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Objects of care

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\textbf{Abstract:} This paper describes a workshop activity intended to cultivate attention to bodies and care. Constructed as a card-deck, the “Objects of Care” activity prompts its players to look more closely at the objects in their lives, notice signs of care in those objects and re-think their relationships with said objects. We believe the card deck, based on the interactions we’ve had with it thus far, offers a few insights for prompting attention to bodily interactions by focusing on the way they manifest in textiles. This tended to have the effect of prompting people to take time with the old and “gross” and see them as rich historical artifacts, a kind of archaeology of the body constructed through the marks and smells it left on textiles.

\textbf{Keywords:} care; noticing; card deck; deep looking; sister corita

1. Introduction

On my foot, my big toe sticks out the most, and, over time, the constant friction between toe, toenail and sock, causes a hole to appear. Or maybe you walk with a certain gait, like me, and you put pressure on your heel, and wear away a small hole on the bottom of your sock. But without the foot in the sock, these interactions wouldn’t happen. The holes in the sock, then become a bodily material, or an interface between the body and other rigid bodies. They become records of being worn--where were you walking so quickly?

When we, the authors, think of bodily materials, what first comes to mind is skin, hair and sweat—things that the body produces. A bodily material is also something that the body has interacted with, or intervened in, like a stain, a smell, or a tear, or a hole. Like the hole in the toe of a sock. The body has imprinted itself on another material--in these examples, a textile material. We, the authors, are textile researchers and we see textiles as holding records of bodily materials and our relationships with the world. People interact with textiles daily--from the clothes we put on our bodies, to the towels and blankets in our homes, the upholstery in our car or public bus, to the mesh on our computer chair at work. And everyday these textiles record all of the interactions with them, although it is not always apparent. A beverage spilled is immediately noticeable. But the slow wearing away over time of a fabric
is not apparent, until it is already threadbare. Textiles notice. They keep a record. We can return to them over time, and recall a memory or an emotion by way of looking over their surface, feeling where they have worn out, or burying our heads in their scent.

Inspired by the ability of textiles to hold memories, we, the authors, designed the “Objects of Care” card game in order to foster attention to these interactions, particularly how they represent memories, narratives, and materialities of care. We wanted this activity to bring about a greater attention to design for the purposes of care, countering our associations of the term with self-improvement by creating space for honoring relational moments of care exchange. In this we align with Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, who argues that care is “not a contract, nor a moral ideal—it is a condition” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). In this view, textiles become sites where evidence of relational care between bodies of human and nonhuman forms can be collected. Life happened when the body imprinted on those textiles, and turned them into a bodily material. We, the authors, find ourselves repairing them and thinking back on what we were doing. We preserve them to preserve the memory of the action. We scrub and scrub and scrub, and try to make it all go away-- the actual stain and the emotional cause of the stain.

In the paper that follows, we will describe the development of the Objects of Care card game. We take note of the particular design modifications we made to support vulnerability, create community, and honor care in the hopes that these insights can help others with similar motives. We contribute these learnings as well as the deck itself to the discussion on designing with bodily materials. We hope this discussion will provoke the attendees to spend time attending to, drawing out, and thinking with care.

2. Related work

Card decks and games have long been used as a means of pushing a creative process in new directions. For instance Surrealist games like exquisite corpse or Brian Eno’s Oblique Strategies demonstrate how short prompts for action can lead to the production of unexpected outcomes (Brotchie & Gooding, 1995). Or the project, Microcosms, led by Jeffrey Yoon Warren, that prompts participants to “use microscopes not as scientific tools, but as a means of listening, knowing, and “tuning into” the Asian-American experience by recording microscopic videos that capture memories, family and stories (Yoon Warren, 2021). Within design research, cards have been put to similar use with a large focus on reflection on design values and generating spaces for a wide range of possible outcomes: from the analysis of values in a design process (Friedman et al., 2018), speculative scenarios for the future (Raven & Bannathan, 2018), or new metaphors to scaffold a design process (Logler et al., 2018). The allure of a deck, then, is the ability to structure attention and play with the themes presented in the deck. As we, the authors, designed our own deck, we took direct inspiration from the structured creative activities of Sister Corita Kent, presented in Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit, which focus on techniques for re-experiencing and interpreting our visual experience. We found Sister Corita’s practice to be largely inspirational in the way
she, as a person, practiced care through social activism, and how her work integrated into those practices in their bold and beautiful statements.

The Objects of Care card deck aims to create space to tell about how care is performed, focus attention on how care becomes material, and offer multiple ways we might design “with” the care that foregrounds it as an honorable and formative activity. The particular form of the deck emerged because we, the authors, wanted to counter a tendency we saw in our workshops and classes that framed vulnerability as a negative experience or caregiving as a task that ought to be delegated to technological systems. While no single approach can be said to be “correct” in any situation, we, the authors, wanted to make space for animating a set of directions for working with care, seeing it as a site of strength or connection, as opposed to delegating care-work to technological systems. We feel that the archetypical focus of design on discovering a solution can unintentionally frame care experiences as undesirable “problems” in that they require labor, maintenance and/or mental strain. Furthermore, care tends to become material in ways that strike some as disgusting, such as stains, holes, smells, breaks, and tears. The deck, then, aims to sideline a focus on solutions and traditional aesthetics of beauty to tell stories of care, and in those stories, to see these intersections between bodily materials and textiles as rich sites of symbolism and significance—a body is involved in the making of the cloth, and a body is involved in the using and wearing away of the cloth. Could our game unearth the stories of bodies and care from these objects?

3. Preface to Objects Of Care card deck: Learning the importance of vulnerability

The ideas and goals that underpin Objects of Care were first explored at a local media festival in 2018, focused upon designing “speculative exoskeletons for caregivers” with roughly 25 participants from the community and a startup festival happening at the same time.

We, the authors, began the workshop with an overview of exoskeletons and the capacity they had to, at once protect, while also revealing elements that one may need protection from. We compared and contrasted these images with other examples of “exoskeletons” used by caregivers, such as baby carriers, strollers, pill boxes, etc. in the hopes that this would expand concepts of military robotics with tasks of caregiving. We asked, what are our caregiving tasks, and, if we had “suits” to help us perform them, what would they look like?
The game consisted of a series of cards and a box equipped with “props” to serve as different robotic components (e.g. third arms, biosensors, gripping hands, etc.). The cards had different categories based on the technologies present in the kit (e.g. sensors, actuators, mechanisms.). Participants formed groups of 3-4 (often strangers) and began with a “warm up” activity where they would pick cards at random and design a technology using the capabilities listed on the cards. Next, they were to discuss with their group the various care roles in their lives.

This event yielded discussions on care but quickly became silly and resulted largely in opportunities to delegate caregiving tasks to technology. While some of these suits revealed a desire to perform better care (e.g. a suit for attaching one’s needy cat to one’s body at all times), others focused on delegating care to technology (e.g. a glove to empower an arthritic mother, a body-based Roomba that keeps you clean). While silliness and empowerment are not in themselves bad outcomes of design, we, the authors, saw them, in a way, as dodging deeper discussions about care and its relationships to technology—rather they seemed to emerge from discomfort to share with strangers, and tended to focus on ways to solve the problems that may require care, instead of rendering the demands and values within caregiving.

Rather than shifting the audience of the workshop towards groups with pre-established trust (which we worried might border on therapy we were unable to scaffold well), we instead chose to redesign the activity in a way that started with a greater space for contemplation of existing objects that have provided care, and then, to provide different directions of designing in a way that called attention to care.
4. The Objects of Care card deck

In July 2021, we, the authors, led a virtual workshop with a group of in-person participants at the Center for Heritage Arts and Textiles in Hong Kong. We focused the workshop around the idea of ‘objects of care’—an object of care can be anything, as long as you view it as representing care in some way, like a chipped mug, a lock of hair, a worried stone, or a beloved garment. We wanted to create an activity that would allow the participant to become more intimate with their object of care, and spend time looking at it, and the way that it shows care. We designed a card deck because we believed it would help scaffold an experience with care that refrained from problem/solution framings (as in the exoskeleton workshop) to focus more deeply on the materials. The deck consists of four “suits”: notice, act, matter and idea, and it is played in two phases. The first phase uses the notice cards and aims to foster vulnerability by encouraging players to engage in private reflections with their object. The second phase uses the act and matter cards to prompt design ideas that embrace care in different ways.

![Image of card deck](image1)

**Figure 2.** ‘Notice’ Cards: Notice cards contain shapes that participants cut out. Each shape functions as a viewfinder, or hole through which objects can be looked at and inspected.

![Image of viewfinder](image2)

**Figure 3.** Looking through the viewfinder on one of the ‘Notice’ cards.

The first set of cards in the deck are titled ‘Notice’. Each card is blank, except for the dotted outline of a shape that is meant to be cut out. This creates a viewfinder or keyhole that the participant uses to inspect their object. The viewfinder allows the participant to pass slowly...
over their object of care, looking at it up close, and framed in new ways, depending on the shape and size of the viewfinder.

We were inspired to create the ‘Notice’ cards with viewfinders because of the work of artist and educator, Sister Corita Kent. Sister Corita Kent was a printmaker and teacher at Immaculate Heart College from 1938-1968. Sister Corita had a practice of looking and noticing using these viewfinders. She said, “You have to look at the world [in] small pieces at a time...Look at it. Just a small part of the world” (Corita & Steward, 2008). Looking at the world in small parts allowed us to notice all of the intricacies and intimacies. We notice structures and relationships we wouldn’t otherwise see, if we were looking at the bigger picture, without a viewfinder.

“[The finder] is a device, which does the same things as the camera lens or viewfinder. It helps us take things out of context, allows us to see for the sake of seeing, and enhances our quick-looking and decision-making skills. An instant finder is an empty 35mm slide holder. Or you can make your own by cutting a rectangular hole out of a heavy piece of paper or cardboard—heavy enough so that it won’t bend with constant use. You can then view life without being distracted by content. You can make visual decisions—in fact, they are made for you” (Corita & Steward, 2008).

By looking at an object of care through a viewfinder, participants are able to notice the care out of context. It allows more attention to be paid to the objects. It causes a deeper looking. Although Sister Corita was using her viewfinder as a way of thinking about artistic compositions, and not to notice these small moments, noticing is something the viewfinder allows one to do very well.

The decision to use a viewfinder to notice was further inspired by the work of artist Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, whose book, Slow Looking: These Views Are Our Tools, does exactly that. Branfman-Verissimo was inspired by the viewfinder practice of Sister Corita, and began taking viewfinders with them everywhere. They began to notice compositions, relationships, and signs of care, in the mundane and every day. This way of noticing caused them to slow down in their life, and find moments of care and beauty in often overlooked places.

Another term we, the authors, like to use for this kind of noticing is Deep Looking. Deep Looking is inspired by Pauline Oliveros’ practice of Deep Listening. Deep Listening is listening with your entire being—your ears, your feet, your heart, your skin. It is a meditation. A trance. A way of being in the world. Deep Listening enhances what is heard—a person’s sonic perception and experience in the world. Deep Looking, with the aid of the viewfinder, asks participants to peer beyond the surface, to look with not only their eyes, for signs of care. It is a way of looking at care, and a way of thinking about how care manifests itself.

Deep Looking is why we, the authors, wanted to integrate viewfinders into this activity. In our own experiences, we felt like they caused us to look deeper, and to care more. We cared about how we were looking, what we were looking for, and what we finally saw. This act of Deep Looking changes how we view things. When using the viewfinders to look for signs of care, it changed our relationships with our objects. A stain was no longer a stain, but a
memory of what was spilled. It was something to cherish, not wash away now that we’ve noticed it. Now we cherish that object more, because of the signs of care within it. We wanted others to have this same experience. To look deeply at the objects in their lives, and notice the care within each object.

Figure 4. ‘Act’ Cards: Act cards prompt the participant to do something (transform, amplify, preserve, commemorate) with the signs of care in the object they brought.

The next suit of cards in the deck is ‘Act’. The ‘Act’ cards ask participants to choose an action: Preserve, Amplify, Transform, or Commemorate care. The ‘Act’ cards ask participants to think about ways of ‘actioning’ the signs of care they have just noticed through the viewfinders. And the following suit of cards, ‘Matter’, offers a range of materials to complete that action with: Cellulose (cotton, linen, etc.), Protein (wool, silk, etc.), Synthetic (Acrylic, latex, etc.), and Metallic (gold, copper, etc.). These two cards, ‘Act’ and ‘Matter’ work together to get one to think about what to do with the signs of care. For example, if one drew Preserve Care and Metallic, one might dip their entire ‘object of care’ in molten metal to keep it in its current state forever. Or, if for example, one drew Amplify Care and Protein, and the object was a sock with a hole in it, one could stitch over the edges of the hole with hot pink yarn, amplifying the spot where the toe pokes through. In relation to bodily materials, the inclusion of protein as a material category encourages the consideration of human/animal products like hair and skin.
Figure 5. ‘Matter’ Cards. Each matter card lists a category of materials (protein, cellulose, metallic, synthetic) as well as a list of example materials that belong in that category in order to spark imagination.

After coming up with ideas based on the different combinations of ‘Act’ and ‘Matter’ cards, participants of the virtual workshop in Hong Kong, shared their ideas in a group WhatsApp chat. After running the workshop, we, the authors, wanted to figure out a way to further engage participants with the ideas they were coming up with—something they could do to not quite complete the full scope of the act, but to also not let that idea get away. So we created a fourth suit of cards called ‘Idea’. Each ‘Idea’ card offers a different prompt:

- “Write your idea as a poem”
- “Mockup your idea from everyday materials and photograph it like it’s a product on a website.”
- “Make a simple line drawing of your idea”
- “Collage your idea”

We, the authors, wanted participants to take more time thinking about how they would represent their ideas and share them, regardless of their prior design abilities, to make their ideas. We wanted them to stay engaged with their ideas and activate them, without actually having to fully realize them. We felt that this would preserve the ambiguity that had been previously present in the sharing of written ideas, but we also wanted the prompts on the ‘Idea’ cards to take participants out of their comfort zone, and find different ways of representing and communicating their ideas.

We believe the ‘Idea’ card allows for an extension of the conversation and solidifies the “ending” of the activity. It is a culminating activity that allows for another round of sharing with the participants, for conversations to be sparked and continued outside of the workshop setting, and for new approaches to be tried, learned and shared.
5. CHAT Workshop Outcomes

Running a workshop in Hong Kong, remotely from the US, required some detailed coordination and time-zone gymnastics. We, the authors, began discussions with the museum team from the Center for Heritage Arts and Textiles to understand the space, logistics, as well as cultural dimensions of the activity we should keep in mind in early 2021. The museum staff were able to situate the workshop in one of their “cozier” workshop spaces and invited attendees to attend in person, within that space. Additionally, we asked each participant to bring an object that represented care to them. As we structured the activity and advertisement, the organizers let us know that the participants might not be as eager to share publicly as we might expect and helped us, the authors, devise a plan to have sharing take place via images only on a shared WhatsApp group. This way, participants could share images rather than text, which we saw to be a way to allow participants to disclose only details in which they were comfortable.

On the day of the workshop, de Koninck and Devendorf called in through zoom and our faces appeared on a large TV screen adjacent to the table where all participants sat in a circle (meaning a few had their back to us). The organizers in Hong Kong had a second camera set up on a hand-held device so they would walk around and “zoom in” to show us, the authors, more details. As we, the authors, presented, we took frequent breaks to allow the organizers to translate, which disrupted our usual practice of rambling through slides, and led us to be much more concise and deliberate with our speech. After sharing our own backgrounds, we asked each participant to share the objects they brought, one by one. This activity formed the bulk of the workshop, and the participants seemed to have no trouble openly sharing. Each time someone shared, there was laughter, often engagement from others, and most of the dialog took place in Cantonese to be later, and much more succinctly, described
to us as the organizers. Our remote presence, in this way, seemed to give the space a personality of its own, that developed enthusiastically and carried through the entire workshop. The remoteness of us was not a problem and perhaps was even part of the success, as it gave the local organizers more control over curating the timing and space of the activity.

Some of the objects of care were: a shredded baby blanket that the participant’s mother would lick for them whenever she washed it so it would smell like her again; a collected of hand felted cat hair; an adaptive garment that the participant had designed and sewn for their own elderly, wheelchair bound mother, so that she could still wear stylish clothing; a plastic bowl that the participant had used to feed their grandmother; a pencil case; sage; a well-used notebook; Kleenex tissues. This sharing of objects of care, in and of itself, seemed to have more value beyond the game we, the authors, were trying to play. The objects of care sparked conversations on care in general, and the many forms it takes. People talked about how they give care and how they receive care.

We, the authors, were participants as well, sharing our own objects of care. To get the ‘Act’ and ‘Matter’ portion of the game started, we seeded the discussion with ideas around our own objects. de Koninck brought in a beloved dress, expecting to do the noticing activity with the back of the dress, which has been repaired several times. But instead, what de Koninck had noticed was an array of stains all across the front of the dress. And with the prompting of the ‘Act’ and ‘Matter’ cards, de Koninck came up with the idea to needle felt into the stains with wool, or the hair of a beloved pet, to transform the stains into decoration. Devendorf brought in a dress they had made for their daughter. Having drawn the ‘Preserve Care’ and ‘Metallic’ cards, they came up with the idea to repair the dress with staples mimicking embroidery patterns. With these examples, the conversation started amongst the participants.

[Participant A], the owner of the notebook, drew ‘Preserve Care’ and ‘Synthetic’ and had the idea to etch the notes and memories onto fabric. [Participant B], who brought in the sage, wanted to write poems about the elderly on paper made from the sage, and then fold them into paper planes and fly them away into the sky as a way to amplify care. [Participant C], who brought in the shredded, licked, baby blanket, wanted to commemorate the care of the blanket by preserving the sense of security it once provided, by attaching raw cotton to enhance the softness of the touch.
The focus on care, sharing of stories about care, and imaginative ideas from participants at the CHAT workshop led us to view the “Objects of Care” card-game as largely a success. We, the authors, believe a few factors of the redesign and implementation led to this outcome but that we could also extend the deck for increased support in the ideation phase.

6. Discussion

As our desires to consider bodies and care in design developed through workshops and the development of the card decks, we, the authors, came to discover relationships between the activity and materials that might hold interest for DRS more broadly.

6.1 On the Relationship Between Care and Bodily Materials

Our first point of reflection relates to the connection between care and bodies. While we with an interest in care and the way that it is evidenced in textiles through their accumulation of bodily imprints, we gained a deeper understanding about how the term “care” does or does not evoke reflections on the body. Put another way, we began to gain insight to the question: is designing with care always about designing with bodily materials?

In some cases, the connection between care and bodily materials was obvious: such as the blanket which had been licked and held until it was shredded. In other cases, such as the sage, the body became evoked in the sense of an embodied experience. For example, the experience of inhaling, touching, and playing with sage. While there were a range of ways, and directness, to how the body and its materials were considered, it was clear to us, the au-
thors, that the design materials engaged were quite different than what we had encountered in other workshops. For example, cat hair and used Kleenex are rarely considered valuable or held on to, as a material. Here, we felt that the framing of “care” created a space to consider such materials in new light. Care became a proxy, or detour, towards engagements with bodily materials rather than directly asking participants to bring in things they had sweat upon or stained. The focus on textiles, and textile materialities complemented this, as they serve as potent containers of stories and material memories. The closeness of textiles to the body in many cases, necessarily evoked the contexts of bodies and experience that were created upon them. In the later stages of the card activity, where participants are invited to engage with broader or more rigid material sets such as wood or metal or plastic, helped to contrast the textile materials and call out their unique capacities and interactions. By starting with textiles, as opposed to plastic or wood, we, the authors, inadvertently privileged textile’s modes of interaction and imprints.

6.2 The Importance of Supporting Vulnerability

Reflecting on the two workshops: Exoskeletons for Caregivers and Objects of Care, helped us understand the subtle ways in which both socio-technical histories can shape interactions. Namely, the technical focus on considering exoskeletons as collections of sensors and actuators did seem to shift into expected territories of “solving care” or making it more efficient. The shift to the card deck, and the bringing in of physical objects of care, created more space for contemplation of care, prior to the participants having to “do” anything with that care. Notably, however, none of our action cards gave options for making the care invisible or solving the issues that give rise to care. While the shift from exoskeleton de-emphasized the role of the body in performing care and wearing technological devices, we, the authors, do believe it created different pathways for bodies to emerge. Namely, in the contemplation of the bodily materials of others (cats, loved ones) as they become entangled with the self through sensory experience. The sage evoked a friend through touch and smell. The cat hair and dog leash evoked a beloved companion. From this, we suggest others interested in engaging bodily materials by way of care should consider how their activity supports contemplation, reflection and also the cultivation of intimacy and vulnerability between the group participants.

6.3 Designing with and for Care

The terms ‘with’ and ‘for’ are used often to demonstrate different relationships to design subjects. To ‘design with’ signifies inclusion of the other subject where ‘design for’ signifies a kind of service from one person (usually a designer) to support a subject. Here, the subject of “care” isn’t a human, so much as an idea, concept, or past event. In our workshops, we saw designing with care as a prompt to engage the objects that held evidence of care and histories of care in a design process. At the same time, we designed for the sake of the care, to honor and create space to appreciate it. Overall, as our workshop shifted in structure, we
saw differences in how our workshop participants related to care. In the exoskeleton workshop, participants used design as a means of caring for another person, or the self. The design itself would do the caring. The shifts made to the more contemplative and decontextualized card deck created more space to think about care in and of itself and how it became manifested through objects and bodies in contact with objects. The subjects shifted most notably from a person in need of care to recognition of care as an ongoing phenomenon and sustaining force in human life.

6.4 Future Work: Making an Archive
Because we, the authors, had the participants of the virtual workshop in Hong Kong contribute their noticing images and final ideas into a group WhatsApp chat, we have that archive that we can return to, to revisit the workshop, and see everything that was contributed. Having this private group chat as the space that we contributed to during the workshop felt successful because it gave a space for everyone to contribute, especially those who were shy about sharing vocally with the group.

Moving forward, we, the authors, would like to create an option to complement the privacy of the group with an archive that anyone can contribute to—publicly or anonymously. This archive will house the outcomes of the ‘Idea’ cards, but not the process images. We, the authors, feel those are better stored in the private group chat space. We imagine this online archive to exist similarly to the project ‘Learning to Love You More’ by Miranda July.

“Learning to Love You More is both a web site and series of non-web presentations comprised of work made by the general public in response to assignments given by artists Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher...Participants accepted an assignment, completed it by following the simple but specific instructions, sent in the required report (photograph, text, video, etc.) and their work got posted on-line. Like a recipe, meditation practice, or familiar song, the prescriptive nature of these assignments was intended to guide people towards their own experience...From 2002 to its close in 2009, over 8000 people participated in this project.” (July et al., 2007)

We, the authors, want our online archive to create a broader community space, much like ‘Learning to Love You More’ did. We want the online archive to commemorate the activity, and like ‘Learning to Love You More’, this archive is an artistic project, and not a searchable database of ideas.

The archive also fulfills a selfish desire, as workshop leaders, to be able to look back on the ideas and outcomes of leading the workshop, and being able to see what comes out of workshops that are led without us. Furthermore, we hope it becomes a space for public inspiration that shows alternative framings of care in design.

7. Conclusion
Designing the “Objects of Care” card game helped us, the authors, develop stronger intuitions for addressing care in design in a way that honors care. We believe the following ways of thinking led to success, which we saw manifested as participants feeling comfortable to
share and new stories of care developing: (1) shifting focus from fast-paced group ideation focused on technological ideas to longer private reflection prior to sharing, (2) an embrace of “deep looking” activities borrowed from established art practices, and (3) an attention to the various ways care manifests as bodily-textile materials. It is our hope that this card deck will become a tool for educators at all levels. That it can exist in both short workshops and university-level design courses. We want the cards to have a life without us. That we can give them away for others to use in their classrooms. We imagine the card deck becoming an activity to start out a semester-long design class, and prepare the students for the kind of looking and thinking that is expected of them.

8. References

About the Authors:

Sasha de Koninck is a PhD candidate in Intermedia Art, Writing and Performance at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her textile research practice is currently centered around undoing and dissolving. She is also a member of the Unstable Design Lab.

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