

A Letter to Krabstadt Education Center

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Abstract

Gahee Park's epistolary essay elaborates on the need to reframe the meaning of knowledge production in her curatorial practice. Musing upon Irit Rogoff's 'event of knowledge', Park states that learning is a performative activity built through specific encounters with others. She suggests love as a practice of learning by emphasizing on the role of humor, laughter and excitement in art education. The text concludes with a set of questions to KEC as pedagogical guidelines.

Dear Krabstadt Education Center,

Whenever asked to speak about my curatorial work, I used to frame it as a practice of working within the possibility of knowledge production. Observing the manifestation of hegemonic power structures in the education system, which tends to reproduce a static way of thinking, it was important to understand artistic practice in general as a tool to produce different forms of knowledge that could stimulate a broader range of perspectives and ideas. However, recently I've noticed a change in my stance: I started to question the phrase "knowledge production" and instead became more curious about words like "learning" and "knowing" as mutual or interdependent processes. I feel uncomfortable automatically ascribing a "productive" role to the generation of knowledge to be performed by the curator/artist; it seems more appropriate to consider my practice as a durational process of "knowing" and "learning," rather than as a closed and defined noun called "knowledge." I have become more interested in organizing the process of learning as an interdependent process in which practitioners can deviate from their position as individual producers and build knowledge together on the premise of the uncertainty of their own knowledge.

To explain the curatorial as a processual practice of learning, I borrow from Irit Rogoff's notion of the "event of knowledge."^[1] Rogoff distinguishes between curating and "the curatorial," stating that if curating is an act of staging the subject within a system of representation, the curatorial is a process of producing knowledge structures and discourses. It is a practice of building a sustainable system and trajectory that enables thought and knowledge of different levels to be constantly engaged with and initiated, allowing existing knowledge and questions to be rewritten (or overcome), which is indeed how I understand it. Calling these performative and contemplative processes the "event of knowledge," Rogoff implies that as such an event occurs, the organization of knowledge within a new framework of relationships needs to go beyond existing discourses for the potential for knowledge production to become manifest. The idea of the "event of knowledge" has become crucial in my curatorial practice as a method. In projects such as "the practice of learning," which took place at Seoul Museum of Art in 2021, in which love was the prism through which to learn from others, I attempted to

create a space for a series of workshops, performances, and activities, which turned the museum into a site of being/learning together.

I focus on the moment (“event”) in which the curator’s system of knowing encounters a spectrum and structures of knowledge as engaged with by others. When a new framework of relationships begins to be established through different encounters, those encounters can become composite moments through which a new web of knowledge is brought into being. That is to say, one cannot create the “event of knowledge” on one’s own, it only occurs through experiences in a process with others. This process inevitably entails performative aspects. Ultimately, the use of words such as learning and knowing aims to emphasize its performative nature, unfolding within a process of encounters among peers or with others unknown.

The importance of mutuality and interdependence in the process of learning and knowing became more evident for me in the past two years. Issues of marginalization and exclusion in society have been accelerated through the outbreak of Covid-19, revealing solidified structures of prejudice and inequity. In Seoul, the queer community was the first to be condemned as a “superspreader,” since some of the first cases were spotted in queer clubs. In addition, there was an increase in hate speech and corona-based racism, targeting specific racial and gender groups, underlining how scapegoating and blame increase during a crisis. A way to overcome the boundaries that we want to repress and be in denial of, was, I think, our willingness to not turn against but rather toward each other. We needed to develop our sense of being together through a willingness to learn from one another, to look out for each other, be more sensitive, and to understand the interdependence of being together. Thus, I came to value the experience of a kind of learning that encourages people to look out for and take care of those who are present in their daily lives and community.

Obviously, the specific backgrounds of and contexts in which you, Krabstadt Education Center, and I live in now are different. However, as a society populated by unwanted people, with their problems, who have been sent to the periphery, Krabstadt may describe a condition that we share—which is living under neoliberalism. The reality of those unwanted people, who usually become precarious workers, is having unrelenting jobs that require a high level of commitment and workload but are static in the sense that one cannot rise above their precarity. This is a reality that is often unseen and concealed by the hegemonic capitalist system. I suppose the structure of cities in neoliberal economies was initially designed to be like that, as were the social structures that perpetually separate and promote segregation along with the conventional ideas and attitudes of the people reinforcing such circumstances. I believe “Krabstadt” is where this rubbish reality is maximized for the purpose of satire and comedy.

I am curious about the world of Krabstadt, and especially the Krabstadt Education Center (KEC) that you are building. Why did you choose to focus on developing an education center among the many institutions in society? Is this because all of you are somehow engaged in art education? Do you think existing educational systems perpetuate inequality? If so, what can I expect to learn from KEC and how? Is there a different way to pursue learning? Do we even need a different methodology toward learning? If so, why? There may not be any explicit answers to these questions right now, but I still want to pose them, hoping that our dialogue can become a way of learning from one another.

Love as Practice of Learning

Love is a word that I have always thought of as synonymous when thinking about “learning.” So I would like us to think of “love” as a key to our dialogue. Where is the love in the humorous and colorful atmosphere of

Krabstadt? What can “love” mean for KEC?

I believe we are living in an era in which love is needed more than ever. Often, we perceive love as a special and romantic feeling that is only revealed within certain structures and relationships. However, love—whether it is *eros* toward a specific subject or affection for humankind in a broader sense—leads us to experience inversion in discovering the differences between one another through encounter, and in addition, explore the world by superimposing the experiences of others onto ourselves. So, love is premised on a willful heart of learning, and enables knowing through understanding such differences by inviting us to face an entirely new world. I reckon we should think of love as a common attitude toward understanding and engaging with the world, which also become reasons for living.

In fact, love is a willful practice of learning that leads to change in our attitude and thought, as well as becoming a cause that initiates understanding of differences by confronting things that are considered strange, different, and unusual in daily life. And here, love is not something that inhabits one’s domain or which can be practiced in some exceptional circumstances, but is a deliberate practice of learning materialized in everyday life confronted by a community and society. So, although we believe that anyone can love, in fact, from the very beginning we don’t really know how to understand another world and be in a relationship. I remember reading Erich Fromm, stating that love is not something that we “fall in to,” but is being “engaged with,” and that “in order to truly love, one needs to be learned.”^[2] Exercise is needed as preparation for the mindset of love and the practice of learning. What can we learn at KEC? Could we learn how to love as a way of learning?

Humor and Excitement

It seems that the most powerful elements that make up KEC are satire and humor that poke at depressing reality. Thanks to humor and satire, the unwanted people and problems don’t crumble in pessimism, but are barreling on, being a force for change. Of course, it’s not simple optimism. The bitterness of being beaten by the insight that comes after laughter is also powerful. Satire and humor are commonly used in art, and they are critical strategies to subvert or criticize reality. I wonder what role satire and humor play in KEC other than as the critical tools we know them to be, and if they do, why you employed these as you were building KEC.

Although slightly different, it reminds me of the “excitement” in classrooms that bell hooks once mentioned. She argued that inciting excitement in class breaks the serious atmosphere, and that this allows for the transgression of boundaries. The excitement in class catalyzes the construction of a relationship in which everyone in the classroom interacts with one another and identifies who they are in the process, while also breaking the rigid and hierarchical relationship that can arise between teachers and students. A network of knowledge that is stimulated by intersecting languages, cultures, and relationships that break individual boundaries. Just think about it— isn’t it truly ideal?

Here is the part of what she said that I really loved: “if there is laughter in the classroom, a mutual exchange of thoughts has probably been made.”^[3] Generally, “excitement” is considered taboo in the classroom. I don’t mean the excitement of learning but excitement as an obstacle to concentration in the classroom. Well, at least in my experience, it was taboo to be so excited in class. However, here excitement is referred to as a tool for learning, where the boundaries of one’s norms and knowledge can be overcome and intersect with others’. In such a situation, students naturally learn from others, and mutuality in learning takes place, as excitement can ease the tension or break the solemn atmosphere in class. In other words, excitement is a very cathartic and dynamic force required for learning. Perhaps it is by this same logic that KEC needs humor and satire for it to become a

reality? Meaning that what we do here, building a site for learning with laughter, excitement, etc., is ultimately establishing a mindset or a room within oneself that is an attitude toward learning. What do you think?

Amphibian, to Become-with-Others

Love, laughter, or excitement can become experiential tools allowing us to file down the boundaries that bound us. Love, laughter, and excitement keep us in shape, and the exercise of keeping in shape is to listen, pay attention to, wait, and encounter unknown existences beyond the boundaries. Therefore, blurring boundaries does not mean losing the place that each of us occupies, but instead is an experience of discovering something new in the exchange of our experiences. I believe these exchanges are the process of becoming with others through encounters. In real life, it is true that it is hard to meet people with different cultural, linguistic, racial, bodily, gender, political, and economic conditions. While we pass different people on the street every day, if you think about it, those we interact and speak to are in fact people who share similar conditions. For us to learn from one another across boundaries, we need to have an environment and sites where we can encounter beyond the personal frameworks, even if it may cause dispute and conflict. Without having such a site, we could end up not even being aware of the boundaries.

It is interesting how researcher Alberto Altes Arlandis conveys the practice of learning through encounter and waiting by juxtaposing amphibians inhabiting a littoral landscape—conceived by philosopher Per Nilson. I quote:

“Littoral” is that which is close to the shore, the coastal environments, including some permanently submerged areas and the zones that are only touched by the high water on rare occasions. All kinds of interesting processes and encounters happen within these areas, and well beyond their strict edges. The littoral is actually larger than it seems. It defines a wise zone of exchange and encounter—not only between water and land—and its specific conditions of humidity, diversity and shifting openness support unique types of life. (...) Inhabiting can be seen therefore as moving along, and inhibition understood in this way breaks the opposition between settlers and nomads (seen as place bound, and placeless, respectively). The wayfarer, moving along and not across, is neither placeless nor placebound but in a constant practice of placemaking. “The Amphibian” is therefore a wayfarer that inhabits littoral landscapes and cares about them and their drift: she endures the encounter with the land and its fragile ecologies.^[4]

I like how Alberto depicts the dynamics of exchanging and blurring edges through the littoral, which lies in between the shore and the sea. Ultimately, learning as we speak of it is not about finding an obvious answer, but instead about obtaining the sense of learning through the dynamics of giving and receiving. Most of all, I love the way he articulates the amphibian as a wayfarer that inhabits littoral landscapes; that is, amphibians are intermediate beings as well as hybrid characters, living in the water and on land, beings living a dual life.

I think in general we go through life denying our capability to lead a dual life, or without knowing it. In actuality we could all be amphibians. There are two clues I’ve found that point to this. First, it begins with the realization that we are innate beings with complex identities. So, we mistake ourselves for beings with singular identities and easily exclude and distinguish others with different positions. Indeed, we have a blind spot for the other complex and multilayered aspects of ourselves, overlooking the variability of our position and condition that can fluctuate depending on where we stand. And this fluctuating is possible by deciding to “become-with-others” through encounters and dealing with boundaries in daily life. We need a perspective that enables us to deviate

from the general dichotomy of normality and not be focused on a single issue.

How do people of different cultures, languages, races, genders, and generations meet and interact at KEC? Are contacts between different people made intentionally? I believe that even if there is disagreement and friction, if they can encounter and run into one another, KEC could also become a littoral zone. Could we consider such possibilities? If KEC is to become a littoral landscape, would those whose practices in becoming-with-others at KEC become amphibians too?

Promiscuity Square

Imagine a community in which there are many beings not classified according to a binary system, and that exist as a diverse voice rather than a “problem” outside of the norm. Imagine a community where so-called normality does not apply, a community full of laughter and excitement, one based on love. Instead of a structure that flows hierarchically down from top to bottom, imagine a learning community that intersects in multiple directions. This imagined community has a complex and promiscuous relationship based on a non-binary structure.

What sort of relationships could be possible in Krabstadt? Or is the community imagined within Krabstadt promiscuous? I would obviously need to take more time to see how Krabstadt has been formed and evolved, but based on what it is for now, I can say that it’s not naive or innocent. I find this very fascinating. I often encounter practices that reflect social problems or issues that miss the dynamics of our complex reality as they are caught up in political correctness or moral obligations. And they attempt to fix these in the “right” way, concluding with a prescriptive solution: “This is right. It should be done this way.” It is hard not to fall into the trap of becoming dogmatic, as we are taught within the norms of society. But it seems that Krabstadt is not like that, but rather a context where inhomogeneous beings come across one another constantly to create and reconcile problems, and in this process authoritative and bureaucratic structures of reality are exposed. I believe this is Krabstadt.

I suppose, after all, that what learning and its related practices referred to at KEC don’t aim for is attaining knowledge itself. Rather it is about producing a place to learn from one another, where common experience is building promiscuous relationships by fiercely listening to, speaking up, arguing, negotiating, reaching consensus and resisting it, and sometimes being distant. In other words, it seems that KEC is a “promiscuous square,” at least to me. Or I wish it to be.

I end this letter by sharing an excerpt from “Towards a Promiscuous Square” written by my colleague and art critic Hanbum Lee a few years ago.

We are making a temporal square here. And this square is promiscuous more than anything. The square, from the outset, is neither a place where something can be built on the same demands nor a homogeneous one. It must not be such a place. The square is a fluid space where distinctions and differences, contradiction and discordance, dissonance and antagonism occur incessantly. It is a space where no concurrence is presupposed and unity is not the ultimate goal; only uncompromising negotiations are to be performed. The square refuses to be represented as one united landscape, but rather, it is preferable that singular beings function as they are. We need the square.^[5]

Looking forward to meeting you in the promiscuous square,

With love from Seoul.

Footnotes

1. Rogoff, Irit and Von Bismarck, Beatrice. "Curating/Curatorial." In *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Edited by Betrice von Bismarck, Jön Schaffaff and Thomas Weski. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012. pp. 21–40.
2. Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*. Translated by Moonsu Hwang. Seoul: Moonye Publisher. 2006 [1956]. pp. 15–45.
3. hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Translated by Eunjin Yoon. Seoul: Motive Book. 2008 [1994]. pp. 158–200.
4. Altes Arlandis, Alberto. "Architectures of Encounter, Attention and Care: Towards Responsible Worlding Action." In *The Constituent Museum*. Amsterdam: Valiz. 2018. pp. 80–90.
5. Lee, Hanbum. "Towards a Promiscuous Square." Unpublished. 2017.