & the Arts

Special Issue: Art for the Sake of Care

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http://www.ijea.org/ ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 25 Special Issue 1.21 September 27, 2024

Taking Care: A Handheld Practice of Listening

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Citation: Buller, R. Epp (2024). Taking Care: A handheld practice of listening. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, *25*(si1.21). http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25si1.21

Abstract

We live in a world of converging crises--COVID, climate, and war--and we desperately need to "take care" and "repair" our world if we hope to "live in it as well as possible" (Tronto and Fisher, 1990). I propose that an important place to start is by listening, specifically by facilitating and enacting relational listening through artistic practice. I offer my participatory project *Taking Care* (2018-present) as a case study through which to consider listening as an orientation, a reciprocal gesture that invites being in relationship. In *Taking Care,* participants write stories about a time in which they felt cared for. In exchange, I listen to the stories by embroidering selected passages onto fabric in public performances, making visible these often unseen labors of care. This piece contextualizes *Taking Care* within histories of feminist listening, the Slow movement, and intergenerational, matrilineal sharing of artistic knowledge.

> *"Two angelic wrinkled faces appeared, smiling, and beckoned me in. I didn't need to understand anything they said to know that I was welcome."*
>
> *"He still made time to meet me in my imagination."*
>
> *"She always cut the toast on the diagonal."*
>
> *"I snatched the note and prepared for the worst. To my surprise, the note read: Front left tire looks a bit low."*

Taking Care (2018-) is an artistic project of listening in which I invite participants to write down a story about a time in which they felt cared for: not when they *offered* care, but when they *received* care.[1] For those who choose to participate, I listen to their stories. I listen by reading their words, and I continue listening by staging public performances within the gallery space, in which I spend hours and days embroidering selected passages for display. The work is long and physically taxing, as care work often is, and it becomes emotionally draining as well as I endeavor to sustain focus on the gestures large and small that impact us so memorably. The physical and emotional toll seems to me an appropriate parallel for making visible these often unseen labors of care—a reciprocal gesture. And whether or not I have met the writer, the durational process of stitching their words causes me to listen attentively and imagine their stories as I embroider. I mimic their handwriting with my stitches. I notice how they angle their script, how they form their letters and words. The material process allows me to enact a bodily listening, a listening with and through my hands that, for a time, attunes me to the often-anonymous participant.

[1] *Taking Care* debuted at Flutgraben artist space in Berlin in 2018. Since then, I have performed the piece episodically, in museums, galleries, and artist spaces in Rotterdam (2018), London (2019), and several cities in the United States (2020-23).

Figure 1. Rachel Epp Buller, detail of *Taking Care,* 2018- .
Performance of listening through embroidery.

Taking Care is part of a larger research project in which I propose that listening is not just an action but an orientation, a way of being in the world, and a reciprocal gesture that invites relationality. Inhabiting a listening orientation entails using all of our senses to pay attention: this means we listen not just with our ears but with the whole body as a means to forge relational connections. My research, carried out through a series of artistic inquiries, explores how specific artistic practices and gestures might enact and facilitate relational listening. *Taking Care* is one such inquiry, an extended case study in what I term "handheld listening." By tapping into forms of knowledge that are taught, learned, and shared between bodily actions and, often, in community, in *Taking Care* I explore how the movements of our hands facilitate listening in relationship.

In order to consider how *Taking Care* is a form of listening, I should say what, precisely, I mean by listening. As a trained practitioner in Deep Listening, I am thinking particularly with Pauline Oliveros, a musician, composer, and educator who wanted to find ways to make music, the act of sounding, accessible even to those who identify as non-musicians. Oliveros differentiated listening from hearing by explaining that, "To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically."[2] Listening is to give attention, to pay attention, to someone or something. Listening, per Oliveros, is both an acoustic—sound-related—and a psychological form of perception, meaning that there is more to listening than sound. Attentive listening incorporates not just hearing but sensing, feeling, perceiving—a social and emotional awareness that, in its best form, enables understanding. And this expansive idea of listening means that we listen not just with our ears but with our whole bodies. As part of her pedagogy, Oliveros developed Sonic Meditations and Deep Listening instructional scores that make clear her understanding of our listening capacities. In "Follow Yourself" (1979), she instructs us to: "Listen to everything. / Notice everything. / Get a body sense of everything. / Play a tone or make a sound and/or movement. / Repeat this cycle indefinitely."[3] In other scores, she incorporates movement as an activation of bodily listening, prompting us to "walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears" or to listen by moving as slowly as possible, the challenge being that no matter how slowly we walk, we could always move more slowly. These are exercises in bodily attunement—walking, feeling, sensing, perceiving, attuning to, or becoming *in tune with,* ourselves and our surroundings.[4] This is the embodied listening I seek to enact in *Taking Care:* a sensorial understanding, listening with my hands and my gestures;

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[2] Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Sound Composer's Practice* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2005), xxii.

[3] Oliveros, *Anthology of Text Scores* (Kingston, NY: Deep Listening Publications, 2013), p. 54.

[4] Oliveros, *Deep Listening,* p. 20.

and a listening by perceiving, what Oliveros deems a psychological perception, perceiving both the meaning of the words that participants write, as well as what is implied but unwritten—listening between the lines.

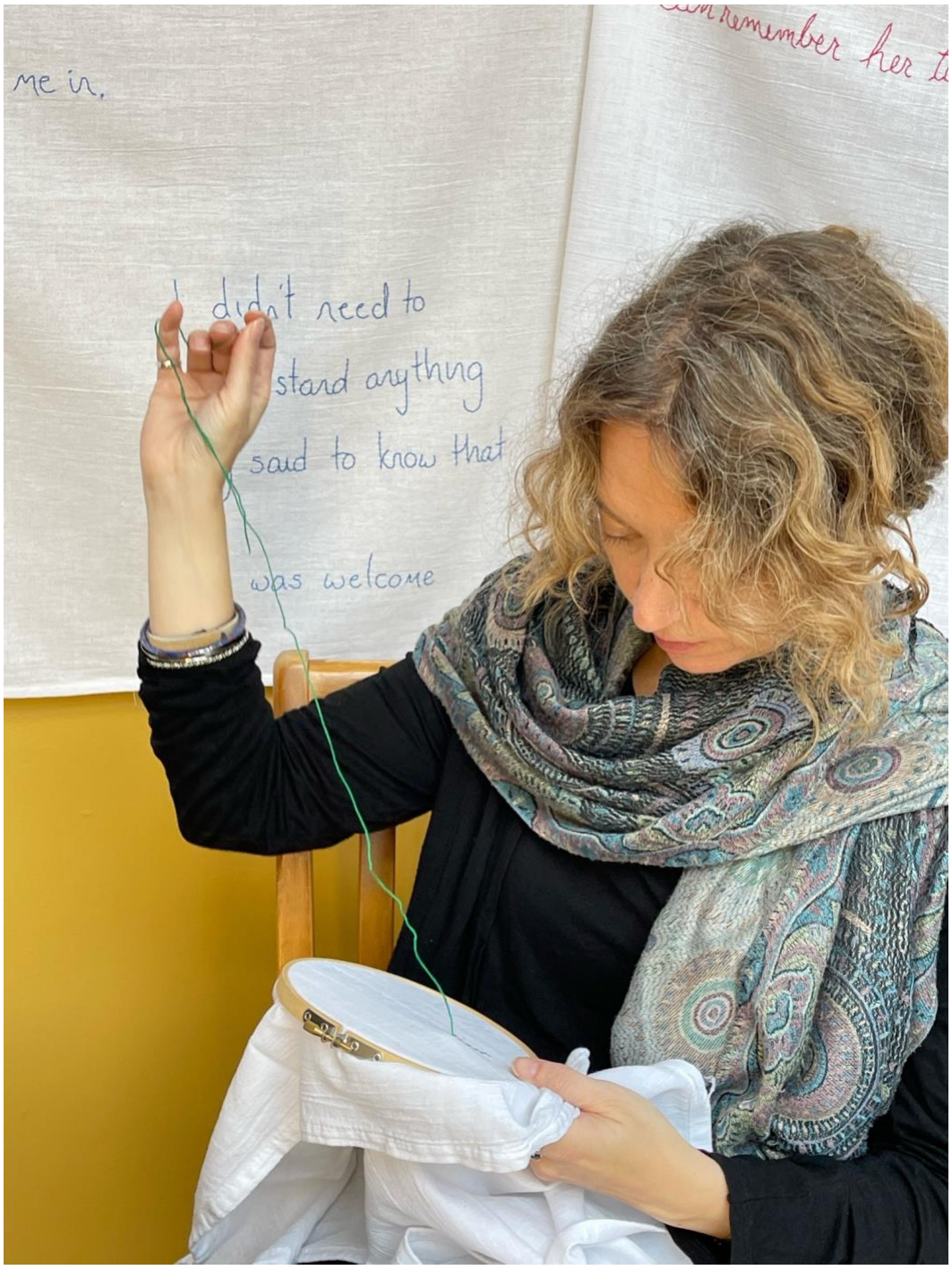

Figure 2. Rachel Epp Buller, Installation view of *Taking Care,* 2018- . Performance of listening through embroidery.

By enacting this multilayered form of listening, with and through my hands and gestures, I am listening to "take care," and attempting to "take care" in capacious ways. Fisher and Tronto offered an expansive notion of care more than 30 years ago when they described care as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible."[5] The writers of the recent *Care Manifesto* echo their language, arguing that our increasingly urgent times demand that we broaden how we conceive of care and that we "care promiscuously"—not casually or indifferently, but care *more*, care *experimentally*, care *extensively*.[6] One way to care promiscuously, I argue, is by *listening expansively*, and this expansive orientation permeates my artistic inquiries. In my project of *Taking Care*, participants listen first to themselves, listening to remember their own experiences of being cared for; I then listen with my hands, my gestures, my stitches, *caring for* them and their stories in the ways that I care for the words, with attention and time and labor; and there is a public listening in the display, a perceiving and an imagining, a gift of attention given to these intimate caring labors, and an opportunity to listen with care toward connection—a relational listening, or what Salomé Voegelin calls *care-full* listening, listening as a reciprocal gesture that provokes, engenders, demands care.[7] Contemporary thinkers across disciplines understand that our current times of converging crises invite us to listen differently. Using another sound-related term, sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that humans aspire to "resonance" in their relationships, what he describes as affective encounters in which each party experiences a sense of transformation.[8] I understand Rosa's resonance to approximate descriptions of "feeling seen" or "feeling heard," and to be ready to participate in the shared mission of resonance, we must be ready to listen. If we move through the world with a listening orientation, I wager that we open ourselves to collaborative, reciprocal relationships—feminist, antiracist, multispecies relationships—being willing to not have all the answers but to learn and be in reciprocal dialogue. Expansive, relational listening disrupts patriarchal patterns of communication, of who speaks and who is listened to, and to what end.

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[5] Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring." In *Circles of care: work and identity in women's lives,* eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 40.

[6] The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London/New York: Verso, 2020), p. 41.

[7] Salomé Voegelin with Mikhail Karikis, "Care-Full Listening," online talk, 10 December 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6dhUSCCxPI

[8] Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016); English translation by James C. Wagner published by Polity Press, 2019.

Expansive listening becomes an act of reciprocal generosity,[9] an exchange, a receiving and a giving of our attentions.

This reciprocity also involves a generosity of time, and part of the performance of *Taking Care* involves the manifesting of slowness. The relational listening I seek to enact and facilitate not only addresses tempo—slow as opposed to fast—but more specifically inhabits the time needed to be in caring relationship. To become in tune with another requires a care-full listening that places demands on us, demands of time and attention. Attunement is not quickly done. And this sustained engagement—of repetition and delay, interruption and endurance, hours and days spent embroidering and listening—is in itself a resistant mode that privileges the affective encounter. In her book *Enduring Time,* Lisa Baraitser writes that these slow ways of experiencing time "have none of the allure of the time of rupture, epochal shift, or change. They involve social practices that are mostly arduous, boring, and mundane."[10] They are, for example, the overlooked maintenance labors heralded in the art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the repetitive and devalued care work, often overlooked but without which our world does not function. To embrace slow means to choose a manner of living and being that not only resists cultural norms of how we inhabit time but also actively disrupts capitalist expectations of *how we spend* our time, and to what ends. Slow is an embrace of non-productive time, willingly acknowledging that working to be in relationship, attuning to each other, has no capitalist benefit, no end-product to be bought or sold. The days I spend in the gallery, stitching and listening, are relational, not "productive": these are not works to be bought and sold, but rather to be made, performed, and displayed in order to listen care-fully, *and* to provoke more listening. If we can orient ourselves to listen differently, we can inhabit time differently: we can resist the magnetic attraction of the ever-new, the quickly changing, the shiny things that fragment our attentions, and instead turn toward repetition and sustained engagement, privileging Baraitser's "mundane" time of caring relations.

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[9] Mary Jane Jacob, "Reciprocal Generosity," in *What We Want is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art,* eds. Ted Purves and Shane Aslan Selzer (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 3-10.

[10] Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 2.

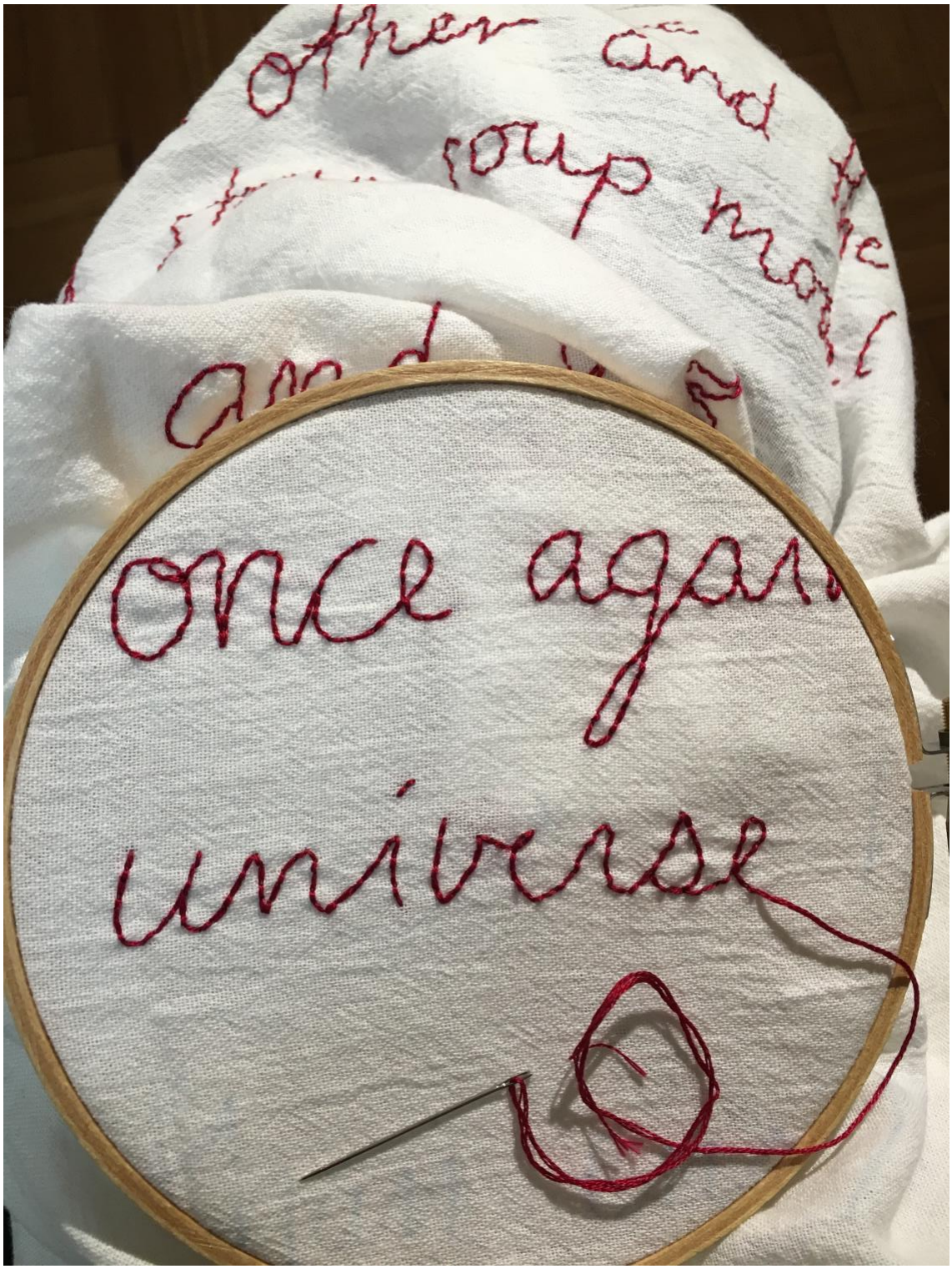

Figure 3. Rachel Epp Buller, detail from *Taking Care*, 2019.
Borough Road Gallery London. Performance of listening through embroidery.

In Tronto and Fisher's call to "repair our world," I hear an invitation to rethink which knowledge systems we privilege. A relational listening, a whole-body listening, includes listening *with* our bodies, *through other* bodies, in the knowledges *of* the body that we share across generations. For centuries, thinkers have meditated upon and conducted research to explore links between the hand and the mind. Ancient Greek philosophers Anaxagoras and Aristotle underscored the critical link between manipulation and mental processes, debating the exact nature of how hands connect to human intelligence but noting hands as a feature distinguishing humans from animals as part of their ability to think. Immanuel Kant referred to the hand as the visible part of the brain, or the window to the mind. Contemporary psychologist Rod Judkins notes that in his field, "Psychologists are now recognizing something that artists have intuitively always known, that we think with our hands as much as our brains."[11] Susan Goldin-Meadow studies the role of the gesture in learning, and her experiments indicate not only that human gestures have the ability to reinforce learning but also that gestures can, in fact, prompt us to change our minds.[12] These thinkers all coalesce around the common understanding that hands are critical to learning, demonstrating thought in action and even embodying a physical form of thinking.

If we can understand hands as a critical part of thinking, then we can also consider how hands are a vehicle for sharing information, intimately tied to both teaching and learning, giving and receiving particular forms of knowledge. I think, for example, about traditions of string figures, or string games, which Donna Haraway writes about as means of storytelling and building new worlds. Beyond what we think of as child's play, string figures have many and varied histories and associations across cultures, as a medium for fortune-telling or a ritual to ensure bountiful harvest or safe passage to the afterlife. Some string figures can be made in a type of solitaire, using only two hands; others require multiple participants, multiple hands weaving in and around the string. Whether solitary or partnered, players must learn a series of complicated maneuvers, manipulating string in and around fingers or passing parts of the string back and forth between hands. I once bought a book of string figures, with pages full of diagrams that I found nearly impossible to decipher. Because of course, this is not how string games are meant to be learned. This is embodied knowledge, with movements and repetitions meant to be shared between fingers. As Haraway writes, string figures are "about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works,

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[11] Rod Judkins, "Think With Your Hands," *Psychology Today,* 26 August 2014, psychologytoday.com. Accessed 27 February 2023.

[12] Susan Goldin-Meadow, "Using our hands to change our minds," *Cognitive Science,* vol. 8 (January-April 2017). doi: 10.1002/wcs.1368. See also: Goldin-Meadow, *Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before, of relaying connections that matter…"[13] Many string figures have an ending point, a visual outcome achieved after one has twisted, looped, and knotted the string in the designated series of steps. Others, however, like the games of Cat's Cradle, are ongoing: players pass the patterns back and forth between their hands, repeating movements over and over until one player drops the string or makes a move at the wrong time. The story is interrupted but we begin again and our hands repeat the knowledge until the patterns are ingrained in our bodies.

Sharing knowledge between our hands in this way involves an intentional kind of paying attention: we listen repeatedly with our hands in order to fully grasp the information, learning so that we might share in the continued dissemination of knowledge. When we share the knowledge we hold in our bodies, what Haraway refers to as the patterns in our hands,[14] we enact a physical, bodily listening—a listening through touch. In my family's Mennonite community, these patterns have often passed matrilineally in the home, learning between generations, in forms like crochet, embroidery, and quilting.[15] Contemporary artist Karen Reimer contextualizes her own use of textiles and craft in this way, noting that in her Mennonite family, "my mom could quilt for the national team, as could her mother and a few of her sisters—and so I learned how to do this stuff at my mother's knee."[16] Historically, these community forms of shared making, like sewing circles or quilting bees, have also doubled as a social space of relational listening, and that model extends into the present. I recently spent a year volunteering at a local retirement community, attending a weekly gathering of elders in the assisted wing. One of my former students worked as the Life Enrichment coordinator for the facility and she invited my participation in her fledgling attempts to begin an arts group. Trying to draw out residents with diverse interests and varied ability levels, Miranda welcomed all forms of making. One resident regularly brought embroidery; another preferred the established compositions of adult coloring books, comfortably filling in each little section, one color at a time. The goal of the gathering, of course, was to offer a social activity, luring

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[13] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 10.

[14] Ibid., 10-13.

[15] This is certainly not specific to Mennonite communities, although it is the context most familiar to me. For broader contexts of sharing handheld knowledge, see, for example, Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), Clare Hunter, *Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle* (London: Sceptre Books, 2019), and Jen Hewett, *This Long Thread: Women of Color on Craft, Community, and Connection* (Boulder, CO: Roost Books, 2019).

[16] Karen Reimer, "Thinking with our Hands," *Mennonite Life*, vol. 76 (2022). https://ml.bethelks.edu/2022/06/27/thinking-with-our-hands/

residents out of their rooms, and at the same time promoting their manual dexterity. During that year, I learned to crochet, at least a little bit. Audrey, a 94-year old resident, graciously took me on as her student, showing me how to begin, watching carefully as I looped the yarn and correcting my many mistakes. Every week, she brought with her a fabric bag full of yarn, crochet needles, and a partially finished blanket. I rarely saw her make stitches herself, though. Nearly every time we met, she would tell me matter-of-factly, "Oh, my hands just don't work like they used to." She would share stories with me of learning to crochet as a young girl, and of the many creations she had made for family and friends over the course of her long life. For this woman, whose hands had known the patterns of crochet for well over eight decades, sitting in stillness must have felt like a hardship. And yet she never seemed to despair. I like to imagine that the chance to mentor someone else allowed Audrey to keep alive the patterns in her hands. Even when she could no longer make the stitches herself, she could still share her embodied knowledge with another.

Handheld listening, whether it occurs between two individuals or in a larger community, is intimately tied to the many ways we give and receive care. Caring with listening hands can look like time spent between grandparent and grandchild, patiently and repeatedly sharing knowledge; or the sustained conversations among members of a longtime sewing circle; or the joyful and determined fingers of children as they play string games together, picking up the string and beginning again together when the pattern drops. In *Matters of Care,* Maria Puig de la Bellacasa explores the haptic, the potential of touch, to "expand the disruptive potentials of caring knowing."[17] She writes that "haptic engagement conveys an encouragement for knowledge and action to be crafted *in touch* with everyday living and practice," arguing for this as a "deepened attention to materiality and embodiment" and "an invitation to rethink relationality."[18] While Bellacasa's own interests lie primarily in haptic technologies, her fundamental argument applies equally to analog processes. We care through touch; we care with our hands; we care with our bodies. And if we can turn ourselves to a listening orientation, a way of being in the world in which we seek to listen differently, and listen to different knowledges, then we can listen with our hands, listen with our gestures, listen with and through our materials, through touch, in ways that disrupt business as usual and move us toward "caring knowing."

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[17] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 95.

[18] Ibid., 96.

Figure 4. Rachel Epp Buller, detail from *Taking Care,* 2018, Upominki, Rotterdam. Performance of listening through embroidery.

Listening with my hands takes on new layers of significance as I perform *Taking Care* during

the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first winter of the pandemic, in December 2020, I perform these caring, listening labors at the Salina (KS) Art Center as part of my larger exhibition, *Hoping You Are Well*.[19] Because of pandemic uncertainties and pre-vaccination dangers, I stage the show as an isolated experience of care and listening, for days on end: visitors are distanced from me, viewing the work only from behind a barrier in the gallery doorway or from the exterior windows, and they share their stories with me through a mail slot in the gallery door. I find that specific conditions allow me to listen differently, and perhaps the conditions also invite participants to listen to their own experiences with a shifted perspective. Many of the stories I receive speak of care received in isolation—not only in recent pandemic isolation but also through the loneliness of cancer treatment or through the devastating isolation of time in prison. In sharing their stories, they remember, they listen again to moments of care that often arrived unexpectedly. And in the gallery, physically removed from human contact for days on end, I weep with their stories, listening again and again, stitch by stitch.

> *"They hook me up and bring a warm, fresh-smelling blanket."*
>
> *"In the night I feel his fingers on my wrist. He is checking my pulse. I pretend not to be awake."*
>
> *"I was in treatment for almost three years. My grandmother wrote to me every day."*

Two and a half years into the pandemic, I perform *Taking Care* at the Outlook Gallery in Minneapolis (MN/US). I take up residence in the small window gallery, embroidering in the window from morning till night, displaying my listening labors for a public outside the window. I notice how my listening with place, interior and exterior, changes over the course of the day and evening. During the day, many people walk by without even noticing I am there. Some, when they notice, are startled by my unexpected presence on the other side of the glass. I feel like a voyeur, observing people unnoticed and watching their interactions. In the middle of the afternoon I hear loud, amplified voices and see a protest march happening down the block. After a time, they make their way past my window, walking three across and chanting, "The people, united, will never be defeated," over and over. They carry signs and I see that it is a march in support of striking service workers who are pushing for higher wages, better working conditions, and union membership. I notice how differently this group of

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[19] *Hoping You Are Well* was exhibited and performed December 2-20, 2020, at the Salina Art Center, Salina, KS/US. Digital exhibition catalogue with an essay by Megan Arney Johnston is available at https://issuu.com/salinaartcenter/docs/buller_publication_

people engages with the space around them. They walk more slowly and intentionally than those on their way to work or an appointment, and many of them look in my window as they walk by. They smile and wave, and I feel a part of their festive atmosphere.

Figure 5. Rachel Epp Buller, *Taking Care,* 2022, Outlook Gallery, Minneapolis. Performance of listening through embroidery, with outdoor participant.

By early evening the sun is setting. With the shifting light, I become more visible in the

window to passersby. I get many waves and smiles, and others stop for a time to read the displayed embroideries, listening to my listening. Evening darkness shifts my place in the neighborhood. I can no longer see people on the street but I am lit up in the window. They watch me without me knowing they are there. At one point I hear voices and am startled to see someone right in front of me, touching the glass and reading the embroidered words aloud to their companion. I am a woman in a window, lit up in the dark night, on display, performing care, being visually consumed, viewed without my knowledge… but maybe also a beacon of light and hope, a quiet resistance, an insistent privileging of relational care and listening, a pointing toward what could be.

Our hands hold the power to transform our ways of being in relationship. Through our hands, we learn from each other, we sense our surroundings, we offer gifts and gestures, we give and receive care—we listen. This, I am convinced, is how we will care for and repair our world—by listening expansively; by listening relationally, to and with and for each other; by listening differently; by listening as well as possible.

> *"Don't worry. We'll make sure he gets to where he needs to go."*
> *"She held me and didn't ask."*
>
> *"We took a chance on each other and the magical stone soup model of giving what we can and getting what we need, and so it proved once again that the universe has more than enough for everyone."*

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About the Author

Rachel Epp Buller (PhD, MFA) is a visual and sound artist, feminist art historian, professor, and mother of three. Her artistic and scholarly pursuits often address these intersections, including exhibitions and publications that focus on the maternal body and feminist care in contemporary art contexts. Her books include *Reconciling Art and Mothering* (Ashgate, 2012) and *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity* (Demeter Press, 2019, co-edited with Charles Reeve), both of which helped shape the field of maternal art studies. Her current research-creation work addressing slow practices and listening as artistic method in contemporary art takes the form of artistic and sonic inquiries, critical essays, epistolary exchanges, pedagogical exercises, listening scores, and creative nonfiction.

She has exhibited her artwork in solo and group exhibitions in the US, UK, Netherlands, Germany, and Italy, and in 2016 she curated and wrote the exhibition catalogue for the first-ever retrospective of German artist Alice Lex-Nerlinger, hosted by Das Verborgene Museum in Berlin. She is a two-time Fulbright US Scholar (Germany and Canada), board member of the

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International Journal of Education & the Arts

http://IJEA.org ISSN: 1529-8094