

# Growing Collectives: Haha + *Flood*

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Located on an unremarkable street, the storefront's simple appearance defies classification. Stencilled onto the front window in plain white font is "Flood:" (and then in smaller type) "A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare." Below, in the same lettering, this pronouncement is helpfully re-printed in Spanish: "Diluvio: Una Red de Voluntarios para Participación Activa en el Cuidado de Salud." Through the glass, a plain white room can be seen, its centre occupied by rows and rows of carefully ordered plants. Sprouting from individual holes cut in white plastic tubing through which nutrients are fed, each plant reaches slowly towards the two 1000-watt halide lamps overhead. The trays are suspended three feet above the floor on a basic wood-framed table. "You can wave your arms under the tables like a magician demonstrating the emptiness between two pieces of a woman sawn in half. The connection to the earth is gone, the earth as a source: unlimited, magical, deep. The plants are fed rationally" (Palmer 2008, 58). There is an antiseptic air to the place. Nutrients, excess tubing, and other supplies are stored on one shelf while the opposite wall is full of pamphlets ranging in subject matter from hydroponic gardening to alternative healthcare treatment for HIV/AIDS. There are some people tending to the plants inside, others milling about, browsing through material or talking to one another. The question of what this place is seems to hang in the air, ushering visitors in like a welcoming host for a party you didn't know was happening, much less were invited to.

## Partial Answers

*Flood* was created by the artists collective Haha<sup>1</sup> in 1992 for Sculpture Chicago's *Culture in Action* exhibition, curated by Mary Jane Jacob. *Culture in Action* was a "watershed exhibition that opened up floodgates of possibility for the intersection of contemporary art and community-based practice" (Temporary Services 2008, 18). The exhibition's importance in the development and integration of these practices happened through its focus on community engagement, deconstructing the relationship between artist and audience. The integration of new audiences and venues outside

of museum structures was not simply about expanding the potential reception of art, but about shifting the definition of art itself, and what art could do. In its active collaboration with a broad range of people, *Flood* was one of the most successful projects developed through this exhibition. Its success can be found in the project's openness: allowing for the formation of collectives, heterogeneous times, and an ethics based in *processuality*—a continually evolving process of working with others, answering to and cultivating the unexpected.

The project involved the creation of a storefront in Rogers Park, Chicago, far away from the gallery and art districts of the city. The members of Haha, wanting to respond to the HIV epidemic that had severely affected their community, started growing hydroponic greens (kale, collards, chard) and medicinal herbs to be distributed to AIDS hospices and people living with HIV. Demonstration gardens were built outside, and the back of the storefront was used as a meeting space (Temporary Services 2007, 18). The storefront also provided biweekly meals, educational activities, public events, as well as information and a place to garden. It hosted school and art tours, initially organized by *Culture in Action*. Through the creation of the project, Haha morphed into *Flood* becoming its own collective. Originally relying mostly on art students, the collective eventually became quite mixed, expanding to include a fluctuating and diverse group of twelve to thirty-five dedicated members, which continued to challenge and transform the definition of 'artist' (Palmer 2004a, 134). Although Sculpture Chicago funded the project for only one year, it lasted for three due to the enthusiasm and commitment of this larger group. As a 'seed project' *Flood* has continued in various forms, including gardens in other cities, a comprehensive HIV/AIDS facility in Rogers Park, and a network of volunteers who continue to work with various HIV organizations in Chicago.<sup>2</sup>

The garden became a way to understand and connect with the immediate community, but also to HIV and the ways it had reshaped so many people's lives. *Flood* operated as a resource network for people concerned with HIV, providing information, support groups, and condoms. But it was necessary for Haha to do something beyond simple service provision. So they built a hydroponic garden as a metaphoric and literal intervention and response to HIV. At that moment in history—as rates of infection were still quite high in North America (especially in Rogers Park, which at the time had the highest infection rates in Chicago), and protease inhibitors had yet to be invented—hydroponic vegetables had the advantage of limiting potentially harmful bacteria found in soil. In addition to reducing bacteria in food, which is important for people with compromised immune systems, the garden's function was equally expressed in its capacity to reveal the network of relations between people and the other-than-human. It presented the opportunity to think of the necessity of interconnection in people's lives—for instance, the ways that healthcare is delivered—in relating to the needy plants. Laurie Palmer, one of Haha's members, draws attention to the garden as metaphor for the impact of HIV: "A body with a compromised immune system can be compared to a plant growing in a highly controlled system without dirt as a buffer or resource, in which every substance that enters the body must be subjected to scrutiny, distrust, excessive consideration" (Palmer 1994, 55). The tenuous close-circuited system offers an opportunity to rethink the interconnections of plant, virus, microorganism, human, water, and nutrients. It does not privilege one relationship over another, but shows the way in which the system depends, for its survival, upon all of these factors working in a manner that can sustain life. Its success as a project rested on the garden functioning as a kind of visual metaphor for the fragility of life and the necessity of connectivity to sustain it.



Haha. *Flood*, 1992–1995. Photos courtesy of A. Laurie Palmer.

*Flood* was not a store, nor a social service agency, nor an education facility, although it borrowed from and blurred the lines of each of these categories. It was a collective art project, adopting “the essence of cooperatively catalyzed events [which] is to defy single narratives” (Holmes 2007, 275). Its excessiveness as an open-ended proposition, the fact of its being unfixable, made it effective as social intervention and as art. Palmer notes: “We could have tried to specify limited goals and outcomes in grant application style—so many school groups visited, so many video screenings, so many bags of greens delivered. But what we couldn’t define or locate was *Flood*’s anomalous existence—not a school, not a clinic, not a store, not a factory and no one drew a salary” (Palmer 2004a, 136). *Flood* operated in excess of all these categories. It offered a way to think about relations differently because it could not be categorized. And its unclassifiable status made it more welcoming, both because it presented an object of curiosity and because the project was not predetermined. It left space for people to engage in multiple unforeseen ways.

*Flood* enabled new connections between people in the neighbourhood and the wider city. The storefront created “an intense constant social involvement with the audience and also a blur as to how people are involved: they’re not just spectators or people who are going deliberately to an art space” (Temporary Services 2007, 24–5) but random passers-by—people interested in hydroponics or people concerned about HIV. Some would stay and become involved in ongoing meetings—discussions ranging from using natural medicine to manage HIV/AIDS to the sustainability of hydroponic food production; some would become key members helping to extend the life of the storefront beyond its first year of funding provided by Sculpture Chicago; some would merely drop in for a bit of warmth on a cold day. For example:

The log recounts the visitors for a typical day (Saturday, May 29, 1993): a small boy interested in hydroponics, an elderly man interested in hydroponics, a neighbor to talk about HIV, three men admiring the garden, a Spanish-speaking couple and their small daughter to look at the AIDS literature, a tour, a student who had read about the project in *The Reader*, a family from Milwaukee directed here by their Chicago-resident son (Culture 96).

By looking at the daily life of the storefront, it becomes obvious that what drew people in was not necessarily a common interest or goal; rather, the strength of the project was in its open-ended ability to connect to many divergent desires, interests, and levels of commitment. Through these random connections of people living in a lower-income and racially diverse community, the storefront helped to establish ways of working between people who would not otherwise have met. As Palmer describes, the storefront became a neighbourhood hub, a meeting point:

One of the really effective parts of the project—if effectiveness is even relevant—is that the people on that block gradually came in. We met people who either hadn't known they were positive or had just discovered they were positive... This kid who was living with his family as a gay teen who hadn't come out and was positive... And all of this was in an immediate area of a few hundred yards and was focused through the garden. It was only maybe a handful of people, but it was huge (Temporary Services 2007, 24).

The rootedness of the garden brought out the ways in which many different issues converge, tangled together in the web of the neighbourhood. It became a source of undetermined potential.

*Flood* addressed social problems in a lateral way, opening up a space to think about the relations between people, food, bacteria, and viruses. As the group describes it, "A hydroponic system requires not so much physical labor as constant attention... *Flood* is, if nothing else, about that commitment, and the body of people gathered to tend the garden" (Palmer 1994, 55). Because of this demand from the plants, new connections needed to be made between human participants. *Flood* was the infrastructure—the garden, storefront, plants, microbes, and nutrients; it was also the collection of people involved—their interests, concerns, and the wider Chicago networks they brought with them. In its multiple relations, *Flood* allows for a reconceptualization of collectives along non-anthropocentric lines: a collective necessarily including the other-than-human. *Flood* offers ideas and insights into how we can work with plants, humans, and viruses in ways that can potentially expand our ideas about 'nature' and 'culture.'

## Collectives

*Flood* produced a heterogeneous collective. The subject here is re-framed as a term in a relation—a term of collective relation that pushes the boundaries of and extends beyond any single individual. The project emerged from the middle, not from one particular idea or any one person: "So it was a gradual teasing out of ideas. When they arrived and clicked, fully fledged, nobody felt any personal ownership except collectively" (Temporary Services 2007, 20). In fact, Haha members describe their projects, especially *Flood*, as a liberatory depersonalized gesture, defying the sovereignty of the self:



We did in the end take full responsibility. But it was not really ours. So part of the group process is its thorough disentanglement from our individual selves... whatever resulted, each project felt "so not mine," which was incredibly freeing. At the same time it was ours in a wonderfully owned way. It was also like having multiple selves. It was great to be able to do work that you wouldn't have recognized as yours otherwise (Temporary Services 2007, 21).

The project, the ideas, and the ways of working all emerged from the collective, and the collective, from the project.

In this context, the notion of the collective is central to thinking through the possibilities of art with gardens. A collective is normally defined as a cooperative enterprise, performed by people acting as a group, but it also lends itself to thinking through the group as aggregate, as assemblage. Félix Guattari provides a very useful definition: "The term 'collective' should be understood in the sense of a multiplicity that deploys itself as much beyond the individual, on the side of the *socius*, as before

the person, on the side of preverbal intensities, indicating a logic of affects rather than a logic of delimited sets" (1995, 9). The affective resonances and nonhuman forces, as well as plants, viruses, microbes, and social power structures all come together to form the collective. It emerges from these relations: material and affective, human and other-than-human. In this sense, a collective is not necessarily based on consensus or agreement, but in its best iterations privileges difference in its encounters as a form of becoming—an opening onto the yet unthought and new forms of practice. It moves away from prescribed notions of identity and place, allowing instead for an emergence between people, environments, plants, animals, and abiotic components.

Understanding that collectivity is fundamental to how people operate (as a kind of inevitability), the question then becomes: How do we make collectivity politically useful while challenging stable ideologies? A collective is, in a sense, always pre-given, a way to understand our relations to others as inherent, although potentially suppressed. We are always in relation, non-human and human alike, always in a form of collectivity. Despite the difficulty of working together, collective practice can usefully pose a mode of consistency to challenge established political regimes and ideologies. Because of the ways collective practices have been used in the past, however, its potential structure as a force of control and domination needs to be addressed. Collectivism carries the residue of communism, both in its idealism and its negative historical alliances with social control and domination through the submission to perfect wholeness. Artists' collectives have responded by transforming collectivity from a style to a strategy, working not from identity, but from modes of identification corresponding and fluctuating according to particular concerns and contexts (Nollert 2005, 29). New artistic experiments in collectivity strive to take heterogeneity as their model: "Rather than fighting against the inevitably heterogeneous character of all group formations, collectivism after modernism embraced it" (Stimson and Sholette 2007, 10). The realities of working in this manner are challenging, but can open up new possibilities for being together, undermining conventional assumptions about the relationship of the self to society. Palmer explains, "There is an ethic in collaboration that forms a base for *Flood* that is more radical and troublesome than simply *learning to play together*. It is troublesome because it goes against the individualist ethic that, especially in America, defines self in opposition, through competition rather than relation" (Palmer 2008, 61-2). Differences create the conditions for us to operate collectively. Sharing becomes redundant if each person is bringing the same values, qualities, talents, aesthetics. And the difference of plants in a garden, or viruses such as HIV, demand collectives to adequately address, combat, and care for them. The demands of the other-than-human world force a response that inevitably moves a person beyond their individual capacities, drawing them into a collective. Here, the concept and practice of collectivity does not rest upon already determined practices and beliefs but, instead, can open up ways of being in the world that allow for variation and difference.

Collectives also serve to undermine authorial control in artistic productions. These collaborations question the framework of individual authorship by opening up artistic production to the unpredictability of working in groups, implicitly undermining preconceived definitions of art and artists. Collaborations involve ways of working where none of the individual artists involved is simply *added* to the others, but that "at the very least collaboration involves a deliberately chosen alteration of artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity" (Green 2001, x). Collaboration operates as a surplus—unnecessary for artistic production per se—that is increasingly necessary as a response to modernist paradigms where the practice and production of artwork



reshapes the artists and non-artists involved (Green 2001, 199). What a collective art practice does, I would argue, is even more radical. Collaboration usually refers to practices between artists, but the collective opens up that practice to non-artists, and then, implicitly, to the tools, media, environment, and all the other components that go into a project. This shift from collaboration to collective was paralleled in the move from *Haha* to *Flood*.

The collective, as a concept and as a practice, makes possible the inclusion of non-humans, explicitly recognizing the kind of force that the world exerts on us as constraining and mobilizing. For Elizabeth Grosz matter is "the thing ... the provocation of the nonliving, the half-living, or that which has no life, to the living, to the potential of and for life" (2005, 131). It is this provocation which incites in us the desire to make, to create, to move beyond ourselves. And it is only by recognizing the dependency on matter, by accommodating ourselves to it as it accommodates to us, that we can fully explore our own capacities as a generative force rather than simply thinking and using nature as mere standing reserve.

In thinking through relations with the other-than-human, gardening, as a practice, inevitably takes on these collective relations. Gardening often re-inscribes already determined power structures between human and other-than-human worlds through control and domination. But because of the garden's excess, the ways in which it is constantly demanding different responses from human participants, it can also force us to think in new ways about these relations. In addition, this demand or pressure from the plant world to modify our behaviour is increasing in a world where food insecurity and the destruction of biodiversity are spreading due to anthropogenic climate change. What is at stake in artistic projects that take gardens or the practices of gardening as a way of working, or as artistic medium, is an opening or challenge to think of our relationships to the 'natural' world differently. Power structures, characterized by relations of domination and

oppression, vitally need to be rethought, and our patterns of behaviour altered. Whitt and Slack bring these power dynamics to the forefront in their assertion that “the tendency of Western societies to parse out humans as separate from and dominant over nature is a habit of thought and a pattern of action which buttresses the tendency to parse out certain humans as separate from and dominant over others” (1994, 5). The possibility of thinking of collectives as involving forces, subjects, and beings that are other-than-human allows for a radical rethinking of the ways in which dominance and power are currently played out in our society. It allows us to recognize the ways in which “Geographical and ecological features of community are rarely incidental to political and cultural struggle: they contextualize—enable and constrain—relations of power” (Whitt and Slack 1994, 6). And, as demonstrated by *Flood*, to address inequalities among humans, we must also take into consideration these other-than-human elements and relations that operate as conditions of possibility. “As the group remarked at one of its weekly meetings: ‘the experience of interacting with the garden is like reading a book: one is not necessarily changed by it, but the condition for change then exists’” (Brenson, et. al. 1995, 96).

### To see something twice

Artistic practice can provide a way of thinking and carrying out relations with each other and the other-than-human differently. Its ways of working, which privilege creativity, can allow for a kind of gap, a space to rethink what was previously thought of as ‘known,’ by taking the everyday and moving it beyond itself. “What this kind of work can best offer are imaginative linkages, if not solutions, that reshuffle the existing ways in which people see and understand the world, to make new relationships and meaning within it” (Palmer 2008, 65). Here, the garden as mundane, habitual practice becomes an object of curiosity, displaced and excessive. As Grosz says, “Art enables matter to become expressive, to satisfy, but also to intensify—to resonate and become more than itself” (2008, 4). In the case of *Flood*, the garden is allowed to intensify as it exceeds, and never quite fits into, its assigned parameters. The storefront, as garden and as art, creates a territory which, as Deleuze and Guattari describe in relation to art more generally, “implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of sensibilia that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of functions” (1994, 183). In *Flood*, the function of growing food shifted from merely one of supply and production, overflowing these boundaries and entering into the realm of pure sensory expression. In fact, the garden was only able to feed seventy-five people every six weeks, a production level far below what could actually sustain the community of people for which it was intended. But the artistic aspect of the project is perhaps most resonant in the non-functioning garden network, its transformation of functions. For if the garden’s ‘function’ was to provide food, and it didn’t manage to fulfill this function, it instead became an expressive feature, adding a kind of question mark to the ways in which plants are typically related to. The garden became incidental to the working of the project, and yet these plants inserted themselves wholly into the collective. It became a site of resonance: it was a field of intensity, whose purpose was not pre-defined and, therefore, left enough space for people to be welcome and to find some kind of meaningful connection, bringing many specific interests and concerns that could not be anticipated in advance. The garden became a kind of connective tissue, an expression of an emerging collective that involved all of these complicated elements, from architecture, to subjectivity, to virus, to food.



The artistic component of Haha's work emerges through their commitment to this open-ended process, to work in an indeterminate zone, rather than towards a particular goal. Palmer explains, "In all of these projects, and in valorizing potential as a precursor to change, the element of unpredictability keeps the results radically open.... What it has to offer in the best sense is something other than what we already have or know" (Palmer 2004a, 139). Art, in their work, is about the creation of a gap. It is a gap in the everyday, "the gap or abstraction or distance that is necessary to see something twice—as what it is and something else" (Palmer 1994, 3). This gap is not only about a kind of remove from the demands of life as usual, but is expressed as an aesthetic project. In the case of *Flood*, it was the undefinability of the project that "created a question that drew people in to talk," where "all the roots grew together in a tangled net" (Palmer 2004a, 136). These beings of sensation formed amongst groups of people, through a system of distributed aesthetics, making it "impossible to absorb in one discrete moment of aesthetic reflection. This is the mode in which most art viewers are still operating. It is an aesthetic hangover that needs remedy" (Bloom 2008, 24). Instead, *Flood* should be seen as an example of distributed aesthetics: "To say that *Flood* has distributed aesthetics is to say that the work cannot be defined in reference to a center point, but only to a social situation... There was no whole or undivided aesthetic experience that could be readily known and consumed" (Bloom 2008, 26). The aesthetic component of the project was the experience of it, the network of relations, and the compelling, expressive force of the garden itself, as a visual metaphor. It created a form of sensuous immersion as artistic and collective activity. *Flood* requires a "continuing resistance to being categorized" in order to maintain itself as art (Palmer 2008, 65). The artistic aspect of the project lies in this unclassifiable excessive register to re-imagine relations between people and other-than-humans within a neighbourhood.

### Heterogeneous Time

In order for these connections to be made, for an open process to explore its possibilities, time has to be made for them. The time of the garden, like the time of social connection, is different from the scheduled times of more traditional service provision. As Palmer points out:

It takes time for indirect and qualitative projects to gather enough critical participation to contribute to their course; it takes time for potential to realize itself through indirection. Unsensational fragments accumulate insistence over time, allowing not just for 'execution' but also for evolution, participation, growing wisdom, changing understandings, shifting participants—development, but not along a pre-determined narrative—and invention (2004b).

I would add to this that the time of the garden itself demands a different method outside of scheduled activities. Growth, watering, feeding, and tending to the other-than-human all occupy their own times. Microbes, microorganisms, insects, infestations, and gardening force both a more insistent and often slower time into modern, urban, human time. Garden time is not one that cares about deadlines, although it did matter when the halide lamps were turned on, and how long it had been since nutrients were pumped through the system. The garden will go to seed; it will begin again. Garden time introduces a radical heterogeneity, one that humans respond to and accommodate into our lives, that gives the project a different edge. As it is often too much work for one person, it forces many people to be there, to care-take. The collective becomes multiplied

through the demands of the plants, it introduces a plurality of times working congruently, and forces the collective to commit to a longer period of operation than standard in contemporary art practices. Possibilities are foreclosed through tight timelines, since under these conditions it is often much easier to fall back on pre-established patterns of behaviour, modes of interaction, and ways of working. In order to begin to imagine and create spaces of difference, time needs to be made for them—time that is not scheduled, that allows for growth, planting and re-planting outside of a pre-determined narrative. The advantage of this slower time—the insertion of heterogeneous time—is that it draws people together—someone needs to be present every day to care for the plants—and it allows for the project to develop laterally, making space for difference and unpredictability.

### Towards an ethics of processuality

What *Flood* illustrates is the radical potential in artistic practice for creating new kinds of collectives. This approach to the political follows from Deleuze's articulation as "organizing good encounters, composing actual relations, forming power, experimenting" (1988, 119). These practices form an ethics of the richness in the possible, "an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealises and deterritorialises contingency, linear causality and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us. It is a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularisation" (Guattari 1995, 29). In other words, the project created the time-space to imagine ways of being together, differently. It allowed for the possibility of thinking about HIV as a metaphor of fragility and connection; it allowed diverse people to come together who otherwise would have no reason to do so; it allowed for the possibility of re-signifying food from simply something to eat to the network of relations that enable its existence. These "events... can be conceived as *actualizations*: what they offer is a space-time for the effectuation of latent possibilities" (Holmes 2007, 279). *Flood* provided an opportunity to experiment with processuality, never knowing in advance what the work would do, what kinds of territories it would create, but allowing for a resingularization of the collective—of the individuals and plants involved—through creating the space-time for re-patterning to emerge.

Perhaps an open-ended proposition to make relation between human and other-than-human worlds visible is what comes closest to answering the question of what the storefront was. *Flood* was a construction that enabled a reterritorialization of a neighbourhood. It became a hub of activity to open up possibilities of what HIV/AIDS could mean and how to deal with it through direct community involvement. The project produced a collective of difference, a group of people and plants joined in mutually supportive activity rather than through identity. And their activity, their diverging attachments, roles, and avenues into the project only heightened the connective tissue of the collective. "*Flood's* value (for me) was its perpetual potential, like an open door, and what this allowed people to see and imagine into, in order to come to their own solutions" (Palmer 2004a, 137). And it is this openness that is so valuable in art practice, rendering visible what might lie just under the surface of everyday experience. Collective art enables a technique to come together in difference, to create a gap, to make visible the nonhuman centre at the heart of our being (together).

### Endnotes

1. Haha was an art group formed in 1988 that originally included four members: John Ploof, Laurie Palmer, Wendy Jacob, and Richard House. Richard House's participation in the group ended in 1998. The rest of the group recently disbanded following the publication of *With Love From Haha* (2008), a beautiful and evocative collection documenting their successes and failures with fourteen collective projects over twenty years of working together.

2. Discussions begun between community and social service organizations at the storefront eventually led to a comprehensive HIV/AIDS facility that opened in 1997. Its services include a food pantry, an alternative high school, a community centre, and administrative offices for four community organizations. *Flood* also worked to develop gardens appropriate to local contexts and concerns in Dekalb, Illinois and Cedar Rapids, Iowa (Haha 2008, 57).

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