

IMAGES OF HEALING AND LEARNING

Nested Tensions in Care

Artwork and captions by Merel Visse, PhD

Abstract

This project presents research-based art works that inquire into the tensions in everyday life from an ethical viewpoint of care, which sees people as embedded, “nested” in care-based relationships. Trust is the glue that holds these “nests” together. Care is the air that lifts them up, but tensions exist as well—between dependency and autonomy, vulnerability and strength, for example. The pull of these ideas exist in a kind of “check” and run through our relations and being.



Figure 1. Detail of *Untitled*, by Merel Visse

Caption

Untitled, ink and mixed materials on paper, explores spiritual dimensions of care. It was created during my summer residency at the New York School of Visual Arts in August 2016 and is part of a collection of works, *Nested Tensions in Care*.

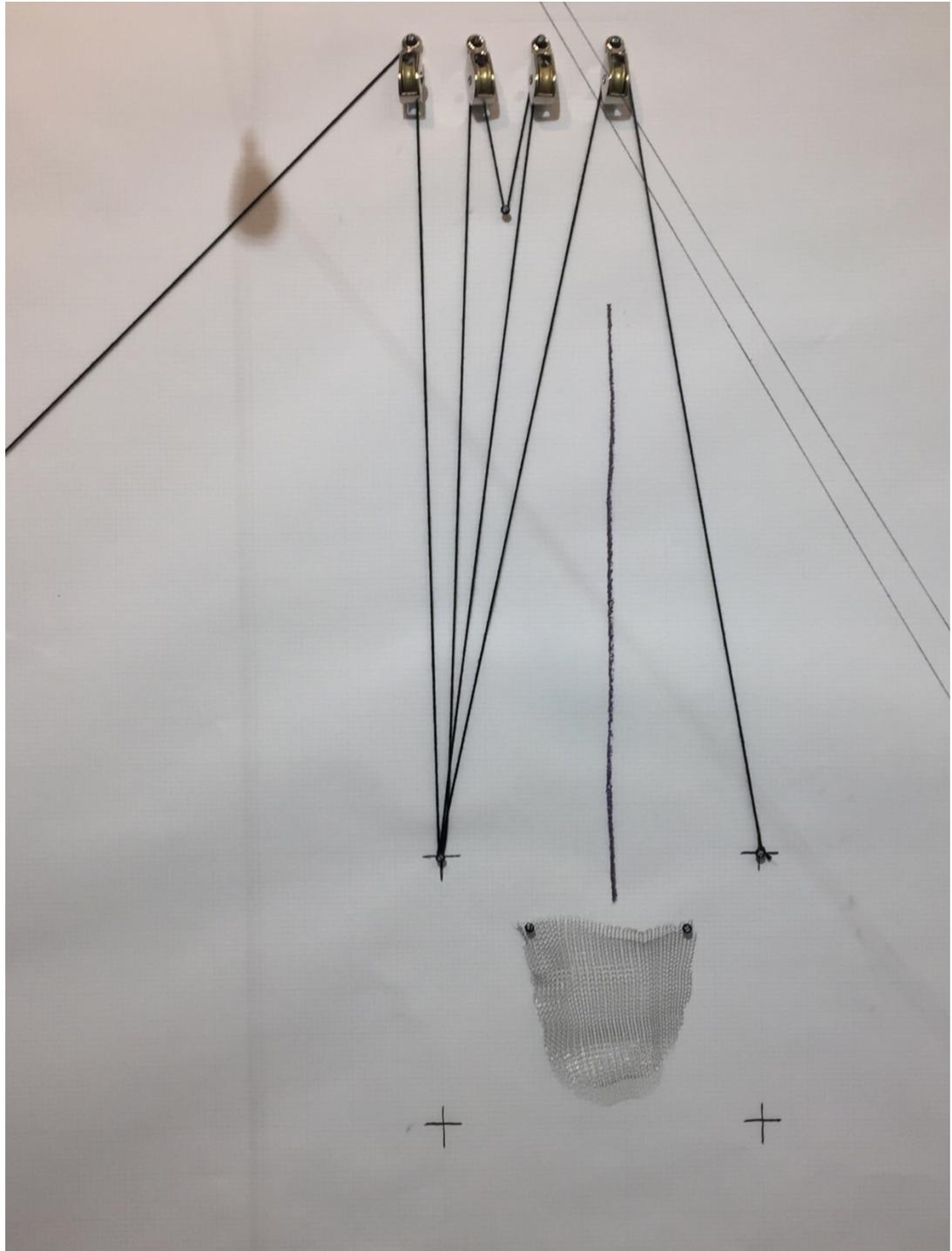


Figure 2. Detail of *Tension*, by Merel Visse

Caption

This fragment, made of pulleys, thread, iron, and paper, is part of a wall-to-wall installation titled *Tension*. It inquires into the asymmetries, reductions, expansions, and relationships among “push” and “pull” forces at play among stakeholders in health care. The “enclosed” nest at the bottom is a representation of physicians’ tendencies to capture people’s illness experiences primarily as diagnostic classifications.



Figure 3. Detail of *Nest*, by Merel Visse

Caption

This is a wall-object titled *Nest*—made of ink, watercolor, and textile on paper—which is part of a three-dimensional installation that is pictured and discussed below. My artistic interests in “nests” began with hospital beds as both a secluded and a public space. Gaston Bachelard’s inquiry into the experience of intimate spaces [1] further inspired my exploration of nests as sites of health care experiences for both patients and clinicians. Bachelard writes about an encounter that I find to be a fitting metaphor for how clinicians and other caregivers could visit a patient’s bedside.

Gently I lift a branch. In the nest is a setting bird. But it doesn’t fly away, it only quivers a little. I tremble at having caused it to tremble. I am afraid that this setting bird will realize that I am a man, a being that has lost the confidence of birds. I remain motionless. Slowly the bird’s fear and my own fear of causing fear are allayed—or so I imagine. I breathe easily again, and let go of the branch. I’ll come back tomorrow. Today, I am happy, because some birds have built a nest in my garden [2].



Figure 4. Detail of *Nests*, by Merel Visse

Caption

Nests is a three-dimensional installation that consists of several objects (nests) made of mixed materials (ink, textiles, and watercolor on paper, thread, and metal). The nest can be a symbol of the isolation and seclusion of health care experiences, on the one hand, and a symbol of connection and community, on the other.



Figure 5. Detail of *Interdependence*, by Merel Visse

Caption

This wall object (ink and pastel on transparent paper) explores our dependence—a function of our bodily fragility—and our interdependence. It illustrates how my husband and I—him being black, me being white—are interdependent and how that interdependence constitutes my body and well-being. Care ethicists often speak about

“nested dependencies” in care [3], so this work considers one important confluence between ethics and aesthetics.

Nested Tensions

This project [4] is born out of need for further exploration of care as a space for listening and being responsive to and present for another person, and it is associated with kindness and love. But entering and occupying spaces of caring, by oneself or with others, can also be confusing, threatening, and frightening. These experiences of health care, in particular, can be invisible and difficult to grasp by the people involved, including clinicians, patients, and patients’ loved ones. Tensions between good and bad, beautiful and ugly arise, because when one cares or receives care, differences between different stakeholders’ worlds come into contact and, perhaps, conflict. Some differences have a small impact, others are severe in their effects. For example, in our vulnerability, we might like it if our pillow is pushed just a little more so it supports our back just right, but someone—even someone with good intentions—pushes it too hastily, and our needs are not quite met. Or we might hope an administrator or caregiver cares about our request, and then we must navigate our disappointment when we get a “right” response—perhaps out of a sense of obligation—that nonetheless feels icy in the absence of genuine intentional empathy.

In these situations, our relationships with others are “nested” and pose ethical and aesthetic complexities, as explored in these works of art. As soon as we care or receive care, we find ourselves in an intricate play. We are (inter)dependent. We all have expectations, hopes, and demands that “pull,” with tension and heft to weigh us down or lift us up.

One response could be to try to resolve these tensions. Present-day society is focused on controlling some of these tensions, perhaps by developing guidelines, rules, and systems-based regulations. This research-based art project never “resolves” tensions and instead proposes the wisdom of less control; tensions can have structural and creative value for us as human beings because they hold items in tension in place, perhaps in balanced suspension if only for now, for our further collaboration and careful exploration. Nested tensions constitute who we are in the spaces of caring. *A la* the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur [5], this art project sees these tensions in health care experiences as necessary for solidarity and trust—two pillars of a caring democracy [6]. When tensions are held, when we hold them for each other, new spaces to breathe might be found.

References

1. Bachelard G. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Jolas M, trans. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; 1964:90-104.
2. Bachelard, 94-95.

3. Kittay EF. *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. New York, NY: Routledge; 1999.
4. This inquiry-based art project, consisting of four wall-based objects and a wall-to-wall installation, was on exhibit during Open Studios on August 4, 2016, at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.
5. Hall WD. *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension between Love and Justice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; 2007.
6. Tronto JC. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York, NY: New York University Press; 2013.

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