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Healing as an Object: Curation, Sentience, and Slowness

Trauma is a troubling feeling. It stands as a cleavage, or creates a rift, between us and our present, detaching us from it (*I*). I think I know the feeling, having been traumatized by losing someone (though indirectly from a typhoon). Accepting that this might be the way the world is after trauma happened may help a little. But healing seems to be far away, a *distant* object we are willing to grab if only we can. Healing is farfetched indeed, as one would have to make peace with the experience of not having peace – even disturbing the possibility of having one in the end. Trauma catches us off-guard, sucker punches us out of the moment. Why is healing distant? I assume it had something to do with its being an object. In German, Heidegger calls the object *gegenstand* or what stands against us (perceiving subjects), something alien from us and so definitely *not* us. We are bewildered by its uncanniness. Healing is strange. Strangely, healing could not be seen in full, especially coming from the view of someone who is a walking discombobulation like me. Could healing be an ‘object’ in the sense of *gegenstand*?

While hiking with a colleague, we talked about *Object-Oriented Ontology* (OOO), a theory for a weird view of objects. Human beings, the theory says, are also objects. And it is weird because the relations between objects are not processes but could also be mediated by objects. An important feature is that an object no longer stands against (*gegenstand*) but is seen as a withdrawn surplus over and beyond its effects and parts. If my colleague is an object, then she cannot be objectified by what she can do (her capabilities or use) and what she is made of (her background or upbringing). My colleague and I could have said more about the intricate relations of that ontology but we have limited such weird realism in this sense at least. Two objects relating can be mediated by a third object. But again, rather than a mereology describing it as a whole more than the sum of its parts, it is weird because an object is a whole that withdraws. An example is given of two fighter planes tragically colliding with each other (2). When these two objects meet in the crash, they have created albeit momentarily a new object – the crashed object – before it begins to disintegrate and its pieces fall into debris. To avoid the goriness, imagine that they are just remotely operated and pilotless. This new object emerged and vanished in the blink of an eye, a compound object whose essence remains withdrawn and vague. In that span of seconds, an object was born, matured, and died. I suspect that this would have been healing as an object too. A traumatized self can only view healing from a distance, but perhaps with another being, another point in time or space, a third object can be seen more than our fragmented visions. I believe I had a glimpse of what healing was within the fragments of my summer.

¹ Jan Kahambing, ‘Healing as an Object: Curation, Sentience, and Slowness.’ *Oxford Public Philosophy*, turn four. 2024. American Philosophical Association.

I spent about half of my summer with a cat – not my cat, my friend’s. Amrit Azad, a name derived from the Sanskrit *amṛta* that means baptismal elixir or nectar of immortality and the Persian word آزاد *âzâd* or freedom, was diagnosed with Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) or the coronavirus for cats. Suddenly the name did not sound so invulnerable and autonomous. My friend Safa had him at 3 months old while recovering from a heartbreak that caused her wedding to be canceled. And with Macau’s heat, what a cruel summer. Amrit felt extremely fatigued one day. Safa was distracted at work, had accidental cuts and bruises. Both of them need healing or as the latter’s name suggests صَفَاً (*ṣafā*): the process of becoming pure. For Amrit, it is 84 days of daily injection; for Safa, it is suspended momentary states of acceptance from traumatic relapses and frequent dissociations. Such *becoming* constitutes a reality albeit one that is not direct but ‘always already’ perceived. Before facing reality, and even before the face, there is the perceived face (3), a caricatured face, reified as if curated in time and space (4). In effect, there is no raw reality as it appears but only curated reality. Perception could just be a curation of what we encounter. This is common to sentient beings including non-human animals. Never mind Descartes calling them calculable machines (5) despite having a dog named Mr. Scratch. Be that as it may, how sentience works is somehow connected to the manner one curates oneself. Apparently, any form of becoming something could be any form of curating something, and therefore, in the case of convalescence, we can only speak of curated healing. But exactly how does sentience curate healing? When the body is ill, am I curating my own machine parts like I am a separate entity looking at an object? Safa’s pain isn’t physical and the ache may be of the heart but she feels it entirely, including the feelings of the past in all her sentience.

Over our smartphones, Safa and I (with Amrit beside us or otherwise playing in a corner) listened to talks of artificial intelligence debated about having consciousness. Consciousness, one reports, is the feeling of pain, a feature of sentience. But if one goes numb, one still is aware of having lost pain. Consciousness is then not entirely about feelings or sentience no matter the huge chunks they comprise a waking state. Sentience, traditionally, is one of the soul’s animal capacities to actually feel (6) and not merely the capacity, say of a Venus flytrap, to react to stimulus. But consciousness is more than feeling. It is the ability to process feedback loops, a funnel leading to an inner self-sustaining workspace, or a mechanism for facilitating the body and senses with the external environment. This does not tell us exactly how and what exactly is consciousness but this gives us a hint. The funelling process somewhat resembles curated perception through sentience’s co-facilitation with the environment. And this varies in animals since their curating sentience differs among them. It is in this sense that in the phenomenology of animals we still do not have an answer to the question about what it is like to be a bat (7). There is the Zhuangzian notion of knowing the happiness of the fish (8), but the knowing is perspectival and again depends on a person’s curated perception of the fish. Psychoanalysis shows that humans too have a gap in explaining themselves. There are hopes though that in the next decade, we can at least mimic what it is *like* to be a fish (9), but probably could still not fully explain what consciousness really is.

Meanwhile, if the distance only creates fragmented selves and perceptions, the core of healing should be a steady re-integration from the shock of reality. Since this real disturbance splits the manner one perceives (10), the way to be free and reignite life from trauma is ideally to just start living, again – to continue curating a life once more. It doesn’t take a whole scoping review to

realize that the notion of ‘one health’ is all about the integration of human, animal, and environmental health, including the planet (11). But this ‘one’ seamless flow of taking in the air of aliveness is not easy. It faces the disruption of parasitic ailments. Paranoia sets in. One feels cheated. Amrit must have been sold without proper vaccinations. Safa could have known something was off despite the pre-nuptial arrangements. One goes on in life with duplicated thoughts of various things in mind. Qualms, qualms, qualms, qualms, qualms... Ideas that are most likely far from the truth begin to haunt. Imagine worst-case scenarios, suspicions, and conspiracies sweeping in... I suppose I could conjure a book about the aftermaths of cheating. ‘Sometimes a start is all we ever get’, concludes the final line of *A Cheater’s Guide to Love*, but how?

2/2

I spent the last half of my summer in the cold northern parts of Denmark. It was a different world. Needless to say, I cooled down and had time to think. At Hjørring, I had a substantial hint of what slowness was with the participants of the ‘Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetics of Slowness’ summer school (12). We camped with sculptures slowly, we swam in the slow delicate waves, we ate slow-cooked food, and we drank harvested wine delivered cautiously all the way from France. The flat beach, North Sea waters, and leveled open hills weren’t so bad at all. There is something in such flatness, rather the opposite of Camus’ description of soggy horizontal hellish spaces without relief and color (13). The empty spaces with streaks of sacred sunrays revealed reminiscence. Kundera had recently died but in the slow drives, walks, and drinks at Hjørring, his ghost reminds the dovetailing of slowness with memory (14). I think of slowness and the ironic surprise of how it somehow leads the way into curating memory, not rapidly scapegoating the perils of time via controlled and indifferent forgetting. One walks slowly to remember, and walks fast to forget, he says. It reminded one of something essential – to live at one’s own pace.

With slowness, curating does not look like a floating perception. From Kobayashi Issa’s haiku (露の世は露の世ながらさりながら), we get an ‘and yet’ in the end. We know that we are fragile and we can interpret that someone hurt us, *and yet*... We know that things come and go, that people can betray us, or that life is fleeting – and yet why are we still hurting? Why do we suddenly break? Trauma is not a mental abstraction. It has a somaesthetic dimension, which means that the body yields, perceives, and has its memory tied to it (15). Aside from slowness then, I also learned that the soma, or ‘body-mind,’ remembers. If so, then healing must have to be somewhere along that dimension and has to do with curating the soma, or cultivating and paying attention to it. The soma is grounded, embodied, and embedded; it cannot deny trauma and healing. It shows authentically what goes on if only insofar as it is not a separate entity like Descartes’ machines.

The message, at this juncture, is that healing needs to be slow or mindful of one’s soma. Not rushing could possibly be an antidote to one’s suffering; that healing is slow, aware of one’s sentience. Healing could just be a form of curating a kind of perception that makes sure that the self is okay. As curating takes its roots in care (from the Latin word *cura*), carefulness could be slow curating, growing amidst syringes, or self-training, all in the process of accepting that healing could just henceforth be *careful becoming*. This could be it. I think I can grasp healing. Until...

...Until the frames of reality suddenly made me see the past. The trauma jolted a little. I immediately thought about the victims of a super typhoon that hit the Philippines in 2013. It was also personal.

From a museological context, I once asked survivor-curators whether a museum (and consequently the museum objects) for a disaster would be traumatic or therapeutic for the survivors of *that* disaster. Most of them leaned on the latter, thinking that the other half of the narrative – the resilient path to healing – can understandably be still on its way (**16**). They had hopes that healing could be curated, told in a different story. Typhoon Haiyan traumatized the survivors' lives 11 years ago and yet they are still healing. They were careful and the healing has been slow but the trauma still lingers. There was a crucial aspect here that can be added. Healing is a compound object, a surplus. Careful becoming is fine but a glimpse of healing emerges more conspicuously with other sentient beings. In this compound sense, sentience curates. What helped in the survival was coming together as a community. Resilience became a communal path to healing.

And so I realized that Amrit and Safa, though sometimes having their own disrupted feelings of the present, have already found healing. They have each other; they perceive each other as present. Amrit has a calm way of being seen. When Safa is not home and Amrit has to rest after the injection, he makes sure that he is visible in my periphery. And when Safa goes home at night, Amrit gladly recognizes her presence and begins stretching, as if preparing for a new day. I sense that healing is just that: Safa and Amrit together, careful of each other's presence. Safa has her own self-training; yoga schedules, jogging, and whatnot. But with Amrit, the experience is different. Healing emerged in two sentient beings meeting, more than their sickness, trauma, or ailing. 84 days of injection, maybe healing can only be curated as careful becoming, but it takes a particular sentient form of *feeling-with*, as caring for someone else's presence. This kind of healing as an object may not be a panacea, but what it shows is a moment that could help keep trauma at bay. Perhaps in this sense, OOO is not weird after all.

Footnotes

(1) Emmanuel Cuisinier, *What is Trauma? Sketch of a phenomenological description (and the philosophy that comes with it)* Oxford Public Philosophy, turn three.

(2) Graham Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation', *Cosmos and History* 6(1) 2010: 1-17.

(3) Aristotle claimed that metaphysics, since it deals with the essence of what exists, is the first philosophy (see *Metaphysics* 1026a25-33) while Emmanuel Levinas' *face of the Other* counter-claims that ethics is the first philosophy (see *Totality and Infinity*, 50-51; 204). Accounts of object-oriented philosophy proposed by Graham Harman claim that because what we only get is the theatrical non-literal access to the essence of the real object, it is aesthetics that takes priority or should be the first philosophy (see *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 260).

(4) Immanuel Kant somehow points to what can be called an automatic epistemological curation called the transcendental where we only know what the formal or conditions of the possibilities of experience, not the direct experience *per se* (see *Critique of Pure Reason*, 67).

(5) See Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 46: 'if there were such machines having the organs and outward shape of a monkey or any other irrational animal, we would have no means of knowing that they were not of exactly the same nature as these animals.'

(6) See Aristotle, *On the Soul* 413a23.

(7) See Nagel in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974. 435-450.

(8) Zhuangzi, §17 "Autumn Floods"

(9) See David Chalmers, *Could a Large Language Model Be Conscious?* NeurIPS 2022. <
<https://nips.cc/virtual/2022/invited-talk/55867>>

(10) See Emmanuel Cuisinier, *What is Trauma? Sketch of a phenomenological description (and the philosophy that comes with it)* Oxford Public Philosophy, turn three: 'trauma ultimately depends on the experience of perception and this perception turns out to be the last window freeing us from it.'

(11) Jan Kahambing and Teng Wai Lao, "The value of museums in averting a planetary health crisis." *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health* 26 (2023): 100866.

(12) Thanks to Lone, Else Marie, Richard, Benthe, Claus, Chariclia, Kristina, Kristy, Joachim, Piya, Siv, Andreas, Wilma, Georgia, Matthias, Jakob, Mads, Jens, Kim, Malena, David, Falk, and others.

(13) See Camus, *The Fall*, 24.

(14) Kundera, *Slowness*, 37

(15) See Shusterman, "Muscle memory and the somaesthetic pathologies of everyday life." *Human Movement* 12, no. 1 (2011): 4-15.

(16) See Jan Gresil Kahambing, "Will a Haiyan museum heal or traumatise? Insights from survivor-curators." *Museological Review*, 2022; 26.