

Joy Within the Trouble

RHUBABA PODCAST EPISODE #7

**Freya Yeates & Khadea Santi (Rhubaba) in conversation with
Gabriel Alonso & Yuri Tuma (Institute for Postnatural Studies)**

FREYA: Hello and welcome to the seventh edition of our podcast at Rhubaba Gallery and Studios. Today, committee members, Khadea Santi, and Freya Yeates are in conversation with Gabriel Alonso and Yuri Tuma, who are artists and two of the founders of the Institute for Postnatural Studies.

The Institute is a centre for artistic experimentation from which to explore and problematise 'post-nature' as a framework for contemporary creation. Founded in 2020, it is conceived as a platform for critical thinking, a network that brings together artists and researchers concerned about the issues of global ecological crisis through experimental formats of exchange and production of open knowledge.

From a multidisciplinary approach, the Institute develops long-term research focused on issues such as ecology, co-existence, politics, and territories. These lines of investigation take different shapes and formats, including seminars, exhibitions, and residencies as spaces for academic and artistic experimentation.

The Institute works at the intersection between Spain and international practices and debates. From its headquarters in Madrid, a 300-metre-squared warehouse with a workshop, residency spaces and shared workspaces invites artists, researchers, and cultural agents to create dialogues with alumni and the broader public. In parallel, the Institute has created the publishing platform Cthulhu Books.

First of all, I want to thank Gabriel and Yuri for being here today and thank them for the beautiful spaces that they created with us.

So, those of you who don't know, we worked with Gabriel and Yuri, they produced two workshops with us as part of our '*Care, Resistance...Joy*' programme, the workshops were titled 'Desirable Futures in Hybrid Bodies'. These created spaces for exploring collective joy, deep listening, and embodiment of other species and different ways of thinking through kind of immersion and sound. And we invited them here today to speak more to that, because we felt there was just so much there that we wanted to stay in dialogue with them and share the essence of the workshops with the wider public and make that space accessible.

I would like to open up this dialogue with maybe a bit of an introduction about how you came to form the Institute for Postnatural Studies, discussing your aims and your interests in the 'postnatural' within the framework of contemporary art and design.

[02:29]

GABRIEL: First of all, thank you for having us. It's great to be here with you once again.

So, the Institute for Postnatural Studies, lately, we are saying that it just emerged (laughs) that it just happened! It was not something that we have programmed or planned, but I think this is the beautiful thing of it, is just that a group of people just gathering together around some themes such as political ecologies or new ways of understanding relations between philosophy and contemporary art, and different ways of looking at nature or, understanding nature as a kind of cultural construct; we started spending time together. And I think that idea of spending time and expanding some of the moments that we were gathering together, just created this kind of platform...family.... we don't know very well how to call it

either, because we like it not having a specific shape, or a specific way of addressing it. But I like to think that it just happened.

[03:36]

YURI: I think we like to think of a 'tentacular' sort of structure where sometimes we can be like a collective, and other times we are a platform, and other times we are more a research group. Because we are also a very pluri-talented group; we can reach out in different directions. And that has always been super beneficial and inspiring, because we can always interchange different ways to approach a project.

[04:04]

GABRIEL: But there is something interesting too, about the fact that we are based in Madrid, which is this Southern European city that is sometimes lacking a kind of international discourse, or that we feel that sometimes becomes a bit closed somehow. And it was very interesting that we started thinking of the Institute as a very local project somehow, like trying to start a conversation between people who are living in Madrid, but this actually happened in parallel to the beginning of the pandemic. So suddenly, we had to change completely the way or the formats that we wanted to explore. And it became from the beginning, a very, virtual online kind of a platform to share knowledge or to share time together. This is also very important because this was a time in which we all had lots of questions—fears, questions, doubts. And I think this was the first lesson, like understanding the Institute as place for making questions rather than for having answers. And we really learned a lot from that, from opening the space for international debate in a very specific and sensitive moment that we were living all together.

[05:18]

YURI: We had programmes, the opening of the Institute, events at the warehouse, and then the confinement happened and we were like, "Okay, we have really no other option but to move forward online." Before that happened, we were coordinating a seminar that would revolve around 'ends of worlds.' And coincidentally, this happened and it kind of aligned. It felt like a really good moment to be speaking about those things. And that was with the collaboration with Caja Negra Editora, which is an Argentinian press—it was around the book by Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who are studying the sort of 'ends of worlds' in different cultures around the globe. So, it was interesting how it all aligned.

[06:10]

GABRIEL: Yeah, because one of the most beautiful things about this book is that they understand the end as a beginning; or 'end' as a possible new start, or how ends of things can be opportunities and how some worlds have to end. And I think the Institute just happened in that way of understanding also cycles and time as a circular thing that has to be always reinventing ways and positions. So...yeah!

[06:39]

YURI: Yeah! Just a little quick backside, the beginning-beginning, because it's interesting to know before speaking how it started; Gabriel was teaching a seminar titled 'Postnature and Contemporary Creation.' And that is what kind of germinated the encounter of the bodies that now are the Institute. So how a seminar also was—

GABRIEL: The seed!

YURI: The seed and the soil. And how a seminar which eventually also became a big part of our practice, gave birth to the sort of encounters that Gabriel was saying, like,

we didn't plan to open the Institute, but because we all met, and we all started exchanging doubts, ideas, it just emerged.

[07:20]

FREYA: Great. Thank you for sharing that. I think how I found you guys was through a YouTube video called like... some person, Toni?

GABRIEL: Toni Navarro, yes.

FREYA: It was "Nature Is Healing", it was two speakers. But yeah, that is how I found you guys. And I had to watch it really slow, and with subtitles because Toni speaks really fast! (laughs)

I guess as well, thinking of that kind of 'postnatural' like, eco-feminism kind of threads as well; when we had our workshop on Friday, Gabriel spoke beautifully about the kind of separation of nature from ourselves. Like this separation between even the word 'nature' as being itself a Western construct that upholds—that is something to be controlled and exploited. I was wondering if you could speak more to that?

[08:16]

GABRIEL: Yeah, sure. One thing we started doing from the from the Institute is trying to deconstruct an image that from a Western perspective, we all somehow have like in our minds, and we share these kind of imaginaries around a nature that is beautiful, that is idealised, that has become a kind of landscape or background in which human action takes place. And we were wondering how that shared image was constructed; which devices, technologies, or cultural constructions have shaped this shared notion of nature?

So, I think all the process we are trying to do is to deconstruct what we take for granted, or what we think that has always been there. And the concept of nature, is of course, a cultural construction that depends on each perspective, in each context, and coming from a Western society, white, male centred, and so on, I think there is... we have to make an effort of going back and trying to understand where this started.

We are very interested by romanticism and these periods of history in which a kind of idealised image of nature was created and how that separated us from nature, no? So, if we create this flat image of nature, by painting it, by writing about it, by designing it somehow, then it becomes like a scenario. And I think what we started doing is just trying to put our heads inside that picture; get inside the picture, get inside the trouble, get inside all the complexities and other species that co-exist with us. And this idea of the 'postnatural' is just an invitation of finishing or ending with a word that maybe is not useful anymore to keep thinking about the complexities of a contemporary moment in which we are called to stop thinking in binary systems, stop thinking in separations, in different ontological spheres that have to 'become one' because this will also give us back a kind of responsibility in the way we act in the world, no?

So, I think what we're trying to do is just like merging everything together; blurring the lines, creating a whole culture-nature way of understanding the world in which both are completely related, and that cannot be any more separated.

[10:50]

YURI: And then I think also, the separation that we are speaking about also gives us the imaginary or the illusion that we can exploit it because it's not us. It's something that is just sustaining us.

GABRIEL: Yeah.

[11:07]

YURI: I don't know if we should get into the Collective Joy workshop, because I think it's a beautiful way also to bring back that connection. You know, that we can explore ways to reel back how we are also part of it, not something that just lives in it, or can utilise it. And I think the workshop is a tool and the conceptual framework of this workshop is also a way to do that.

GABRIEL: Yeah. And I think what Yuri just said is very important. If we understand if this concept of nature comes to bear with an exploitation, with a kind of extractivist this way of being in the world. And not only by taking matter from the territories, but also an extractive way of looking at time, how to be productive. We are now very interested in trying to relate crip theory or disabilities with a way that we understand territories and how some landscapes or territories can be 'disabled' in the sense that they cannot be exploited, or they don't give us back what we need. And then we just ... (to Yuri, in Spanish) ¿Como se dice 'las quitamos'?

YURI: Rejected.

GABRIEL: We reject them, no? So, there are many ways of how we have created hierarchies in order to exploit and extract from the world. And I guess what we are trying to do, which is, of course, not easy, but it's through hands-on workshops, like experiencing together, a collective joy, or a non-productive way of being in nature, is trying to stop with those hierarchies. Like, try to put everything in the same kind of ontological level. And when I say everything, I mean it—everything! From the glass that I am drinking from, an idea that passes through my mind, a person, a body, a matter. So, if we try to deconstruct these hierarchies, maybe we will stop organising and doing these taxonomies of reality that we have to abandon.

[13:10]

FREYA: That is really beautiful and needed and useful...

Thinking as well of that flattening of the hierarchies as a way to create a more desirable future using imagination and employing different...situating the knowledges, if that makes sense? And thinking about how history can be as relevant to influencing the present as sci-fi or imagining all these different things that were brought in from you guys.

I am thinking as well of 'The Camille Stories' and this idea of utopia and what that means. I want to know what your thoughts are on that, and kind of problematising these things as well.

[13:49]

YURI: When we were talking about hierarchies, I was thinking about Octavia Butler, and how in her fiction, in her trilogy 'The Xenogenesis Trilogy,' she speaks how this search or desire for hierarchy is the ultimate destruction of humankind. And she calls it...(sighs) –Oh, I don't want to say because I forgot the word!– But she says that the search for hierarchy is what is ultimately gonna...it is interesting to also see fiction as a way to propose those desirable futures. I'm sorry, I think I deviated from the question! (laughter)

FREYA No, no, no, no, you've not deviated. It's good. It's all good.

[14:30]

KHADEA: I guess I am interested as well in how you employed sound in that workshop on Saturday, because it was really interesting thinking about hierarchies in the terms of us, our voice internally, and how that can be separated through these

Westernised ways of thinking; of there being one voice of knowledge, or one place of getting information. And then actually, it was really nice immersing ourselves into that fictional space of like...you were doing that meditative reading or text that you were reading out. I was really interested in how you involved sound in that workshop, and also clay in the previous workshop on the Friday.

[15:12]

YURI: Well, something that we are reading a lot about and really interested in is the 'phonoscene'. This idea of a 'phonocentric era', which basically means if you were to speculate or move forward, putting listening and sound in the centre; what kind of change that would have in the way we communicate? The way we relate with not just ourselves, but with other beings, with other entities, other geologies? Because the act of listening is actually already an act of care.

If we let go of the ocular-centric way of inhabiting the planet which is so fast... We see it on social media, you just look and you scroll, and there is not really a creation of a relationship with the image itself, unless it is something that specifically moves you or... but it is such a high-consuming sense that listening is a way to propose different ways to co-exist; different ways of inhabiting, of slowing down, something that perhaps we need. Also, it is a fruitful soil to create new relationships out of care. Which is why when you proposed the Collective Joy workshop, it was clear to us that listening had to be part of it. I think if you don't explore a mental state where we are present—and I think the act of listening is one of those practices that makes us be present—really be with you, with the others, and connect on a level that is not just superficial. We have to create tools to share a present moment; a real "I am here" moment.

That is why the meditative text and sound art, I think, allows us to share a common space; even though the imagination is individual, it is still a shared space,

because we are all being guided through the same words . The beautiful thing is that we are all gonna imagine something different, even though we are sharing the same physical space. So, this tool is super important to explore these new ways of relation, of co-existing.

We had a session, and we have a seminar called 'Mutability and Mutualism' in collaboration with the Institute of Queer Ecology. The last session we had, we had Reverend Houston Cypress, and they are an artist activist from the Miccosukee people in Florida, in the United States. He was saying how they do this activity—in their case it is more meditative and not such an experimental way—how when they are protesting, they make time for a moment of meditation, of silence, as a tool for healing as well. This is so important, also, to speak of our ecological moments, we have to have these moments of healing. If not, we are just being always burnt out and it just becomes even more difficult to make actual inner change.

[18:14]

GABRIEL: Yeah, and I think this is also something that we are learning in ways; that we need more rituals, we need more ways of being together and more ways of sharing time and listening together. These philosophers as Donna Haraway and many others, I think what they are proposing with this storytelling way of approaching desirable futures is also creating narratives for the new rituals that we have to embody, no? I think this is maybe the most important artistic practice today; the one of creating rituals and the one of creating shared spaces and shared situations that are creating worlds; that are not models of worlds, but are worlds themselves, that are worldly by themselves. So I really believe in what Yuri was saying because it is actually being in the world differently, worlding differently.

[19:09]

KHADEA: Can I just add how beautiful it is that the ways that you access those things are so malleable, so you can bring your own experiences and your own knowledges to the material sound. There is no wrong way or right way, there is just a way with sound. And also the workshop space is a coming together. I feel like there was something you guys were tapping into that really was beautiful for Rhubaba as well, not having had that space for a very long time and being in a sort of space where we are tackling more institutional or environmental extraction and eviction, all these things that it was really nice to ground and meditate and think through the sound because it does help imagine otherwise and other worlds in a really intangible, but tangible way.

[20:03]

YURI: Yeah, I think imagination is such an important tool and it's so lacking in the western educational system, especially after a certain age, we just stop imagining because nobody asks us to. A powerful tool, maybe that's why it's not being asked of us. I think it is something that the more you practice, the easier it is to really imagine other ways that would co-exist. Because it just becomes kind of like a muscle, the stronger you feel with that, the easier it is to really change your surroundings or your day-to-day or the way you see things.

[20:35]

FREYA: I'm gonna diverge— I've got your book!

G & Y: Yay!

FREYA: I read the things that were in English, and then I translated all this....

G & Y: Ahh! (excited, affirming exclamation)

[20:44]

FREYA: "Humans Are Eco-Hazards, Machines Too" I translated it all into English. And that was really beautiful . And then I developed a relationship with the text and it was kind of like an emerging understanding...my knowledge of it was getting built upon and by the end I was like, "Oh, wow!" Thinking of that and thinking at the same time, that interconnected cyclical, really embodied description as well, and thinking about the text within this and how the 'Compost Reader' came around. Where did the idea to move out into making publications as well? Because I know you have another publication coming out soon or in development?

[21:26]

YURI: Those texts that you are mentioning by Sonia Fernández Pan, are super powerful, because it's, like you said, very intimate, very first person perspective, but it also opens up this whole world of slow violence and how we all participate in this. You know, she speaks about bruxism. I think it is in English, how do you say?

FREYA: Yeah, bruxism or bruxism? (pronounced two different ways)

YURI: Yeah, yeah.

FREYA: Clenching your teeth really hard and grinding your teeth.

YURI: Perhaps not all of us are clenching our teeth. But we are all feeling some sort of anxiety in the moment we are living in on how we can do things better, or how we can not participate in this slow violence. So that text was really important for the first publication because we brought those things up.

GABRIEL: But basically, the answer to your question is that we love books! (Gabriel & Freya giggle) And books have been our companions and are these other people that are around us. I love to have them around, not even necessarily to read them, just to have them around, this feeling is really... *acompañante*.

YURI: A companion, a company.

GABRIEL: So, we started saying, "Okay, we love books—let's do books!" Let's try to think what would be the editorial platform of the Institute. We wanted it to be a kind of independent project. Of course, it is part of the structure of the Institute, but at the same time, it's like a kind of other being that is learning through the way. So with this 'Compost Reader', what we wanted is to share all the conversations, time we spent with friends of the Institute in our first year, and try to do a compost of all that; feelings, conversations, texts. It's like a kind of almanac or calendar of experiences together with people that are surrounding us. The idea is to have a 'Compost Reader' every year to put together all these relations in a very experimental format because we open the invitations to artists, writers, photographers to just explore.

Then, we are working now on other kinds of books... we are working on a more theoretical kind of book around the concept of 'postnature'. But we are also working on a very interesting, I think, format, which is transcribing some sessions that we had in a very important seminar that we did together with Marisol de la Cadena, Uriel Fogué, Okan Telhan and Fernando Domínguez, which was 'Encounters at the Edge'.

This was a seminar in which we were inviting amazing people like Déborah Danowski, Karen Barad—people that we have admired for a long time—to not come as expertise, to not deliver their ideas, but to tell us about their edges. Moments in their thought that they approached a kind of edge, or edges between ideas, or

limits that they don't know how to keep going, and to share those doubts and fragilities of their thinking. So, what we are doing now is trying to transcribe these conversations, also understanding how these ways like we are doing a zoom call today, or the way we are proposing online seminars is also creating a maybe different way of thinking together. So, how are we being affected by the format itself? And how can we explore other ways of communication through digital platforms and so on? And it's really great to do this transcription because the way we think in these platforms has changed completely, like a linear way of— There are no *charlas*, like talks anymore. There is just a kind of circular, complex...¿Como se dice...?

YURI: A weaving...

GABRIEL: Yeah, weaving kind of thing. People asking, opening questions that never get solved, things happening on the way. And we are working on a book, trying to put all these new ways of thinking together on paper. So, let's see where that gets us—because it's not easy!

[25:46]

YURI: It's not easy, because then you gotta make sense of all those backs-and-forths. The question that was asked in the minute ten gets brought up at the second hour (Gabriel laughs affirmation). And then, does it make sense there? It's been an interesting editing job.

And then lastly, we have one that's fun, too!

GABRIEL: Ah yeah!

[26:10]

YURI: We did an open call for people that were interested in sending us a short story in which the narrator was a nonhuman. So, it's a 'xenofiction' open call. We wanted people to exercise these ways of embodiment through literary work. We received some really cool, inspiring ways of—and this is an animal series, so only animals allowed for this one. (laughter) Non-human animals. I think it also goes with that idea of speculation that we were speaking about earlier and listening and how this literary process can also be an exercise to listen to another species. Understanding the impossibility of really speaking through another perspective; but as an exercise.

[26:58]

FREYA: Really, really exciting to hear about that.

Final question I feel like we are moving on to is, within the consideration of joy and collectivity that led to the formation of the 'Care...Resistance' programme and your invitation to work with us, as well as...there's threads of this within how you formed the Institute and how that came to form in the pandemic. But thinking how joy is a partner of grief, particularly within the context of ecological crisis; thinking of a radical joy as a refusing of the melancholia, or a refusing of this hopelessness that keeps us in the trouble and keeps us stuck. And moving towards joy as almost a form of mourning which accepts loss as both real and a potential for transformation and strengthening connection and that endings of worlds that breeds responsibility and reciprocity. And I wondered how you consider that?

[27:57]

GABRIEL: I couldn't agree more because it is, I think it's also very political how fear has become very productive, no? So, fear as this thing that is paralysing is what moves the economy today. I am very afraid of how we have been taught that we have to

be very afraid of things that are going to come and how that creates a crack or rupture in which we then depend on these big companies, these economical systems, and so on. So I think joy is definitely a kind of resistance to that. And specifically talking about the ecological crisis, if we go back to the first question and how we want to deconstruct this way of looking at nature as something separated; if you think about how that was done through the sublime, through this idealising way of looking at nature, this is also paralysing, this was also a tool for paralysis, for creating a kind of paralysis in you in which you cannot do more, effect anything. That paralysis is the worst thing we can do. So I think through joy, through collective experiences—as we were speaking before—through these new rituals that we have to celebrate life, celebrate other beings, celebrate coexistence. It is the only way we can really resist this kind of... nature has been kidnapped somehow! And we have to take it back somehow. I think it's through these kinds of more collective modelling and collective joy experiments.

[29:35]

YURI: What you said Freya was super beautiful about joy as a way of mourning. I think it's also how in Western culture we've seen that as something that is extremely something to be afraid of. Gabriel was saying to how fear has been driving everything. If we accept transformation, as something positive, as something that we crave, as something that is joyful, then perhaps we won't feel this melancholia. There are different ways that we can feel joy about having responsibilities. Perhaps you stop eating meat because you feel joy about it; or you stop using plastic because you feel joy from not using plastic because you understand a bigger scheme of things. So when it becomes not 'responsibility', or 'you have to do this because otherwise this will explode and we're all gonna die and it's gonna be the end of the world'. If we approach it in a different way, like no, this should bring you joy and then you just start doing things different.

And the idea of collective is super important. For me, I have very introverted moments in times, I find myself in very introverted spaces at times. So, for me, exploring these ways of being introverted but collectively is also very interesting, because it's so important. Because when you create collective memory that is joyful, that will resound within you moving forward, and those are memories that you can always go back to when things get a little bit...not so joyful. So, the more memories we create collectively and joyfully...is a stronger base that we can always go back to, and keep moving along.

[31:18]

FREYA: You mentioned those kind of individualisations of action that are created, thinking about when we bring things to the collective we move beyond those actions is the most central... Like, that essay is kind of explaining how these individual actions, they connect to so many different means. But at the same time, collectivity, we rely on that to change things right? You can't do it on your own, you can't change much on your own.

If you are happy to wrap up then I just want to thank you for taking the time to meet with us again. Yes, thank you to our listeners for tuning in. And hope you have good days.

YURI: Thank you.

GABRIEL: Thank you. Thank you.

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