

## A Situated Reading Diary of Exhaustion as a Creative Methodology

Mona Livholts reads *Creative Ecologies*, written by H  l  ne Frichot.



Park bench before removal due to park restoration, (2019) Thora Dahls park, Stockholm, Sweden.

Photograph: Mona Livholts.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> November 2019: First readings.**

I have just begun to read Hélène Frichot's *Creative Ecologies. Theorizing the Practice of Architecture* (2019). It strikes me how the train where I am located is a suitable space to begin; me, the reader, situated in this body of steel in movement, passing through stations, people, tunnels and landscapes. However, when I think about it now when I write this diary note, today is actually not the beginning of my reading. The first encounter with the book happened when I opened the parcel I received in the post. This first reading was visual, called upon by the cover of the book. It is stunning, a beautiful and powerful cover with half the space of the front and back cover showing what I first saw as an image of ice bergs, surrounded by black night air. I thought it was a photograph and did not see the river in this image. It was not until I read about the image in the book that I learned that it is an art work by the British-born, Berlin-based artist Tacita Dean, *Fatigues*, from 2012. It is a visual composition of chalk drawings on a black board, showing the snow-capped peaks of Afghanistan's mountains and the Kabul River. I have difficulties freeing myself from my first visual reading of ice bergs. Another 'first reading' is how I am hooked to read more about exhaustion as a key theme of this book. I reflect on why this word is not in the title of the book, neither in the summary on the back cover. Don't let this 'reoccurring motif' (p. 69) of exhaustion as an artistic conceptual creative practice in the book pass unnoticed! The following sentences become a load star for my reading (p. 71):

*Exhaustion is more profound than tiredness; its structure of feeling is rather about an anxious restlessness. Exhaustion is about wakefulness and the distance of sleep. It is insomnia. Exhausted, awake, not tired, a constant wondering plagues you, as you ask yourself: Have I exhausted all that is possible? Have I done everything I can to ameliorate my local environment-world? It is an exhausting challenge.*

Perhaps I was drawn to the language of exhaustion because I was travelling to my doctor for a health control on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, the day when I read the book and made this first diary note. Or maybe Frichot's book is so thought provoking in the way it unexpectedly awakens the reader's attention to the richness of theoretical language that exhaustion offers that it speaks to many readers who will feel that they have waited a long time for this book to be written? I am struck by how the reading focuses attention on the complex



condition of fatigue, how the reading unfolds through a series of memories, almost like a filmic experience of scene-making, awakening hope and faith in what might be possible if I can move beyond exhaustion. Frichot writes about the many things exhaustion can be, many thinkable things – a volcano, a clinic, mud – and this reminds me to become attentive and caring. The book carves a space for architecture that is indisciplined and asks questions that as a reader, I could possibly not turn away from.

*Have I done everything I can to ameliorate my local environment-world? (p. 71)*

A specific memory returns to me during the reading. It is summer (2019) and I am travelling to my home town. It strikes me how Frichot's exhausted methodology is useful as a concept-tool for this place, an historically exhausted society in the mid-Sweden area that has been portrayed as a devalued, forgotten, a non-important place. People who live here are often asked if they are going to move soon. It is a place people mostly pass on their way to another place. I am that place. My body is shaped by the rural landscape and the wooden houses I grew up with, the dark green forests and the cold river, the old bridges, and my horse, the sound of clattering hoofs, a yellow sweater, sawdust. On my return this summer, I find signs in the main street with an invitation to 'the world's largest art exhibition'. Orange umbrellas fly above a street between two houses, fabric in diverse colors has been attached to the old railway bridge, and paintings cover the sides of houses. A tiger, a bird, and flowers. Something happens with(in) me. A sense of bubbling joy and happiness. Something has changed. I tell stories to my grandchildren about this place, we play in the new playground by the lake; I show them orange umbrellas and the beautiful cloth on the railway bridge. The theme of exhaustion of environment worlds has five characteristics writes Frichot (p. 69): Exhaustion is corporeal and conceptual; it breaks down things, both human and non-human and concepts. It is related to the exhaustion of territories and environments, a methodology that makes it possible to practice in the midst of spaces and temporalities of exhaustion. It is distinct from extinction that exists beyond exhaustion. Exhaustion should not be understood as being tired.



Street art, (2019) Ljusdal, Sweden.

Photograph: Mona Livholts.





Street art, (2019) Ljusdal, Sweden.

Photograph: Mona Livholts.

I don't feel tired now. Something happened with my exhausted self in the local *environmental* world. I feel an intense restlessness of creativity. I am thinking about what it means to challenge globalization by thinking 'worlds and worlding' (p. 31) as Frichot suggests, to become through a continuous process that is material-semiotic, that places the corporeal and incorporeal together. Frichot writes (pp. 22, 34 and 36).

*... there is no offstage to the world.*

*I am not ready to give up practices of worlding.*

*There is no one-world solution.*

*Worlding becomes about acknowledging one's situation and then opening up to new versions of what might be possible today, and in the future.*

### **11<sup>th</sup> November 2019: On reading when not reading: practice scenes.**

I am amazed how reading is an ongoing process, even when I am not reading. I believe this is because the first snow has arrived (yesterday and today). I planned to return to read *Creative Ecologies* later today, but I have a lot of other work to do. As I look out of the window and see the snow, I am interrupted in my work with assessing student papers, and memories from the reading is actualised sooner than I planned. Perhaps this is one of the things that Frichot's book has awakened within me: a strengthened attention to weather conditions, a reminder of how narrative form always needs to be challenged. There is a feminist intervention in the telling of other stories in this book, an extended space that includes women practitioners. There are eight practice-scenes in the book as exemplars of architecture as creative art practice. In particular, one of these caught my attention: Katla Mariudottir's volcano (in chapter 2 'Ecologies').

Katla is the name of a volcano on Iceland and of an architect that grew up in coastal Iceland and did her degree in architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden in 2012. This was two years after the eruption of Eyjafjallakökull 14–20 April 2010. As Frichot tells the readers (p. 65): 'Katla tentatively situates herself as a spokesperson for



the landscape.’ Her creative art practice as an architect includes listening to ghost stories by her adopted blind grandfather, the reading of letters from wives of shipwrecked sailors, photographing fishermen’s huts, and the tales of a church that was destroyed and rebuilt several times; every time shifting location. This practice scene illustrates the creative invention of a *Compass*, Jardnaedi: Tranquil Terra (2014) (FIGURE 2.1, p. 66), showing entanglements of landscape events, narrative events and architectural events. Frichot describes how Katla presented an installation of her work in 2014, and how the critics assembled were drawn into her story. The scenic creation of this practice-scene has remained with me, attracting my attention to the layers, or the hyphens, that bind together different narrative forms in architecture.

### **20<sup>th</sup> November 2019: Restless reading through the veins.**

I have moved my location to the brightest room in my flat early this morning to write before work begins. Is H el ene Frichot’s book a sign of an expanded, creative and ecological way of creating knowledge and living that knowledge so we can live sustainable lives (I don’t think she would use the concept of sustainability)? It is the first day for a long time that I see the sun and I decide to go for a walk during lunch. Meanwhile I have to stay as close to the window as I can, close to the light. I am worried that the extra time reading and writing about this book is taking me closer to exhaustion. I feel like I am in a state of anxious restlessness, of insomnia. I feel like the veins in my body are similar to the branches in the large trees outside my window.

Body/tree/veins in this local environment-world of an expanded flat.

Frichot challenges disciplinary norms and boundaries and places architecture itself in a formative moment of creative ecologies. I would like my students in social work to read this book. How can we understand the multiplicity of social vulnerabilities in diverse local-environment worlds? What stories of women’s lives could we (re)create if marginal figures could take up space? Could an exhaustive methodology of restlessness be useful for social work(ers)? What if I would use the practice-scene of Michael Spooner’s *A Clinic for the Exhausted* (chapter 6 ‘Concept Tools’) as a creative art practice? As Frichot tells me, although her work on exhaustion is inspired by the Deleuze’s essay ‘The Exhausted’, it was

Spooner who first introduced her to this theme. I am wondering, as I read, how can I make use of this concept-tool? A clinic is for me a building, a materialized space that has defined a goal for treatment of peoples' bodies and thinking. There are elements of disciplining practices and this in particular makes me think about the second part of the book: *Thinkables: A Clinic for the Exhausted* offers something different. As Frichot (p. 193) describes it: 'It is the space that emerges between architecture and the imagination ... sometimes necessary to construct a life boat, and even let loose a life buoy for the wreckage that is left in the wake of a clinic as the productive (if violent) collision between building and boat requires that you find your own line of escape, to say nothing of leakage.' This is an 'affective atlas', which means that affect is what creates movement from one episode to another. 'How do we creatively resist our present situation when circumstances become intolerable?' (p. 190), Frichot asks.



Restless reading through the veins of a body/tree, (2019).

Photograph: Mona Livholts



**25<sup>th</sup> November 2019: Gleaning reading.**

Today I have been thinking about gleaning and how useful the creative practice of gleaning is. I translate gleaning with Swedish 'samla', 'axplock'. I read about gleaning in part II of the book named 'Things', where Frichot (p. 83) asks the question: 'How, instead, can we address objects, or rather things, with care?' The underlying critique is that people have tended not to handle objects and things with care and as a result we don't develop a relationship to them. What do we do when we glean? Gleaning is an art of stooping down to pore over what has been forgotten, to pick at the earth, to pluck at the pavement in the disheveled aftermath of an event. It is an art of creative resistance in response to a fast-paced consumptive life style. But gleaning is also related to women's labor of caring and a form of sustenance. (pp. 82–3). Frichot offers a folded road of an exhaustive methodology: one approaching erasure, even obliterations of modes of life, extinction; and another, a process of gleaning, collecting, reclaiming, recovering and contracting encounters with others. (pp. 12–3)

**26<sup>th</sup> November 2019: No one thinks alone. No one is outside a situation.**

*...who has the time to think these days anyway? (p 12)*

I smile a bit when I read these words, at the same time I appreciate the seriousness of this question. And because thinking is a collaborative entangled practice, the dynamics of thinking, as well as the concept-tools and creative practices we do with words and things and objects needs to be caring. No one exists outside a situation. I would like to make use of the language of the 'exhaustive lists' that Frichot proposes in this book to think together with my students and students across disciplines. I believe that in the classroom there is still some time to think. I have been exhausted into seeing this opportunity. Frichot's exhaustive list includes global warming, slavery, rape of refugee girls, homelessness. What if we think through the concept-tool of exhaustion as a creative practice of resistance, not from the viewpoint of tiredness, but through the condition of having enough?

*Have I done everything I can to ameliorate my local environment-world? (p 71)*