

# LINES

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*My sincere thanks to everyone who helped make this project possible. Christina Battle, thank you for inviting me to participate in the project that spawned this essay. Jordan Kelly and Cherie Kelly, thank you for all your reading and editing assistance. Jenn Jackson, Gloria Wong, and everyone at OR Gallery, thank you for offering a space for this project to live. And thank you to everyone who listened to me while I blabbed about maintenance.*







LINES





Marty works with helicopters. I know this not because I'm friends with him—in truth we've never met—but because Marty is good friends with my father-in-law, Garth, and is a recurring character in his life. Marty often comes up in conversation on the way to the Kelowna airport because the drive, which depends primarily on following the soft elbow of Highway 97, weaves through town past gas stations and restaurants and box stores and eventually past Marty's work. For a few years, I thought Marty was a helicopter pilot and imagined him accordingly: aviators, helmet, over-the-ear headphones. I'm sure I'd been corrected as to Marty's actual job a number of times, but my version proved stubbornly persistent. Then, a couple of years ago, on a sun-skimmed, early-morning drive to the airport, I asked Garth a question about Marty (*Was he in Top Gun? Does he know Airwolf?*) that led him to remind me again what Marty's job actually was. "He works with hydraulics," Garth said patiently. "His company works on the steering mechanisms in helicopters."

"Oh."

It was like a television in my brain had finally been flicked off. Sitting in the back seat with a black-screen silence I could finally think about Marty's actual work, not the work I'd imagined for him. "So he fixes those parts when they fail?" Even as the words left my mouth, I realized my error: "No," Garth said, "his job is to make sure they never do."

With his sentence, Garth was drawing a line between acts of repair and acts of maintenance, distinguishing one from the other. Repair, in this case, is best understood as work done to fix something once it is broken: it's what we do to return something to working condition when it can no longer function as intended. Maintenance, on the other hand, is work done to something that is functioning properly in order to prolong its life—to make sure it keeps working. When it comes to helicopters—or really any giant metal object flying through the sky under its own power—maintenance seems pretty integral. If we forgo maintenance, people could die.

My conversation with Garth echoed loudly in my head because I had recently been drawing lines of my own. In this case, my lines connected three words: maintenance, care, and attention. I'd come to believe that the three ideas, the three practices, were related, perhaps even interdependent. I'd convinced myself that one could not exist without the other two. Hearing Garth describe Marty's work only deepened my belief. I started to wonder—my conversation with Garth pressing firmly on my brain—how tightly these three ideas might indeed be bound.

In order to find out, I decided to draw a line back. Like watching roots grow in reverse, I wanted to get back to the seeds of these words—attention, maintenance, and care—and the ideas they might contain. So often we understand history as a line running through us, tying us to what came before, but histories, like the words they are written in, are mutable, subject to change over time. By digging into these words I hoped I might unearth some meaning that might have been lost.

## Seeds

The English word maintenance finds its origins in Old French and Latin: from the fourteenth century, we find *maintenance* and *maintenir*, the French words for maintenance and maintain. By definition, *maintenance* means to upkeep, to shelter, to protect. Similarly, *maintenir* means to keep, to sustain. We can break *maintenir* down further, though, by splitting it into *man* and *tenir*. When we do this we start to find the Latin roots *manu* and

*tenere*, which translate literally as “to hold in the hand.”

We can take a similar journey with the word attention, drawing a line all the way back to the Old French word *attencion* and the Latin *attentionem*. Both words have roots in the Latin *ad tendo*, which was understood at the time to have meant “to give heed to.” Literally, though, the word translates as “to stretch toward.”

Our third word has origins that are, to me, most intriguing because I was ignorant of them. They belong to the word care, which I tend to think of in one of three ways: a fondness for (*I care about you*), consideration for (*I care about the environment*), or supervision over (*they are in my care*). Historically, though, the word is primarily associated with feelings of concern, worry, and anxiety. Indeed, the word still holds that definition today (OED: a troubled state of mind arising from worry or anxiety). It was not until the 1500s that the word began to also suggest a fondness or an inclination for a subject—a meaning which still contains a level of worry or anxiety, since a fondness for someone would presumably be accompanied by a concern for their wellbeing.

If you look up the definitions of any of these three words—care, attention and maintenance—the other two show up. Each word lives inside the other. From their etymologies, though, a line starts to form. It runs from the brain, through the heart, down the arms, and into the fingertips. This line traces a series of interlinked behaviours: stretching toward something, holding it securely in the hand, and feeling worry, concern, or grief for it. I thought these three words might be branches on the same tree. Unearthing their histories suggested that they might all be part of the same branch. But how, I wondered, did these histories echo in the present? What branches grew from this one?



## The Life Instinct

Using etymology as a tether, I began to wander towards other lines, starting first with a categorical separation: lines of division. In her now-famous “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition ‘CARE,’” the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles draws a line—or perhaps more accurately identifies one—between what she calls the Life Instinct and the Death Instinct.

### I. IDEAS: A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one’s own path to death—to do your own thing, dynamic change.

The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium.<sup>1</sup>

As Ukeles defines it, the death instinct tells a familiar story, one that we are likely to encounter on movie screens or magazine covers. It is the story of a lone individual, usually a tireless visionary or hero, who single-handedly changes the world or blah blah whatever. The life instinct, by contrast, encompasses everyone who does the work that makes that story possible—the countless people who create the conditions for that single hero to act. In her manifesto, Ukeles reiterates these two instincts, life and death, through a systemic lens as development and maintenance:

### B. Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance.

The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend

and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight;<sup>2</sup>

By likening it to the very instinct of life, Ukeles is foregrounding the importance of maintenance, reminding us how much we depend on it. She is also distinguishing maintenance from development, drawing a line not unlike the one Garth drew between maintenance and repair.

As I laid Garth's line next to Ukeles', I wondered how the two were speaking to one another. Each had identified the importance of maintenance work, but they had separated it from two distinct systems: development and repair. Staring at these lines, I started to believe there might be value in partnering the two distinctions, effectively adding repair to Ukeles' classification, recognizing not just two systems but three.

In order to better understand what separated these three systems—maintenance, repair, and development—I returned to my tether: to stretch towards, hold in the hand, and feel concern for. If indeed these three actions form a single line, then the absence of one means the line is segmented. There is no care without maintenance, no maintenance without attention. We cannot hold something in the hand without first stretching towards it. So when faced with these three systems—Ukeles' and Garth's combined—I found myself wondering first about the stretching.

## **To Stretch Toward**

Years ago, at a friend's wedding, I was unexpectedly overcome by a definition of marriage that I'd never heard before (a feat in itself). My friend Kristine was performing a toast. Like most wedding speeches, I remember almost none of it. Near the end, though, she described marriage as "the ability to truly allow yourselves to be stretched by one another." It was perhaps one of the most beautiful descriptions of love I'd ever heard. In her telling, stretching was a passive act. Unlike resistance, the explicit work of not stretching, Kristine's phrasing suggested a willingness, a vulnerability. To allow one's self to be stretched by another is to be open to the possibility of being changed by an experience. In speaking about

love, it seemed that Kristine had found the roots of attention and, by extension, of maintenance and care as well. I can think of no greater act of love than to give attention to another person. Similarly, there is a deep loneliness that arises when sharing space with someone whose attention is absent. Was Kristine suggesting that in order to care for a relationship, in order to maintain it, one need only pay attention to it? If so, intention seems key. Kristine's words suggested that stretching is something done to us, not something we do to ourselves. The implication then is that the work we do is not stretching but openness to being stretched. If attention is indeed an act of stretching, where does the work lie? Do we actively stretch or do we work to make ourselves pliable? Do we give attention or do we open ourselves to being drawn in?

The answer, I suspect, lies somewhere in between. In 1890, William James wrote, "Everyone knows what attention is. Attention is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalisations, concentration of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others."<sup>3</sup> James's definition is, I think, intentionally vague as to the subject of a mind's possession. It could be that one possesses their own mind. It is equally possible, though, for a mind to be possessed by an external stimulus. I suspect most of us have experienced some version of unintentional focus. Perhaps it's the uncontrollable grip of a television sitting behind a person you are speaking with, or the reflexive grasp for a phone in the grocery store line, or even that feeling of arriving at a destination and not remembering the walk—or more frighteningly, drive—that got you there. Possession, as James uses it, suggests control, ownership, agency. His definition hints at how easily our attention can be hijacked, how quickly it slips out of our control.

But what are we really talking about when we talk about attention? It's helpful, I think, to understand it as something that straddles the line between resource and labour. It's both something we use and something we work at. As a resource, attention has value but it also has limits. Much like a literal well, we've come to understand attention as finite: renewable but not bottomless. It's a point Michael Goldhaber has been making for a long time. Goldhaber, a former theoretical physicist, has become famous

in certain circles for being a “prophet of the internet age.” According to Goldhaber, “Every single action we take — calling our grandparents, cleaning up the kitchen or, today, scrolling through our phones — is a transaction.[...] When you pay attention to one thing, you ignore something else.”<sup>4</sup> Put another way, stretching toward one thing—intentionally or not—means allocating your attentional resources, assigning them one focus and not another.

As a practice, attention is the work of isolating one thing by excluding others. In his definition, James suggests that focus is as much about what we don’t pay attention to as it is what we do. The key to his phrasing is the word “withdrawal.” Imagine for a moment that you are sitting in a crowded restaurant. Sitting across from you is a friend who is recounting their day at work. The story is important to them but includes the names of people you’ve never met at an office you’ve never been to. While your friend is talking you feel your phone vibrate in your pocket. The notification is intended to get your attention; it is literally an alert. You want to be a good friend and keep listening but your brain starts to wonder what new message is hiding away in your pocket. With a single sensation a new avenue of attention has opened up. In order to keep listening, you have to avoid going down it.

If the resource of attention is indeed finite, then the labour associated with attention can be understood as our ability to allocate that resource intentionally. This is complicated by the fact that not all stimuli appeal to our attention equally. The vibrating phone is more captivating than the friend’s story about work, partly because of its potential novelty. Some stimuli are like sugar for our attention, others are like peas. The work of attention is not simply about choosing to eat the peas, so to speak, but also about recognizing the reflexive appeal that the sugar has and actively withdrawing from it.

I was especially interested in James’ use of the word “withdrawal” because I’d recently encountered it under different conditions. I’ve practiced yoga for years and have repeatedly fallen in and out of an Ashtanga practice. Ashtanga literally translates as “eight limbs,” where those “limbs” represent a series of guidelines for living a purposeful life. In researching them, I found each of the eight limbs to be fairly straightforward except





for the fifth: Pratyahara. The word breaks down into *prati*, meaning away or against, and *ahara*, which literally means food but can be understood as anything we take into the body. The word is most often understood to mean a withdrawal from the senses. When I first read this definition, I was confused. What did it mean to withdraw from the senses? I did some googling. I asked instructors. Many of the explanations I was given had to do with turning away from the external world in order to better engage with the internal. One explanation, though, stood out from the rest. A teacher told me that it was about creating space between you and your sensory information. Imagine, she said, that all the information that came to your consciousness had to travel through water to reach you and was slowed down by the water's resistance. Imagine how you would engage with those stimuli if you had more time to see them, process them, and decide how you wanted to respond. Seen through this lens, the work of attention is partly about creating space so that we can actively select what we pay attention to and what we ignore.

Negotiating the withdrawal of attention from contemporary life is the subject of Jenny Odell's *How To Do Nothing Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. In the book, Odell explores our relationship to the natural world, technology, and our own attention. She suggests—I think rightly—that not all forms of attention are equal. Some are shallow, easily hooked by the attention economy. She says, “We might extrapolate from this to conclude that deeper, hardier, more nuanced forms of attention are less susceptible to appropriation, because discipline and vigilance inhere within them.”<sup>5</sup> The deeper forms of attention that Odell references sound like Pratyahara, withdrawing from our senses in order to choose what we pay attention to. Odell is pointing here to the labour that it takes to access deep forms of attention. Doing nothing, as she sees it, is a form of work. To do nothing is not simply the cessation of anything “productive” or kinetic. It is about finding comfort in the discomfort of stillness and, at times, actively resisting the forces that might pull or propel us unintentionally forward.

This kind of “nothing” does not come easy, though, which is why it is work. As with other resources, the finite nature of attention does not mean that we always allocate it sparingly. Stretching toward something, holding it in the hand, and feeling concern for it might describe any number of

behaviours that we recognize as attention and care: taking the hand of a loved one, putting a bandage on a skinned knee, changing a bed pan, clearing ice off a sidewalk. At the same time, this is an apt description of our relationship to mobile phones, screens, chocolate, money. The practice of attention shapes how we utilize it as a resource. But if attention is the axis that maintenance and care hinge on, then we could extrapolate that the things we pay attention to become the things we care for, the things we maintain, whether those acts of attention are intentional or not.

## **Chafing at the Boredom**

There is a detail in Ukeles' manifesto that addresses the tension between maintenance and attention. It is the part, somewhat appropriately, that I keep returning to. I'd like to underline it here:

C. Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.) The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom.

The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay.<sup>6</sup>

Chafes at the boredom: Maintenance can be a drag, in part because it is never complete. So often, it embodies the tedium of doing the same thing over and over again. As work, it is cyclical. It is about returning to something repeatedly, not in the hope that it changes but to ensure that it doesn't. As Ukeles says in her manifesto, it is about the eternal return—coming back each day to the toothbrush, the dust pan, the vegetable garden. And what's wrong with this eternity? The answer, of course, is nothing, save for the fact that it does not hold our attention. It isn't exciting or novel. It is not a story we yearn to tell over and over again and it's certainly not one we, as a culture, celebrate.

Ursula Le Guin highlights this tension, between what is necessary and what is subjectively interesting, in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." She notes that a majority of the food that kept human beings alive in temperate regions during prehistoric times was gathered, not hunted. Le Guin writes, "The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather

seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein.”<sup>7</sup> Le Guin is writing of the things that “defend and prolong the advance,” as Ukeles would say. Occasionally, Le Guin continues, a restless few would head out to hunt mammoths and would return with meat and a story of how they got it. She writes:

It wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story. It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats.... No, it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood spouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain.<sup>8</sup>

There it is: the life instinct and the death instinct living side by side. But that's just it. Development and maintenance sit next to one another, separated like a fork in the road. Which path we take is shaped, in part, by how each appeals—or fails to appeal—to our attention. One is exciting because it is novel, stimulating, propulsive. The other is necessary, important, essential; but, perhaps because it is repetitive and familiar, it does not translate to us as interesting. To further an earlier metaphor, one is sugar, the other is peas.

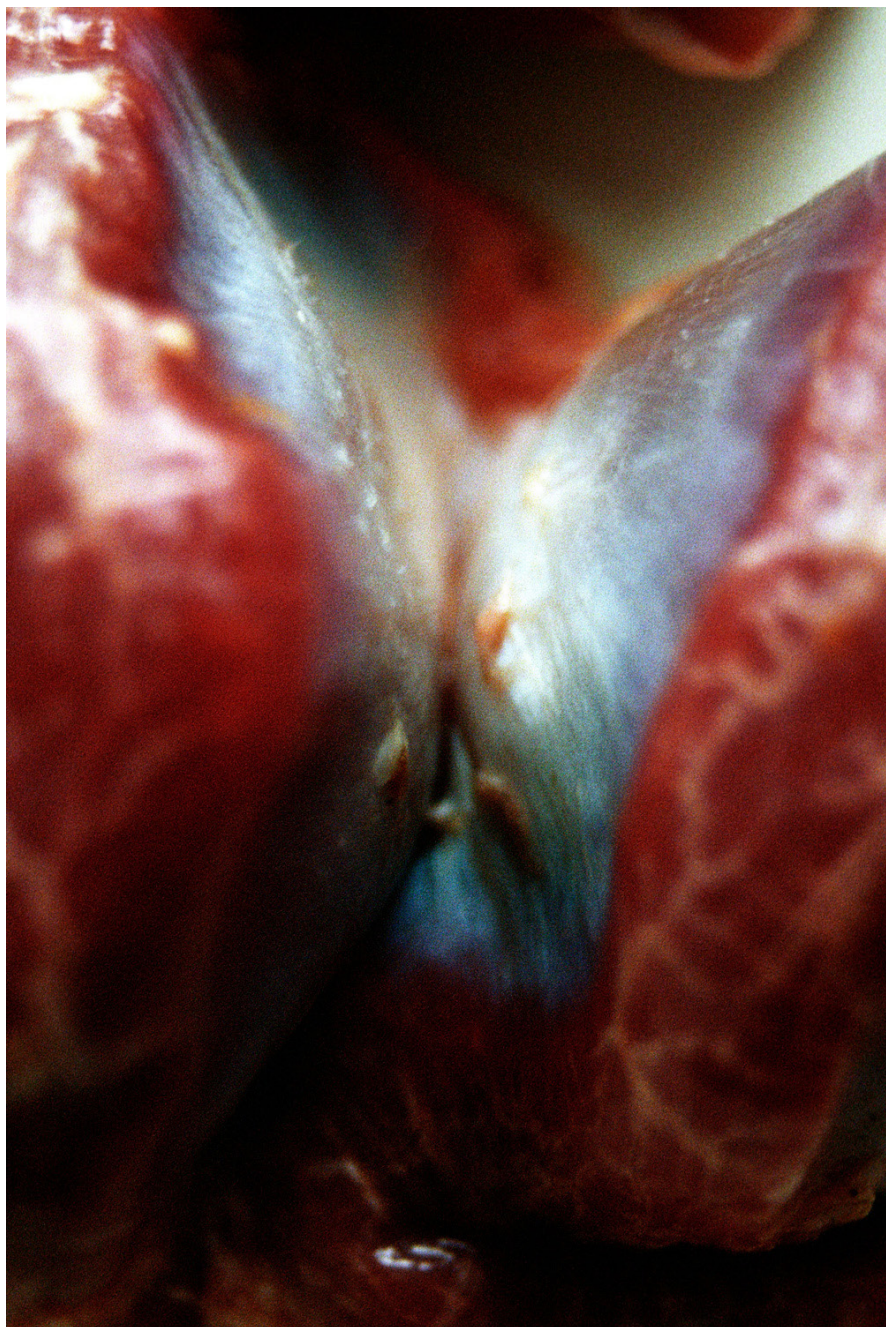
Because we struggle to pay attention to it, our contemporary lives are filled with built-in reminders for maintenance. Most cars will alert us when they need their oil changed. Our phones notify us when their batteries are low. There are even apps, dozens of them, designed to remind us to drink water on a regular basis. We struggle to pay attention to acts of maintenance so we build a systemic safety net in order to avoid doing real damage, because real damage leads to repair.

And if attentional appeal is partly what separates development from maintenance, then repair is distinguished by disruption. Repair gets our attention by demanding it—by interrupting other activities we might pay attention to. A flat tire keeps us from driving. A broken leg keeps us from walking. If we want to keep using the things we've broken, repair is something that cannot be ignored.

It is perhaps easiest to think of this distinction first in the body. We each budget part of our daily attention for maintenance on a personal level, whether it's stretching towards the bathroom to expel waste or stretching towards the kitchen to eat food. These activities allow us, body and mind, to keep going. Over time, these daily acts of maintenance have become habitually factored into our routines. If we're lucky, we take lunch breaks. We try and remember to go to the bathroom before a long car trip. We drink water when our bodies (or our apps) tell us to. If we ignore bodily maintenance, it will eventually demand our attention. When we go too long without eating, our bodies let us know. When we wait too long to pee, our bodies let us know. Our bodies give us information through sensation and when we ignore them, our bodies start to scream.

As with the body, civil acts of maintenance are built into our social systems and are, either by design or neglect, relatively invisible. Trash collection goes mostly unnoticed, regularly hidden in back alleys. Janitorial services often work outside traditional business hours, yielding magically emptied waste baskets and miraculously cleaned floors. Even child care is basically designed to make sure a parent doesn't have to see to their child's needs for a portion of the day while still knowing that their child's needs are being met. As with the body, maintenance and care become most visible to society when they stop. In *Give People Money*, Annie Lowrey writes about The Women's Day Off, a day-long protest that took place in Iceland on October 24, 1975. The protest was intended to draw attention to the unpaid maintenance and care work that women do on a daily basis. Lowrey writes:

Dads were left to change diapers, make breakfasts, soothe tantrums, and put on outfits. Children accompanied their fathers and grandfathers to office buildings, docks, factories, and work sites, with nurseries shut down and schools canceling



classes. Sausages reportedly sold out at grocery stores, because they were easy enough for men to make for their kids. Shops closed. Restaurants and cafés shuttered. Theaters went dark. The national airline canceled flights. Banks scrambled to find tellers.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps echoing the words of Joni Mitchell, who had recorded “Big Yellow Taxi” five years earlier, the women of Iceland decided that the only way to make the country recognize the work they had been doing was to take it away. The result, like a full bladder or an empty stomach, was work that could no longer be ignored.

The same was true in 2009 for the City of Toronto. For thirty-six hot summer days, Toronto’s waste management personnel went on strike when the city began “seeking concessions from the unions as [the city tried] to balance its books.”<sup>10</sup> For the duration of the strike, garbage piled up in the streets, city residents had to wait in long lines in order to dispose of garbage, and public pools and parks were closed and turned into temporary dump sites. A simple maintenance act that we might not ordinarily think twice about became an act of repair. The relatively invisible work that waste management workers do on a daily basis became hyper-visible (and hyper smell-able).

The cyclical nature of maintenance and care work can render it dull fairly quickly. Stories of discovery, creation, and risk often captivate our attention. Disaster stories, by contrast, are often thrilling tales predicated on preventative measures that either fail or go overlooked until it’s too late. Maintenance stories are harder to come by. Chores, in children’s stories, are often doled out as punishment or treated as work done in exchange for a reward, but rarely is maintenance work the true subject of the story. As an embodiment of the eternal return, maintenance stories tend to bore us. Similarly, maintenance jobs usually go under-rewarded, under-appreciated, under-paid. Yet, without maintenance and care, everything else falls apart. Maintenance is the system that neither baits our attention nor demands it. Instead, it sits patiently hoping to be noticed, only demanding attention once it’s breached the line that separates maintenance from repair. But it’s also the work that we hide, that we diminish, that we often ignore.

As I looked more closely at Ukeles' manifesto, I wondered about the contrast she highlights. On one hand, she describes maintenance as both boring and essential. On the other, she points out just how poorly we treat the people who do maintenance and care work—how little social status, through work, they earn. The divergence nagged at me like an equation that refuses to balance. At their most effective, systems work to steer us toward ends that we might otherwise miss. I wondered why our systems—the ones we designed—had steered us to this end.

## Care and Maintenance

I'm going to take a small tangent here and outline a couple of terms that can prove a bit slippery: care work and maintenance work. These two terms, and by extension these two fields of work, are a part of our systems of maintenance. At the outset, I thought I had a grasp on these terms, identifying them easily on sight. As I've progressed, they have come to feel more and more like words that I know only through context, not through actual meaning. In an attempt to rectify this, I want to look at how some lives exist inside the lives of others.

Recently, I was walking with a friend who was back in Edmonton to see family. After our walk, he told me he was going to meet another friend who now had two children. Having met her a few times, I asked how she was doing. He filled me in and then said that she was "re-emerging." I asked what he meant and he responded with a question. "Do you find that all of your friends who are new parents just kind of disappear for like five years?" I uh-huh'ed. He told me that his friend was reaching a point in parenthood where she could reemerge into her own life a bit more.

After our conversation, I started to think about the hours in a day, of which there are never enough of. As I noted earlier, we each budget a part of our day for daily acts of maintenance, many of which we identify as basic needs: eating, drinking, sleeping, peeing, pooping. We've all got to do it. Those acts get slotted into our day alongside all of our other daily activities. Parents, like all care providers, must budget a part of each day for not only their own needs but the needs of their offspring. (This isn't a secret, but it can really never be repeated enough.) As I thought about



the acts of disappearance and reemergence my friend had mentioned, I started to wonder if care work could be thought of as the act of subsuming another life into your own. The life of a new child—which is bound, relatively speaking, to the same parameters as the life of an adult—must fit inside the life of those who care for them. This wouldn't be a big deal if the parameters of an adult life were flexible—if our lives could balloon up, making space for the life of others. But they aren't. They can't. A child has twenty-four hours in a day just like an adult. They may spend the time differently, sleeping and eating when they choose, but at the end of the day, we are talking about two things that are the same size. Fitting the life of another living creature inside your life means making space, pushing other things aside or simply letting them go.

In trying to define care work, I came across the work of Nancy Folbre, the Director of the Program on Gender and Care Work and a Professor Emerita of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Folbre has a blog called Care Talk: Feminism and Political Economy where she often relates her research to current events and ideas. Early in the pandemic, Folbre made a post titled “Are We All Care Workers Now?” In the post, Folbre struggles with the definition of care work as it comes crashing into the realities of the pandemic. She outlines her evolving definition of care work, beginning with “hands-on or face-to-face work” (to hold in the hand), growing to include “work in which concern for the welfare of the care recipient is likely to affect the quality of the service provided” (to feel concern, grief or anxiety for), and then expanding to include what she described as “dirty work”—things like “the emptying of bed pans, cleaning of toilets, and mopping of floors.” As COVID-19 takes hold, Folbre's definition continues to evolve:

The pandemic...has pushed me over a cliff, because it is redefining the meaning of “dirty” work—now, any work that increases the risk of exposure to a potentially deadly virus: not just health care, child care, and elder care and unpaid care for family members, but also food services, package delivery, police protection, home repair services, garbage collection... the list goes on. We rely heavily on the motivations of such workers to minimize our own—as well as their own—chances of infection.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the work that Folbre described in her pandemic-adjusted definition is maintenance work, which, along with care work, got rebranded as “essential work” during the pandemic. There are important distinctions between care work and maintenance work, the most obvious being gender and pay, but in many ways they are versions of the same thing. Care work is grounded in ideas of maintenance, and maintenance work, even if not explicitly dealing with living things, often involves a concern for the well-being of others. Just like Marty’s work with helicopters, a lot of the work we classify as maintenance is done to keep people safe, alive, and healthy.

Taking all of this into account, I’d like to propose a definition for care work that we could perhaps apply to maintenance work as well. Care and maintenance work are labour that place the well-being of another living creature inside the life of the person doing the work.

In offering this definition, I am in part attempting a prepositional shift. Care and maintenance are often described as foundational parts of society. I, myself, have described them in that way. This description draws to mind the foundation of a house—the part that holds it up but also the part that gets buried. Labelling maintenance and care work this way is useful in highlighting the ways that they support all other kinds of work. But it also places these kinds of labour at the bottom of a hierarchy. This positioning, I would argue, influences how these kinds of labour are compensated, who is expected to do them, and how visibly they are rendered in civil society.

Instead, I’d like to try and imagine something else. Rather than thinking vertically, I’d like to think circumferentially. I’d like to try thinking of care work and maintenance work as a line that curves back on itself. Together, these jobs are the boundary that holds all other work and, by extension, all life. Inspired by Le Guin—who, referencing Virginia Woolf, proposed the idea of “container as hero”—I’d like to propose the idea of care work and maintenance work as container: the work that holds everything else.

## Invisibility

Earlier, I described maintenance work as “relatively invisible,” which, on a cultural level, is true. To say that maintenance and care work are invisible, though, is to ignore the fact that these acts of labour are only invisible to some. The women of Iceland saw the work they were doing. The waste management workers in Toronto saw the work they were doing. Simply because we undervalue its importance, neglect it in media, and minimize the role it plays in society, doesn’t mean that nobody sees the toil and the value of maintenance work. As Rebecca Solnit points out in her essay “Nobody Knows,” “when the powerful insist that nobody knows, what they mean is that their acts are witnessed by nobodies. *Nobody* knows.”<sup>12</sup> Solnit, in this case, is writing specifically about our long history of ignoring sexual assault and harassment, but more broadly she is speaking about power. When we describe maintenance and care work as invisible, what we are partly saying is that, culturally, we don’t value it, don’t care about it, aren’t willing to stretch towards it. Similarly we are saying that people who do this work are of little value, unworthy of our attention, powerless.

For over a decade I’ve gone to a city-run swimming pool not far from my house to swim laps. A few years ago, the facility implemented a wristband policy. Upon entering, each patron is given a temporary wrist band not unlike the kind you would get at a music festival. In addition to the new procedure, the wristband policy produced new waste. Used wristbands were carelessly discarded in the corners of showers or on the locker room floors. In response to this new trash, the facility printed out signs that asked patrons to kindly dispose of their wrist bands in the waste receptacles (which were placed strategically below the new signage). It didn’t work. The facility then got bigger garbage bins that functionally shortened the distance that the garbage, moving from hand to receptacle, might have to travel. The wrist bands continued to show up on the ground. Then the facility made new signs that featured the City of Edmonton logo and a distinct line pointing straight down at the garbage bins below. People still discarded them on the ground. I suspect the reason people continued to throw their wrist bands on the ground had less to do with distinct signage and large garbage bins, and more to do with the fact that the facility had a janitor who, each time he passed through the change room, would bend over and pick them up. I had a few casual conversations with one of the

janitors who was often working when I was coming and going. During one, he told me about a recurring pain he had in his lower back—pain, I thought, that was likely exacerbated by the repeated act of bending over to pick up other people’s trash.

The social invisibility of maintenance and care work is ironically partnered with an expectation that it will always get done: Diapers will get changed, trash will be collected, grocery shelves will be stocked. The “how” and the “by whom” of it all only matters when those expectations aren’t met. At the same time, most of us have an implicit assumption around what a maintenance or care worker should look like. This fact makes it impossible to ignore the relationship between the invisibility of maintenance and care work and the invisibility—and here I intend this to mean systemic invisibility, social dehumanization: the invisible line that separates the deserving from not—of the people tasked with doing it. Most often the line that separates maintenance from development and repair is one that overlaps divisions of race, gender, and class.

In *Caste*, for example, Isabel Wilkerson quotes former South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond who spoke in 1858 from the floor of the United States Senate in favour of the South and slavery saying:

In all Social systems, there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have...It constitutes the very mud-sill of society.<sup>13</sup>

A mud-sill, as Wilkerson points out, is “the sill plate that runs along the base of a house and bears the weight of the entire structure above it.”<sup>14</sup> The class of people worthy of such work, as Senator Hammond saw it, were enslaved Black Americans. In the eyes of the United States constitution, they were not at the time seen as fully human.

The Senator’s words weave together fact and fiction with a tactful cunning. It is true that all social systems depend on certain work getting done, but the idea that these jobs require little skill or intelligence, that they are menial, that they are the work of a certain class (or caste, as I

think Wilkerson would say) of people—these are just stories, fictions that piggyback on the myth of race itself. The truth about these stories is that they deepen the divide between people with power and people with none. They allow the powerful to avoid doing difficult and boring work and give them license to pay others little—if anything at all—to do it.

We tell similar stories about women and the unpaid care work they do to raise children, maintain a home, and meet the needs of a family. This work is often invisible, hidden inside the walls of a home, and is rarely accounted for in fiscal policy, rarely compensated unless performed by a third party. At the same time, care work has a history of being female-coded putting the expectation and the responsibility of the work on women, an expectation that has persisted as women have moved more fully into the workplace. “Feminine-coded work does need doing—which is why it is never done, as the sexist proverb goes,” writes Kate Manne says in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. “So it’s no surprise that this work is often safeguarded with moral sanctions and internalized as “to be done” by women. Then there’s the threat of the withdrawal of social approval if these duties are not performed, and the incentive of love and gratitude if they are done willingly and gladly.”<sup>15</sup> These incentives and sanctions stand in stark contrast to the incentives offered to men in more visible and celebrated fields: money, status, access.

Manne also points out that some of the work of care-giving is, itself, invisible:

[A]s well as affection, adoration, indulgence, and so on, such feminine-coded goods and services include simple respect, love, acceptance, nurturing, safety, security and safe haven. There is kindness and compassion, moral attention, care, concern, and soothing. These forms of emotional labor go beyond the more tangible reproductive and domestic services that may be less expected of women.<sup>16</sup>

These invisible acts of care, in a society that prioritizes productivity and tangible goods, can be casually written off, even as we find ways to qualify their benefit. Similarly, the effort that these feminine-coded acts require, the energy they can take, is consistently overshadowed by the visibility of

physical labour and quantifiable profit.

As labour markets shift and “invisible” populations move into new fields of work, the narratives we tell about those jobs can change along with them. In *Dirty Work*, Eyal Press tells the stories of three groups of people who perform the gruelling, traumatic, and largely invisible work that helps shape our world. One such group are the people—now largely documented and undocumented immigrants—that work on the kill floors in industrial slaughterhouses. The fact that these plants are predominantly staffed by immigrants, Press writes, has “fuelled resentment among the locals wondering why more Americans weren’t hired.”<sup>17</sup> A woman named Pam, who has worked at a poultry plant in Alabama since the 1970s tells him, “There are people out there who want jobs...They just quit hiring Americans.”<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Press points out, “the influx of immigrants was what made them undesirable. In Albertville as elsewhere, working in a chicken plant became ‘immigrant work,’ the status of which was diminished by the hiring of foreign-born workers who exerted downward pressure on the wages and bargaining power of all employees in the industry.”<sup>19</sup>

Press’s book is not just about invisible populations, though, but about work that we intentionally try to keep hidden—work that, in the harsh light of day, many would find morally repugnant, intolerable, downright cruel. In addition to slaughterhouses, *Dirty Work* examines the work done by drone pilots who carry out lethal military operations and the staff who work in transitional wings for mentally ill prisoners in maximum security prisons. These jobs, in the systems we’ve built, are as essential as a teacher, a nurse, or a mail carrier. They are part of what philosopher Michel Foucault would describe as “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, and develop its life.”<sup>20</sup> This right, as Foucault points out, often depends on violence and death as means of stamping out the forces that might threaten the social body. Death, he suggests, “presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”<sup>21</sup> Put another way, there is a cost to the versions of maintenance and development that we live with. We use human proliferation as a justification for that cost, casting it as a devastating side effect, a series of necessary evils, but this framing

does little to diminish the damage done. And, as is too often the case, the burden is not borne equally. The people Press interviews, the jobs he investigates, they, like a select group of others in society, take the brunt.

Additionally, people who do society's "dirty work" are often degraded and demeaned by the rest of us. There are no bumper stickers that read "I Heart Slaughterhouse Workers" because, as Press says, "[m]ost of us don't want to hear too much about such work. We also don't want to hear too much from the people who do it on our behalf, not least because what they tell us might stir discomfort, maybe even a trace of culpability."<sup>22</sup> The invisibility of certain jobs and the people who do them is intentional. It allows us to live in the bliss that ignorance brings. Akin to the portrait that Dorian Gray keeps in his attic, some work is kept hidden so that we can keep looking at ourselves in the mirror each day.

Of course our intentional ignorance only deepens the toll for those who are not so fortunate. Press highlights the "stigma, self-reproach, corroded dignity, shattered self-esteem"<sup>23</sup> that accompany such jobs. He compares these feelings to post-traumatic stress disorder and to moral injury, a term used in the military to describe the damage done to soldiers ordered to perform tasks that are antithetical to the core of their being. Much like the "invisible" benefits of care work, some of the damage done by dirty work cannot explicitly be seen.

The invisibility of maintenance and care work seems bound up with our tendency to look away from things that are boring, challenging, painful, or disturbing—especially when we feel powerless to change them. But that act of looking away only further entrenches systemic issues and isolates people who are bound up in them. And so I find myself, after a small meander, back at the same question: Why do our systems help steer us here?

## **Systems**

In November of 2021, *The Atlantic* published a piece by David Zipper titled "The Deadly Myth That Human Error Causes Most Car Crashes." In the article, Zipper draws a contrast between traffic fatalities in the





United States, which have risen ten percent over the past decade, and traffic fatalities in Europe, which have dropped thirty six percent over the same period. The distinct trends, Zipper suggests, are the result of two very different approaches to traffic safety. In Europe, legislators take a broad approach, frequently redesigning roadways and pushing car manufacturers to produce safer vehicles for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. “American transportation departments, law-enforcement agencies, and news outlets,” by contrast, “frequently maintain that most crashes—indeed, 94 percent of them, according to the most widely circulated statistic—are solely due to human error.”<sup>24</sup> Over the course of the article, Zipper points out how ineffective the American approach has been in positively impacting road safety. To make his point, Zipper presents the reader with a hypothetical:

It’s a foggy day, and the driver of an SUV is traveling along a road at the posted speed limit of 40 miles per hour. The limit then drops to 25 as the road approaches a town—but the road’s lanes do not narrow (which would naturally compel a driver to apply the brakes), and the lone sign announcing the lower speed limit is partially obstructed. Oblivious to the change, the driver keeps traveling at 40. As he enters the town, a pedestrian crosses the road at an intersection without a stoplight. The driver strikes the pedestrian.<sup>25</sup>

The driver in Zipper’s example is guilty of not paying attention to the lone traffic sign, of not seeing the pedestrian in the crosswalk, of not slowing down as he nears the approaching town. As Zipper points out, though, placing all blame on this hypothetical driver ignores the systemic changes that could have prevented the accident.

Contemporary conversations about attention often lead us back to practices of personal attention, like mindfulness and meditation. Though I think these practices have value, such conversations put too much pressure on the individual and minimize the role that systems play in harvesting our attention, rewarding development, and neglecting maintenance. They ignore the role that social structures play in steering our natures.

In *How To Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell writes, “we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative. Our very idea of productivity is premised on the idea of producing something new, whereas we do not tend to see maintenance and care as productive in the same way.”<sup>26</sup> The other side of this coin is how often we allow things to decay, simply through neglect, to the point of needing repair. From memory, I started making a list of all of the events in my lifetime that had been described as crises. The opioid crisis. The subprime mortgage and financial crises. The climate crisis. The AIDS crisis. The homelessness crisis. The COVID-19 crisis. I started to wonder how many of these crises could have been avoided—or at least mitigated—if we’d given them our collective attention before they demanded it.

As I worked my way through the research, writing, and art that helped shape this text, a series of questions continued to loop in my mind. If maintenance work is essential to our survival but is also something we struggle to pay attention to, why do we exaggerate its invisibility? Why do we minimize the work that people do to care for children, seniors, people with disabilities, each other? Why do we ask cleaning staff to lug bags of trash to back alley dumpsters in the dark hours of night? Why do we allow apps and corporations to further degrade our capacity for attention—not to mention our self-esteem and our social systems? Why do we make it easier to neglect maintenance and care work?

Capitalism, in the face of these questions, becomes an easy and apt target—a bullseye that fills half the dart board. Maintenance is rarely as lucrative or as costly as development and repair: a new car is more profitable to a car company than the work of maintaining an existing one; a new iPhone is worth more to Apple than simply replacing the battery in an existing one; ad revenue, as Meta sees it, is more valuable than the mental health of teenagers. Similarly, cheap and free labour are highly incentivized within capitalist systems, and the people that end of doing that work often have less choice and less access to power. This is, at least in part, because capitalist systems do not have the same priorities as social systems. Often, just the opposite. But unfettered capitalism, like weeds in a garden, can quickly overtake a social landscape.

Capitalist systems can also make it easy to look away. The hierarchical

value structures that are implicit in capitalism encourage us to believe that hard work and success are tethered, meaning that if we are thriving in a capitalist system, we've earned it, and if we're struggling, we deserve it. When born into capitalism—as many of us have been—we also inherit a belief that some work is more worthy of being celebrated and compensated, even if it isn't essential, impactful, or meaningful to our broader communities.

At the same time, raging against capitalism overlooks the boons that capitalism has delivered and ignores the reality, as Noam Chomsky points out, that certain crises—climate change being the most noteworthy—must be met “within the framework of existing institutions, modifying them as necessary.”<sup>27</sup>

It also ignores the other factors—the systemic incentives and disincentives—that have little to do with capitalism, that are, in many ways, a product of systems that have been poorly maintained.

The associations Mierle Laderman Ukeles makes in her manifesto—equating maintenance with life and development with death—are not, I believe, intended to suggest that development cannot help foster and further life. It simply means that development, on its own, cannot survive. It depends on maintenance and care work. As we stare down the future, development and growth will be necessary. We will need to make massive investments in renewable energy, scientific research, even the arts. What Ukeles' work highlights is that without a similar investment in maintenance and care work, any efforts at development and growth are doomed to fail.

In the wake of that reality, I found myself asking different questions: How might we modify our existing institutions to elevate maintenance and care? How, within the framework we currently live in, do we make the invisible more visible?

## Visibility

The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon describes a form of bias wherein a person, upon noticing a certain detail, practice, or subject, will begin to see it everywhere. If you are thinking of buying a certain model of car, for example, you might suddenly find yourself spotting that car over and over again. The phenomenon is a sort of illusion. To the viewer, it makes it seem like there is a sudden increase in the frequency with which something appears. In reality, the frequency hasn't changed, the viewer's attention has. The phenomenon is also aptly known as frequency illusion, a name that reminds us that the act of noticing something does not indicate a thing's existence, just our awareness of it.

Since I started considering the relationship that maintenance might have to care and attention, I've seen references to it everywhere. The word seems to jump out at me when I read it in texts or hear it in podcasts. I think about it each time I water my plants. I think about it every time I see a stroller. I think about it when a sidewalk in my neighbourhood goes unshovelled for too long after a snowfall (while also wondering about the conditions that might be preventing someone from shovelling). I think of it when I mistakenly throw food waste in my garbage bin and not in the compost bin where it belongs. I even thought about it after the excitement of starting this essay wore off and I had to maintain the creative energy to finish it.

According to the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, I'm seeing maintenance everywhere because I've made myself more aware of it—my attention is cued up to recognize it. But I'm also seeing it everywhere because it is everywhere. It permeates our lives just as it contains them. In some ways, this is good news. It means that the things that we depend on already exist, we just have to get better at highlighting them, drawing our attention to them, and supporting them. But how do we begin to recognize and elevate something that has always been all around us?

We might begin to answer that question by recognizing systems that are already succeeding at this task. The Costa Rican health care system, for example, is uniquely maintenance-focused and makes “public health—measures to improve the health of the population as a whole—central to

the delivery of medical care.”<sup>28</sup> In August of 2021, Atul Gawande wrote about Costa Rica’s health care system for *The New Yorker*, noting that it had resulted in a higher life expectancy in Costa Ricans than in Americans. This is atypical, Gawande observes, because life expectancy tends to align with a country’s national income. Costa Rica’s health care system—which itself is a global outlier—has made the country an exception. After describing Costa Rica’s public health-based approach, Gawande writes:

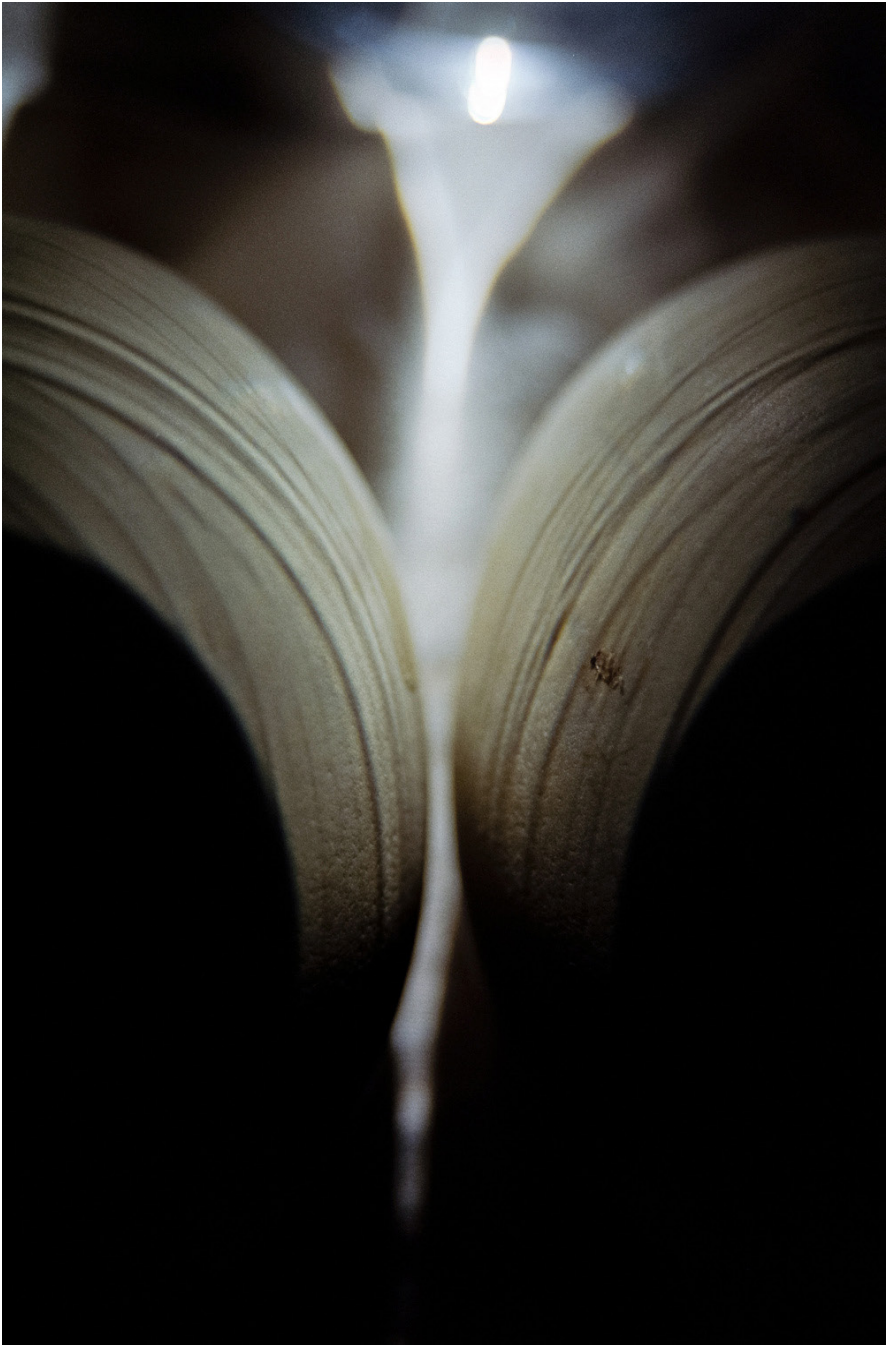
[M]edical systems seldom focus on any overarching outcome for the communities they serve. We doctors are reactive. We wait to see who arrives at our office and try to help out with their “chief complaint.” We move on to the next person’s chief complaint: What seems to be the problem? We don’t ask what our town’s most important health needs are, let alone make a concerted effort to tackle them. If we were oriented toward public health, we would have been in touch with all our patients, if not everyone in the communities we serve.<sup>29</sup>

The distinction he outlines here sounded to me like the line Garth had drawn on the Kelowna highway, when speaking about Marty’s work.

Gawande’s piece focuses partly on Álvaro Salas Chaves, the man largely responsible for modelling Costa Rica’s health care system. As I read about the system he designed, I was struck over and over again by how often Salas’s approach started with attention. Early in his career, “Salas was put in charge of setting up a new mobile public-health unit, one of many deployed in the government’s rural health program. When you work at a hospital, patients come to you. In a public-health unit, you have to go to them.”<sup>30</sup> Through public health units, Salas inverted the typical attentional relationship in health care.

Rather than being reactive, the system Salas designed engages directly with the community, meaning that health care practitioners are giving attention to that community rather than waiting for the reverse. The resulting system allows health care professionals to recognize certain needs before they become desperate.

This transition, though, did not happen overnight; it was the product



of years of commitment on Sala's part. Additionally, it required the commitment of the government that—intentionally or not—gave Sala's philosophy and his approach the opportunity to succeed. It required that the Costa Rican government support Sala's vision, even if they were not yet able to see how beneficial it might be. It seems possible, perhaps even likely, that other systems might be transformed as Costa Rica's health care system has been. These changes, though, may take time, and will certainly require sustained attention, focus, and support through turbulent periods of transition.

In the meantime, how might we make maintenance and care work more socially and culturally visible? For starters, we could begin to rethink how maintenance and care work are compensated, turning these essential jobs into jobs that people can make a meaningful living from. We could also work at making the toll these jobs take more visible and perhaps more equally distributed. "Dirty Work is obscured by structural invisibility," Eyal Press writes. When he asks what we might owe the people who do our collective dirty work, he begins by saying, "At minimum, it seems to me, we owe them the willingness to see them as our agents, doing work that is not disconnected from our own daily lives."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps, then, it is not just the work that we need to make more visible but the interconnectedness of our lives and our labours.

In the same vein, this interconnectedness might involve the inclusion of maintenance and care workers in conversations about policy, procedure, and execution, treating maintenance and care work as valuable kinds of knowledge. It might also involve making our private lives, or perhaps the structures that contain our private lives—our homes, our cities, our neighbourhoods—more fluid, cohesive, and interconnected.

In writing about the Green New Deal, Namoi Klein says that "most of us have been trained to avoid a systemic and historical analysis of capitalism and to divide pretty much every crisis our system produces—from economic inequality to violence against women to white supremacy to unending wars to ecological unraveling—in walled-off silos."<sup>32</sup> This perspective, she argues, limits our capacity to see the sources of these crises and, as a result, prevents us from making meaningful change. Perhaps the social segregation that capitalist systems amplify also contributes to a

segregation of empathy and imagination. In this light, what impact would a compulsory year of civil service have? How might we think about trash collection, child care, or senior care if we all took a turn at it? Perhaps de-siloing our work might also de-silo our perceptions, allowing us to truly get a sense of what “being in this together” means.

Our political discourse is often shaped by the stories we tell ourselves—or the stories we buy into about ourselves. These narratives can lead us to believe in the triumphant nature of winning, often followed by an “off-season,” when participation declines. In an interview with Ezra Klein about renovating and reimagining democracy, the professor and philosopher Danielle Allen says, “the work of democracy is to continuously resist capture.” Allen is pointing out that our organizational systems—social, cultural, political—are often subject to capture by small, privileged groups who erode means of democratic participation. Allen says, “Democracy is the work of resisting capture by powerful interests and restoring power-sharing just over and over and over again.”<sup>33</sup> I was struck, while listening, by the words *continuously* and *over and over and over again*. Like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Allen is reminding us that the maintenance work, in the political sphere as in any sphere, is never done. With this in mind, how might practices that encourage societal participation, like compulsory voting (already an enforced law in over twenty countries), help maintain our social and political containers?

And then there is the question of time. One of the lines that separates maintenance from development and repair is a temporal one. The costs associated with maintenance are immediate, but the benefits are delayed, often experienced only as a continuation of the status quo. If we’ve done the job of maintenance properly, we might notice no change at all. We just keep enjoying our roads and our daycares and our teeth. Because maintenance is partly about averting repair, it is dependent on looking carefully at the present and predicting what might be necessary for the future, weighing it equally with the perks of the now. Creating systems that force us to look patiently at where we are headed, and that allow us to appropriately throttle up or down when necessary, could help create the space that would allow for more intentional, informed choices, while also creating the conditions that would allow us to move quickly when necessary. For example, automatic stabilizers—economic tools that help



cool or stimulate an economy when certain indicators are triggered—could save time in moments of fiscal insecurity. We might consider similar ideas for other parts of our political systems. In the future, could the appearance of a deadly, air-borne respiratory virus, for example, trigger the production and distribution of medical grade masks to a country's population? Rather than simply setting precedent, could some judicial rulings trigger a mandatory review of the underlying law? As our systems age, they become bogged down by generations of bureaucratic debris. Can we find systemic ways to make us clean them up and create space for new, thorough, speed-appropriate responses?

As humans, we aren't always good at stretching towards the things that matter the most, especially when those things stop being new and exciting. Some of this is evolutionary, and though our attentional instincts might present as flaws to us now, our ancestors may have experienced them as boons. The question I think we need to ask more often is not whether these instincts are good or bad, but what to do with them. Many of the systems we live in today are designed to exploit our natural tendencies. The people who thrive within these systems are often those who understand how to use them, those who have the capacity to sidestep the pitfalls, or those who start with a leg up. What if, instead of exploiting some human behaviours, we found ways to temper them?

Part of Marty's job is about avoiding crises. By maintaining helicopters, he keeps them aloft. The line between a broken helicopter and potential death is a short one, easy to spot. But that line, when drawn between other acts of neglect and the potential for harm, is not much longer; it's simply easier to ignore. Through participation, we maintain the systems that we live within. What we pay attention to affects how we participate and what systems survive and thrive. In order to change the shape of those systems, and of our lives, we must imagine that they could be different. It is through this act of the mind that the walls become shiftable. But we must choose to see the walls in order to move them. Similarly, we must choose to recognize the lines that connect us, the work that sustains us, and the people who maintain what we have built. Many of our biases, values, and perspectives are rooted not in fact, but in the stories we choose to tell and the stories we choose to believe. As we move forward into a world that feels increasingly precarious, how do we tell new stories?

How do we steer our tendencies toward new ends? It begins, I think, by acknowledging what we owe one another. We live at the mercy of others who live at the mercy of us. We are indebted to those who came before and responsible to those who come after. Embedded in Ukeles' manifesto is an uncomfortable truth: life is work. Not exclusively, of course. It can be filled with moments of joy and love and ecstasy and fun. But it is work, and it is hard. The work is worth doing. It is worth doing together.



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