

# Reciprocity, becoming-with, and painting

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I will start with looking at Simone de Beauvoir's concept of freedom and reciprocity, then continue with Donna Haraway's ideas about the cat's cradle game as a tool for *becoming-with* and a way to rethink how we tell our stories. I end with my own work as a painter and how these ideas have become entangled in my making of paintings.

## reciprocity

The idea of freedom was essential to Simone de Beauvoir. Freedom, to her, meant being able to fully engage with the world.<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger wrote, "there is no interiority for men; his subjectivity is revealed only through an engagement in the objective world."<sup>2</sup> A person's subjectivity does not exist prior to her or his engagement with the world but arises through that engagement. In this thinking, not engaging with the world would mean not properly developing a subjectivity.

Beauvoir showed how most women were denied this freedom and so lived their lives as mutilated beings.

These human beings have become stuck in the immanent, in the given situation, unable to transcend it and project themselves into the world and create their subjectivity in engagement with the world.

Beauvoir lists several ways in which women can become trapped in this kind of situation. One of the most important ones is that women are taught to exist for others, particularly for men. Where men are encouraged to go out into the world and make themselves, women are taught to support this action. Never able to develop their own projects, women are unable to engage with the world and so unable to develop their own subjectivity. They are what society makes them and so become stuck in the immanence of their situation.

One of Beauvoir's main points in *The Second Sex*<sup>3</sup> is that man is the universal subject. Until quite recently the word *man* was habitually used to stand for human beings and this did not always include women. Beauvoir points out that whereas man is the universal subject, woman is always a sexed being. She is man's other. But, unlike the otherness between two countries, where a reciprocity can be developed as both parties recognise that the other

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<sup>1</sup> see: Simone de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret Simons (...: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in: de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 114.

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011).

sees them as other too, woman does not see man as other because he is the human, the universal subject, and her whole existence has been to aid him in this.

Reciprocity between two people is only possible when both allow the other the freedom to engage with the world and develop their own subjectivity. Both need to be subject and object, be an agent as well as a listener and a receiver. Then, their relationship itself becomes a site of subjectivity-making, of *becoming*, a site of flourishing for both.

Reciprocity carries importance beyond the equality between a man and a woman. Indeed, I think it needs to be a part of every engagement with the world, human and non-human. Reciprocity is something that arises from an engagement, but it is only possible if the partners approach the engagement with an attitude *towards reciprocity*. This attitude towards reciprocity might be brought to a meeting even when there is no hope for it to be reciprocated.

## cat's cradle game

In "Playing String Figures with Companion Species" from her book *Staying with the Trouble*<sup>4</sup>, Donna Haraway talks about the game of cat's cradle as a way to understand *becoming-with*, the coming together of beings, be they different peoples or humans and non-humans.

Her narrative is not one of big overarching plans to try to save the earth with global policies but small stories of local attempts at partial recuperation. This is what she calls 'staying with the trouble'. She writes: "These are stories in which multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation."<sup>5</sup>

Characteristic of the string figure game, the cat's cradle game, is that you are required to hold "...still, in order to receive and pass on."<sup>6</sup> One of her key words is response-ability, the ability to respond. The attitude towards reciprocity is inherent in this term: responsibility is the ethical action of the agent, response-ability shows the listening element at the heart of this action, an action that is not about asserting one's own subjectivity but using the power of subjectivity to respond with care to a situation. In a meeting where one does not see the other as also being a subject but only object and does not respect the other's freedom to flourish, there can be no response-ability. This is the heart of this attitude towards reciprocity, as I understand it, being agents with response-ability.

Haraway writes: "Relays, string figures, passing patterns back and forth, giving and receiving, patterning, holding the unasked-for pattern in one's hands, response-ability; ...

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<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

*Becoming-with*, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are ... rendered capable.”<sup>7</sup>

There are echoes here of Beauvoir’s thought that this flourishing in freedom requires the freedom of both parties. Beauvoir writes: “Our freedoms support each other like the stones in an arch, but in an arch that no pillars support.”<sup>8</sup> The partners render each other capable, facilitate each other’s becoming subject, agents, becoming responsible through response-ability.

*Becoming-with* requires the attitude towards reciprocity to play in broken and deeply complex situations, such as the clashing of the needs to two vulnerable groups. Can the cat’s cradle game of becoming-with find innovative ways of living together in such circumstances, even rendering each other capable?

Haraway writes: “Partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements.”<sup>9</sup>

Subjectivities arise through the knottings, the making of new worlds together, and all kinds of species contribute to these entanglements. This is reminiscent of Beauvoir’s and Heidegger’s thoughts on how subjectivity does not exist prior to, but arises from a being’s engagement with the world. It is an intersubjective, cross-species engagement with the world that allows subjectivities to arise.

## Painting

The story-teller, or the painter, could easily slip into a role of being all subject, the maker, the expresser of a complete subjectivity, not made through the making but already made, expressing. The painter might be all subject, imposing my will on the plastic, mouldable object, as if it were mine to do with whatever I want.

If I project myself into the world and, through engaging with the world, make myself, then the painting makes me as I make the painting, then the story is not all mine but also the object’s, the material’s. There is a need here to be a subject and an object, to be a doer and a listener, there is a need for my freedom and a kind of freedom of the object that will become a springboard for others’ engagement the moment I finish, no longer mine.

The making of art, is an engagement with the world reflected on itself, sometimes even a celebration of engaging: making, being made, for no other reason than to make and to be made. Like the game of cat’s cradle, making art is a game of engaging. And like the knottings of the string figures, the products of art-making are offerings of springboards for others to pick up and transcend.

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<sup>7</sup> Vinciane Despret quoted in: Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> de Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” 140.

<sup>9</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 13.

The paintings in this book all come from drawings of the same tree root. I made dozens of drawings, drawing, turning the root slightly, drawing again. Over days, even months, coming back to it again and again. Drawing became an action of gathering, gathering shapes. It was not about depicting the root, capturing it, not by covering all sides, nor do any of the drawings make an attempt to show the whole root in one picture. It was not about finding the best point of view, the one that could definitively represent the root. Rather it was an attempt to enter into a kind of game with an object, one where I play a balance between doing and listening.

It became an act of gathering, gathering shapes. Like when I gather berries from my garden and I know each place where a new branch is growing.

This gathering is a type of story-telling. It is a story like a long-distance hike, each step is a berry gathered, precious, and always followed by the next step. No one step is the right step, the big step, the step of glory, but each step touches the brown grassy earth and then moves on.