

Composting our practices (and organisations) through artist-led pedagogy

Jacina Leong

Abstract

Composting as a pedagogy is about cultivating a transformative practice, in and with community — for relational and affective assembly. Thinking *with* composting as a pedagogic (and more-than-human) metaphoric device, this article introduces *composting our practices*, an online pedagogical exchange developed and facilitated by the author for the 2021 *disorganising* project. Included are conversations shared between the author and practitioners who gathered to compost their practices — to ingest, digest, and churn their practices — by collectively attuning to the rhythms and temporalities of practice, including the chronic stress and cumulative impacts of operating under capitalist, neoliberal logics of productivity, growth and expansion, job casualisation and precarity, and competitive and scarce funding models. Our shared conversations are an offering to readers to forage what is useful to their thinking. In doing so, we propose that you ask yourself: what aspects of your practice are transforming? What needs to transform? And how might we be able to do this, at different scales, through shared practices of reflexivity? Composting as a pedagogy is a situated, practical, and ongoing labour towards the maintenance, repair, and where necessary and possible, decomposition and transmogrification of our institutionalised habits and behaviours — including those we enact, knowingly or otherwise, through the organisations in which our practices operate.

Keywords

composting, care, pedagogy, reflexivity, community of practice

Twice we met to compost our practices. To churn and digest our disorganising. To think with and alongside slow infrastructures and dominant productionist timelines, deep time, and container logics. To ask what nourishing and transformative concepts might emerge in the care work of our composting. Physically dispersed, we gathered online across lockdowns, towards the end of the Waring season and the beginning of the Guling, and as our meridians and body clocks moved through heart time.¹

This opening reflection describes *composting our practices*, an online pedagogical exchange I developed and facilitated between artists and arts workers, for the 2021 *disorganising* project.² *disorganising* was a project initiated by three Narm/Melbourne-based artist-led organisations: West Space, Liquid Architecture and Bus Projects.³ As former directors Amelia Wallin (West Space), Joel Stern (Liquid Architecture) and Channon Goodwin (Bus Projects) explain in their contribution to this journal — the project was borne from cross-organisational defunding and a collective decision to pool limited organisational resources. In doing so, like the distributed and collaborative concept of *lumbung* promoted by Jakarta-based artist-collective *ruangrupa*⁴ Wallin, Stern and Goodwin identified an opportunity through *disorganising* to commission artists to “experiment with divergent ways of organising and creating” (*disorganising*, 2021a, n.p.). This took place between and across their long-running artist-led organisations, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

disorganising is a nebulous concept and action.

It is slippery and messy, but that is what we are here to investigate.

When Lana Nguyen, producer for *disorganising*, proposed these ideas in her email invitation to me, likening *disorganising* to the “possibility of metamorphosis” (L. Nguyen, personal communication, 12 April 2021) I was deep in the messy work of composting. I compost at home with the help of worms. Soil dwellers whose careful and persistent work, metabolising the nitrogen and carbon scraps I feed them, slowly transform organic matter into nutrient rich castings. Worm wee and poo that I return to my garden beds. I check in on them — red wigglers, mostly — every few days. Sometimes I run my fingers through their layered composite, saying hello and thanking the worms for their ceaseless work, learning to attune to their rhythms, tempos and temperatures through smell, touch and sight. At time of writing, where I live, on the unceded sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Narm/Melbourne, this time of year is known as the Waring (wombat) season (Melbourne Museum, 2022). Days are short and nights are long. A felted blanket provides an additional layer of warmth for the worms when temperatures are low.

Composting is slow, intentional, collaborative.

¹ This reflection was originally shared via <https://disorganising.co/composing-our-disorganising>. The Waring and Guling seasons referred to in this reflection are two of seven seasons marked by the seasonal calendar of the Eastern Kulin people, the Traditional Owners of the (so-called) Melbourne and Greater Melbourne regions, including the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. Heart time refers to the two-hour interval of the 24-hour qi body clock where energy is understood to pass through the heart meridian

² See <https://disorganising.co/>.

³ Narm is the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung word for (so-called) Melbourne.

⁴ *Lumbung* means ‘rice barn’ in Indonesian. See <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/glossary/lumbung/>

It also necessitates that as a human facilitator of these “tender alchemies” I “pay attention to what goes into the compost bin. It implores that [I] attend to [the worms and their] *critical metabolisms* — to notice not only what is being transmogrified, but also under what conditions, why, and to what effect” (Hamilton & Neimanis, 2018, p. 502, emphasis added by author).

Composting leaves me curious.



Figure 1: A social media tile (image) used to promote the composting workshops. Image courtesy of Bus Projects, West Space, and Liquid Architecture.

As one of the artists invited to develop a project for *disorganising*, I was interested in exploring how composting as a metaphor could torque the imaginaries of those of us who had been invited to disorganise.⁵ Metaphors as a figurative language convey and make meaning. They help to translate and make sense of complex and sometimes deeply embodied ideas including, as I will explore, institutionalised habits and behaviours. Composting as a more-than-human metaphoric device for “co-worlding new and latent possibilities with others” (Neimanis & McLauchlan, 2022, p. 219) first emerged for me in the provocations of Jennifer Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis (2018). Informed by their respective practices as home composters, as well as facilitators of the feminist and environmental humanities reading group *Composting Feminisms*, Hamilton and Neimanis (and more recently Neimanis with Laura McLauchlan) position composting as a methodology for:

⁵ For a full list of contributing artists, see <https://disorganising.co/>

Carefully bringing things together but in ways that pay close attention to honouring genealogies, valuing what is often discarded as no longer useful, and growing new possibilities from the mulching together of things sometimes treated as separate ... This process is sometimes messy and make-do but always careful and attentive (Neimanis & McLauchlan, 2022, p. 221).

As a metaphoric device, and informed by this methodology, composting for me invoked reflections on time, pace, language, and labour. Not only in relation to my home composting practices as previously described. In thinking with the provocation put forward through *disorganising*, I was also reminded of the conceptual and practical labours of arts practice. Including, as this article considers, the etymological resonance of words such as *common*, *community*, *companion*, *complicate*, and *complicity* to our relationship (as artists, artworkers, creative and cultural producers) with the capitalist and neoliberal organising and operating logics enacted by the organisations in which our practices occur. Each of these words also share with composting the Latin prefix 'com', meaning 'together with, in combination', and are associations (sometimes, sources of tension) that have surfaced in my own practice over the years.

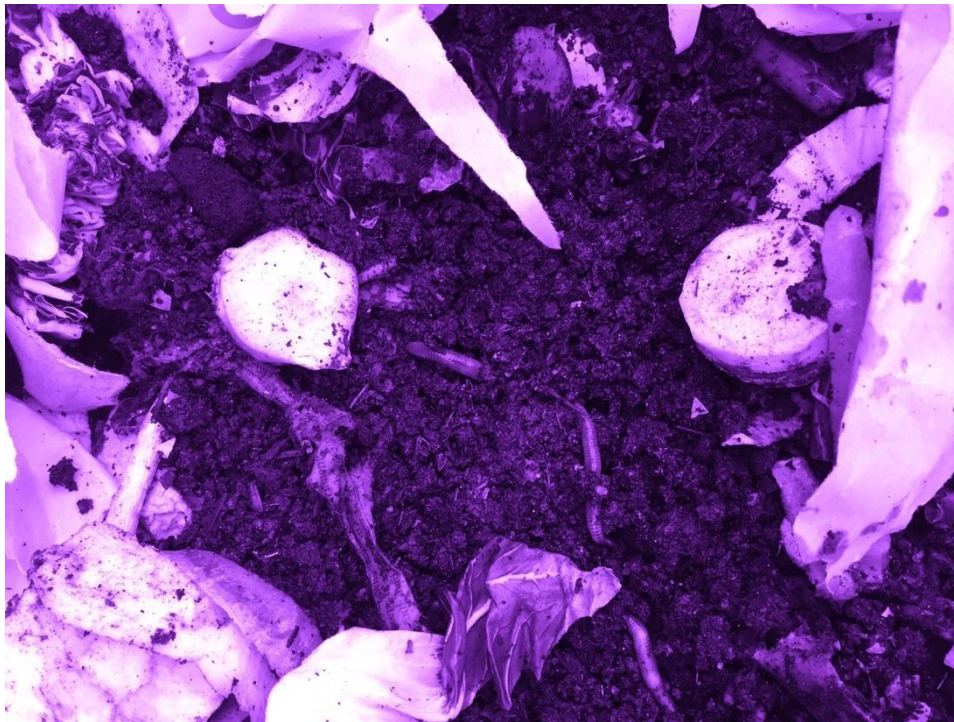


Figure 2: A photograph of the author's worm compost bin. Photograph courtesy of Jacina Leong.

For fifteen years my practice as an artist has taken place in and across the contemporary arts sector, including artist-led organisations, and often within the context of public programming, alternative pedagogies, and community engagement. Specifically, as a form of public pedagogy, my practice is concerned with actively and deliberately bringing people together to explore and respond to overlapping crises, through durational and dialogic forms of gathering. Despite the propensity of such practices for longitudinal engagement, the chronic stress and cumulative impacts on

practitioners operating under capitalist, neoliberal logics of productivity, growth and expansion, job casualisation and precarity, and competitive and scarce funding models, are also well-documented across the arts sector (Reckitt, 2016). This includes experimental organisations like Bus Projects, West Space and Liquid Architecture. Doing more, but not necessarily with more resources — what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2015) calls keeping pace with dominant productionist timelines — has only been exacerbated in a pandemic-impacted climate (Zhang, 2022). This often means that as practitioners we neglect practices of deep reflexivity.

This is not because the *want* or *need* for deep reflexivity is lacking in the arts sector, but because our bodies (as artists, artworkers, creative and cultural producers) have become co-opted by the organisational systems and structures in which we work, knowingly or otherwise. Artist-researchers Jenny Richards and Sophie Hope (2018, p. 76) have observed in their research of workers in the arts sector, “how quickly bodies become institutionalised within their workplaces ... how quickly blind spots grow, and how the energy to do things differently can soon be diminished”, due in part to capitalist, neoliberal principles that Noongar writer and researcher, Cass Lynch (2021) reminds us have their origins in the European and British colonial project.

In my conversation with other arts practitioners as part of my PhD research, I found that reflecting on the everyday habits of practice was not something many had done or did regularly due to time constraints and, in some cases, feelings of non-comradery within the workplace. Yet many practitioners articulated a *need* and *want* to make space for a different pace of practice to resist what Richards and Hope (2018) have observed as the institutionalisation of the body across the arts sector. Through my invitation to disorganise, then, I wondered what elements of practice could be mulched together, decomposed, and transmogrified by collectively attuning to the time, pace, language, and labours of practice. Of taking the time as practitioners, across shared conversations and organisational affiliations, to take stock. Even if momentarily, of where we are. To understand both the broader ecology and specificities of our practices. To pull the layers of the metaphorical compost bin apart. To understand the systems and structures in which we operate, how they are organised and by who, and what their purposes are, by allowing time to attend to our *critical metabolisms* as Hamilton and Neimanis propose (2018).

And so, between extended lockdowns and suspended activities for some, *disorganising* provided an opening, however fleeting, for me to facilitate a gathering through a pedagogy of composting. Composting as a pedagogy is about cultivating a transformative practice, in and with community. For relational and affective assembly. In doing so, I invited *disorganising* collaborators to compost — *ingest, digest, churn* — their practices together with voices whose scholarship on slow infrastructures and soil times (Barlow & Drew, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015), care scales (Tsing et al., 2017) and word/world making (Pomarico, Kahakalau & Morales, 2021), community organising (Brownlee, 2020) and deep memory (Lynch, 2020) might torque the imaginaries of those of us gathering. To intervene in and tinker with our practices. To think with and through questions about how *disorganising* currently figures within our practices as artists, arts workers, creative and cultural producers? What kinds of *disorganising* are we practising, for whom, and towards what purpose? Are our *disorganising* needs urgent or can we transform slowly? What other nourishing, transformative, decomposing concepts emerge in the care work of composting, and how might they be useful? Where do we place our *disorganising* energies, individually and collectively, beyond what we are doing in this group?

On the pages that follow I have gathered some of the conversations shared between breakout rooms and group chats on Zoom. As you read, I invite you to compost with Tiyan, Madeleine, Debris, Bec, Ceri, Lana, Hãng, Amy, Lynda, Joel, Amelia, and me. To take up the metaphor of ‘composting’ is to apprentice and attune oneself to the rhythms and temporalities of practice. To wonder, following Hamilton and Neimanis (Composting Feminisms, n.d, n.p.), what matter might “break down and re-emerge as new matters”, as potentially transformed matter/practice, in and through your composting. Some of our conversations may resonate and seed questions, and others may not. Our shared conversations are an offering for those reading to forage for what is useful to your thinking at this moment, and to read aloud the dialogue and questions brought forward through our conversations.

When we read and speak such words, when we hear and air them, we carry the wisdom and the presence of those who have passed them. Words are not ours to begin with, they were spoken before, and continue to reverberate in and through us (Pomarico, Kahakalau & Morales, 2021, p. 236–237).

Take a few moments to arrive into this space

When you are ready, I invite you to think about the process of *disorganising*, and borrowing from cultural anthropologist Joseph Dumit (2014), to ask:

What does it look, sound, taste, smell, or feel like?

What kinds of relation, attention, emotion, cognition are involved?

When does it appear? What is the rhythm of its appearance?

What activities enable others to come across it?

Bec ... is like, hey Jacina. I was just telling the others that I'm so new to this idea of *disorganising* that I played with word association. For the question, what does *disorganising* smell like and taste like, I thought about burning. The smell of burning and the smell of forgetting that you have something on the stove or in the oven, or like burning toast and the sound of an alarm. I was also thinking about forgetfulness and the feeling of frenetic like panic. Like, 'oh shit, I've forgotten something!'

Lana I had a really similar thing for how *disorganising* smelt. I said it smells like smoke, a mixture of fire and water. This intense burning.

It's soft like ash and it's hard to breathe in. It's a collision. So I was thinking about this *collision sound* of multiple things at once.

Bec I love that phrase 'soft like ash'. I'm thinking now of when you burn paper and embers appear gently curling and floating in the air.

Lana Ash is also very helpful in compost. It was funny hearing you talk about qi earlier, Jacina, because yesterday I did a tai chi class. The instructor was talking about qi as this unquantifiable, indistinguishable energy, and I was thinking about that in terms of *disorganising*. This different way of sitting. It's almost like this imperceptible change. But then a change does occur and it ripples through your body, how grounded you feel, and how you might move differently.

Amelia I was thinking about *disorganising* as this low hum. Something that is always there rather than an alarm or sudden burst. Something that can be easy to ignore as demands pile up, but remains a consistent urgency. Lana and I have had many conversations about the contradictions of doing this kind of work that takes a lot of time when you don't have any time. The kind of inherent tension of *disorganising*.

12:06:00 From hang : Jacina, any good tea recommendations for heart time 11am-1pm? thought you might know :)

12:14:19 From Jacina : Great question. Heart meridian likes red foods and warm / sour foods. So peppermint, for example, may be too cold to drink now. Black teas would be good, maybe with berry / pomegranate tones ...

I guess all the things I was writing down had this dual side of discomfort and then spaciousness. A feeling like sandpaper, but then you start to relax into the unknown. Or there's a little invitation for quiet contemplation and then bursting towards action. It feels kind of syncopated.

Amy

My mum's from the Borneo jungle, and for me, *disorganising* feels like the jungle. It's a confronting space. It's unfamiliar but full of potential. It's very evocative. It's dark and mysterious. It's somewhere that I don't quite understand yet but there's an invitation, like you said Amy, in the unknown for spaciousness.

Tiyana

I love what you just said, that you don't understand *yet*. It's not about perennial incomprehension. It's acknowledging that there's space to move towards something understandable.

Amy

I think *disorganising* is a little bit like this *pointing* puppy .

Madeleine

I thought the sound of *disorganising* is a little bit like when lots of people are in a kitchen and they're cooking. As part of this project, I've been speaking a lot about metabolising and *disorganising* our relationship to capitalism through our metabolisms. I've been speaking to people who are organising and *disorganising* new artist-led economic models through food.⁶ So I've been speaking to people about kitchens, and I keep thinking that kitchens are really improvised spaces, but there's also something that comes out of it at the end. You don't really know what your job is in a kitchen where lots of people are cooking, but something will happen and we're all going to eat in the end.

⁶ See <http://disorganising.co/breadcrumbs-in-the-forest-conversations-with-tenacious-bee-collective-and-cocina-collaboratio>

Lynda ... hello.

Joel Go on, Lynda. You should finish the thought.

Lynda I think it was just the artist, arts worker, and artist support. And, Hăng, I'm right there with you, with the emotional labour that sits with that. There's the bigger piece of collaborating and then the massive, epic undertaking going on between Ceri and I that you don't see.⁷

Joel It's something Hăng and I were talking about in the context of co-writing a couple of things together, and how the dissolution of a single author's voice allows you to write things that you normally wouldn't. We wrote things that neither of us would write on our own, because neither of us were wholly responsible for them. And so in some ways the good thing about collaborating with someone who's very different from you is the delegation of authorship and responsibility, where you feel enabled to put something out there that is not or does not have to comply with your sense of self-identification. I think of that a little bit like a composting of materials because it sort of breaks down the, let's say, construction of self-identity that we work so hard to reproduce every day. Or try to pretend it is sort of more coherent than it is.

⁷ See <http://disorganising.co/revealing-the-mess-of-it-all>

Hằng When the website was launched, Lana and I were saying, it's kind of funny how it all looks really polished but we know there's been all these other things leading up to it that have been really chaotic.

Joel It's a good sort of metaphor for the way in which the surface can look polished, but the back end is a mess.

Hằng I really liked thinking about the compost bin, what the bin represents and the labour rights of the worms. We were talking about the worms trying to escape the bin when there's not enough oxygen.

Joel That got me thinking, are we the worms trying to escape from the bin? Lynda was then speculating, well then, what is the bin? Is the bin our organisation or is it some other apparatus, the state, for example. And so, it's been interesting trying to break down composting into some of its constituent parts and its material dimensions, the combination of organic and inorganic matter. But also the tools and platforms upon which these things transform themselves.

Lynda We live in a flat and we share a compost bin. There's a whole lot of negotiation that goes on about who's taking responsibility, who's churning it, because it is not always a joyous job.

Lana We've spoken a few times about the body and *disorganising*. For us, *disorganising* has been a

very verbal project, a very written project a lot of the time. So, how do we bring the body back.

Amelia And how can we think about comfort, physicality, all those things with equal importance to the writing and the speaking because it's been so discursive. How can we bring *disorganising* back into our bodies? I think you're right, Lana, to say that the weaving workshop facilitated by Yasbelle Kerkow has been a really nice entry point into the verbal but one that also centres the body.

Lana And also the dinners, in terms of digesting and sharing nutrition in a communal way, has been a nice way to remember the body through *disorganising*.⁸

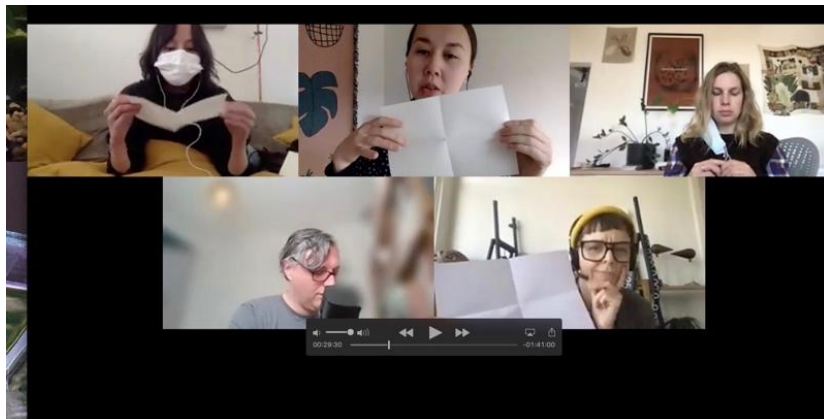
Amelia Some walking, some stretching, some movement would be a really nice layer to add to the project.

Jacina Bec, what you said earlier reminded me of Aimi Hamraie's work, planning their academic calendar around the waxing and waning phases of the moon. I'll share it now. It's a beautiful resource but also points to the difficulty in

⁸ See <https://disorganising.co/disorganising-dinner-1>

doing so within the dominant productionist rhythms of academia.⁹

Lana It is so nice hearing about this. You reminded us earlier also of the Eastern Kulin seasonal calendar and the different temporalities of each season. In our last conversation, we were also speaking about Kronos and Kairos time. I feel like we do chronological stuff all the time without thinking of a more responsive way to plan, for example, according to moon phases or being more perceptive to seasonal changes.



⁹ See <https://twitter.com/aimihamraie/status/1293211033721610240?lang=en>



Figure 2: Screenshots taken in and across compositing breakout rooms on Zoom. Images courtesy of Jacina Leong.

Jacina I went back to the *disorganising* website, Hăng, and was reminded of your and Joel’s provocation that through *disorganising*, ‘Something less than an organisation emerges: a disorganisation? Or even less, simply an organ. Rather than building anew, the organ asks us to remember that we are breathing, pulsing and in relationship to a larger living organism — we cannot thrive on our own.’¹⁰

Joel Yeah, the idea that bodily organs are useless on their own. But I suppose you can be an organ donor and you can receive an organ transplant. This idea then that while an organ might outlive its use in one body, it can remain useful to another body — which could be helpful in thinking about how certain aspects of *disorganising* might be more useful to someone else than they are to us.

¹⁰ See <https://disorganising.co/a-promise-was-made>

Jacina This brings me back to your question, Hăng, about what parts of the institution need to die for something else to grow.

We had great conversations. I think our conversations were a great reminder for me about the structures that we put onto ourselves in our working lives, in our day to day lives, in terms of time rhythms. We were talking about hours and days and months, different cycles that we can tune into, but often we have very Eurocentric ideas of time. For me, what I think we need to change in the ways that we work is to become more trusting and compassionate. We need a different sense of time. Lana

I was really taken with the resource shared on moon phase planning, and our conversation about shifting work habits, and how *disorganising* could be a platform for trying to do something different. Doing away with the 24-hour rhythm and replacing it instead with a longer-term rhythm. It feels like it's the right kind of platform to try something like that. Amelia

I have the enviable position of trying to summarise our conversation given Lynda and Hăng had to leave early. Joel

We spoke about the idea of *disorganising* as a maze where there are lots of dead ends. What do you do when you get to a dead end? Can you turn back? What tools can we use to break down the dead end of a maze? This got us thinking about the construction site next door to Collingwood Yards.¹¹ The constant jackhammering and the rhythm of that in relation to *disorganising*: a rhythm characterised by funding cycles, the years that people spend in organisations before moving on, and the way in which *disorganising* might be a form of intervening in these short and long rhythmic cycles.

The thing that has stayed with me, and I think will stay with me for a long time is Amy Madeleine saying that we're good at unearthing urgency, but how do we bring these urgencies into public? And how do you nurture urgency through slow infrastructure?

Can we afford to be slow?

Ceri Metaphor is alive until it becomes, you know, a cliché and you're no longer thinking about the live meaning that it conveys. It becomes like the dead structure of language. I think there's something interesting in this process of how much we require these organisational structures of language to almost inhabit or to use those structures as a host to do stuff. But at the same time, how do we not fall into the quagmire of dead language and dead metaphors. How do we continue to open the possibilities of these structures, making new kinds of economies of meaning?

I guess this is where it gets quite complex because arguably the capacity to make new meaning is made available to us in the expanded domain of capitalism. It provides us

¹¹ Bus Projects, Liquid Architecture and West Space are at time of writing currently located at Collingwood Yards, a former technical college, based in Collingwood, Narm/Melbourne.

with, you know, access to the material to make value to pass up the chain. So maybe it's about reconciling that we're all part of this capitalist platform and working out how to at least make it as equitable as possible for those trapped inside the compost bin.

The other thing is this idea of neuroplasticity and these action-based meditations that we've been part of. You know, through doing things or enacting things that are rearranging or rewiring how we see the world, how we see others, how we interact with others. Working out how to pass on those insights is, I think, important.

Debris You're talking about dead language, and I feel like composting is also this process of stretching open the binary between living and dead. Do you think that dead language can and should be revived?

Ceri Maybe it's the composting process or it's like growing fruit in graves rather than consigning things to that binary of 'it's no longer valuable'. It might be that there is a whole range of things that are still very valuable, but it's how we reconsider them or reorganise them.

Lana This made me also think that, for example, when you know the word for tree in multiple languages, you have a better idea of getting towards the essence of what the tree is. Rather than this association *points to head* of tree is that *gestures to tree*. This multiplicity of understanding.

Hằng I wonder if that can be applied to the word *disorganising*. At the start, the question was always, what is *disorganising*? What are we *disorganising*? And, Lana, what you were saying yesterday, that *disorganising* is a vulnerable act. It lends itself to critique and a lot of curiosity as well.

- Ceri While the tree is still hanging in there, I read something recently about these biodomes that have been growing healthy trees. But the trees are starting to fall over because they've never been stressed. They've never actually experienced wind, for example, while they've been growing. So, they don't have root systems. It's just interesting to consider that we've been going through this whole process, which has been, you know, stressful. But possibly with that stress comes all this incredible resilience and capacity to respond to things that would otherwise not be provoked.
- Jacina It speaks to what you said before Ceri, along with Hǎng and Lynda, around the need for resilience as a resource. Particularly now at this time and knowing that there will continue to be disruptions.
- Ceri Yeah, and if we zoom out a bit, for an exercise in thinking — how are organisations reconfiguring themselves? There's been attempts to describe how the function of art in society is a little bit like the immune system. A call for art to be out there anticipating threats that are not actually tangible or visible because they're beyond the limits of what the body is even aware of. And so, it's necessary that artists and our organisations are experimenting in anticipation of things that are just about to happen. Which is then the exact opposite of box ticking and delivering things that are anticipated, and almost intentionally being on the backfoot to be able to respond ...
- Debris ... which makes me think of evasion as maybe parallel or counter to resilience. You can be resilient to these kinds of frictions, which is important, but I'm also thinking about how words such as flexibility and resilience are tied up with neoliberalism. How these terms keep us fixed as subjects to weather the storm of bullshit.
- Jacina I'm thinking again about structure, and scaffold as structure and what happens in this case to our conversations, to our *disorganising* exchanges, after its removal.

Ceri And also, falsework. When you create a bridge, you place falsework under the bridge, which is taken away once the bridge is built.

Lana It makes me think about relationships and interspecies collaborations. Like French Bulldogs, and how they are born through caesarean section because they've been in relationship with humans for so long, they're no longer viable without that relationship. When we're thinking about the bridge analogy, how do we create this supporting structure that can exist without us. But also, maybe we do need the supporting structure for it to exist, maybe those relationships are important, through that entwining.

But also farming and gardening in terms of the types of plants we might put in the earth that require different energy and maintenance. When we work against the conditions that exist, in terms of the weather or what we grow in certain ground, then we end up working against the finite energy that we have.

Ceri Yeah, those different kinds of economies of energy and energy flow. I guess that is the big thing that we're learning is where we can direct our energies.

I was just thinking about what was said earlier about *disorganising* being a process for revealing the internal processes and habits of practice. Have we been revealing our processes to those who need to see it? Is it those within the organisation or those outside who need to see these habits and processes?

I get a sense that they're exactly the people who need to see this. The people who constitute the internal part of the system. It's only through the process of becoming aware of what the actual effect of being, you know, tooled up and part of an organisation ... even the capacity to reflect on that or be self-reflexive about that is possibly one of the only hopes that there could be some structural change through this short circuiting. Ceri

It feels like hacking, like grassroots activism in some way. I feel like lots of people are sceptical of *disorganising* as well, in a very justified way. Thinking it may be virtue signalling from organisations that just want to continue and don't have practices that are speaking to what is needed to change. But at the same time, I feel like even if that was not genuine, the fact that they've taken this rhetoric that has become popular and speaks to grassroots activism, it is like infiltrating the power chain. I find that hopeful. I think that's why it's important to interrogate these organisations on a very internal level, rather than a larger public. Because, I mean, even the time that we're in is asking us to do that. The pandemic is creating this context where that is the most fertile work that we can do in this space. Not by planting, you know, a cottage garden but ... Lana

My friend said that last year was a fallow year where you don't do any planting, you let the soil rest. Hãng

Maybe creating small rituals is the only way to keep the meaning alive. Ceri

Composting in practice

Twelve months after we gathered to compost our practices, composting as a metaphoric device took on new meaning following the announcement that after twenty-one years of operation, the

Narrm/Melbourne-based artist-led initiative Bus Projects¹² would close at the end of 2022 due to multi-year defunding. While composting holds space for life cycles over perpetuity, the closure of Bus Projects, and the grief that follows endings, was felt personally — both as an artist who had long recognised its significance for emerging arts practitioners and as one of its co-directors.

Building on the deep learning and reflection undertaken during *disorganising*, in October 2021, Bus Projects announced the appointment of a co-directorship. Two months after *composting our practices*, I joined Bus Projects to co-lead the organisation with Nina Mulhall through a time of experimentation, testing and action.¹³ Imagining new models of organisational innovation and forms of dynamic, diverse, and unexpected artistic programming. Nina and I recognised this as a time to strengthen connections with new and existing communities of practice, and to support and empower the depth, breadth, and diversity of contemporary art practices by emerging and underrepresented artists. In doing so, as co-directors, we also returned to many of the questions *composting our practices* had brought forward and surfaced through our respective practices over the years — asking how we might consciously and carefully decompose and transmogrify elements that no longer served the organisation. This included reviewing inequitable staffing structures, slowing down phrenetic curatorial and programming production, and ensuring that staff capacity was sustainably, ethically and accurately aligned with organisational staffing, available funding, and our programming vision so that we could support artists, with and through practices of response-able (Haraway 2016) forms of care.

Following the announcement of the closure of Bus Projects, Nina and I shouldered varied responses from our community. From those devastated, in deep shock and disbelief that this was the fate of an organisation that had played such a pivotal role in so many early careers over twenty-one years of operation. To those who advocated for a petition, a protest for action, for funding stakeholders to intervene. Others recognised that the decision made by the Board to close the organisation reflected broader funding cuts and austerity measures. Indeed, these recent and ongoing funding cuts to the arts in Australia have devastated the sector, exacerbating a culture of precarity and burnout amongst artists and arts workers (Flore, Gaylor & Hendry, 2020). The loss of core government funding alongside the devastating impacts of the pandemic on the arts sector will reverberate for years to come. These compounded impacts cannot be underestimated.

So, what does the (temporary¹⁴) closure of a small artist-led organisation like Bus Projects, and 'composting' our practices as a pedagogy teach us?

Composting as a pedagogy, for me, is about holding questions that do not always have clear answers, for rehearsing and making space for shapeshifting. For creating moments of solidarity, between and amongst practitioners, to recognise and articulate the habits and tensions of our practices. Habits that we have internalised, consciously or not, that no longer serve and rub against our values. For navigating the conditions and boundaries of our practices. For what needs to be transformed, what is transforming, individually and collectively, in and through our practices. To hold and make space for the practitioners that we are, and the practitioners we *need* and *want* to become. In so doing,

¹² See <https://busprojects.org.au/> for information about the organisation

¹³ Nina Mulhall joined Bus Projects in 2016 as the Curator (Public Programs) and was appointed as Co-Director, alongside the author, in 2021.

¹⁴ At time of publication, Bus Projects announced it would remain open thanks to strategic project investment from Australia Council for the Arts. See <https://busprojects.org.au/program/bus-projects-is-continuing>

composting as a pedagogy is not about achieving consensus (Bertoni, 2016). As the conversations in this text make visible, while not all of us agreed on the elements of practice mulched together, composting as a pedagogy is about doing the work to ‘dig deep’ (Neimanis & McLauchlan, 2022, p. 222). To recognise how our bodies are ‘differently *affecting* and *affected*’ (Neimanis & McLauchlan, 2022, p. 220, emphasis added) by the organisations in which our practices occur. To radically open our practices, and in the process our internalised and institutionalised habits of practice, to ask:

Where are we going, in whose company, and how?

Why do we do this work? What do we stand for?

Whose voices are in/excluded? Whose labours?

Who is our community? What are our roles and responsibilities in and with this community? How are we connected?

What do we want to achieve, together, now and into the future? What kinds

of practices do we want to cultivate?

What kinds of organisations do we need to cultivate?

What do we need to decompose?

What do we need to transform, how, with and for who?

As we witness and experience more artist-run organisations closing (both temporarily and permanently), and as “we find ourselves experiencing the growing pains of working within, whilst trying to reckon with” (Khalaf, 2022, p. 54) dominant systems and structures, there is a need to create the conditions for a prefigurative community of care through pedagogical exchanges. Not as peripheral activities or collective encounters practiced only during times of crisis, moments of flight or fight, global health pandemics, or defunding. Reflexive and relational pedagogies, such as *composting our practices*, can and should become an integral part of our work. This includes deep invitations to regulate our practices through rituals built into the infrastructures of our organisational practices. To name our privileges, vulnerabilities, and complicities. To heal and to practice ways of being, transforming, becoming, resisting, and resting, *together-with*, through pedagogies for uncertain, disconnecting, and sluggish times. In this way, as writer and curator Jordan Amirkhani describes, composting as a pedagogy becomes:

an inherently communal activity, created and enacted within the relations of a committed group of learners to make and share knowledge, question habits of thought, and render visible the ideological premises upon which this work is done (Amirkhani, 2021, p. 16).

This is collective and ongoing care work for the maintenance, repair, and where necessary, the decomposition of our practices — including institutionalised habits of practice that we enact through the organisations in which our practices operate.

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Biography

Jacina Leong 梁玉明 is an artist-curator, educator, and researcher, living and working in Narrm/Melbourne. Working in the cultural sector since 2008, Jacina is committed to the role that cultural organisations can play in bringing people together to explore and respond to complex and converging crises: through situated, responsive, and purposeful forms of engagement. She is a former Co-Director of Bus Projects, Public Programs Curator for The Cube and Ipswich Art Gallery, Producer for the Creative Industries Precinct, an ACMI CEO Digital mentor, and founding member of the Guerrilla Knowledge Unit. Jacina has recent writing published in the *Routledge Companion to Mobile Media Art* and *Dystopian and Utopian Impulses in Art Making: The World We Want*. She is currently a Sessional Academic at RMIT and La Trobe, where she teaches art theory, and is completing her PhD on the complexities of caring in and through practice in a pandemic-impacted world.

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