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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Care as practice and provocation: A response to Andrew Kötting.

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“What does it feel like to care for someone like Eden? Imagine someone pulling at one’s sleeve...” Kötting leans over the table and gently but firmly pulls on my arm. The pressure is enough to feel weighted down, tethered, but when he lets go there is both lightness and loss. It is a sensation I recognize. The weight of holding up a body, the strain on the neck and shoulders. The release of setting that body down – the unclenching of tensed muscles and straightening of the spine accompanied by a lingering ache. It’s September 2016 and I’ve met with Kötting for a coffee the day after our Discourses of Care conference in the cafe at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. We talk about his work, as artist and teacher, his relationship with Eden and I share the story of my younger sister, Alice. Alice had Rett Syndrome, a neurodevelopmental disorder resulting in a series of cognitive and physical impairments. She couldn’t walk unaided so we used to hold her up under her arms as she’d kick her feet out in erratic steps forward. As she got older, she got heavier and the curvature of her spine became so severe that these tiny expeditions – from chair to TV, from garden to door - had to stop. As Kötting pulls on my arm, the weight of holding up (or being held down) by Alice’s body is what I recall. In this gesture and in his writing Kötting summons the embodied experience of loving, caring for and creating with Eden as being an anchor alongside the ambivalence that this implies. ‘Without her’, he acknowledges in his essay for this collection, ‘I am both freed and lost.’

I first encountered Kötting's work when acting as a graduate teaching assistant for a course on the Road Movie in which we studied *Gallivant* (1996). The film charts Kötting's clockwise journey around mainland Britain alongside his octogenarian grandmother, Gladys, and his daughter Eden (then 6 years old). In Eden I saw signs of Alice, her specialist boots, the use of makaton to communicate, her joy of silliness and the unbridled laughter. I also recognised the anxiety of loving and caring for a child with a life-shortening condition, what Kötting describes as the *notknowing*, though, following Alice's death at the age of 16 in 2002, I was now living on the other side of it.

In Carlo Caduff's essay on the ambiguities of care he draws upon a series of literary examples centred on the act of giving care to an elderly or ill parent. 'When people start looking after their elderly mother or father' he writes 'they discover the weight of a body. That body has always been there; it has always been close. One has seen it many times, but now one has to physically move it. To care for someone known is to discover how little one knew' (2019: 803). What is it like to care for someone like Eden or Alice? The weight of a body doesn't come as a surprise but, in Kötting's terms, it is accompanied by different kinds of *notknowing*. The *notknowing* of 'raising' a child with a life-shortening condition and the anxiety of the routes her life might take or the ways in which her body might, or might not, develop. The *notknowing* of simply what is going on in her head. As Eva Feder Kittay has explored in her writing informed by her experiences of caring for her daughter with cognitive disabilities, caring for someone with a developmental impairment demands a rethinking of our understanding of human subjectivity and communication. But we might also recognize, as Carlo Caduff observes, 'relations of care always involve a level of strangeness, no matter how close the relation' (2019: 803).

This short essay offers a response to and a reflection on the words and work of Andrew Kötting, focusing in particular on two of his films – *Gallivant* and *This Our Still Life*

(2011). Like the circles and spirals that underpin his filmic work, Kötting's contribution to this collection also loops through a series of discourses surrounding art, autobiography, creativity, communication and subjectivity, and whilst I will touch on each of these I want to reflect on and filter these ideas through particular understandings, experiences and discourses of care and caregiving that highlight – like Kötting's own account of living with Eden – the tensions and ambivalences of 'living with the erratic' (Mol, Moser and Pols 2010: 10). In drawing upon Caduff's essay and his challenge to the kinds of embodied knowledge that are offered as evidence of care, what I want to suggest is how Kötting's own work, created out of these uncertainties, might point us in the direction of a possible aesthetic of care.

In Kötting's essay he describes his work and his collaborations with Eden as a way of 'combatting the *notknowing*' that he experiences. His preoccupations with memory, tradition and family born out of a sense or fear of impending loss. *Gallivant*, made when Eden was still young, is explicit in its aims and intentions, acknowledging the limited life expectancy of both Gladys and Eden whilst offering the opportunity for great grandmother and great granddaughter to get to know one another – as Kötting's voice over explains the gallivant taken offered them "a coming together before going our separate ways".

I have written elsewhere, alongside my co-editor Karen Lury, of the significance of the relationship between old and young for the caring relations that are visible on and through children's television (Holdsworth and Lury, 2016). The seaside, in this context, is a privileged site for this coming together of generations. Iain Sinclair also recognizes this in his essay on Kötting's film: 'this is a homage to that archetypal home movie, the seaside excursion. The day out, remission from mundane routine. Time for putting together oldest and youngest members of the family for the hell of that British togetherness' (1997: 20). In line with this tradition *Gallivant* starts and ends in Bexhill-on-Sea on the South Coast of England: the site, as Gladys tells Eden, of her daddy's own boyhood holidays. And so the

film looks to the continuity of tradition in the face of the *notknowing*. Sinclair describes the journey taken in *Gallivant* as ‘a memorial, a premature obituary. It allows Kötting to come to terms with the inevitable’(1997: 21). Coming to terms though suggests some kind of conclusion, acceptance or an end to the journey and *Gallivant* instead is steeped in a series of circular, repetitive and looping patterns. The familial traditions of the Kötting family are situated alongside a host of local, regional and national festivities, habits and behaviours. On their way, Kötting and his band of travellers encounter and document a series of festivals, celebrations and commemorations: the ‘Bolster day’ celebrations in St Agnes, Cornwall (in which giant paper maché puppets and a young maid clad in white re-enact the Cornish myth of Bolster the Giant and St Agnes); a ‘Jack in the Green’ May day parade in Hastings; a ‘Remembrance Sunday’ ceremony in November. The mapping of the coast uncovers numerous examples of folklore, song and dance passed down through the years: in Whitehaven, two local men play and sing ‘D’ye ken John Peel’ (a folk song about a legendary Cumberland huntsman) and the intertwining of Viking and mining heritage is invoked in a rapper sword dance performed in North East England.

In her writing on historical re-enactment, Diana Taylor describes such performances as a ‘constant state of againness’ (2003: 21) and the circularity that marks this particular road movie is mirrored in the repetitive motions, actions and scenes that make up the film. Waves crashing backwards and forwards on the shore, a stream of tourists taking their turn at a viewpoint, a camera that continually spins and turns, loops and spirals. Life with Eden is also experienced, in part, as a ‘constant state of againness’ and, as Kötting writes and his films document, the ‘saying of the same thing again and again and again’. The non-linearity that is evident in the theme and form of *Gallivant* offers an early articulation of the experience of living and collaborating with Eden that Kötting describes in his essay for this collection. It is worth noting that ‘again and again’ does not always imply perfect (or perhaps nightmarish)

repetition but is suggestive of the more iterative aspects of care that Annemarie Mols, Ingunn Moser and Jeannette Pols describe as a matter of ‘practical tinkering, of attentive experimentation’ (2010: 13).

Other themes emerge in *Gallivant* that also point towards the pain and privilege of this experience and to the continued ambiguities of care and caregiving. Modes and technologies of communication recur across the film (train tracks, telephone lines, satellites, post boxes, phone boxes) and Kötting foregrounds Eden’s use of Makaton sign language to communicate. The tender growth of Gladys’ relationship with Eden is charted in the development of her understanding of her great-granddaughter’s use of Makaton. At the end of their journey, framed together on the beach at Bexhill and wearing matching bright red coats, Gladys proudly informs her grandson that Eden is coming back to live with her. This world is a precarious one however and in celebrating a moment of connection the film is as aware of train lines that diverge, coasts that erode, inhospitable interviewees, and disconnected phone calls back home. Kötting’s own shattered ankle, sustained when falling from the side of their van, is evidence of the contingent nature of the project and the spectre of the *notknowing* that lurks behind the ruins, graves, pollution and erosion of land and communities encountered on their coastal path.

Kötting’s work and collaborations are collagist in nature, often composed from a range of sources including found footage and sound, recorded performances and home-movie archive. Films such as *Gallivant* or *This Our Still Life* are composed of an often haphazard and contingent set of images, sounds, voices and bodies that are pieced together and, in the best tradition of montage, are always understood and produce meaning in relation to one another. The significance of collage, for Kötting, though is in the ‘attempting-to-make’ and the ‘getting-lost-en-route’, it is a form that emphasizes the process rather than the product or finished result. In this sense, collage is reminiscent of care. Never smooth and complete, ‘in

the scene of care', Caduff writes, 'things fall apart, collapse more often than not, get stitched together piece by piece, however provisionally, however precariously' (2019: 790). Framed in this way Kötting's work and his collaborations with his daughter Eden - as subject, performer and artist in her own right - perhaps bring us close to a possible *aesthetics* of care. Kötting's contribution to this collection offers us an account of the challenges and affirmations of raising, caring for and creating with Eden but also emphasises how he has been shaped and sustained by their interdependency. Joan Tronto has suggested that care can be understood as both a practice and a *disposition* (1993: 104). In this sense it could be seen as a particular quality of mind and character (to have a 'caring disposition' for instance) but another sense of the word seems equally applicable, for example, a disposition of objects refers to 'the pattern in which they are arranged or their positions in relation to one another' (Collins Dictionary). It is the second use of this term that foregrounds the significance of relationality to an ethics of care but it also evokes the formal properties of the collage and the piecing and re-piecing of parts together. Through the processual nature of their art and practice Andrew and Eden are positioned together in both care and in creative collaboration.

This Our Still Life deploys a similar aesthetic and is 'stitched together piece by piece' from archival images and sound alongside footage shot by Kötting between 1989-2010 of his family (Eden and partner Leila) at their home in the French Pyrenees. Like *Gallivant*, the film is cyclical in form. Though tethered to a particular place it employs a seasonal structure that starts and ends with summer, whilst looping forwards and backwards in time to offer a portrait of Eden as both child and young woman. That documentary impulse instigated by the same sense of the *notknowing* is also still present: the recording and preservation of family memory through the home video, the threat of impending loss, the challenge of Eden's unfathomability. In response Kötting's camera maps and scrutinizes as he conducts his own form of 'attentive experimentation'. It slowly tracks across the shelves and walls of the

farmhouse where paintings, photographs, trinkets, souvenirs both found or created adorn almost every available surface. The aesthetic of the house itself is collagist, fragmentary, provisional, memorial and mirrors that of the film. Kötting's camera is similarly invested in its inhabitants at times moving to extreme close-up across the contours of Eden's face or catching the intimacies of Leila's bath time.¹ It watches and it waits – hovering in the grounds at dusk looking back at the lights and movements within the home.

In Agnese Sile's contribution to this collection she considers the overlapping work of Briony Campbell as both photographer and daughter within the scene of (palliative) care and describes the attentiveness that each role requires. For Sile, care and concern are expressed through the vigilance of Campbell in her dual role – being with, witnessing and standing guard over her father. Attentiveness has been central to understandings of care and how we recognise and respond to the needs of others (in both caring and being cared for). At the same time, discourses of care have relied upon an attentiveness to embodied forms of knowledge and 'small moments' to evidence the existence of care. As Caduff writes 'care finds its expression in minimal movements, in episodic signs and gestures.' (2019: 788). He argues that the very real possibility of 'care without care' instigates a 'search for clues' whereby a 'feeling's expression in signs and gestures is here supposed to solve the problem of scepticism' (2019: 798). Caduff takes as his ammunition the 'idealised' image deployed by sociologists Mol, Moser and Pols of the kinds of expressive language used to describe care: 'putting a hand on an arm at just the right moment, or jointly drinking hot chocolate while chatting about nothing in particular' (2010: 10). But hot chocolate, as Caduff points out, can equally comfort and scald. The ambivalences of care, the possibility that care as practice,

1 It is perhaps important to note here the legacy of documentary as a form of oppression for people with disabilities who have long been objectified by a medical gaze. It is a history that Kötting explores in the collaborative project *Mapping Perception* that was underpinned by the desire to understand Eden's subjectivity by using film as an experimental art form (see Hughes 2017: 279).

affect, and value might not always align are what makes it such a complex and complicated field of enquiry and one of the central aims of this collection has been to acknowledge the different ways in which care is performed, understood, debated, represented, enacted or neglected.

Kötting's pull on the sleeve is clearly an example of the kind of embodied knowledge used to express feelings and experiences of care. It is one that, as I've attempted to unpick, is complex in its anchoring effect - to be securely moored or stuck in one spot, the freedom to move or being cast adrift. It is also specific in its context and the caring relations that it expresses as it speaks to the value of attentiveness and embodied knowledge beyond Caduff's critique of the warm and fuzzy gestures of care. For instance, 'the close attentive eye', Feder Kittay writes, 'is needed to care for a dependent individual' with cognitive disabilities. It gives rise to 'perceptual capabilities that are not shared by those who have at best a glancing acquaintance' (2010: 406). It is this attentiveness that is needed to develop and understand forms of communication that exist beyond our normative ideas of how individuals think and feel but also to value those 'small' pleasures, moments and movements within the ordinary affective realm. It is these everyday and routine occurrences that form much of *This Our Still Life*. We see Eden washing up whilst loudly singing along to the radio, painting at the kitchen table, beside herself with laughter at her father's games and jokes, miserable and uncomfortable in the heavy mountain rain as she peeks out from under her raincoat.

In theatre practitioner James Thompson's essay on the aesthetics of care he also returns to the notion of attentiveness as found both in writing on the ethics of care and as existing at the heart of the creative process. An aesthetics of care, he argues, is 'a sensory ethical practice, that following Robinson, involves "not only learning how to be attentive and patient, how to listen and respond, but also how to rethink our own attitudes about difference and exclusion"' (2015: 437). Beyond the immediate sphere of the family, the work of the

Andrew and Eden Kötting and their collaborators is invested in combatting a different kind of *notknowing* – one which excludes and marginalizes the lives, stories, experiences and skills of people with learning disabilities as they ask us to ‘rethink our attitudes about difference’. A not knowing may mean realizing that we actually know nothing, and that speaks to the forms of epistemic injustice that Amanda Ptolomey (drawing on Miranda Fricker’s theorization) argues shapes the lives of disabled girls (2018). This is not about reshaping a life to fit the mould but involves a perhaps more radical desire to express the strange and the banal, tiring and invigorating experience of life with/as Eden and to experiment and play with our means of expression. As Anna Poletti argues, the possibilities of collage to challenge our ideas about the representation of our life stories have made it ‘a powerful technique for life writers who aim to produce life narrative while responding to the normative ideas about life that underpin the autobiographical speaking position’ (2016: 362). In its challenge to the linearity of dominant (life) narrative forms, the Köttings’s work contributes to the questioning of those normative modes and ideals that continue to restrict our understandings of human experience.

The aim of this essay has not been to suggest that there is a singular aesthetic of care, just as care itself is diverse, complicated and contested. Collage offers one particular strategy that chimes with an intertwined experience of caring and creating within ‘the everyday life of an artistically productive family’ (Hughes 2017: 283). What Kötting enables us to understand is the centrality of care within the creative process. As a (auto)biographical experience that informs the work of art, as an arrangement of human relations, and as a way of visualizing and making sense of (or attempting to make sense of) the world. Care here is both provocation and practice. Through Kötting’s works, words and world we are offered an illustration of the complexities and contradictions of care and caregiving as messy, ongoing, mundane, sustaining and, above all, most vital.

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