

THE TROUBLE WITH EDGE EFFECTS
MARIANNE MULVEY

EDGE EFFECTS



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Áine O'Dwyer, Down at Beastie Rock (2017)

THE TROUBLE WITH EDGE EFFECTS – A REFLECTION ON AWKWARDNESS, EMPATHY AND EMBODIED LEARNING

Please be aware that tonight's performance involves blocks of ice suspended from the ceiling. Be wary of melt water and falling ice.

With these words of warning the audience are invited into Áine O'Dwyer's sound performance installation *Down at Beasty Rock* at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow. The sizeable theatre has been emptied of seats and turned into a giant instrument of different sound-making zones. We arrange ourselves around the room's edge waiting for the performance to begin; but out of the darkness the delicate clang of melt-water droplets hitting a cascade of cymbals is already sounding. When the room is full, the artist sits at a desk with a table microphone, softly reading a text whilst splashing her bare feet in two bowls of water. Later, she moves to stand beneath a harp suspended from the ceiling and slowly pulling invisible threads attached to its strings, uses her body weight to elicit their vibration. Later she sets a hanging cymbal in motion that shivers each time it kisses the floor along its elliptical orbit, before moving behind a projection screen to play with plants and their shadows. Each of these things evolve slowly over time, and all the while melting blocks of ice drip onto cymbals. This constant silvery sound not only precedes, but also exceeds the performance, as if it would go on forever.

O'Dwyer's sound performance installation was part of Edge Effects, a public programme focussing on the relationship

between art and ecology, curated and produced by the Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW) at the CCA in July 2017. Edge Effects is a series of programmes and exhibitions showcasing parts of a much larger five-year EU collaboration project, Frontiers in Retreat. As described by the network's lead curator Jenni Nurmenniemi, this complex and multi-dimensional project operating 'at the edges of Europe' aims to 'map out artistic practices with an interest in ecology, [and] examine processes of change in particular ecological contexts... [that can] offer new approaches to ecological thinking, doing and being'.¹ Each of the seven artist residency organisations involved in Frontiers is now producing their own Edge Effects to make public the different practices, processes and collaborative projects that have happened across the network. SSW situated part of their Edge Effects programme in Glasgow to extend their weekend activity and reading groups in Lumsden to an audience beyond the immediate local, rural context. Four days of performances, screenings, workshops and discussions in the Glasgow sought to address the questions: 'What multiple forms of knowledge, discourse, and models of action would construct a viable future for humans and other forms of life? What kinds of boundaries should be dismantled, so that change in the direction of an ecologically sustainable future could be possible?'² Besides this programme of activities taking place across the city, the Edge Effects hub in the CCA Clubroom housed a temporary library with a rich collection of books and reading lists compiled by contributors to Frontiers at SSW.³

As a curator pursuing doctoral research on public programming practice within art institutions,⁴ the invitation to participate and write a reflection on my experience was intriguing. My research is driven by moments during a performance and live events that strike me – an odd feeling that I can't shake, something beautiful, an emotional charge in the room. I began

by asking myself: what struck me at Edge Effects? and jotted down instances during the programme that were not simply interesting, but were either disruptive to my habitual thought process, or caused a new understanding. I work through these moments below, weaving them together with some theoretical work on awkwardness and kinship in an attempt to indicate some of the 'multiple forms of knowledge, discourse, and models of action' that might be needed to address the urgency of climate change.

#Awkward

I have experienced many awkward moments during public programme events that I've organised or participated in. What I've almost come to enjoy is that besides the tension, the awkward moment ushers in a sense of potential, a 'what will happen next?' feeling. The event 'Green Tease – Frontiers in Retreat' contained one such moment. However, it bothered, more than titillated me. As an introduction to Frontiers in Retreat as a whole, the session began with an overview of its conception by curator Taru Elfving, who developed and continues to work as advisor on it, a breakout session was facilitated Creative Carbon Scotland director Ben Twist and two artists involved in Frontiers at SSW presented their work.

The conversation between SSW's Programme Manager Yvonne Billimore and artist Carl Giffney introduced his film *I don't really feel them* (2016) made during several residencies with Frontiers partners. Explaining that his practice might be termed as participatory in relation to place, Giffney described research methods that involve learning five words in the local language and creating characters who perform unusual actions in public space. These odd vignettes provoke exchanges with local people, through which he learns about the place he has been invited work.

After this intriguing beginning, Giffney criticised a dominant mode of participatory practice that presumes to understand the problems of a particular community and tries to fix them through art. Describing this as ‘patronising’, he proposed that doing something to *damage* a community could in fact do more to build it: removing a bus stop from a street of six houses, for example. It was unclear whether Giffney expected anyone to take the provocation seriously and it created an awkward tension, though no one challenged the statement during the conversation.

I found myself wondering about this tension. In his short book *Awkwardness*, Adam Kotsko analyses our responses to this nebulous feeling proposing that it is inherently social, a feeling that circulates between people creating ‘a weird kind of social bond.’⁵ Whomever or whatever the cause of awkwardness, what it reveals is a thinning of the social order governing a given situation: ‘Awkwardness shows us that... [we] have no built-in norms: the norms that we develop help us to “get by,”... awkwardness [then] is what prompts us to set up social norms in the first place – and what prompts us to transform them.’⁶ Put simply, what it *reveals* is that there might be another way of doing things. Was this the effect Giffney was trying to produce? Was his suggestion of radical damage aimed at producing radical resistance in the residents of this imaginary street, galvanising them into action?

Later I attended the screening of *I don't really feel them* in the CCA cinema. The film centres on a pair of bronze Dutch clogs forged in Scotland under a full moon during the 2014 Independence Referendum, taken on a pilgrimage through Northern Finland to Saami land. Many other things happen along the way, but for me the film's best sequence shows the artist crawling into an igloo and lifting the solid bronze clogs slowly from his backpack. Extremely heavy (27 kg to be exact), it takes several

minutes for him to polish the clogs and carefully wrap his feet before putting them on and clawing himself out of the sunken ice shelter. Watching Giffney begin a slow, slithering walk along the snowy road is deeply awkward, but at this point in his long essay film, it is rewarding and very funny. Perhaps as expected, Giffney eventually abandons his journey on foot to hitch a lift to a nearby Saami town where he sits down to polish his shoes again in a car park. This strange ploy generates conversations with some local people, who are curious about what he is doing. As the film ends, we a young Saami rapper's response to trying on Giffney's uncomfortable, impractical footwear: ‘I don't really feel them’, he says.

For me, the film ends by saying something not just about awkwardness and its potential for transforming social norms, rather unexpectedly, something about empathy. What does the Saami rapper mean – that he cannot physically feel the shoes on his feet, that he doesn't understand their purpose, or that he doesn't like them? Perhaps he is calling on the expression popularised through rap and internet culture, in particular the ‘I feel you bro’ meme depicting two straight men sharing a hug or the popular #IFeelYou thread. The phrase has also been the title of many pop songs, such as Depeche Mode's hit *I Feel You* (1993) that demonstrates the empathetic slippage between thinking, feeling and a haptic understanding between lovers in its lyrics: ‘I feel you, within my mind’, ‘I feel you, each move you make’. As he feels out the bronze clogs though, the Saami rapper ultimately fails to understand, or empathise with them. What is perhaps interesting, is that faced with such an odd proposition in a place where practical clothing is a necessity, he tries.



Carl Giffney, I really don't feel them (2016)

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Interfaces for Empathy, Regenerative Notes – Reflecting and Developing Empathetic Practices in Post-Fossil-Fuel World (2017)

#IFeelYou

The following day a whole session was dedicated to the discussion of empathy. ‘Regenerative Notes – Reflecting and Developing Empathetic Practices in Post-Fossil World’ was led by the group Interfaces for Empathy (Mari Keski-Korsu, Maarit Laihonen and Petri Ruikka). The session began with a presentation about last year’s Pixelache Festival in Helsinki, also called ‘Interfaces for Empathy’ from Ruikka. Given that human to human conflict is one of the determining factors of climate change, we heard that the group are researching how empathy might be employed to ‘reconnect us with our ecosystem and ourselves’. Their proposal is that if empathy ‘has enabled humans to work together and collaborate in order to flourish as species,’⁷ then we might use it more productively to address climate change. Moving into a break-out session, we were asked to discuss in small groups a time we felt empathy that had surprised us. Before we could start, someone clearly unconvinced by the task, asked the presenters to define the difference between sympathy and empathy. The group responded to this challenge and we began our smaller discussions in relatively good humour, though the distinction preoccupied the discussion in my group for some while too.

Given the emotive topic, it is perhaps unsurprising that the feedback session elicited strong feelings from audience. The man who’d raised the earlier question seemed eager to demonstrate his extensive knowledge of how empathy dissolves subject positions and can be felt across species divides. Another asked whether empathy is something we can arrive at, or is it only ever in process? Someone else, a choreographer, pointed out that we were trying to define something that works *because* we don’t understand it intellectually. She felt that positioning empathy as a tool for more efficient collaboration and communication however, comes dangerously close to a neoliberal agenda

of productivity. Another, a psychotherapist, explained that empathy is considered a tool for psychological change in the therapeutic space. Might empathy in fact be the best tool *against* neoliberalism? In response to a proposal that we need more empathy in the workplace, someone shared with palpable emotion how an experience as a support worker for addicted people showed that *too much* empathy can sometimes be problematic.

With the definition of empathy becoming slippery and the event running overtime, it seemed there was too much of it in the room - no one would take responsibility for closing the conversation and there were even suggestions for extending it. I felt a different kind of awkward tension at this juncture. Perhaps due to the event turning from a presentation about empathy into a laboratory where the audience became co-researchers – even research subjects? Ultimately, like the Saami rapper we failed to really ‘feel’, or more to the point, agree with one other. However the changing dynamic could be what created space for the *attempt* at a shared definition, which established that empathy is a process working on both affective and cognitive registers and cannot be arrived at. This makes it hard to grasp, or utilise as a tool. Whereas over-determining empathy in service to productivity felt problematic, mining our personal experiences of it allowed a *felt* understanding of its processual quality, and for me, a new kind of respect for the way in which it works on and through humans and even across species divides.

#Body

This resonated with a couple of the more embodied experiences on offer during Edge Effects, particularly my 'Beat to the Balance' sauna whisking session. These 30 minute treatments were offered by artists and sauna healers Mari Keski-Korsu and Maaria Alén in the Arlington Baths Club, a Victorian bathing complex which was undergoing refurbishment, gloriously empty and quiet. Once arrived and undressed, I was handed a cup of sweet and refreshing birch cordial and told to shower before entering the sauna. Sauna whisking is an ancient practice where bunches of dried leaves are stroked, drummed and slapped against the naked body in the sauna, releasing their oils into the skin. I can only describe this experience as being hugged by a tree. Lying first on my belly Keski-Korsu placed soothing wet leaves lightly over my head, enveloping me with their smell. Next I felt the soles of my feet gently tickled, before my whole body was caressed by branches. Her strokes varied in intensity until I felt sharp tingles on my arms, thighs and the sides of my trunk. Slowing down, she pressed the leaves against my knees, shoulder blades and arm pits to further release their oil. Having worked on both sides of my body, Keski-Korsu finally opened the door letting light and fresh air in to the sauna. Through my deep relaxation, I heard her singing a Finnish folk song in low tones and had the strong sensation of a forest awaiting me outside.

Some weeks afterwards, I am curious to find out which trees Keski-Korsu used on me and ask her to explain their healing properties. I learn that Birch cleans the skin like soap, and is good for the muscles. Maple is used for warming the body and moving the steam (löyly, the spirit of sauna). Rowan creates a feeling of protection and harmonises relationships. Willow connects us with our dreams and hidden emotions, and its salicylic acid is good for all kinds of pain and blood circulation.

Finally, Juniper's grounding, warming energy helps with breathing. After my session, I drifted towards the CCA knowing that I had received something very special. The feeling of having my body worked on by these trees stayed with me all day and I found it hard to concentrate in the following sessions.

If I felt dazed by my sauna whisking session, the next morning's 'Movement Workshop' with choreographer Mele Broomes left me physically and mentally exhausted. The two-hour workshop mixed core strength, balance and hip opening exercises with social dance from the African Diaspora. After an extended warm up, Broomes introduced a game to get the class moving around the CCA theatre with these simple instructions: 'Choose a one. Keep your eye on this one at all times. Now, try to get as close to your one as possible.' Each of us identified someone, and in hot pursuit of them we formed a tight circle whirling around itself. 'Now chose a two.... Try and get as far away from your two as you can.' Immediately the group dispersed, spreading into the furthest corners of the space. After a short while Broomes gave a new instruction, 'Find your one and your two, try and make an equilateral triangle between you.' Off we scurried around the room again. Keeping track of my one and two, I strove to equalise the planes of our triangle. As soon as the entire group began to settle, slowing almost to a halt, someone's foot moved a smidgen and our entire system collapsed and renewed again its searching movement. With stasis impossible, our perfect triangles were never achieved. And yet each of us in this game was connected to four others in striving to find it. As we collapsed and reformed, I began to understand our game as a metaphor for an ecosystem, and smiled at its simplicity.



Mele Broomes, Edge Effects Movement Workshop (2017)

At the very beginning of the workshop Broomes had explained that the physical focus of the workshop was hip opening. This, Broomes stated, is especially important for women who have been conditioned to keep their legs closed, which can make sex traumatic for some. As she spoke I thought of the relaxed open leg seated position I've begun to explore on public transport, silently letting my knee fall against my neighbour. Broomes reminded that with this subtle gesture I visibly claim space as a woman, rejecting shame of my sex ingrained through years of scolding and social messaging. However, I was new to these radical hip opening exercises and due in part to a knee problem, I found most of the movements too challenging. As I watched others attempting what Broomes fluidly demonstrated, I found it impossible not to read a strong sexuality into some of the most exaggerated postures. What could their meaning in the context of a public programme about arts and ecology be?

#Oddkin

Being unable to participate fully gave me space to reflect on Broomes's refreshing approach that proposes hip opening as a radical act for the self, as well as self / other relations. Within the context of Edge Effects then, this workshop asked me to open not just my heart and mind to new ideas, but also my body, specifically the parts of me that receive an other's body in more intimate moments. Such movement renders us not only vulnerable, but also available to new kinds of connection. For me, Broomes's physical tasks of playful collaboration and hip opening connected to the guiding questions of the Edge Effects programme, as well as Donna Haraway's notion of 'making oddkin'.⁸ In Haraway's recent book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, we are reminded that, 'Kin is an assembling sort of word... all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-

assemblages (not species one at a time).'⁹ Haraway urges us to look far beyond the ties of blood, beyond nationhood and race, beyond species even to understand that no matter what *kind* of 'earthling' we are, we are all *kin* who must practice better care of one another.

Both Haraway and queer scholars working on kinship propose an urgent rethinking of who and what we call kin. As Heather Davies explains, 'Queerness [asks]... who our intimate partners can be beyond a binary gender system, the conventions of the couple, and the nuclear family'. Because queerness destabilises the 'heteronormative frameworks that serve... anthropocentrism' it ultimately ties our sense of 'obligation and care' for past and future generations to ecology, because, 'if we presume that our kin are not just human, then we have an obligation towards our companion species'.¹⁰ If under neoliberal capitalism we are held personally responsible for our own success or failure, queer theory provides new ways to rethink our relationality and responsibility towards our kin. In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* José Esteban Muñoz turns to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of 'being singular plural.' For Muñoz this concept, 'addresses the way in which the singularity that marks a singular existence is always conterminously plural – which is to say that an entity registers as both particular in its difference but at the same time always relational to other singularities.'¹¹

#FinalThoughts

For me, 'making oddkin', queer kinship and 'being singular plural' resonate with many things I experienced during Edge Effects: my sauna whisking, the empathy discussion and especially the game in Broomes's workshop where, not quite knowing whom we were connected to or how, we nonetheless

collaborated to attempt the perfect triangle. Haraway writes that ‘We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations,’ and her message is clear: ‘We become-with each other or not at all.’¹² This notion of becoming-with brings me finally to the three-piece band Charismatic Megafauna’s Saturday night performance at Edge Effects. Playing in the CCA’s theatre, their high energy feminist punk aesthetics, sound and ethics were generously shared. The audience split – some danced like crazy, getting drunk and letting off steam, others (myself included) shuffled shyly, and children ran around the space well past their bedtime. Discussing the gig the next morning, band member Jenny Moore told me how fellow musician Georgia Twigg describes their performances as ‘confidently learning in public’ – that they are unafraid to try things out and show their thinking process in the presence of others. Perhaps this is what a good public programme does: allow a safe space for people to take part in an individual learning process with others, sometimes in conflict or going against the grain of social norms.

Sometimes this might feel a little awkward. But as Kotsko writes ‘the *-ward* of *awkward* is the self same *-ward* as in *forward* or *backward*.... [and] the Middle English *awke*... designated something turned in the wrong direction.’¹³ Awkwardness is not a fixed state but in fact a movement, albeit an uncomfortable one. The moments during SSW’s Edge Effects at CCA Glasgow discussed above caused me to think this movement on a planetary scale. As technology advances and global conflicts accelerate, we also seem to be moving backward politically, ethically and socially due overwhelmingly to the colonising, extracting and plundering of the Western, developed world. However, like Giffney’s uncomfortable shoes, Kotsko always points us toward the space of potential that awkwardness opens. He asks us not to ignore it, but to ‘go with it’ and allow other ways of doing things to emerge.¹⁴ Haraway too implores us to ‘stay with trouble,’ which

requires, ‘learning to be truly present,’¹⁵ and not succumbing to abstract hope, despair or indifference to climate change.¹⁶ As O’Dwyer’s dripping melt-water on cymbals signalled, our human impact on the earth began long before we awoke to it, and continues every moment – drip, drip, drip. We must pay careful attention. We must assemble our kin, and stay with this trouble.

¹ Jenni Nurmenniemi, *Frontiers in Retreat* Booklet, 4-6 http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/downloads/170605_Frontiers_content_web_Press.pdf

² <http://www.ssw.org.uk/?p=6658>

³ <http://www.ssw.org.uk/edge-effects-reading-groups/>

⁴ <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/studentships#mulvey>

⁵ Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness* (Zero Books: Winchester, 2010), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁷ <http://www.petriruikka.com/Interfaces-for-Empathy>

⁸ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2016), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰ Heather Davies interviewed by Rosa Menkman <http://www.sonicacts.com/portal/queer-kinship>

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press: New York and London, 2009), 10-11.

¹² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

¹³ Kotsko, *Awkwardness*, 5-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ Haraway, *Staying with Trouble*, 1

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.



Charismatic Megafauna, Edge Effects (2017)

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SSW

Edge Effects Glasgow weaved together the geographically dispersed processes and key discourses developed during Frontiers in Retreat to mark the conclusion of the project.

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Mari Keski Korsu & Maaria Alén, Beat to the Balance (2017)

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