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INTERMEZZO II

The Garden of Solace | De Tuin van Soelaas On co-creative art practices, care and moral ecologies

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Abstract

In this intermezzo, I invite you to follow me on a walk towards the becoming of the Garden of Solace¹, a recent co-creative art project in my hometown in the Netherlands. During this walk, I create brief side paths or stepping stones to address the issues identified in my PhD research on co-creative art practices in care settings. Imagine musicians co-creating music with patients and caregivers, artists portraying people with dementia in a nursing home, and patients who receive palliative care co-creating works of art with visual artists. These are a few examples of the initiatives part of Creating Cultures of Care², where my PhD project is embedded. Although co-creative

¹ De Tuin van Soelaas, hoopvol handelen door daad en draad. A collaborative art project by Maartje van den Noort, Vanessa Oostijen and Marielle Schuurman (2024).

² Caring for each other, and collective care: what will that look like in the future? This social challenge is the focus of the partnership Creating Cultures of Care, formed by educational institutes and partners in professional healthcare. Together they approach the healthcare challenge from an artistic perspective and by utilizing the power of design.
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practices in hospitals, nursing homes and medieval city gardens are not comparable in terms of care, I propose they have something in common. Co-creative artistic practices have the power to open people's minds and hearts, (re)connect to feelings of loss and grief and nourish new and hopeful connections between people, materials and places. By meandering this way, I aim to share with you some perspectives on art, care and creating caring communities.



is this the final result?
or an open space for something new?

Introduction

In the first days of March 2024, I joined the Linen Project³, organized by the Dutch platform Crafts Council Nederland. The goal of this project is to experience the circular process of

³ The Linen Project explores diverse approaches to flax production and its processing into linen, including a focus on Shared Stewardship (centered on manual processing). The self-organizing participation model emphasizes knowledge development and transfer, shared responsibility, and active citizenship, using the commons as a foundation. The manual approach is essential to understanding the process, as well as fostering a relationship with and appreciation for the materials and outcomes. To make this model transferable, The Linen Project has developed a handbook and guidance framework. Discover more about the Linen Project [here](#).

cultivating flax on a very small scale. Guided by an expert of the Crafts Council, we would follow the steps from sowing 1 m² of flax seed to growing and harvesting the flax plants, to processing and spinning the dried flax, to weaving a small piece of linen fabric, the size of a handkerchief. This cycle would take up a whole year to complete, consisting briefly of three phases of 100 days: cultivating the plants, processing the dried flax and spinning & weaving the flax into fabric.

care for

small scale

I was excited to follow this transformative process from seed to fabric, learning about each step while reconnecting with this lost craft (flax culture was once very common in our country but disappeared because of the growing global textile industry) and syncing with the rhythm of nature intertwined with flax. And I sensed a deep longing to work with the linen material but was unable to capture it verbally. In the past months, I had collected much of my grandmothers' needlework and lace, a craft she mastered well. Craft with purpose; as a teacher and mother of six, she always said, 'I have no time for beauty.' Keeping her work close to me and engaging with it—by drawing the holes in her lace, I explored the material she knotted and the spaces she left—became a way for me to care for my own roots and to get to know my grandmother in a different light.



sowing seeds

common



Maartje, one of the artists of the historic convent where my graphic design studio is situated, invited me to use the old sandbox in her studio garden, so we could join our square meter flax fields and make it easier to care for each other's plants.

Artist Vanessa, who had previously collaborated with Maartje, joined the Linen Project as well. On a chilly early spring morning, we proudly sowed three square meters of flax seeds and eagerly awaited the first seedlings to emerge and push their tiny green heads through the layer of soil covering the sand.

While the flax was growing, V and M shared with me their first ideas about wanting to do something with feelings of despair and grief about the world we are living in. We are losing so much, they shared. Our planet is dying. Do we stand here and just watch? Or can we create something, amidst all the noise of consumerism, crises on all levels of society, and feelings of shame and guilt? What can we do, as makers, to make space for these feelings that a lot of people experience, without silencing the unease or buying off the guilt? Three linen handkerchiefs wouldn't be enough. I quickly connected with their desire, as I recognized my motivation to embark on my artistic PhD project and contribute to the creation of caring communities.

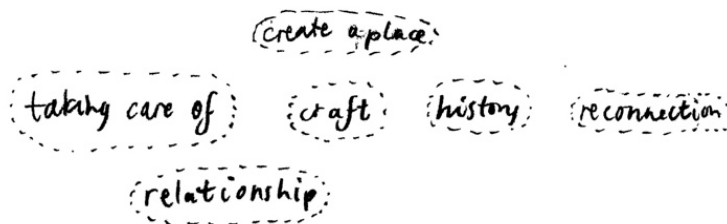


As a PhD student setting my first steps in the world of academic research, I find nurturing soil in care-ethical theories,

where the inherently relational and contextual nature of moral agency and responsibility is emphasized (Walker, 2007, Tronto 1993) and where 'care' is defined as *Everything that is done to maintain, continue and repair our world, so that all can live in it as well as possible.* (Tronto, 1993, Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017:161). Joan Tronto defined care in a context of human-to-human relationships, the definition of care and 'our world,' is slightly adapted by others during the years, parallel to the growing consciousness about the state of our planet, and the realization (or remembering?) that all is connected. (Kimmerer, 2013, Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Didier Zúñiga makes an effort to include ecological *thinking* and

acting in care ethical theory and insisted ‘that our existential conditions of interdependency and vulnerability, which we share with all other living beings on earth, ought to occupy a central place in our reflections on how to live together.’ (Zúñiga, 2020:17) An activating viewpoint that adds ecology to care ethics as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry (Leget et al., 2019). I wonder if artmaking, including its materialities, could be added as enriching perspective?

In the flax field, we didn't engage in discussions filled with concepts and theories. Instead, we practiced care with our hands, and the desire to find ways to coexist served as a driving force for us. And although Tronto states that ‘to create a work of art, is not care’ (Tronto, 1993:104), this intermezzo illustrates that art and care may be more intertwined than we initially thought– and in our collaborative art project, they were not separated. Starting with our fabric-to-be: there would not be any fabric if we did not care for the becoming of it. So, when the sun got warmer and days got longer, we took care of the flax fields during lunchbreaks on working days (watering them in dry periods in early summer, weeding to provide enough space for the plants, braiding a rope around the squares, for the higher plants to lean on). In the meantime, we made plans for a place of contemplation in the garden of the medieval building of the ‘Volmolen’ in Amersfoort⁴. Our material would be linen, our instruments would be our hands, needles and thread. And importantly: to avoid (more) waste, we would work with material that was already there. Maartje built a warm relationship with the owners of By Mölle, a shop and atelier, since 2012 known for their circular way of designing and producing bedding products with local wool and linen. They were happy to donate their leftover linen to us – which we accepted gratefully like it was a pile of gold. The textures, the colors, the way the fabric responded to our hands, the light, to the wind outside. We couldn't wait to begin!

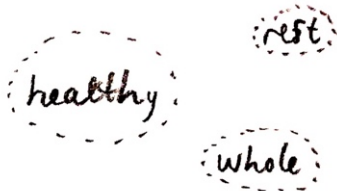


⁴ The Woolmill (Volmolen) dates of 1642: this used to be the place where textile entered the city and was crafted into clothes and fabric for household and industry.



Summer

In June, we carefully raised 1,5 m² of flax, healthy and strong, standing upright with delicate tiny blue flowers. The other 1,5 m² suffered either from too much or too little water, or maybe too much sand from the sandbox? The plants were yellow and small or already brown, looking more dead than alive. By the end of July, we harvested our 1,5 m² of healthy-looking flax. We laid the harvested whole plants – whole because we harvested them with roots, stems and seeds – on the soil to start a fermenting process called ‘retting,’ or ‘roten’ in old Dutch. After that, we enjoyed our summer holidays, giving ourselves and the flax a period of rest.



In the last days of August, when the flax was still fermenting on our tiny field, we met again in the painting studio of Maartje. A fourth artist joined, although she would be working from distance on smaller pieces of linen and join the bigger work later. We started with sharing ideas and exploring the big pile of linen fabric together. We roughly discussed our roles and participation in the process. Our starting point became clear, but none of us had any idea of what the result should look like. Adventure! Perfect conditions to start a creative process! From then, we would meet weekly to work with the material.

roles:

participation



harvest

We tore the fabric, cut and sew it together again, stitched, embroidered, colored large pieces with onions, walnut and beetroot. Formed shapes, broke vertical and horizontal lines into round shapes, leaves, flowers, tore and stitched again, repaired little holes with smaller decorative stitches. In the beginning we carefully asked each other permission to put the scissors in a piece one of us had worked on. I remember one day finding a big hole in a leaf I embroidered, because V already had plans with that piece of fabric. I was frustrated because I liked it and spent so much time on the embroidery. But I realized she was just as much – or little – the owner of our collaborative work as I was. By taking initiative and sometimes holding back and following the other, by trusting each other and the material, we were sculpting something nobody knew exactly, but it sure was more than we as three separate individuals could imagine. We did not talk that much about what solace might look like, or what it meant to us. We just followed our hands and our hands followed the fabric. Meanwhile, we got to know each other better, shared smaller and bigger issues in our lives, brought pieces of homemade cake and soup to our ‘Solace’ sessions. But above all, we were fully dedicated to the material and to the time we carved out for ourselves to work in. It became a place of comfort in our busy lives with work, kids and others to care for. We shared

the process on social media, through pictures and updates, and received a great number of reactions: ‘witnessing your process gives already so much comfort and joy!’ ‘Please keep doing this, the fabric and colors and your enthusiasm makes me so happy!’ We did not produce decorative wall hangings that were ‘finished’ or perfect. It was our making and unmaking, the transparency of the fabric, the loose threads and the fringes that touched something in ourselves and in those who followed us, that was powerful and heartwarming. Solace was spreading itself within our online community, and beyond.



Early Autumn

By the time our flax was ready for processing, we were so busy preparing for the opening of the expo and the garden that we almost forgot to harvest it from the field and bring it inside to dry. Fortunately, the volunteers from Volmolen, who were also involved in the Linen Project, offered their assistance and helped process our flax, as it was also their flax. On a calm Saturday in October, we opened The Garden of Solace, together with so many people. Friends and family, but also people we never met in person before, who followed our process on social media since the first seeds in



April. They wanted to feel the fabric and see what we made with their own eyes. As if the fabric itself captured the memories of all the joy, commitment and care we put in it and everybody could participate and share, by being physically present. And by *creating a space* with the fabric – instead of putting them on a stage as ‘aesthetic wall hangings,’ gave room for so many others with their experiences of grief, loss, fragility but also of comfort, connection and beauty. We never expected our work would resonate so much, and the material itself would be such a strong ‘actor’ in creating a caring community.

Winter

As I finish this intermezzo, another spring has almost arrived. A few days ago, I received an e-mail from a friend: ‘I wanted to say to you, my husband and I still speak about the Garden of Solace, it made a big impression.’ I realized my work as a maker is not so different from my work as a researcher. In my PhD project, I need them both when I explore co-creative, artistic practices in care settings (CARE-labs) together with participants involved in them. Building on the care ethical work of Margaret Urban Walker, Merel Visse (among others) and the enlivenment philosophy of Andreas Weber, I approach the CARE-labs as *moral ecologies*. As living, dynamic relationships of people, spaces, material and meaning, interwoven with threads of creativity and care. I call them ‘**moral ecologies**,’ because they bring a shift in roles and perspectives on ‘good care’ and ‘meaningful living’ and offer the possibility of collaborative and creative moral learning. What the CARE-labs have in common, is that they aim to bring vitality, creativity and meaningful relationships back to places where these qualities are lost or under pressure. The willingness to shift on an institutional level is increasing and it is a challenge for both artists and care institutions, to stay with the beauty and the trouble, and co-create new futures together. While I follow them as a researcher, observing, interviewing, drawing, I dare say: in every CARE-lab, seeds are planted. And in some of them, a caring community is already growing. As one of the designers said: we don’t know what the future of care will look like. We just practice it together.





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About the Author

Marielle Schuurman works as a graphic designer and action researcher. In recent years she has conducted research into more flexible maternity care (the Maternity Dialogue) and transdisciplinary collaboration on Age-Friendly Communities. She designs creative tools and working methods to explore the issues together with those involved: what emerges when you start from (shared) values, personal experience and creativity? Her PhD project ‘Drawing towards moral ecologies of care’ focuses on new concepts and practices of making and caring through co-creation. Her artistic PhD is part of the collaboration between Utrecht University of Arts (HKU) and the University of Humanistic Studies (UvH): Meaningful Artistic Research.

More about the Garden of Solace / De Tuin van Soelaas:

<https://detuinvansoelaas.nl>

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