

“A book is already a library”

Kate Whiteway

Over the last three years, Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik – the duo collectively known as Soft Turns – have been in the artist residency program at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of Guelph. Their practice pivots on themes of the materiality of information and the slipperiness between the organic and the digital. This kind of study sees them engage with researchers in diverse fields at the university, including agrogeology and space agriculture. So, to write on Soft Turns, artists who engage a complex and layered integration of science-based knowledge systems, my first impulse was to question my own qualification. Through what parameters would I, someone trained in the field of contemporary art, be able to read and interpret their work? How would I grasp their field of references and the stakes of their inquiries?

I accepted the invitation to write because I felt interpolated by something in each of my encounters with Soft Turns, including an exhibition,ⁱ an artwork,ⁱⁱ and a conversation.ⁱⁱⁱ This ‘something’ is the desire they communicate towards their subject, a desire that, in turn, invites the viewer in and sets them alight. Soft Turns have been practicing for over a decade, creating video-based installations that reach across multiple disciplines and bear the mark of collaborative authorship. They are inspired by methods in the natural sciences, like closed-loop tests and controlled-environment chambers. Their wide-cast net and cross-pollination of source material includes YouTube instructional videos, art magazines, and scientific journals. The artists lift their methodology of collaboration from their study. For instance, the “critical zone,” a term used to delimit the space approximately one metre above and below the planetary surface that supports most life, has acted as inspiration for multiple inquiries. The critical zone is an apparatus used by environmental scientists that calls for cross-disciplinary collaboration between previously isolated natural sciences, and is, for this reason, instructive to Soft Turns’ way of making.

Soft Turns’ practice delivers a kind of speculative fiction, where sentient and non-sentient beings converse on the same surface. There is the figure of the cosmonaut and the entity of the traveller’s journal. There are stone cells, the crystalline structures responsible for the grittiness of pears. Gorlitz and Olejnik are currently interested in how, like tiny optic-fibres, stone cells have recently been theorized to bring light deeper into plant tissue for photosynthesis. And there is *Arabidopsis Thaliana*, the first plant that survived a full life cycle in microgravity, the “lab rat” of plant biology. This plant, an edible weed that grows in disturbed terrain, between pavement cracks and in junkyards, has been a sounding board for several of their installations, including *the seeds float away*. This cast of characters recur across their body of work, playing different parts according to context of the installation.

The kind of cosmonaut that Soft Turns engage is the one who plants and communes with gardens in outer space. It is from such a gravity and soil-free environment that *Space Mould* (2018) begins its transmission. Set in what could be an off-world greenhouse, the video

speculates on a future without soil. The camera robotically pans across plains of granular particles, representing a catalogue of commodified substrates that could potentially act as soil replacements in light of the finitude of resources on the planet. The substrates have been manually crushed from the salvaged porcelain of toilets, computer boards and other junkyard regulars. The camera lens dips into each substrate, leaving an indent as if planting a seed; its touch triggers digital distortions at the edge of the frame. The substrates, 19 of which are on display in *the seeds float away*, were selected with guidance from researchers in aeroponics and green-roof technology at the University of Guelph.^{iv} In a gesture of interpolation by the artists that combines the speculative premise of the video with archival research into space history, the video is accompanied by narration from a journal by Valentin Lebedev, “Diary of a Cosmonaut: 211 Days in Space.” Lebedev was the flight engineer aboard the Soviet space station Salyut 7. On this trip, he was also responsible for the exo-garden.^v Long before American astronaut Scott Kelly posted a bouquet of zinnias grown in space to his Instagram in 2016, Lebedev had witnessed the first flower bloom in space, the *Arabidopsis Thaliana*, in 1982.

For their exhibition *The Vibrating Self* at Paved Arts in 2012, the artists wrote, “Our works are attempts to show that the metaphysical operates already at every point, in every encounter, that the horizon is within every proposition, that a book is already a library, that silence or an image is a cluster of statements.” The poetic metaphor of the book being a library helped me to understand how their practice not only takes a contained entity and stretches it across contexts, but rather how the object itself already is the vastness of the references and disciplines which make it up.

During a recent writing residency I attended, led by *Momus*, presenter Tammer El-Sheikh asked the question, who are your authorities? Who do you invoke, affiliate with, argue against, or summon in your work? In practical terms, who do you cite? Citation is, in a sense, a formalized process of conversing. On her blog Feminist Killjoys, Sara Ahmed wrote, “I would describe citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies.”^{vi} Citation, she argues, is political, and it has the power to regulate, intervene, or create new authoritative structures within disciplines. When we cite we show our work, lay bare our references, and communicate our aesthetic and political engagements.

My concerns with my own literacy in writing about Soft Turns’ practice began to erode through an email exchange with the artists. They wrote, “What has ultimately always guided us is conversations, or even just being together, this is how all our works begin. We take walks, we talk, and, in that process, we feel something special happens.” The seedbed of their practice is, quite literally, engagement. It takes root in walking, talking, and thinking together. In the darkened days of a pandemic, this is no light commitment. A viral post by Chip Ward chimes in on the messiness of this engagement: “For better or worse we are woven into the microbial matrix of a fluid planet where we are all eventually downwind and downstream from one another.” This reminder of interconnectivity, at once familiar and alienating, can be a guide.

Kate Whiteway is an independent curator in Toronto. Her curatorial practice is broadly interested in epistolary networks, with exhibitions including *In & Out of Saskatchewan* (Art Museum, 2019), *Whispers That Got Away* (SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, co-curated with Hera Chan and Thy Anne Chu Quang, 2018), and *A Glass House Should Hold No Terrors* (abandoned pool, co-curated with Yen-Chao Lin, 2016). She recently completed the Master of Visual Studies in Curatorial Studies at the University of Toronto. She has worked as Gallery Manager of SUGAR Contemporary (Toronto) and as Publications Coordinator for the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. She is the recipient of the 2018 Reesa Greenberg Curatorial Studies Award, the 2020 C Magazine New Critics Award, and participated in the 2020 Momus Emerging Critics Residency.

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ⁱ PLANT/PIXEL, 8eleven, 2018, partnership with Images Festival, Toronto, Canada.

ⁱⁱ *St. Helena Olive Tree, Extinct 1884-1977, 2003- (2010)* in the exhibition *Island(s)*, curated by Julie René de Cotret at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ A conversation we shared at an exhibition titled *Living in the Soft Machine* by SISTER CO-RESISTER at Sugar Contemporary, Toronto, Canada.

^{iv} Tak Pham, "A Vegetal Odyssey," *esse arts + opinions*, Issue 99, spring 2020, 62-69.

^v Robert Zimmerman, "Growing Pains," *Air & Space Magazine*, September 2003, <https://www.airspacemag.com/space/growing-pains-4148507/?page=2>.

^{vi} Sara Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points," *Feminist Killjoys*, September 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>.