

## THE HOLDING ENVIRONMENT

Stanton Taylor on “The Holding Environment” at Bonner Kunstverein



“The Holding Environment,” Bonner Kunstverein, 2021, installation view

In psychoanalysis, the holding environment is the literal and figurative space in which a parent holds and cares for their child. At the Bonner Kunstverein, curator Fatima Hellberg conceived an exhibition around this notion and used it as a metaphor to address pressing questions about contemporary society: What happens when the technologies used to sustain life are employed purely in the pursuit of profit? When care and reproductive labor take a selfish turn? Here, artist and writer Stanton Taylor weaves through the exhibition’s rich range of references, concluding that care isn’t so much about affirmation or critique, but about the labor of keeping things alive.

Thus I knew her

Once, stretched out on her lap  
as now on a dead tree

I learned to make her smile  
to stem her tears  
to undo her guilt  
to cure her inward death

To enliven her was my living.

– Donald Winnicott, “The Tree”

This poem, written by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott at the age of 67, recalls his childhood experience of his mother’s depression. However real or autofictional, a sense of his mother’s

inability to continuously care for him cast a shadow over his theories of childhood development, which hinged on the ideal of an “ordinary” devoted mother whose attention to her newborn child is unfaltering. Author and analyst Adam Phillips even went so far as asserting that for Winnicott “the inattentive or absent mother is [...] a saboteur of the developmental process that he equates with the continuity of care. Though not blaming mothers for their ‘failures,’ he was implicitly demanding everything of them at the very beginning.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Winnicott’s theory begins with the very first moment a mother holds her newborn. From then on, she should act as a completely reliable wellspring of attention that allows the child’s ego to unfold unaware of its mother’s self-sacrifice: “It is axiomatic in these matters of maternal care of the holding variety that when things go well the infant has no means of knowing what is being properly provided and what is being prevented.”<sup>2</sup> In Winnicott’s terms, this “holding” not only encompasses the physical act itself, but the entire environment where childcare takes place. When the holding environment is unreliable, the child fails to form an integrated self, and even runs the risk of psychosis. Commendable, then, that Winnicott made it so far.

Upon entering “The Holding Environment” at the Bonner Kunstverein, the first thing to greet visitors is a set of stairs – part of the custom-built exhibition architecture that the Kunstverein’s new director, Fatima Hellberg, conceived together with stage designer Michael Kleine. After climbing the stairs, visitors survey the exhibition as though from a parental panopticon. One work immediately stands out: an illuminated billboard by Hellberg’s own mother, the artist Annika Eriksson. In an almost ironic take on the

psychoanalytic setting, *Shelter* (2021) blows up a close-up of a family album to larger-than-life proportions. Despite the images’ domestic origin, their scale addresses them to an unwittingly voyeuristic public. All the same, the actual content of Eriksson’s photos – a little human in a green costume, a woman on a painted set – yields little to interpretation. If anything, they emphasize just how opaque the image of the family can be.

Here, what might first be read as the curator’s autobiographical bravado – the show also includes collaborative works by Hellberg and her mother – is actually relatively commonplace among the artists. In the neighboring Artothek, the Kunstverein’s art lending library, Marc Kokopeli presents a selection of images shot by his mother. Installed at toddler height, their diagrammatically overacted scenarios – which include the artist himself – were intended to help children acquire social skills. Perhaps more perverse than anything the Pictures generation could have thought up, the acquisition of emotional intelligence seems to be outsourced to the images, despite however fake the emotions on display might be. Elsewhere, Niklas Taleb’s trio of photographs *overthinking the hand* (2021) presents snapshots of recognizably domestic scenes – a poker game, a highchair, an inverted portrait of the artist’s father – without any discernible narrative. Meanwhile, the work’s title seems to mock any attempt to assign some deeper meaning. Taken together, Eriksson, Kokopeli, and Taleb seem to create a peculiar analogy between the medium of photography and the experience of other people’s families: a sense of completely recognizing a situation while having no idea what’s actually going on.

But contrary to what the show’s title suggests, it doesn’t spend that much time mining the



Marc Kokopeli, "Untitled," 2016–21

psychic abyss of domestic dramas and eventually opens up into a panorama of vulnerability. The collaborative video *This Is the Fast I Want* (2021) by Gregg Bordowitz and Morgan Bassichis offers a folksy song of gratitude for every time the body manages to heal itself in the face of diseases such as HIV and diabetes. As the ostensible narrator stares up at the sun filtered through leaves, he muses on cuts, scratches, and bruises, and calls for the oppressed to go free, suggesting that a sense of bodily vulnerability could be the starting point for political solidarity. Co Westerik, on the other hand, offers a fleshier take on our mortal coil. In paintings like *Hand Kiss (I)* (1984) and *Foot* (1990), his meticulously layered glazes condense

into landscapes of veins, dry skin, and liver spots. Slightly larger than life-size, the images immerse the viewer in a sudden and unexpected intimacy with a stranger's body. Despite the sense of decay implied by aging skin, the level of attention lavished on another person's parts conveys an almost erotic fascination. Here, Bassichis, Bordowitz, and Westerik seem to share a vision of human frailty, a sense of the body as a prison, while never forgetting the pleasures it promises.

But by far, "The Holding Environment" is most compelling when it asks us: What happens when the technologies used to sustain life are employed purely in the pursuit of profit? What happens when care and reproductive labor take a



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selfish turn? Carolyn Lazard's brief but devastating video *Pre-Existing Condition* (2019) presents a slideshow of documents summarizing medical experiments (e.g., "Transplant Removal") the University of Pennsylvania performed for various corporations on the inmates of Holmesburg Prison and how much prisoners were compensated (e.g., \$13). Meanwhile, a voice-over by former inmate Edward Yusuf Anthony describes his inability to pursue compensation for inhumane experiments with a carcinogenic medication due to his preexisting conditions. It isn't the sheer inhumanity of Yusuf's treatment that's most haunting – the Holmesburg experiments were found to be in breach of the Nuremberg Code for medical trials – but rather the dystopian capitalist future

it evokes. As Jackie Wang warns us, "labor-saving technologies will not necessarily liberate humans from work as we move toward a post-scarcity and post-work society, but can lead to the creation of surplus populations that are housed – and generate value – in prison."<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Lazard asks us to think the inhuman, Marianna Simnett shifts the focus to our fellow species. Her film *The Udder* (2014) details the mechanics of mastitis – an infection of mammary tissue – in industrial milk farming and the technologies used to combat it. Dazzling montages interlace visceral close-ups of laser-guided robots, clinical dissections, and various fluids with real-life farmers and children singing "mastitis, mastitis, my mammary gland is in

pain.” Here, the analogy between children and cows opens the door to interspecies empathy. But despite the implicit violence of factory farming, Simnett stops short of taking any moral position herself. Rather, by domesticating rationalized brutality within a “childish” framework, she helps us envision the complex web of interdependencies that underpins the production of an everyday commodity – an enchanted ecology entangling humans, animals, and machines.

Seen in context, “The Holding Environment” sits firmly within the genre of exhibition-as-essay, and Hellberg is hardly shy about her authorship. Indeed, the show’s self-reflexive elements read like a commentary on curation itself. Surely, the way it illuminates some of the darker dimensions of caretaking is also a riposte to the humanitarian undertones of the recent emphasis on care in curatorial practice. When I speak with Hellberg about some of the ideas behind the show, she also emphasizes that its long run time, bipartite structure, and changing selection of works come from an attitude of continued attention, a continuous process of showing up and attending to things. At the same time, the show was also conceived as a reflection on her own relationship to the institution. The Bonner Kunstverein, for example, is an institution that has always been run by women. As a result, it has been built on a kind of feminine self-sacrifice usually chalked up to a “labor of love,” where the lines between care and caretaking grow increasingly thin. Here, her tone echoes the same kind of ambivalence running throughout the exhibition. Ultimately, it seems that for both Hellberg and “The Holding Environment,” care isn’t so much about affirmation or critique, but about the labor of keeping things alive.

“The Holding Environment,” Bonner Kunstverein, April 9–August 1, 2021.

#### Notes

- 1 Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 123.
- 2 Donald Winnicott, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41 (November/December 1960): 594.
- 3 Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2018), 64.