

## Imagining the poetics of Email: on being a different collective

Mercedes Bunz | [mercedes.bunz@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:mercedes.bunz@kcl.ac.uk)

I am writing a letter. I am writing an email. Two, somewhat similar, somewhat very different sentences; each sentence opening up a different world. This short text has the task to explore the gap that stretches between those sentences and how that gap can be transformed from a dark, cold, cramped abyss into a poetic landscape crossed by colourful bridges. Maybe with a jump. For there is potential: Email is writing, and writing is never fully separated from the poesis of literature, never far away from words and symbols with their power to create a new and different world in the existing, unveiling a glimpse of its different image. Also, both - letters and emails - indicate travelling. They are taking things somewhere else, riding on an idea, a feeling, a train, a plane, or through an undersea cable, to travel further: to infect and affect, to move someone by moving something – the letter, the mind – to make a connection from my life to yours, from my idea to your mind, from the inside to the outside of a situation, a person, thereby transforming a world. Which is needed, now that the way we daily do our communication has created the wrong form of a collective delivering an unsustainable life in an unsustainable world. What is being human today, now that humans have been connected to emails? And how could we be a different, more sustainable email collective?

Western collectives have been/are/will be for another while organised around work. Labour, physical work, the performance of bodies was how the West understood this activity with the major concern on bodies more than minds. Now that a lot of us have left the factory to sit at a desk, this is still the case; and the reason why quite a lot of us are being forced to watch ponderous videos about posture, when we are ‘onboarding’ for new work. However, back then when we started to sit still for work, something else was happening: Once our hands connected to a keyboard, ‘thinking’ started to become labour through writing, through finding or knowing the right words, creating a text, judging and evaluating that of others, organising, finding solutions for issues, using words to calm someone down higher up or lower down in the hierarchy of the kingdom that is work. It seemed as if thinking, which Hannah Arendt described in the *Human Condition* as an ‘activity of the head’ had become work through writing. Back in her time, she described it ‘in some way like labouring’, but soon after it was exactly that: writing/thinking emails is labouring. This was accompanied by another transformation, pushing the situation further: In the beginning of writing becoming labour, when there were still letters and reports to type, the typewriter stayed at work. When writing started to happen on the PC, the laptop, the smartphone, work did less and less have an end as our machines were ‘personal’ and did not stay at work until they accompanied us everywhere. Emails were reaching out to us wherever we were, which turned writing into a rapid, cold, cramped, threatening activity. Inboxes became the 21<sup>st</sup> version of an assembly belt as message after message after message passed through our

hands hacking answers into a keyboard, manipulating one text after the other, shaping it, sending it off.

### Towards planetarianism

That was before the shift. After the shift from capitalism to planetarism, a shift which took place on the heights of the cost-of-living crisis and put the focus from the making of individual profit to the making of sustainable collectives on our planet and introduced a 12:1 wage ratio; after that shift emails and writing have been identified as the most important tool within an organisation, a collective. It was clear that this tool needed to be handled with care and caution. Besides for spam, emails are therefore also filtered according to time, in order to allow the right and need to withdraw from communication and to switch from the work collective to other ones. During the four-days of our work week, emails are being released at only two different times – in the morning and early afternoon. This ensures a humane pace. Also, emails automatically draw in existing institutional information, which in my organisation I only need to cross-check and add a personal note to. The numbers of cross-checking emails are limited to seven a day; shall there be more, my organisation knows that there is an issue which needs attention. The focus on collaboration and collective processes are now seen as important; but we also know that they need balancing with the needs of us as individual beings. To get the balance right, adjusting the collaboration with our digital technologies plays a big part.

It took a while until we understood that digital technologies do not automatically heighten productivity as the neoliberal ideology made us believe far too long. Being blinded by that ideology, we overlooked that the always unstable digital comes with constant updates and incompatibilities. Today, nobody lives in the misunderstanding anymore that digital technologies are there to serve us. We know that being human is being part of an collective – through a language, a communication, or an infrastructure, which is often digital. Technical aspects from grammar to computational logic make up a large part of that collective. As those aspects also structure our everyday lives and help us to ensure the future of our planet, everyone is aware of the societal effect those technologies enforce for good or bad, and the energy and resources they rely on. Which is why we shape the technologies that are shaping us as a collective in return.

The times when we misunderstood our technologies as an instrument that serves us is also long behind us. The shift has changed the role of tech workers, who facilitate our collectives not very different from our politicians. In all collectives I am part of, we vote regularly on the roles of in-house tech workers; those who look after adapting the technical systems and infrastructure to allow meaningful collaborations. We all are aware that we need to counter certain effects of our technologies on our collective planetarian as well as individual being. To fight the isolation that comes with being glued to screen work, my organisation, for example, has linked me up with a work twin (as well as it introduced me to a more experienced mentor); me and my work twin have fixed weekly meetings in which we therapeutically

discuss difficulties we both encounter, and get some us-time to moan or brainstorm and reflect on our beings at work but also in different collectives.

On different collectives

Human beings, that much we know, are made up of collective parts, sharing a language, being traversed by different infrastructures, being connected by platforms to communicate and calculate the world around them with. Naturally, the question 'Who are, we?' is therefore at the forefront of everyone's thinking. What forms of collectives we encourage has become more urgent in light of planet earth's temperature rise forcing already quite a few planetary collectives to simultaneously adapt, transform and or even move. Faced with an overheating planet, our task now is to have visions (Meadows 1994) for a different kind of 'We', in which we incorporate our collectives as ensembles that act in coordination towards a more sustainable way of living on this rapidly changing planet together. Sylvia Wynter's critical question: Who are, we? is central to this. Its intent was not to abolish the 'we' as a form. She did ask us to walk away from the binary relation used by the West; a culture that built its collective against an Other. However, one should not misunderstand Wynter's important question as an encouragement to walk away from any idea of a collective. To evade the challenge that thinking forms of being a collective pose, is no option anymore. Today we know, we have to walk towards another way of being a 'We' as the unsustainable world we live in pushed the question how our collectives share this overheating planet as an ensemble up on the agenda. Today, after the shift, we are still working on ways of interplanetary communication. The technological being that is the internet shows us technically that planetary cross-communication is possible but as humans, we have not been successful in this form of communication yet. Years of neglecting the work on the idea of a collective still shows. While we slowly come to live better together within our collectives, we still struggle to link up different collective cultures in a coordinated ensemble needed to truly share a planet.

The better it is that everyone is aware of this attention towards one another's collectives that is needed. Not very surprisingly, connecting with radically different material, paying attention to rather different approaches, reading that material, has become a core value of our cultures after the shift. In light of the situation of our planet, we had to foreground the importance of connecting with another being and another collective, learning about their situation, thinking, feeling, to inform my mind and my collective, through a text, an image, a symbol that is taking us somewhere else through the process of reading it. And while I can never be sure if I read things correctly, something is still happening, always happening, when we read. The magic of reading. Which shows in the following sentence, one that is somewhat similar to the one that opened this text, only that now it carries a different tone, a more sustainable world, a future: I am reading an email.

Meadows, Donella. 1994. "Envisioning a Sustainable World/Down to Earth". Third Biennial Meeting of the International Society of Ecological Economic, Costa Rica.