Taking care of issues of concern: feminist possibilities and the curation of Speculative and Critical Design

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What are the possibilities for taking a feminist approach on 'an ethos of care' to the settings of engagement with Speculative and Critical Design? In this paper, I explore the intersection between the curation of Speculative and Critical Design (SCD) and the notion of 'care' as a question that has arisen in the work of feminist scholarship in technoscience. Feminist voices in SCD and related design disciplines have drawn attention to 'neglected things' within certain works of Speculative Design research. I expand this consideration to the settings of encounter with SCD. Through a short case study of curatorial practice, I focus through literature, in particular from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, to speculate on how qualities of care raised through enquiries in feminist technoscience are useful to consider in the care or curation of speculative enquiries around issues of concern.

Care; feminisms; technoscience; speculative design

Introduction

In this paper, I explore the intersection between the practice of curation and the settings in which it engages with Speculative and Critical Design (SCD). In so doing, I take up the notion of 'care' in the work of feminist scholarship in technoscience, notably Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's "matters of care" (2011; 2017), in order to explore how curatorial practices themselves might open up speculative possibilities. If feminist design researchers take seriously the view that museums and galleries may be unsuitable sites for the display of SCD (Russell, 2015) then what possibilities does this raise for the settings of engagement with SCD and for the practice of speculative curation? That is to say, if the organisational settings of cultural institutions, including museums and galleries, operate to enact and reproduce dominant and normative traditions of representation and meaning making, then we – as feminist design researchers – should, in part as a consequence, be sceptical about claims as to the efficacy of the production of debate in 'design for debate' (Kerridge, 2015).

As a mode of design practice rooted in the notion and exercise of care, curation raises the question and possibility of how to care for speculation. In responding to this question, this paper draws upon

a rich and varied trajectory of work by feminist scholarship in technoscience. In particular, I focus on matters of care in order to develop a reflexive account of a specific case study of my curatorial practice. Puig de la Bellacasa encourages 'an ethos of care' in the study of science and technology – for which, she proposes a 'thickening' of Bruno Latour's 'matters of concern' with 'care' using feminist knowledge politics (2011).

The case study I describe, *Antarctica SE3,* was a one-off curated event[1]; and was conceived as a testing ground for a speculative engagement to care for a matter of concern of climate change. This case study can be seen as a pivot for this paper, and I motivate it in the following ways: I use it to summon writing on care from feminist technoscience – and I take-up this literature on developing 'an ethos of care' that I consider to be a sensitizing concept for reflection on the curation of speculative endeavours. I reflect on the requirements that an ethos of care places on curatorial practices of speculative works, including a sensitivity and attitude towards creating practice responses that are situated, self-reflexive and embodied. The case study of *Antarctica SE3* provides a description of a practice that attempted 'curating with care' and I use it to highlight these sensitivities. Then, through discussion, I also draw attention to further challenges for fostering an ethico-political commitment that is central to care, and for 'taking care of the possible'.

Initially, the paper proceeds by outlining the take-up of feminist scholarship by design researchers and practitioners. I then go on to describe the dominant settings of public engagement with the outcomes of SCD – e.g. exhibitions within cultural institutions – and a number of calls and critiques that ask us to pay attention to the mediation of design in these settings.

Feminisms, Speculative and Critical Design and the settings of engagement

Recently, there has been a clear interest and uptake of feminist scholarship from science and technology in the field of Speculative and Critical Design.

That feminist theories offer a valuable and urgent approach can be traced through lineages of the discipline of design through HCI and Interaction Design to SCD. This includes Bardzell's proposed integration of feminist approaches into interaction design research and practice (2010); that, in turn, brought forward traditions associated with feminism from HCI research, including Bell and Dourish's critique of ubiquitous computing that identified how certain technologies replicate visions of gender relations in the home (2006); to more recent work which employs an intersectional feminist approach to critique SCD and highlights the role speculative design artefacts play in reproducing normative futures; to suggest ways for opening up futures to a plurality of different voices (Prado, 2015; Mazé and Wangel, 2017, p. 273). Questions of the neglect of issues of gender, race and class have arisen as an acute concern for feminist design scholars and practitioners involved in understanding the role of speculative and critical design as design research (e.g. Prado, 2014). Furthermore, a recent 'Conversation' at the Design Research Society conference by Laura Forlano et al., took voices from feminist technoscience, including Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, into the setting of design research; and asked, "How can engagement with speculative prototypes suggest a more participatory and co-designed experience?" (2016).

Extending from a focus on the outcomes SCD, to the settings of engagement with these outcomes, it can be seen that a dominant context for encountering SCD has been through the curated exhibition. Exhibitions, for the purposes of SCD, are conceived as spaces for public debate on issues of concern; and arguably therefore, the curation of such practice impacts this public debate. However, Kerridge suggests that we need more empirical accounts of "what exhibitions do for SCD" (2015). Gillian Russell provides such an account, as does Christina Coghill. Russell, in her review of *United Micro Kingdoms: A Design Fiction* by Dunne and Raby (Design Museum London, 2015) describes how the adoption of normative museological tropes of curation produced a didactic experience for an

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[1] I am using the commonplace notion of event in this paper, and not 'event' as the technical philosophical concept used in the work on 'design events' (Jönsson, 2014) and 'prototyping as event' (Wilkie, 2013).

exhibition audience, impacting an opportunity for a more 'participatory speculation'. Russell suggests that museums and exhibitions may not be suitable places for works of SCD (2015). Then, Christina Cogdell in her review of *Design and the Elastic Mind* (MoMA New York, 2008) was critical of an overarching curatorial narrative. She draws our attention to the curatorial framing of the group exhibition, where a dominant viewpoint – of design and science aligned with progress, and of a human control over nature – served to perpetuate narratives of colonialism and the decimation of natural resources through deterministic stances around technological progress (2009).

Thus, when Prado (2015) suggests that a feminist perspective of SCD can also offer alternatives to "how these objects are presented", this also speaks to certain feminist curatorial practices that challenge and problematise the patriarchal structure and hierarchies of cultural institutions; or that highlight arrangements that contribute to reproducing established power relations, and neglect issues of gender, race and class (e.g. Horne et al., 2016; Molesworth, 2010; Ramos, 2016). As feminist voices from technoscience would remind us here – "ways of representing things has world-making effects" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 30) and that we need to find ways to 'care for neglected things' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011).

Whilst critique of exhibitions of SCD is important, there is perhaps a reduction of curatorial practices to acts of presentation of design. As the etymology of the word 'curator' derives from the Latin *cura,* meaning 'to take care of', it seemed to me that when thinking about the settings for engaging with speculation, that an ethos of care as a notion and a practice was important to spend time with. Therefore, curation can be understood here, not as a variant of a design practice or as an act of presentation of an existing design, but as an exercise that connects to a concept of care and that enables attention towards a multiplicity of care practices.

In looking for ways to become sensitive to how to care for speculation, I draw on the notion of care that has arisen in the work of feminist scholarship in technoscience as a sensitising concept. In particular, I draw on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's work on "matters of care" as an entry point to ground this discussion (2011; 2017). Rather than developing a set of applicable methods for care, Puig de la Bellacasa is promoting 'an ethos of care' as a proposition to speculate with. Furthermore, feminist theory invites consideration of the practice, affect and commitment of care in SCD, and seems to make suggestions to take towards its curation – including developing situated and embodied experiences that seek to align speculation and care.

Care in feminist technoscience

The notion of care is typically associated with social support, welfare and health, as well as self-care. In addition, care is often understood as a practice of maintenance and repair that is feminized and predominantly gendered (Peace, 2017, p. 21); and one that has been at the forefront of a feminist concern with devalued labour (e.g. Precarias a la Deriva, 2006). Care as a 'labour of love' has been challenged and complicated by feminist practice through exposing the invisibility of carers and society's reliance on them, such as in the work on ethics and care by Carol Gilligan (1982) and her discussion of the moral and political work of care in the mother-child relationship.

Although I focus on the writing of Puig de la Bellacasa, there is a much broader set of literature to recognise here. A number of feminist scholars in Science and Technology Studies have been developing empirical and theoretical accounts of care over the last decade. There has been a sustained preoccupation with questions of responsibility, care and agency in scientific knowledge production; and a focus on practices of healthcare – such as in the work of Annemarie Mol (2008) in relation to patient care and choice; as well as care as a practice of tinkering and experimentation (Mol et al., 2010); and care in relation to environmental policy issues (Waterton, 2002) and farming practices (Singleton, 2010), to name a few. The work of feminist sociologists is important in elevating, rather than downgrading, mundane practices of care (e.g. Latimer, 2018). Puig de la Bellacasa's writing draws on care and ethics with Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher; and enters into dialogue with the work of Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers amongst others –

work that includes a notion of care that extend from an anthropocentric view, to the pressing challenges in caring for fragile "more-than human worlds" (2017, p.1).

Through its circulation as a practice, care as a feminist concern is acknowledged as a slippery, ambiguous term; where care – or the lack of it – can be expressed in different ways, depending on who is describing it, and in what situation; and where caring for one thing may mean *not* caring for another, thus highlighting the contested nature of care (Tronto, 1993, 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 9). Part of the contribution of feminist theory to practices of care has been to acknowledge that the ambivalence of care is *useful*. As Puig de la Bellacasa also suggests, to try to summarise the plurality of the contradictory viewpoints would be a reductive act at odds with the liveliness of care (2017, p. 2-3). So, whilst ways of caring can be identified and empirically described, these multiple and polyphonic definitions are in themselves central to an ethos of care, where the complexity of care makes it usefully resistant to constraint. Central to feminist thinking is a commitment grounded in situated practices; concurrently, a situated approach – of how to care in each situation – becomes paramount as a way of thinking and doing care.

In her writing, Puig de la Bellacasa's aim is to suggest how care in technoscience and nature-cultures means more than the responsible maintenance of technology; and more than a feel-good attitude or "a moral value added to the thinking of things" (2011, p. 99). She describes caring as comprising three connected elements: it is an *affective, embodied phenomenon*, where transforming things into matters of care is a way of relating to them, of inevitably becoming affected by them, and of modifying their potential to affect others; and caring is also a *practical labour* – that requires getting involved in a practical way; and an *ethico-political commitment* that affects the way knowledge is produced (2017, p. 4-7).

Puig de la Bellacasa scans voices on care from different domains, and includes the voices of many other feminist scholars (2017, p. 2-17); but highlights an understanding on care by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher as central to her own ethos of care. Fisher and Tronto proposed an ambiguous notion for care to include: "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (1990, p.40). Puig de la Bellacasa finds this 'generic' description useful for the purpose of her speculative exploration through care – and this connection of care to a speculative endeavour is pertinent to my enquiry also. First, Fisher and Tronto expose care as open-ended ("everything we do") and do not fix the location of care-giving to solely a human interaction, or limit the issues that should be cared about; second, as an act of 'maintenance and repair' they propose that care gives attention towards the ongoing, everyday practices of social reproduction; and third, they suggest that questions around the ethics of care, and how to care, need to be asked and speculated on ("as well as possible"), and therefore to use care *itself* as a provocation and an act of critique.

My decision to focus on the theory of Puig de la Bellacasa, in order to develop a reflexive account of practice, is due to the connection between care and speculation in her writing that make this literature pertinent to focus with – and to take to caring for modes of speculation, such as speculative design research.

Developing 'an ethos of care'
Drawing on the work of Puig de la Bellacasa, for my purposes, I will take up a number of points that put pressure on thinking about the care of speculative endeavours. First, the slippery, ambivalent nature of care is intrinsic to caring practices, and that this is useful. Care seems to demand a necessity of developing situated responses around issues of concern, and consequently, a resistance to developing methods of caring. Through this literature, I am persuaded that care insists upon an ethos, rather than a methodology of how to 'do' care (also see Mol, et al, 2010, p. 13).

Second, that care is simultaneously an embodied state, a practice of 'doing and intervening', and an ethical obligation. It engages hands-on action with affective and ethical implications – it has

consequences – where transforming things into matters of care is a way of relating to them (Bellacasa, 2017, p. 5). A central question driving Puig de la Bellacasa's enquiry is this: "how can an ethico-political concern such as caring affect the way we observe and present things?" (2011, p. 100). If we understand, as Haraway described, that "it matters what worlds we world worlds with" (2011), and acknowledge that the ways in which we study and represent things can have world-making effects, then we need to be aware of what kinds of frames orient our caring acts. What counts as care? What is cared for, and consequently, what *isn't* cared for? And who, or what, is neglected?

For Puig de la Bellacasa, engaging with care requires a "speculative commitment to neglected things", that is, to "think about how different things would be if they generated care" (2011, p. 96). This engagement is described as a 'commitment' because care is attached to a situated understanding of care, that is affective, practical and ethical; and 'speculative' because it retains an openness on the specific caring requirements for each situation, instead of presupposing there is one way of caring. Therefore, when asking how care can contribute to the curation of speculative endeavours – or the act of framing 'another way' in order to pay attention to how things could be – this would, again, seem to insist that a situated, but open-ended response is required.

In the next section, I will describe a case study of a curated event – *Antarctica SE3* – that I have used to both explore and motivate my understanding of the literature from Puig de la Bellacasa. What I have been looking for are approaches that offer a more productive relationship with speculative acts and the settings of encounter. Instead of adopting engagement formats without consideration of 'what they do for SCD', could a more situated, germane and open-ended response – of how to care in each situation – foster speculation and care for an issue of concern? Could a self-reflexive orientation, to trace the relation of our position to our practice, highlight what or who is neglected from a speculative act?

Curating with care

To motivate an understanding of an ethos of care, the following short case study provides a description of a practice that attempted 'curating with care'. The one-off event was made outside the remit of a cultural institution, and took a situated (and sited) response to a speculative engagement with an issue of concern, namely, climate change. As I will describe, a relational format with multiple participants was developed, and the outcome of the speculative event, was left open-ended and unfolded over the durational frame. This format enabled participants tune-in to various positions around the issue of concern; and set out to give attention to the care of 'more-than-human' things: the care of a heatwave and rising C02 levels.

Case Study: Antarctica SE3

In September 2016, ten people local to south-east London participated in *Antarctica SE3*, meeting in Blackheath, Lewisham, and walking four miles south to Catford. This speculative work was conceived as a 'curated conversation' to mediate and care for a matter of concern around issues of climate change. Earlier that summer, the South Pole Observatory in Antarctica had recorded levels of carbon dioxide at 400 parts per million for the first time in four million years (Kahn, 2016); an indicator of our sore planet. At a local level, *Antarctica SE3* occurred in the hottest September since 1911 ("Highest September Temperate", 2016), a heatwave that could be described as both an actant and a mediator in a wider cascade of effects of global warming.

This event had a number of interconnected conceptual and practical proposals that connected caring about an issue of concern with the settings of speculation. First, how to situate speculation for rising C02 levels in Antarctica from this site in south-east London? How do climate change predictions manifest locally – could a heatwave be cared for? Second, what format could promote speculation with and through these more-than-human things of gases and heat? And what formats enable a quality of self-reflexivity? Last, how to construct the abstract concept of 'rising C02 levels' as an

affective experience? If a group of participants wonder about – and wander about – a heatwave, is this a form of embodied speculation?

Figure 1 Participants in Antarctica SE3, Blackheath. Photo credit: Gemma Lord

The connection to Antarctica also seemed to promote the format of a walk, or expedition; a format that is an "embodied presence in motion" (Solnit, 2014); one that speaks to tactics of collective protest and resonates with the psychogeographic wandering of Situationist International, or promenade performance experiences. Unlike a turn towards an 'active spectator engagement' (e.g. Ranciere, 2007), the participatory format was relational and conversational. It was designed to promote 'active listening' (Schrader, 2015, p. 673) or 'listening with care' (Puig, 2017, p. 58) through a semi-structured framework for group interaction, where the majority of the conversations were intimate ones between two people.

Figure 2 Participants in Antarctica SE3, Catford. Photo credit: Gemma Lord

The curation of the socio-material setting was carefully considered and existing artefacts and infrastructure were gathered to situate and motivate conversations at a number of points along the

route. Although these chosen locations did not connect to the local implications of climate change as obviously as a flood barrier might, say; I wondered whether specific locations of south-east London could be connected to Antarctica through an almost parasitical overlay of materials, concerns and people, a sort of 'dumb' augmented reality; by *not* being in Antarctica; by people walking as an embodiment of an expedition, speculating through a place synonymous with climate change whilst situated in a heat wave?

Figure 3 Participants materials of climate change. Photo credit: Gemma Lord.

Yellow hats, statistics, recording equipment, people, weather all gathered to situate a conversation in a durational and relational framework and to contribute a 'logic of materials' to the event (Lury & Wakeford, 2012). Participants were invited to bring a 'material of climate change' – including an electricity meter key, a bottle of English wine, a piece of coal from China, a bicycle, a worn t-shirt from Florida Keys reading "Silence in the Islands" – and these materials functioned both as prompts to open an initial conversation and enabled a degree of visibility around the various opinions on the issue of climate change.
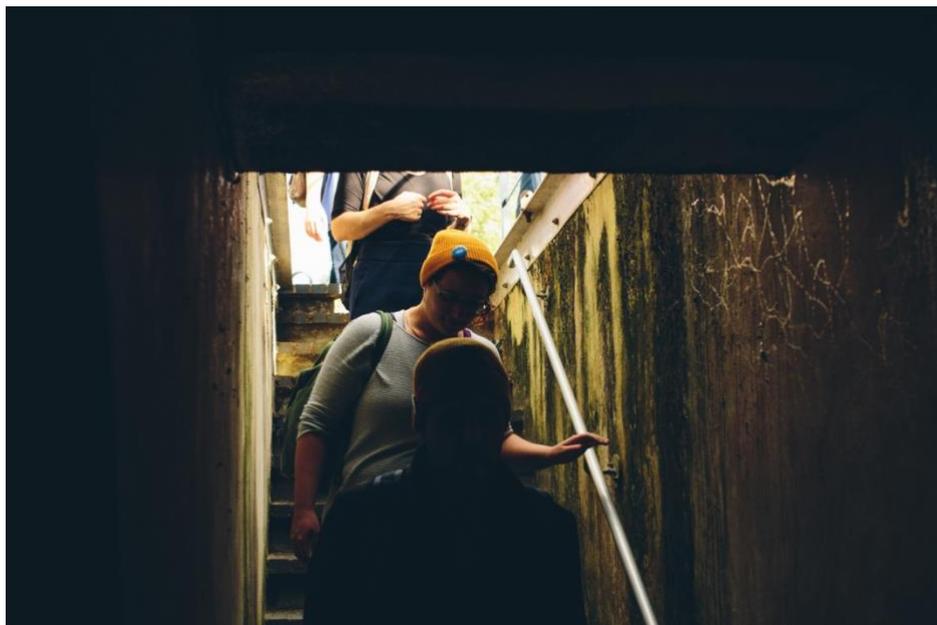
Figure 3 Underground Ice House. Photo credit: Gemma Lord.

Discussion: Caring for issues of concern and taking care of the possible

In one respect, the case study addresses how relational formats might afford modes of care, as well as exploring settings outside cultural institutions for their capacity to facilitate issues of concern. As I hope will be surmised from the description and following discussion of the case study, certain sensitivities raised in the section *Developing 'an ethos of care'* begin to resonate through reflecting on this activity, where qualities of situated-ness, embodiment and self-reflexivity around an issue of concern were given attention through the curation and the unfolding timeframe of the event.

Care has a contested nature, and caring for one thing may mean not caring for another – but this 'contest' is intrinsic to the notion of care; and because of it, care seems to have a resistance to repeatable methods where 'how to care' needs to be kept complicated. Situated responses are more appropriate for establishing 'how to care in each situation', to respond to the requirements of a particular empirical setting. Additionally, this chimes with a feminist curatorial approach of taking care in the curatorial role through 'attending to local urgencies' (Horne, et al., 2016, p. 124). Therefore, *Antarctica SE3* was an attempt to situate speculation around the complex global issue of climate change, within the context of south-east London; through configuring an existing heterogeneous network of humans, non-humans, more-than-humans, practices and spaces – including the heat-scorched grass of Blackheath common, the blue heritage plaques of two male Victorian Antarctic explorers, an Ice House, hidden rivers, petrol stations and paths unrecorded by Google.

An ethos of care that this activity produced was a relational way of connecting local conditions of extreme weather to rising C02 levels. For example, during the walk through the meteorological setting of a heat wave, a visit to an Ice House (a Victorian storage facility for food) was planned as a contrasting, embodied experience of a colder environment. Here, in a chamber underground, participants discussions reflected on the environmental impact of the shipping of imported ice required to store food; and there was discussion about Antarctica as a location of fantasy, historically, a place to project myths and legends. This relational frame that connected human participants and more-than-human things, resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa's proposal that "transforming things into matters of care is a way of relating to them" in practical and affective ways (2011, p. 90; 2017, pp. 5-6).

Then, care also suggests an on-going self-reflexive ethos for understanding the frames that orient our caring acts, of what is being encouraged to take care of, and how. By staging assemblages of relations to explicate configurations of care, questions can be asked about who and what is, and is not, assembled. Whilst this was a small group of participants (who were friends, or who had seen the event advertised through social media; and included a Transport for London worker, a Green Party activist, a gardener, a curator, a designer), they were given opportunities for acknowledging the various positions or experiences they brought to the issue of climate change. The self-reflexivity of participants was paramount, especially given our relative privileged situation in London; as the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, and rising sea levels, rising air temperature, storms, flooding, extreme weather and under-nourished soils, create unbearable living conditions for many.

Therefore, opportunities for self-reflexivity were afforded through the intimate conversations of the relational format, as well as through the personal descriptions of materials brought to the beginning of the event. Here, for example, one participant brought an electricity meter key to describe her need for a direct financial relation to her power consumption; whilst another participant brought a bottle of English wine as a material to talk through his opinion around the benefits of climate change and the changing patterns of crop production – a reminder of the diversity of opinions in the ecology of this issue. Although this event took place outside the settings of the gallery or museum, 'neglected issues' of gender, class and race were raised – for example, prompted by a blue heritage plaque commemorating a famous male Antarctic explorer, participants initiated a conversation around geopolitics of 'unsettled' land, and the colonial narratives connected to expeditions in

Antarctica. Eating food of dry Antarctica 'sledging biscuits' prompted conversations around food conservation and production, as well as cereal crop failures that year.

In addition to qualities of situated-ness, embodiment and self-reflexivity, another quality or attitude that the literature on an ethos of care describes is that of an ethico-political commitment; that is, to *generate* care through an act of concern. But did this happen in *Antarctica SE3*? If the point is not only to expose or reveal 'neglected things' for care, but also to generate care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 94) and to both be affected and to affect others; then was it enough to make a space for criticality and speculation through this short, single event? Was this 'engagement', and is engagement the same as care?; or does care require something else, a different mode of practice that enables an ethico-political commitment? As STS feminist Astrid Shrader asks, "What is the relationship between knowledge and affect?" (2015, p. 671), or between knowing that we care about something to becoming troubled by it?

Therefore, I suggest that a further challenge for the curation of speculation endeavours – and that can also be found in literature from Puig – is that "we must take care of things in order to remain responsible for their becomings" (2011, p. 90). Not only does Puig de la Bellacasa make the argument for doing more careful acts of speculation, in territories that may be neglected in some way, and to attend to situated and urgent matters of concern; but that this attention of care extends to taking seriously what becomes through them. I see that there is possibility for attaching "taking care of the possible" (Bordeleau & Stengers, 2010,p.12) to the *curation* or care of acts of speculation. Through 'caring for' acts of speculation, should we attend to what we are *and* what aren't we speculating about? And would the care of speculative endeavours ask us to pay attention to both?

Conclusion

If we take seriously the criticism that the dominant settings for speculative and critical design – such as exhibitions in art galleries and museums – may impose curatorial narratives that problematize who is represented in 'debates on futures', and how; then we – as feminist design researchers – should also consider alternative paradigms for caring for speculation. As an activity that already contains the concept of care, I suggest that curation offers up an opportunity to explore a multiplicity of care practices. Therefore, to expand an understanding on care, I have drawn on literature from feminist technoscience on "matters of care" that I see as productive for this purpose, to point to key features of developing an ethos of care.

In this literature, a notion of care as 'good intentions' is dismissed (see also Tronto, 2015). Here, care is described as simultaneously an affective, practical and ethico-political act; and I suggest that this sensitises curatorial practice with a feminist notion care in a number of ways. First, it suggests a move towards embodied interactions that seek to foster affect and generate care through concrete, practical acts. Second, rather than a fixed or replicable methodology for caring practices, it suggests that care requires a situated approach that asks, 'how to care in each situation'. Third, care also demands the development of an ongoing self-reflexive ethos for understanding the frames that orient our caring acts, and this includes looking for places where care may be overlooked or neglected. I have used the points raised in the section *Developing 'an ethos of care'* to reflect on a practice case study, *Antarctica SE3*, that offered a situated curatorial paradigm for speculative engagement with an issue of concern of climate change.

Finally, not only does the literature make the argument for doing more careful acts of speculation, in territories that may be neglected in some way, but that this attention of care extends to taking seriously and responsibly what 'becomes' through them – and this is what I understand within Puig de la Bellacasa's argument for the ethico-political commitment involved in care practices. In addition, therefore, I see that there is potential for attaching 'taking care of the possible' and a responsibility for what becomes, to the *curation* or care of acts of speculation.

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