

5 minutes for Who Cares

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Introduction to conversation with D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem

CUE Art Foundation Panel art@covid.edu: Studio Art MFAs and the Cost of Remote Learning

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abstract for virtual break-out session, Who Cares:

Dana DeGiulio and D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem will discuss student expectations of care on having entered what many interpret as a custodial relationship with the institution, from whom that care is expected and how it's delivered, putting voice and face to who cares in this relationship which is in fact a contract, an affect economy underwritten by tuition, not pretending as love but being most essentially work, which we do at our own and variable degrees of risk, and the demands placed acutely on Black womxn in the academy these days and all days ever. introduction addressed to students.

introduction addressed to students:

you're right. you all are right to identify a crisis. this can't hold. we can't do this.

everything you think is wrong is actually wrong.

the academy is outrageous, unjust, insane, violent, punitive, restrictive, extortive, biased, phobic and mean, yes.

everything is just as it was before, just now we all have to look at it.

people now have cell-phone cameras, state-sanctioned violence is as it was before, just now we all have to believe it. (that the image verifies over the speech of some subjects is an academic problem, and like art, not apart from the world.)

which isn't flat

our bodies held anxiously apart are no more fragile than before, our interdependence now staked openly, maybe we should have been gentler. schools buzzwording Community! over a depleted enrollment, they're right, as an idea community is much less risky to enact without the excitable charge of bodies in space, our disembodied heads staring into the little green light, way more intimate than is safe and not what i signed up for, the privileging of speech and writing (here in English) over material and action and the quietness that learning to see together in the same space requires, this is the present of pedagogy. i don't have anything to say about its future. i'm good at looking at the wound, at helping it take form, because it got there before i did.

i miss feet.

i sweat when i'm nervous, it's what we risk in being together, breathing all over each other, being susceptible. learning is crisis, it opens a fissure in your order of things.

people got sick and we all were told to leave school and you hoped we could all go back someday but instead they broke your heart.

you have to only let them do that once.

your teachers, we helped them break your heart.

school is awful but learning isn't, genealogy isn't, chosen families and elders and apprentices and trying to help isn't, not sharing, Adrienne Rich wrote it and i thought it too with her help: that if this is where i must look for you then this is where i'll find you, in this sick apparatus i came to in pure need 22 years ago after the cops and a hospital and some other stuff, an art school! where materiality could dispute image and semiotics fall apart in the face of something like spit in the spirit of a deconstruction which is always optimistic, a belief something else might be built out of these pieces if one person equals one person and we are not embarrassed to be material too but first we must take it all apart and no one can do this safely alone.

i never really left, for the relief i guess. because i had been relieved.

everything that has helped me get along in this pandemic i learned in art school: the habituation to

uncertainty, the imperative to use all senses, how to make a burrito last two days, how soft we are.
bullshit maybe.
it's not about my heart! you say.

fine, wherever your hope lives. your guts or bowels. it's about what you thought would happen, what we
all thought would happen having been driven by habit.
it isn't going to be the same. you aren't going to get this back. not that monument either.
there's no going back to the world before all this because we didn't leave it.
fact: your teachers will show up to teach whoever's there, and sleep no worse than ever, though we are
perhaps a little sadder because we miss you.

The contemporary neoliberal university stands at the end of a long line of enormous violence.
There's a reason we say "affect" instead of feeling or emotion, it's because it's a noun and also a
transitive verb and when it's a verb you are its object. you have been affected by this. affect is the
medium of your education, an academic paper from 1983 asked "who does the flight attendant's smile
belong to?" we as workers ask ourselves this all the time. estrangement as an antidote to alienation, a
tool of employment, easy to use if you can't help it, if you already care, if you are relieved that something
will hold you even this uncomfortably. this is part of the price we pay, part of what you paid for.
the better your teachers get at this, the worse it is for you. maybe you should get out while you can.
here is why i don't.

I'm angry. I love us as a species and hate the injustice of much of what we've built. The Western
museological project in alignment with colonialism and nationalism has elected to hold gently the material
traces of people after administering enormous violence to their actual bodies. This is our field. I work in an
academy that upholds these structures and seeks to erase the violence done by exclusion to actual
bodies in a weak burlesque of late-phase inclusion of objects into their legitimating syntax after, in most
cases, the artist is safely dead. it's a better story.
it's dumb because i'm here for love, to serve something, and this is stupid because it's work. i let it break
my heart all the time.
we get paid for being lonely with this care. for depositing our tools on the table and letting people walk
off with them and you become a vampire, your questions about how to live that have never been
assuaged by anything kept alive year after year after year, made new. it's stupid.

given that i know better, that we knew better when we walked in to a place that doesn't hold us right and
stayed and stayed, Jouhandeau writes of someone whom another had ahold of by the hair and in order
to not give out that appearance pretends he is being caressed. we are pretending because someone
must carry what you need and we all don't get to see the flowers in the gardens we're watering, the ones
we get to see are probably too quick, what was it to have been a question, to open holes in your
certainties, to believe that we can help each other in this way and that being careful and precise and
humble in face of materials will help us not kill each other, in a heterotopia not pretending as love but
being essentially work, here we are surprised to be affected, who does this care belong to who has it
holds it gives it to you who gives you back to you this time in form. who has the tools to help you take
form. i'm at work, and you're trying not to cry, and Denenge is saying the old poems out loud and i'm
belching the alphabet and we make a space for you in a space that doesn't hold any of us right, i'm a
vampire, teaching is how i address the future.

J. Butler finally explained it, that vulnerability is resistance because it is a deliberate exposure to power.
so you can see the effects of that power.
who cares is important.
who do you think will decolonize your canon?
at what price?

Black womxn have been doing this work in the academy forever. They told us about O. Butler and
told us not to worry. This is care work and precarious labor in every sense. I wanted to talk about this
with Denenge, an artist and teacher of great courage.