

## How have we been working together?

*A text written and shared at Bidston Observatory in August 2022, in the company of Clare Daly, Georg Döcker, Giulia Casalini, Helena Botto, Joe Kelleher, Lorenza Peragine, PA Skantze and Rebecca Tadman. The image is a detail of 'Pointing the Finger', made with Rohanne Udall as Cha cha cha cha cha.*



## How have we been working together?

Sitting in circles, mostly, except of course for all those times when we weren't: cooking and eating and sleeping and walking around the building seeing where people were and whether they were ready to gather again. So yes, mostly in circles; and mostly talking, or in a mode that some of us referred to as 'discursive' or 'disembodied', although I don't remember at any point leaving my body. Sitting together, in these circles, in this circle, with each of us sharing something of our work with the group, with all that intimacy and vulnerability that comes when we offer a part of ourselves to others (don't judge me, don't hate me, don't think I'm stupid), and of course with all the exhausting politeness too: has everyone had a go? Are we spending more time on this person than we did on the last? Has everyone spoken? Is this a form of conversation in which everyone can comfortably participate? Some of these questions are explicitly named and agreed upon, and some remained unspoken, anxiously playing out in each of our minds, or in my mind at least, as I keep looking around the room.

I notice some people speaking more than others, which is fine; except of course when it isn't, and I can feel my frustration build. What makes one situation ok and the other not? Is it simply my taste, my allegiances, my bias? No, actually. I can think

of times when the same individual speaking has tipped from talking lots to talking 'too much': when it starts to dis-able other people's participation. The conversation gets too full, and there's no more space for others to speak. Or perhaps there is simply no space for me to speak. I wonder: who is paying attention to all this? Who is keeping track of who is waiting to say something? How much am I aware of it myself; and when does it slip away from me, as something urgent bubbles up within me that demands to be spoken?

Any why speak, anyway? What am I doing opening my mouth? Sometimes I want to report back to the person presenting about what was going on for me. Sometimes I am trying to clarify something: what they mean by this or that term, or what they are looking for in sharing these materials with the group. Or I am trying to make something overt that I sense is being assumed in the conversation. I am here to think, after all, and while a sense of togetherness can be nice, I notice myself get most excited when something crunchy happens: when things don't fit together, when we notice a difference, when we can no longer pretend that the group is one harmonious whole.

Has this happened, this weekend? Sometimes, but not too often. I feel our conversation jump, jump, jump across tangents, continually flow onwards, often without me ever really knowing what we're talking about. I want to think slower, think fewer: not with fewer people, but with fewer ideas, fewer words, fewer concepts. I do not want to participate in this deathly dull academic economy of having something to say – of knowing comments, of useless references, of endlessly bringing up various projects I have been involved in – simply for the sake of begging others to recognize me as clever, useful, impressive. I say that I do not want to participate in this, because of course I do. I am constantly seeking that validation, that acceptance. There is always that needy small part of myself, of all of ourselves, in this room, in this circle, at this meal, on this dance floor – each of us speaking, watching, seeking, withdrawing, asking, asking without asking, yearning, despairing, persisting, surviving.

I look around the room. I see old habits, needs disguised as acts of care, eyes meeting in exasperation, quiet touches of affection, heart-swelling vulnerability, flagrant assumptions of collective agreement, jokes that include some and leave others outside. I participate, I listen, I wait my turn, I zone out. Sometimes I push back, and sometimes I bite my tongue; in tiredness, in resignation, or in fear for what my challenge might provoke. The stakes are low, but they are also very high. There is profound fragility in this circle. People could get really upset, feel profoundly judged and rejected, at a time of our lives that many of us have expressed as being already saturated in crisis.

And so I ask myself, and each of you – how are we working together? What is achievable, in the here and now, between us? When should we insist on something, or sit back and let things flow? How are each of us paying attention to each other, and understanding ourselves – with all our needs and limits and desires, known and unknown?

*Paul Paschal, August 2022*