

# Touching/Transforming: Notes Towards Collective Critical Artistic Research Practices and Processes

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## Biography

**Freja Bäckman** works as a multidisciplinary artist, researcher and educator. They often work collectively with workshops and discussions, text, sound, performance and installation. Their working methods are informed by queer-feminist strategies. Their doctoral research explores what there is to be found through the proximities and entanglements of belonging, care, vulnerabilities and violence within collective formations. A central part of the research is the body of work *I was told I chop wood like a ballet dancer*, within which they published the vinyl record (*On Circles*) (2020).

**Rebecca Close** (b.UK) is an artist, researcher and poet. Their projects often incorporate elements of performance, sound, net.art, video, poetry and live reading. Their doctoral research theorises post-internet reproductive work through a combined cyberfeminist and queer marxist lens. They are author of poetry collection *valid, virtual, vegetable reality* (2018) and one half of arts duo *Criticaldías*, based in Barcelona.

**Marie-Andrée Godin** (1986, Canada) is a visual artist and researcher based in Finland. She completed an M.F.A at the school of art of Laval University (Canada) and is now conducting doctoral research in Aalto University (Finland). She is investigating Magic and Postcapitalism through artistic research. She was granted several working grants and scholarships, e.g.: SSHRC-CRSH

Social Science and humanities research council of Canada doctorate grant, Québec Council for art and literature (CALQ), Canada Council for the Arts, the Arts Promotion Center of Finland. Her work is based in the fields of installation, performance-art and socially-engaged art. It has been shown in Canada, the United-States, Japan, Finland and Italy.

**Mira Kallio-Tavin** (Doctor of Arts) is the Winnie Chandler Distinguished Professor of Art in the Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia. She focuses her research on critical artistic and arts-based practices and research in questions of diversity, disability studies, social justice and critical animal studies. Dr. Kallio-Tavin is a World Councilor of the UNESCO partner organization InSEA (International Society for Education Through Art), and the founder of the International Disability Studies, Arts and Education (DSAE) conference. She is the author and editor of six books.

**Ali Akbar Mehta** (b.1983, Mumbai) is a Transmedia artist, curator, and researcher. His doctoral research 'Practicing Online Performativity' investigates (infra)structural and performative relations between online archives and its users through mediated interventions of Second Order Cybernetics. His practice consists of creating immersive archives that map narratives of history, memory, and identity examined through a lens of violence, conflict, trauma. This practice extends to co-founding and collaborative working within para-institutional settings such as at Museum of Impossible Forms, Party Office, MAS, and the Garden of Precarious People. He holds an MA in Visual Culture, Curating, & Contemporary Art, Aalto University.

**Abdullah Qureshi** is a Pakistani-born artist, curator, and educator. Within his practice, he uses painting, filmmaking, and collaborative methodologies to address personal histories, traumatic pasts, and sexuality. He is currently a doctoral candidate at Aalto University, Finland; his project, Mythological Migrations: Imagining Queer Muslim Utopias, examines formations of queer identity and resistance in Muslim migratory contexts.

**Sepideh Rahaa** (1981, Iran) is a multidisciplinary artist, researcher and educator based in Helsinki. Through her practice, she actively investigates and questions prevailing power structures, social norms and conventions while focusing on womanhood, storytelling and everyday resistance. Currently she is pursuing her doctoral studies in Contemporary Art at Aalto University. Her practice and research interests are representations in contemporary art, silenced histories, decolonisation, feminist politics and post-migration matters. Rahaa has been actively participating in debates and taking actions regarding the art

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politics in Finland as a member at Third Space Collective (2015-), Globe Art Point (2016-), Culture for All and Nordic Network for Norm Critical Leadership (2018-).

In June 2021 CCARe organized the two-day seminar *Touching/Transforming* in Suomenlinna at HIAP (Helsinki International Artist Programme) and online. This seminar was centered around a public-online talk by skolt Sámi theater director and activist Pauliina Feodoroff (2021).



Figure 1: Documentary drawing from the seminar (Rebecca)

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Suomenlinna is an island in front of Helsinki with complex connections to Finland's socio-political histories. The main attraction of the island is the fortress, which was built in 1748, a few years before a land reform popularly known as the Great Partition. Pauliina's talk addressed, among other things, this and various other moments in history when land has been appropriated, privatized or resold for profit in imperial and colonial nation building projects in the Finnish context. The subject of land uses and care for the land was a central thread in the discussions that ensued.

Cluster for Critical Artistic Research (CCARe) was established in 2019 as a research group within the Department of Art at Aalto University, Finland for critical artistic researchers (CCARe, 2021). The research group brings together a community of doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers, and faculty members at the university and beyond.

*Touching/Transforming* departed from the precarious relation of artistic research to both the university and a wider field of counter-institution building. While an artistic research practice may be formulated and marked by the discursive and political framework of the neoliberal university, the multiple genealogies of critical artistic research reach far beyond and are rooted in feminist, queer, antiracist, postcolonial and decolonial activisms and theory.

This tendency of artistic research to *reach towards* multiple sites of knowledge production occurs also within and across academic disciplinary boundaries, with many critical practices touching (on) the study of theory, film, music, technology, science or medicine.

This seminar hoped to provide a space to reflect on the value of *touching* fields of knowledge through material practice and what it means to *transform* them. The notion of touch proposed here embraces the physical and material as well as the virtual, literary and speculative. *Touching/Transforming* regards the power of magical thinking to transform institutions and knowledge as well as ourselves.

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Pauliina Feodoroff (she/ her) is a skolt Sámi theater director and activist from Keväjärvi and a part of Snowchange co-operative (<http://www.snowchange.org/>).

She has been part of the cultural revitalization work within skolt Sámi community starting Saa´mi Nue´tt organization with Tiina Sanila-Aikio, Heini Wesslin and Minna Moshnikoff, among others, organizing cultural camps, language nest activity in Sevettijärvi, hosting IPCC-bound workshops, coordinating the campaign leading the skolt Sámi gramota scrolls to be listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World listing and starting the co-management plan work in the watershed of River Näätämö that has led to the first Indigenous-led watershed restoration work in Nordic countries.

Feodoroff has also served as a chair of Sámi council and during her term concentrating on guarding the Sámi´s right to have a say on the industrial land use projects in Sápmi, especially on projects concerning industrial forestry and mining. She has been advocating the truth and reconciliation process between the Sámi and Finland and as a cherry in the pie, designed the dubbing structures for Sámi languages with Susa Saukko for children´s programs.

The following text is a combination of documentary images of the two day sessions, and a collective text composed of responses to the talk by Pauliina Feodoroff.

### **Freja:**

Pauliina asked about the language we use, where does one feel comfortable and what makes us feel uncomfortable?

Pauliina said that land communicates through your body in a way that it might take many, many years to decode the messages into verbal speech. How the land communicates is recognised in the practices and how people carry their bodies. It is an organic knowledge.

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Figure 2: Documentary drawing from the seminar (Mira).

Pauliina said that it is difficult to mention bloodlines in a time when the context is nationalistic. In a native tradition it is important.

Pauliina said that the colonial way of working together has the form of a pyramid. It is a way of working through specialization. Colonial pyramid working structures are based on fear.

Pauliina said that the decolonial way of working together is round, it has the form of a circle. The circle is nonhierarchical. Decolonial working structures are based on love, kinship and companionship.

We said that a practice of care needs time and space to accommodate it.

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Pauliina said that what you touch will transform you.

Freja said the format of this paragraph is taken from Athena Farrokhzad's (2013) collection of poems titled Vitsvit (White Blight).

### **Rebecca:**

on Suomenlinna between state lands & private lands

between the fortress island's tree that protects belonging & the institution that protects profound ignorance

between unwaged friendship & waged work

between a body sure & uncertain

between elevator pitches to Disney & restoring 180 hectares of wetlands; reintroducing boulders & rocks into rivers; creating 130 new sites for trout, grayling and salmon

between monitoring & restoring

between academic connections as an asset & exhaustion (also known as burn out)

between your body as an indicator & a commitment

between a camera that captures & a camera that cares

between care that extracts and care that sustains

between a passport that gets you here & a colonial monument

between Family & Family

between—1542, 1749, 1944, 1980— (the dates Pauliina draws out from under us)

& an emergency

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between sexual energy & military energy on Suomenlinna

### **Ali:**

Stories have been with us since some kind of a beginning. Some stories, as ongoing narratives, merge with others, take on new forms and meanings, must be read against the grain, and updated, as we update ourselves. As new stories of oppression add onto the old, characters and protagonists change, marginalized and the oppressed bodies shift, and new actors play the part, but the structure of the performance remains the same. The performative illusion also presents itself as an instance that such oppression is happening for the first time. In articulating the statement, “there has been change”, one is forced into a more responsible assessment, adding, *but not really*.

In the context of socio-political thought, if the walls of the house are the first and the basic unit or cell of society, it is also its most fundamental division, the house, protects and gives security and privacy from others. This is a contingent grouping, where by creating the grouping of a *family*, one is also creating a group, which is *non-family*. Moving from this agrarian construct of the wall, further divisions and groupings may be extrapolated into the compound wall, the locality, the suburb, city, district, state, nation, continent, planet, solar system, galaxy, the known universe... one's choice, if it were possible to make such a choice, would ideally be dependent on one's own comfort with the level of contingency: at which stage do we choose to exclude, the inevitable act of exclusion? At which stage do we define We the People? An almost Kafkaesque transmogrification connects a prehistoric past to sci-fi future. “Who really are ‘the people’? what operation of discursive power circumscribes ‘the people’ at any given moment, and for what purpose?” (Butler, 2015, 3). What has really changed?

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...

*Fiction* is increasingly occupying a position in our collective imaginations as a space that is less autocratic than theoretical knowledge. Through a resurgence of fiction, we, as a global society, are looking ever more towards fiction to ‘not tell us’ directly, because such a *direct* telling involves a set of power relations we have become ultimately suspicious of, and that we have learned to reject. Through the *indirect* telling that fiction can perform, we hope to find a more genuine experience, or at least a narrative and although archives are situated within the realm of the *auditable* past and *warranted memory*, it can take its inspiration from the vast uncharted spaces of the imagination. Like Janus, it may be rooted in the present, but must always face the past and future simultaneously—a *temporal hybrid*.

Paulina Federoff talks about one such story—a story of land rights. Not land ownership, but a right to land. A people’s right to a fundamental relationship between themselves and the earth, the rivers, the sea, the animals, birds and fish. A relationship like this feels inherently alien to me, firstly as a person born in a city, secondly also a city where one may live one’s entire life and yet not feel the sense of belonging. To own a relationship, to say this is mine, an ownership of kinship is a powerful feeling, and yet for it to be effective, for it to resonate, is it required to be paired with the ownership of loss, of trauma?

The discourse between such familial relationships and bonds of kinship, not only between people, but also non-human counterparts, and extending to non-living beings and non-beings, posits relationships as codified structures. Any code, whether as law, a code of rights, a constitution as a political code, a social code of conduct, a moral code, or a genetic or *memetic* code, is a statement of fundamental significance. Linguistically, it means that as spoken or written word, as a sign or symbol, it is a *signifier of meaning*, and that its value is significant. Code may

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even be interpreted as a genre of thought unto itself. Sacred texts, law books, cookbooks, and manifestos are all code that facilitate a *process*—they enable thought and action. They empower praxis.

Computer code facilitates the praxis of an entire world. A world that is neither a pre-existing *Old* world nor a discovered *New* world. However, when once everything within it was consciously worded through code, or encoded, we find ourselves immersed in a world already spiralling out of control, auto-generating itself through the very acts of user engagement. What we architect through code shapes our Cyberspace, for the future and for us. Artistic practice has the potential to disrupt this collective code, or at least problematise it to the extent that Cyberspace becomes a political space—not just a world for *being*, but also a world for *doing*.

The manifestation of a code as the building blocks of a world has undeniable parallels to the construction of multiple infrastructures, of specific contestable grounds whether social, political or economic, of exponential diversity, whether ethnic or technological, ultimately of power and its dynamic manifestations as fluctuating intersubjectivities, all sustained as a complex planetary *entanglement* (Mbembe, 2018) ultimately unrevealable as *architectures of control* (Marx, 1848).

Paulina Feodoroff talked about a shift from *monitoring* to *restoring* and one can't help but hear the resounding irony, in a time obsessed with surveillance, monitoring, and management. Perhaps this is why restoring takes on such radical overtones.

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Figure 3: Documentary drawing from the seminar (Mira)

### **Mira:**

Can a person survive without land? Can a person survive without a body?

Peoples, bound to nature,

impacted by the centralization of national policy making.

Institutions, whitened and controlled,

following bloodlines of the colonizer.

My ancestors were farmers in Karelia. To my grandmother, the house, land, dirt,  
and territory had all the meaning in the world to her.

This connection was affective, embodied, sensorial, and emotional.

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This connection formed as a strong and direct belongingness to a place and matter. Later, the abandoned houses and the villages lived strong in her mind. They were more real than the life around her.

Skolt Sámi lands, inhabited since the ice age, were given to Finnish farmers for free after the war by the Finnish government.

Living in the homeland effects how one carries their body. The body is whole instead of decapitated.

Land and waters mean protection. Land and waters need protection, as they are molested.

Indigenous knowledges attend to nonhuman animacy.

Underground water flow,  
layers of trauma,  
towards restoration,  
erotic energy,  
care.

### **Marie-Andrée:**

Being (in) a circle  
calm, time is passing a sitting still  
a quality of presence.

*I think: in order to be into care, one has to be into presence*

Being into care

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a concept?

I thought I had written about the light that was coming through the window  
the ray hitting the wooden floor  
its angle  
both sharp and soft, the feeling it left.

*I think: Into care is as much the space of the one who is being taken care of as it is the space of the one taking care of. Being into care is being in the space of this exchange. Fluid space. Everchanging space. The cared for and the caring for exchanging their places with one another, sometimes subtly, sometimes not, but continually.*

Into care with Pauliina  
in the ray of a light.

### **Sepideh:**

It is a day with friends and Pauliina who is a true inspirational person to me. Listening to Pauliina, the gravity of her wisdom makes me feel settled, my mind travels back and forth in between the past and present. The small pauses. It is inevitable that I am trying to connect her stories to recent happenings, thinking of justice, belonging and feeling that despite the fact that we may be together yet we are alone. At least today I feel otherwise, a place where everything is perfect, narratives, languages, people and their relations, it is possible today for a moment to feel this way, sitting in this room in Suomenlinna.

Pauliina's words loudly echoes in my mind:

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*“If I live an empty life someone else will fill it for me Shifting from observation to undoing the damages Captivity*

*A small pause*

*Women were always the ones who first would move/come and make relations. . .*

*Walking towards the. . .*

*To keep the family warm*

*I walk with my father*

*because he is the one who teaches us how to fish in our family*

*The revolution of landing into your own body, accepting physical shape and tone you are in this world because it is your current form of your existing*

*Awareness from this realization ‘bodily commitment’”*

Later in my body, I feel a sense of discomfort. Truly, how do we position ourselves to the locations and events around us? Collecting my thoughts around the traumatic events in the past, how honest I have been with myself in turning a mere ‘observation’ to a real ‘act’? On the way to becoming a mature person standing on our feet, perhaps every one of us are traumatized. Indeed, the path to becoming a woman standing on my feet has been tough and meanderingly obstructed.

From the corner, Marie-Andrée says, “Magic is a capacity for change”. I second that in my mind, indeed.

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Figure 4: Documentary drawings from the seminar (Abdullah).

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