

## Flight as Method

(Paper for *Art and the Critical Medical Humanities: Confabulations X Health and Care at the RCA*, 19–21 June 2024)

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**GB**

We've been working together, which means writing to each other, since 2020. '*Sick Women: correspondences and performances*' is a collaborative letter writing project that develops a multi-form and multi-disciplinary approach to its embodied, critical, and theoretical investigation of sickness, gender and cross-historical correspondence and care. Across multiple outputs of creative and scholarly practice, the project explores the potential of experimental feminist methodologies to 'care for' the 'sick women' figures of a global art history and visual culture. As we write to each other, we also reach to other addressees across/beyond histories and temporalities, asking what else might be conjured and known – the vitality and complexity of sick voices, lives and works – through the form of the letter.

We write to each other about our flights to, from and between a further two sick women correspondents: Cookie Mueller (writer, actress, portrait sitter, 1949–1989, who was active in, and close with, the art and cultural scenes of Downtown New York in the AIDS-impacted 1980s) and Liliana Amon (writer, actress, portrait sitter, 1892–1939, who moved through the circles of Viennese modernism at the turn of the century). As a coupling, this might seem surprising, rebellious in its forgoing of conventional art historical models, but we are interested in what such expanded methods of correspondence across time enact – for care and with care.

AB

Cookie and Liliana are our ‘sick women’ whom we bring together across time and for the first time in letter-like visual and textual flights of synchronicity, serendipity and resonance which alight on the singularity and difference of sickness and likeness. Specifically, in our letters to each other that comprise our essay, we dare *to look* at them as the mother and not-quite mother; *to wait* with them and the pressure-points for thought that they pose, in the endurance, remembrance, belatedness and ongoing goodbyes of our writing-as-flight, or our ‘flight-as-method’, which in turn revitalizes the complexities of our sick women subjects’ sickened lives, works, bodies and minds, their creativities and cares. We would like to share two extracts of this essay of coupled correspondences: two parts of two letters that encompass two pairings of images. We circle these materials, proposing flight as a method of writerly care.

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### **Flight 3**

*Late-May 2023*

Somehow, it’s different with the contact sheets: these minor, intimate, private, expectant, scrappy, shabby (but also careful and full-of-care) *preliminary* things, which denote rectangular pieces of paper (for printing, for writing) that etymology suggests is rooted in the verb ‘to project’. A contact sheet is a projection of light writing, an imaginative surface, an image-to-come. Not quite. Not yet. It is close to the intimacy of a cloth covering at home, or in the hospital, or more likely spaces in-between. And like the letters-in-letters of

our archive, the contact sheet is multiple, shifting; comprising images-in-images, like the enchantment of being born with eggs that might make a child-to-come, bound by cellular connectivity. With her son nearby and her friend beside her, Cookie is communing in the commons of this photographic apprenticeship.

From 45 degrees to full frontal. It's a dizzying choreography. She's holding me here. Dead on. Exposing all my letters addressed to her.

**GB**

## **Flight 4**

*June 2024*

I faltered too, made self-conscious by 'Liliana's' absolute sense of herself, a subjectivity produced by the most inconspicuous of details: the ring that rests between knuckle and nail, being too small now to slide down her swollen finger; a ring I could imagine her twisting, tapping, *testing*; returning to as a circular window on to an interiorized view, as something to look at whenever it became necessary to look away. The ring was the punctum as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart describe it, meaning 'whatever grabs you into an elsewhere of form' but I pushed it away. In doing so, I also refused the directness of her stare (which is not the same as her gaze through that window of my flight) at me, the viewer-artist-doctor between her knees. To lock eyes with this subject – to wonder about her worrying of this ring – was to submit to the risky, critically speculative work that would become so much a part of our sick feminist art history of attention, affect and care. I wasn't ready to do it. I/she/we had to wait.

AB

These extracts have been selected to evoke how our methods perform and to what effect.

They also include our key terms: shabbiness, care, mothering, looking, waiting, writing.

We are concerned with how our methods open out new understandings of our subjects'

mothering orbits. But we have not yet decided on a subtitle, and we would be interested to

use the discussion here today to refine this: how do you respond to the thematic foci of our

flights?